

RELEVANCE OF THE **GURU-SHISHYA PARAMPARA** TO MODERN-DAY MENTORSHIP

By Mona Behl and Charitha Pattiaratchi

MENTORSHIP IS DEFINED as a professional relationship, whereby a mentee and mentor are matched to share professional and personal skills and experiences, as well as enhance career development. It has been in existence for many centuries, and in several South Asian cultures, mentorship took place through an ancient tradition called the *guru-shishya parampara*. In a unique and innovative pedagogical approach, a *guru* (teacher) assumed comprehensive responsibility for a *shishya* (student), providing education, guidance, and support in every aspect of life, following the tradition of *parampara*, the succession of knowledge from one *guru* to the next. A good *shishya* had the following attributes: *smriti* (memory), *medha* (intelligence), *shlanga* (merit), *raga* (devotion and dedication), *sangharsha* (hard work), and *utsaha* (enthusiasm). Under the *guru's* tutelage, the student acquired a multifaceted education, encompassing science, warfare, critical thinking, linguistics, agriculture, dance, music, and arts. Practicing yoga was important for spiritual progress. Skills, knowledge, and wisdom were passed down from generation to generation. The philosophical pursuit of knowledge, its seeking and giving, was equated with power and status, making both *guru* and *shishya* aware of their mutually beneficial relationship.

The *gurukul* was a communal space where students resided, studied, and performed menial tasks under the guardianship of their *gurus*, who often lived in

the same dwelling or in close proximity to their students. This kind of living and learning arrangement fostered cooperation, collaboration, and camaraderie. It also strengthened social bonds. The famous *Panchatantra and Jataka tales* are full of stories of princes being sent to far-off Taxila, renowned for its educational institutions (Roy, 2018). Among the many virtues of the *guru-shishya parampara* was the fair and equal treatment of all students, regardless of their disparate backgrounds. Education was customized based on a student's interests, aptitude, and potential. The essence of effective communication between *guru-shishya* hinged on dialogue, debate, and discussion. A *guru's* ultimate goal was to put the student on the path of self-realization.

Guru dakshina was the compensation the student offered to the *guru*; however, it was more than just giving of material possessions or wealth. The ultimate form of *guru dakshina* a *shishya* could offer was to put what was learned from the *guru* to good use and spread that knowledge by teaching others, ensuring the continuation of lineage, with the *shishya* taking over the role of *guru* into several generations.

Because of its holistic approach to education and mentorship, the *guru-shishya parampara* was a much celebrated and revered tradition in ancient South Asian cultures. Nurturing of the whole student is a nuanced and mighty task that has immeasurable benefits not only for education but also for society. How can modern-day education and mentorship

benefit from an age-old paradigm, particularly when today's education is less a realm of philosophy and more of research and innovation?

The purpose of higher education today is to cultivate habits that help students achieve personal and career goals and contribute to the betterment of the broader society. Mentorship can be one of the most impactful and lasting relationships. It can unleash a mentee's full potential, build confidence, provide opportunities for career/ethical/moral growth, foster leadership development, and enhance overall well-being. A good mentor promotes a culture of inclusion and belonging.

Early in their academic journeys, students may be in the process of acquiring strong disciplinary foundations and seeking exposure to various careers that align with their interests and passions. Following the *guru-shishya* paradigm, mentors can foster enthusiasm and guide their mentees toward their goals. In addition to possessing the five timeless qualities of a mentor outlined in a Quarterdeck column by *Oceanography* editor Ellen Kappel (2008), mentors must strive to understand the positionality¹ of their mentees so that they can provide tailored guidance and advice. In addition to encouraging critical reflection, mentors can help their mentees handle failure. While providing opportunities for career growth and development, mentors can help remove barriers that prevent their mentees from achieving their goals.

¹ Positionality is the social and political context that creates an individual's identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability status.

Mentors can discuss technical and professional aspects of career development and, if required or requested, other aspects of the students' well-being. Here, the tradition of the strict *guru-shishya* hierarchical relationship should be relaxed. The students will develop confidence, independence, and satisfaction working in an environment where their views are openly discussed and advice given. It should also be acknowledged that each mentee requires differing amounts of assistance and guidance at different times, even when they become mentors themselves, highlighting the concept of *parampara*.

Mentees can contribute to the effectiveness of mentorship by identifying the skills, knowledge, or goals they aim to achieve and communicating them to their mentors. Additionally, they can collaborate with mentors to create opportunities for feedback, reflection, and assessment of their mentoring relationships. Effective mentorship can transform into a life-long relationship between mentor and mentee.

As an example of the *guru-shishya parampara* concept in modern-day mentorship, we can reflect on the record of one of the authors (CP), who has co-authored publications spanning five academic generations (graduate supervisor, graduate supervisor's own supervisor, himself, his graduate students, and his graduate students' students). CP transferred the mentorship received from his PhD supervisor to his work with students, serving as a role model and leading by example. CP now observes the mentoring of his past graduate students as they transfer the same ideals to their own graduate students ("academic grandchildren"), which is continuing the tradition of *guru-shishya parampara*.

The modern analog of *gurukul* are minority-serving institutions (MSI) across the globe. Varying in demographics and enrollment, MSIs span a wide range of institutions, including urban and rural, two-year and four-year, public and private, highly selective and open access (NASEM, 2019). Depending on their missions, MSIs provide tailored programs

to meet the needs of their students while doing so in a culturally relevant manner that drives them toward higher academic achievement. By connecting students to mentors and role models, MSIs provide students with safe, supportive, and nurturing environments, thereby enhancing and strengthening diversity.

The most important goal of mentorship is to help individuals connect with their true selves so that they can become the absolute best person, role model, and scholar possible. This central tenet of the *guru-shishya parampara* offers a unique model of mentorship that could be leveraged to create a better world. ©

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<https://tos.org/diversity>

The Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Committee supports TOS in embracing and celebrating our differences, broadening participation, and creating a culture of belonging. The JEDI Committee works closely with the TOS Council to facilitate the recruitment, participation, and retention of diverse individuals in its membership; address injustice, discrimination, and harassment in the ocean science and related disciplines; and ensure that the benefits of ocean sciences are accrued by all members of the Society.

Our web page contains information about the committee, including goals, actions, membership, and how to contact us. As part of the JEDI Committee's work, we also provide a list of resources to advise the broader ocean science community in how to dismantle barriers to equitable participation and promote benefit-sharing.

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