



# Master and Disciple Relationships in Modern Times

The relationship between master and disciple is one of the most ancient and vulnerable bonds in human culture. Today, multi-generational lines of descent have become rare, and so most often this bond is not born of kinship, nor is it friendship, nor a business contract – it is an alliance, one that the disciple seeks but the master chooses. An alliance in which the flow of knowledge is at stake, and in which both parties invest heavily: the master invests their time and accumulated experience, the disciple invests their attention, their humility, and their commitment.

How can this be done well?

And how can it be done badly?

This writing is not a general guide, but a retrospective look back over the past 25 years of my own discipleship, lived across different fields: personal experiences, human stories, and the encounter with centuries-old cultural patterns that lie behind them.

## **The Fragility of Respect and Status**

In premodern societies, the master's position was guaranteed by the social order. The master was not a master because the disciple found them authentic day by day, but because the system assigned them their place. Respect was granted by the structure, not by human quality. This structure has now – especially outside Japan – collapsed.

Once, disciples abounded. In earlier times, professions like weapons forging were generally multi-generational activities. To enter a renowned workshop from the outside and become an assistant was a rare opportunity, one that conferred social rank and a secure livelihood – an immense motivation. There was no shortage of applicants, for even the tyranny of a cruel master was better than having no prospects at all. If one candidate could not endure being trampled, ten others stood ready to take his place.

Today, the situation is fundamentally different.

The craft is dying.

In Japan as well.

The old structure, where the disciple lives in the master's house for many years and the master provides for them, is slowly suffocating itself. Few applicants are willing, in today's fast-paced world, to devote many years of study and considerable financial effort for an uncertain livelihood in a narrow market.

And while this sifts out disciples, many serious aspirants cannot even begin their studies because they lack sufficient family support.

The master of today does not have behind them the invisible army that protected them in the past: there is no economically weighty, stable guild, no automatic financial security, no endless supply of disciples.

Because of this, the one-directional, Confucian-based structure built on unconditional obedience is loosening, and human questions are coming to the forefront far more than they did in former times.

#### Personality Profiles and Cultural Differences

The master-disciple relationship unfolds not only in a technical space, but in a deeply psychological and cultural one as well.

In my own case, one of the greatest difficulties was that I always formed a strong emotional attachment to the master I chose, and for one of them, this was very difficult. He was a man with little freedom in emotional self-expression, not a tactile person, unlike me. Our cultures, our temperaments, our neurotypes differed sharply from one another — and I understood just how much far too late.

In his darker periods, my master fell completely silent. He did not communicate, not even about work, not at all. I could never manage this; I fell into despair, and I tried to close the distance between us — and he stepped back. When I noticed this, I consciously tried to restrain myself, but between two people who are both stepping backward, the distance only grows.

Another key issue arises when the master's and the disciple's profiles of understanding are fundamentally different. My former master's knowledge was very deep, but instinctive. I need to grasp the theoretical background in order to feel secure in the work. I need to understand what I am doing and why. (This gave him cold shivers.)

The traditional Asian way is not this — especially not the Japanese way. (In Chinese systems, there is more room for it.)

In traditional educational systems, the relationship is daily and direct, and the disciple can often observe the process. If something is not understood, it is shown to them again, but the direct, empathic connection with the material is something they must uncover for themselves. Modern training is typically seminar-based, with practice carried out at home, independently, and not guided by another — and this cannot provide the traditional opportunities for learning. Here, questions must be given their due place.

### **Learning Habits – The Network Learner and the Linear Learner**

Most people learn linearly: they advance step by step, and the master can easily measure their progress. But a smaller fraction does not work this way. They learn as a supersaturated solution begins to crystallise: they grow crystals at a thousand points, integrate a sea of information, and only begin to grasp the essence when the crystals connect into a network.

These people ask far more questions at the beginning of the learning process and advance more slowly, because their thinking does not proceed along a single path, but within a spatial structure, and their understanding synthesises multi-variable, dynamic responses from cross-sections of this structure.

If a teacher does not understand this, they may find such a disciple unsuitable, seeing in them only an idle brooder — but that does not mean it is true that such a person is more prone to uncertainty.

Network learners do understand linear learners but linear learners do not tend to understand how network learners function. This can be a reason for rejection, with the words: "Too many questions, too few results."

Yet the network learner is moving towards genuine, deep, integrated knowledge — only not along the marked, more easily surveyed path.

One kung fu master's method was to answer every question, until months later the disciple himself said: "I have asked much now; let us go and practise."

## **The Gesture of Gratitude and Mutual Investment**

Most learners today look only at what they can receive, not at what they can bring to the relationship. They do not help the master in any way, to give back some of the time the master has devoted to them.

They consider it demeaning to sweep out the workshop — yet that workshop is their school. (And how far from the truth that is: I let no one sweep up in my workshop who is not a trusted and welcome acquaintance; more than that, I do not even let them inside. Where you are permitted to take hold of the broom, where you may empty the charcoal — there you may move freely, and this is a trust not granted to everyone.)

This is the very gesture of gratitude, which ought to be fundamental. Both parties invest. A great deal. This must be noticed — from both sides.

If this does not happen—from either side—in the long term it hollows both parties out.

Let such an applicant not be affronted if they are turned away.

## **Traditional Structures – by Culture**

### **Japan: The Weight of Hierarchy and the Possibility of Renewal**

In the Japanese tradition, the master–disciple relationship operates within the sensei–deshi framework, which is deeply hierarchical. In premodern Japan, the word of the master was beyond question, and the total subordination of the disciple was not a matter for debate but a fundamental condition. The hard master of the old school could hide his cruelty, his inner brokenness, behind the hierarchy, and this was accepted. From this comes the saying, "The disciple is only there to be beaten and scolded."

It is important to stress, however, that this was not universal. What a master chose to pour into the framework was always his own decision, made on the basis of his own humanity. Numerous stories are known, from Japan as well, in which a master lost a gifted disciple because of his own arrogance, narrow-mindedness, or egoism—even if these stories are seldom quoted.

And still more seldom are those masters mentioned who, behind their strictness, teach with deep humanity and responsibility.

#### China: The Liberating Power of Humour and Community

The foundation of the Chinese master–disciple relationship is Confucian hierarchy and respect, but this rigid framework has always been loosened by the humour and directness that come from Taoist and Buddhist traditions. In the Shaolin monasteries, "being disrespectful to the master is unacceptable, but making him laugh is." This fine but sharp distinction shows exactly how humour can ease the rigidity of hierarchy without undermining respect.

In the famous novel *Journey to the West*, the relationship between Sun Wukong and his master Tripitaka is full of humour and bickering, yet also of deep loyalty. Here the master is not a cold, distant figure, but a fallible, often erring man whom his disciple is forever rescuing, while constantly teasing him. This kind of dynamic is one of the most beautiful examples of the Chinese master–disciple relationship.

#### India: The Price of Knowledge and the Sacred Bond

The Indian master–disciple relationship, the guru–shishya parampara, is the oldest continuous tradition in the world. Here the bond is sacred: the disciple sits at the guru's feet, and the transmission of knowledge is not a transaction but a spiritual act. The gurudakshina—the disciple's offering to the master at the end of training—is not payment, but an acknowledgement of gratitude and of the bond.

The Indian system also recognises, and handles well, the problem of network learners. The disciple who asks too many questions without first thinking matters through thoroughly steals the master's time. For this, a brilliant method was born: the disciple paid the master a small sum for every single question. The amount was symbolic (the disciple generally had scarcely any money), but its effect was enormous. The disciple was forced to think: "Am I certain I have to ask this question? Can I not work out the answer for myself?" In this way, the master was not meting out knowledge, but pressing the disciple to develop their own problem-solving ability and systems thinking.

The Indian tradition also knows that the master may hold nothing back. One meaning of the word guru is "he who disperses the darkness." He who withholds knowledge is not a guru but a merchant—and a merchant does not deserve the disciple's loyalty.

## **Persian and Arab Tradition: Adab and the Right of the Master**

In the Persian and Arab cultural sphere, the master–disciple relationship is governed by adab—proper conduct, refined manners, respect, and self-discipline. In Islamic mysticism, in Sufism, the relationship between the pir (master) and the murid (disciple) is absolute: the disciple must be in the master's hands "like a washed corpse in the hands of the washer." This is the ideal of complete trust and self-surrender.

Yet this same tradition also recognises its abuse. The Arab proverb—"He who would stand as a master must first be a servant"—warns that mastery does not come automatically. The master too had to travel his own path, and he who forgets this, who makes of the disciple only a servant without giving anything in return, abuses his position.

In the workshops of the Persian miniature painters, the master transmitted to the disciple not only technique, but also the secret of the "eye": the capacity to see beauty. He who withheld this was no master, but a bungler—regardless of his technical skill.

## **The Zen Master and the Two-Way Path — The Disciple Who May Correct**

The master–disciple relationship in Zen Buddhism is one of the most refined examples of how hierarchy and mutuality can coexist side by side. The Zen master is not infallible. Disciples are not only entitled, but obliged, to signal when the master errs — and this is not an insult, but an integral part of practice.

The famous Zen stories are full of moments when the disciple overrides the master: with an unexpected reply, a well-aimed slap, a silence that says more than any words. Enlightenment is not the privilege of the master, but the fruit of shared work. Master and disciple stumble along the path together, and now one, now the other helps the other to their feet.

This model differs radically from the rigid, authoritarian structure represented by the masters of the old Japanese school — and by the modern false masters who follow in their footsteps. In Zen, the master is a master not because they never err, but because they are capable of recognising and admitting their error. The disciple is a disciple not because they obey blindly, but because they are brave and humble enough to teach their master, too, when the need arises.

This two-way path is the most mature form of the master–disciple relationship. Here the alliance is no longer merely about the transmission of knowledge, but about shared human growth. Master and disciple alike learn, alike change, and their relationship is not a one-way street, but a continuous flow of knowledge and respect in both directions.

### **The Self-Taught Masters**

One may sometimes encounter masters who did not grow up within a spiritual legacy, but who themselves uncovered, or uncovered anew, something that had been lost. Their effort deserves every respect. It often happens that they find it difficult to teach properly, for no one transmitted to them the knowledge they possess, and they have no knowledge of how this should rightly be done. If you cannot find a path to them, they remain closed gates — often even when the intention to share their knowledge is there within them.

They expect, to a far-reaching degree, the utmost efforts in independent study, and this standpoint, given their own story, is well understandable.

### **The Gift Masters**

They are the rarest of all. They appear, transmit a precious teaching without asking them to do it — the essence of many years of their own hard effort, given to you as a gift — and then they vanish, without expectations.

The one who helped me in this way asked only that I keep Her identity a secret.

The „Chosen Guardians of Secrets” — The Fake Masters

The centuries-old tradition of the master–disciple relationship has always been shadowed by vanity and foolishness. They are the false masters and false teachers, "The Chosen Guardians of Secrets," who philosophise on social media about overcoming the ego, while exploiting even their closest family members. Their mask is inward-turned wisdom; their reality is narcissism and control.

Mystification is one of the oldest tools of manipulation. He who shrouds knowledge in fog, who hints but does not show, who promises the exclusive circle of the

"initiated" — he does not teach; he exercises power. Mystification does not conceal the depth of knowledge, but the desire to possess, or the smallness of the soul.

Behind the guild secrecy of earlier times lay a real existential fear: the protection of livelihood, the warding off of competition. Behind today's "Guardians of Secrets," however, there is often nothing at all but the ego, which feeds on the withholding of knowledge and the adoration of followers. They are not masters, but influencers — and between the two lies a gulf of difference.

The true measure of a master is the depth of their knowledge; the true measure of a teacher, what their disciples become. The "Guardian of Secrets" never lets the disciple go, for letting go would mean the end of their power. The genuine master is most successful when the disciple outgrows them and has no further need of them.

## **Conclusion**

Being a master is always, in smaller part, a matter of craft; in larger part, a matter of humanity. The importance of this cannot be stressed enough. What is broken cannot transmit wholeness.

He who is false, arrogant, superior, judgemental (often in matters in which he himself fails again and again), who does not take responsibility for his own mistakes, who exploits and humiliates those who turn to him — sooner or later he either breaks the applicant, or casts them out from his circle and abandons his disciples.

And though nothing is easier than to say, "The disciple is only there to be beaten and scolded," or, "The disciple is only bitterness and disappointment," he for whom this is the conclusion must seek and understand something within himself.

One of my masters said this:

"One should teach solely for the sake of teaching. Everyone who hopes to gain profit from the disciple will be deceived, for the disciple's path may not lead in that direction. Therefore one must strive for humanity, and if the relationship is built on this foundation, shared work becomes possible."

(I myself worked together with him until — many years ago — I left the craft of instrument-making that I had originally studied. Our relationship remains active

to this day; when I am at a loss, even now, at fifty years of age, I turn to him, to the Master, for counsel. My thanks to him for this.)

### **The Story of the Transmission: The Sign of the Alliance**

My most important master was a smith of fantastic humour, extraordinarily sensitive and intelligent, incapable of compromise, and terribly gruff. We called him only by this name, at home: "the Marvellous Curmudgeon."

It was through the help of the instrument-maker master I spoke of above that I gained entry to him — he was old and ill by then, and did not even really wish to meet me.

For eleven years I went to him, and I came to love him, so that he became a foster-father to me. Because of his failing health, I could seldom see him work, but he taught me a way of seeing and a way of thinking. I could never approach the astonishing breadth of artistic and professional intelligence that he possessed.

Before he died, I wanted to buy a hammer from him. He placed his own hammer into my hand — that tool which, in forty years of smithing, no one else had ever been permitted to touch.

I asked him, "Then what will you work with, Uncle Géza?"

He said, "I'll make myself another one."

It was heart-rending. I knew that he had just set down and handed over the craft of sword-smithing, and I felt that I knew nothing of it, nothing under the sky.

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The Master died not long after, his hand forming on mine the ancient sign of the gate of alliance.