The Guru kula, is the traditional structure within which the sacred teachings were imparted in Ancient India. A guru is a master who sheds light (Gu) on darkness (Ru). A kulam is a "womb", a structure (physical, mentally, emotional, psychical) within which the Guru is able to "shed the light of knowledge on the ignorance (darkness) of his student. In olden days the Chelas (students) lived in their Gurus homes serving the Guru and learning form him on a second - to - second basis. The Guru's home was usually a hermitage, a hut. In a remote place, in the forest. The hermitage would be very simple and the life style austere and natural. Usually the Guru was a family man, with a wife and children. The students became part of the Guru's family and usually stayed with him for a period of nine years. The students served the Guru by taking care of the cows, the gardens and doing household tasks, like chopping wood and carrying water. Close students offered personal service to the Guru like massaging his feet, washing his clothes and serving his food. These duties were considered to be a privilege.

The ancient Hindu mind understood that service was the key to intimacy. Those who served the Guru became very close to him. This was the structure within which the sacred teachings were imparted. There was no fixed syllabus. There was no uniform teaching method. The Guru watched carefully for that “teachable moment”. When the student consciousness was opened and ready, nurtured by Tapasya (austerities), Swadhyaya (self study - awareness) and Iswara Pranidhana (surrender to the higher wisdom and transcendence of ego) the Guru imparted the wisdom necessary. Of course, a daily routine was followed: early morning rising, ablutions, pujas, prayers, meditation.... Karma Yoga duties.... Vedic chanting.... But the “Real teaching” occurred only when the student was ready. Sometimes this “teachable moment” came only after years.

The Upanishads are filled with stories of the Guru - chela relationship which was a bond as strong and sacred as between parents and child, husband and wife.
In Prasna Upanishad, Rishi Pippalada tells the five eager young men who came to him seeking to know the sacred lore: “Stay with me five years and serve me. Then, ask me what questions you like. If I know the answer, I will tell you!” (A real gamble, isn't it? What if after all that time, The Guru did not know the answer).

Qualities of character were to be cultivated in the Guru Kulam before the higher wisdom could be accessed! Faith, cheerfulness, good will to all, self control, discipline, cleanliness, truthfulness, honesty, gentleness, and so on. Unless the student possessed the “good character” the higher teachings could not be imparted.

The teachings simply “would not work” if the student did not possess good character. If the soil is not fertile, the seed will not grow!

Since the teacher lived with his students, he knew their character well. He knew what to teach, when to teach, how to teach. Character is mostly comprised of the word “act”. One’s repeated “actions” form one’s character. “Deeds speak louder than words”. As Swamiji Gitananda Giri often said, “if I want to know someone’s character, I give them a job to do”. The way one “works” reveals the character. Ponder these points to create a solid basis for your Sadhana.