The Gurukula is the traditional structure within which the sacred teachings were imported in Ancient India. A Guru is a master who sheds light (Gu) on darkness (Ru). A kulam is a “womb”, a structure (physical, mental, emotional, psychic) within which the Guru is able to “shed the light of knowledge on the ignorance (darkness) of his student. The word “instruction” implies that teaching must take place within the correct “structure” which for spiritual teachings is the Gurukulam. In olden days the Chelas (students) lived in their Gurus homes, serving the Guru and learning from 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 lifestyle 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 (seva) 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’s consciousness was ripe 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 for the student at his/her level of evolution. 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. The Guru – Chela relationship was considered an absolute necessity to spiritual development.

In Prasna Upanishad, Pippalada the Guru tells the five eager young men who came to him seeking to know the sacred wisdom: “Stay with me five years and
serve me. Then, ask me what questions you like. If I know the answers, 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 this “good character”, the higher teachings could not be imparted.

The teachings simply “would not work” if the student did not possess good character.

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 said, “If I want to know someone’s character, I give them a job to do. The way one “works” reveals the character!”

At the end of the period of studentship (Brahmacharya) the student was sent home, to begin the next phase of life as Grihashta, or life as a householder, a father, a husband. The student then offered “Dakshina” or the “love offering” (Fee - Payment to Guru). This could range from half a kingdom from a king’s son to gold / from / cattle from the son of a priest or a warrior. But Dakshina was a must. There are no beggars allowed in the spiritual life - one must always “give back” at least equal to what one receives, if not more. There is no “Profit motive” in the spiritual work. The Dakshina sustained the Guru on the material level and enabled him to care for his family and maintain his household.

The above description is not an idealization of a glamourous past. It is the “way things were”. Even today there remain some fragments of this Guru Kula structure in various Ashrams and teaching centres in India. The purity of the life style of the old Guru Kula may be impossible to sustain in this age, but at least some semblance of this ideal can be realized.

One could say the basic structure of the Guru Kulam was the concept of family. A family is a group of people who are bonded together either by common genes, or environment, or by an ideal, or project - any group which comes together to achieve a purpose which they cannot achieve as individuals constitute a kind of family (Kulam). Members of a family unit interact on an intimate basis, usually in day - to - day situations. They must adjust to each others needs preferably with sweet affability and or ability to compromise. The compromise is not for principles or ideals, but rather of one’s own personal comfort and ease. A family must have some sense of commitment, one to the other. The members must be able to count on each other. The behaviour should be predictably reliable.
I am reminded of a story about Edward Kodak, the founder of the Kodak photography empire. Once it was said Ed Kodak took a team into the African jungles on a photo shooting expedition. He had sharp shooters with him, bearers, cooks, all necessary members of a team. The group had spotted a rhinoceros grazing with its family. Edward Kodak set up his tripod and was clicking his photos fast and furiously when suddenly the wind shifted and the rhinoceros “got wind” of their presence. The wild beast charged madly straight at Edward Kodak he did not move, but continued to click away even as the beast charged straight at him. The sharpshooters got their bearings and shot the beast which fell dead just a few feet in front of Ed. Later the men asked Mr. Kodak why he did not run when the rhinoceros began to charge. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “You have got to trust your team”. Your job is to protect me. Mine is to take photographs”.

Like that, a family is a team. Each one has its own function and role. Each must fulfill its Swadharma, one’s own duty. Then only the common good can be achieved.

Sadly in modern times, the whole concept of such a family is lost. Most modern people in Western society have never lived in a healthy family unit. Hence they have missed all the lessons which can only be learned in such a structure. Most families no longer share even essential activities like eating together.

I had a student about ten years ago who was the son of the CEO of Titian watch company in the USA. He said his family home was like a museum it was so huge and had such valuable art items everywhere. But, he grew up without a family structure. He and his brother ate all their meals with the servants in the kitchen. His father was “always away”. The mother was a “fitness and health food freak”. After her daily trip to the gym she would lock herself in the kitchen and eat her “carrots and cucumber” all alone! He was unable to join the other students at meal times. He would get a panic attack and run to the roof to eat his meal alone! Needless to say, he was severely disturbed mentally and required a very strong counseling which helped to some extent. But he was so damaged, the Yogic teachings could not work to their full effectiveness.

The Guru Kula structure is a family structure. The family is highly valued in Hindu culture. Those who live a family life are called Grihastas which literally means “those who hold the house together”. This is considered an essential stage of spiritual development, which should not be passed over.

Studentship, householder life, detached performance of Duty and finally, at the end at one’s life (after 60) Sannyas), or renunciation. These are the four stages of human life through which all must pass, according to Hindu Dharma, Each stage has different lessons to learn.
Our Ashram life is like a combination of the studentship (Bramhacharya) and the family stage, lived with detachment. The ideal of Vairagya Rasika or detached enjoyment is cultivated. To enjoy everything, but not to be attached to anything!

Well! Such a long meditative essay. In the Ashram you will be living very closely with one another and with your teachers too! We learn to live together, yet to give each other space as well. Such a lesson in the art of relationship is one of your most important lessons here.

This is the Guru Kulam, this is the oven in which the wet, clay pot is baked to make it strong enough to hold water! This is the space in which spiritual gestation can occur so you can have a chance to go out into the world with a renewed spirit. This is the structure necessary for all these lessons to be learned.

This is Ananda Ashram (ICYER) 16th Mettu Street, Chinna Mudaliarchavady, Kottakuppam 605 104, Tamil Nadu, India.

Over the door is this sign: Enter here only if you are happy.

Put a smile on your face and open that door!

We await your arrival with 10,000 eyes. (Old Indian saying)