

INITIATION

Why accept someone as a guru? You accept someone as a guru because you want to be guided by him in your Krsna consciousness. Additionally, you experience that Krsna comes to you most strongly through this person, you have absolute faith in him, and you want to give your life to Krsna through him.

When a devotee joins ISKCON, they are not allowed to choose a *diksa* guru until they have been practicing Krsna consciousness for at least six months. However, this does not mean that one cannot take guidance from a senior devotee or initiating guru within that first six month period. It just means they should not make a decision on who they would like to take *diksa* from during this time.

After this six month period, when a devotee wants to accept initiation from a particular guru, the prospective disciple is referred to as an “aspiring disciple.” However, this term is not exact. You don’t become a disciple by initiation; you become a disciple by accepting someone in your heart as your guru (teacher) and following his instructions. In other words, if you have accepted a person in your heart as your guru and are serving under his guidance, you are already a (siksa) disciple. If you also hope to someday take initiation from him, you are not an “aspiring disciple” but you are “aspiring to take *diksa*.” In some cases, a devotee may not be ready for initiation for many years, but the relationship of guru and disciple exists from the day the disciple accepts the guru. The relationship is later formalized at the time of *diksa*.

Simply because one is not certain when and if they will be ready for *diksa* is no reason to not accept a siksa guru. And they may not even be expected or forced to honor or worship their guru on the level of a *diksa* disciple. As such, the protocol chosen should be in accord with the development of the relationship.

Deciding to take initiation

After the six month period, if a devotee wants to take initiation from an ISKCON guru, he can approach the guru asking for initiation (in person, by email, or through another devotee). However, one should not feel pressure to choose someone as a *diksa* guru because of the amount of time they have been in Krsna consciousness. Neither should one choose a guru because of peer pressure, or for reasons other than seeing Krsna coming clearly through this person.

If one is not certain who one wishes to choose as their *diksa* guru, one can choose someone as a siksa guru, and one can approach him requesting a siksa relationship (and perhaps explain that you are considering a *diksa* relationship with him as well).

After choosing a *diksa* guru, you may later become attracted to take *diksa* from another guru. There is nothing wrong with this. To do this, ask permission from the devotee you were formerly aspiring to become your *diksa* guru.

You will read more about this topic in my newsletters (written in three parts) titled “What is Guru” (available on my website under newsletters).

Approved to take initiation

When you want to take initiation from a particular guru, contact him with your request. Once accepted by him, you will still need to receive approval from a local ISKCON authority before your guru is authorized to give you *diksa* (how this happens may vary from place to place, but generally an approval letter will be issued by an ISKCON authority in your area (if you don't live near a temple, then you will need to make a connection with a local nama hatta, bhakti vriksha, or local devotees who can approve you, or connect you with devotees who travel to your area). You will be required to answer a test and read a paper as a final measure of approval.

Each temple may have various other requirements before they give you approval, but the basic requirements aside from the above mentioned testing are that you have been chanting 16 rounds and following the four regulative principles for at least six months (including no drinking coffee or tea. Eating of onions and garlic is also to be avoided.). Some temples require that you are engaged in regular service, and have visibly good sadhana, etc. But the main consideration is that your local authority believes that you are steady and serious enough in Krsna consciousness to make initiation vows that you will be able to honor throughout your life.

Keeping Prabhupada in the center

Any guru in ISKCON will help you better understand and come closer to Srila Prabhupada. It is important to understand Srila Prabhupada's position and the position of all gurus in relationship to him.

The GBC resolutions in this regards are as follows:

“As it is enjoined in scripture that a devotee must honour his spiritual master, ISKCON members shall be trained to place their faith, trust, allegiance, first and foremost in the founder-acarya who is the pre-eminent siksa guru for every member of ISKCON. Srila Prabhupada is to be worshipped through his words, his murti, his picture, and his devotees. Disciples of ISKCON diksa-gurus, other than Srila Prabhupada, may worship their gurus according to the guidelines of ISKCON laws and in keeping with the spirit of the abovementioned standards for guru worship in ISKCON.”

“ISKCON members conducting vyasa-puja ceremonies for ISKCON siksa and diksa gurus shall observe them in a modest way, significantly less elaborate in duration and cost, than Srila Prabhupada's vyasa-puja. In general, devotees shall observe these vyasa-puja celebrations in their own locales. In ISKCON, only Srila Prabhupada's vyasa-puja books shall be published.”

“In order to offer appropriate respect to Srila Prabhupada as founder-acarya and pre-eminent spiritual master of ISKCON, it is considered an essential devotional practice for all ISKCON devotees, to observe or perform Srila Prabhupada's guru-puja daily, either in an ISKCON temple, or if not possible, in one's home.”

“With an aim to focus more fully on Srila Prabhupada and every devotee's special relationship with him, and to correct any imbalance in application between the respect

offered to siksa-gurus, diksa-gurus and other senior vaisnavas contributing to a devotee's spiritual progress, an ISKCON siksa or diksa guru may accept public guru-puja (arati and/or foot-bathing) in person once a year on ISKCON property as vyasa-puja."

"Events welcoming vaisnavas, including siksa and diksa gurus to ISKCON temples should be modest (for example, limited to presentation of garland(s) and accompanying kirtana)."

Note that you are not bound to these restrictions when welcoming your guru at your home or at other private places, but you should keep these restrictions in mind if you are doing a program at home in which guests who are not disciples of your guru are participating.

"ISKCON leaders shall teach that Srila Prabhupada's books and teachings are the foundation of the spiritual lives of all ISKCON members. Therefore, all ISKCON members shall consider it their compulsory duty to study Srila Prabhupada's books. Hearing from other devotees' books and teachings is secondary and supplemental and should not be done at the expense of hearing regularly from Srila Prabhupada." At the time of diksa initiation, all disciples will be further instructed by their initiating guru that Srila Prabhupada is their pre-eminent siksa guru as ISKCON's founder-acarya, ever present in his books and teachings. Thus they have a recognized siksa link to Srila Prabhupada."

The Guru's Service

Prabhupada asked his disciples to make disciples. If and when you take initiation or siksa from someone, the guru does this service on behalf of Srila Prabhupada. The purity lies in his following the pure order of Prabhupada. The Nectar of Devotion says that one should follow the acarya under the guidance of the spiritual master. The guru's service, therefore, is to help you better understand and follow Srila Prabhupada, ISKCON's founder-acarya, and to effectively serve his mission. When your guru leaves his body, you will still have the shelter of ISKCON and the many siksa gurus in ISKCON. Since the message of the guru is one, you will see your spiritual master in the many siksa gurus you can learn from, and/or take shelter of, in ISKCON.

Guru's qualification

In our temples we daily chant the Guruvastaka prayers to the spiritual master. We meditate on Prabhupada in that song. Does this song not also describe other ISKCON spiritual masters? When you think of Prabhupada, it is natural to think of Prabhupada's disciples serving as your diksa or siksa guru. However, when asked about this song, Srila Prabhupada said that the author, Visvanatha Chakravarti, is describing his spiritual master, and if one's spiritual master doesn't fit all the descriptions of this song, one should think that his spiritual master is aspiring to achieve what the song describes (ecstatic symptoms, assisting in Radha and Krsna lila, total absorption in Krsna, etc.).

Sometimes devotees overestimate a guru's qualifications, or the qualifications of gurus in ISKCON in general. What is important to understand is that one who is determined to follow the instructions of a pure devotee can steadily advance in Krsna consciousness. Ordinary people can become extraordinary by the mercy of Srila Prabhupada.

Personally, I try my best to follow the same practices that I ask others to follow; practices that Prabhupada wanted us all to follow. If you steadily follow these practices throughout your life, you will someday become Krsna conscious, and perhaps even take up the service of initiating your own disciples.

Of course, it is the etiquette to honor the spiritual master as God's representative – to not think of him as an ordinary person, etc. But this doesn't mean the spiritual master is all-knowing, like God. Neither does it mean the spiritual master is necessarily expert in all material affairs, and is to be seen as a perfect guide in such matters as finance, marriage, health, etc. (although individual gurus may be expert in some areas of material affairs, this is neither the necessary qualification or symptom of a guru). The real qualification of a guru is how he is spreading Krsna consciousness. This means his qualification is that he can give you Krsna consciousness because he has heard from his spiritual master and realized those teachings, and he applies those teachings in his life.

Within ISKCON there are many devotees that can help you in your spiritual life, and thus your *diksa* guru will not be the only person guiding you. Respect all those who help you, and serve and honor the senior devotees. Prabhupada told us to honor the guru's god-brothers (and sisters) just as we honor our own guru. So serve and assist the god-brothers and sisters of your guru as you would serve your guru. This also applies to senior devotees and authorities in ISKCON who are not Prabhupada's disciples.

What is Initiation?

Prabhupada says that, "Initiation means to accept, officially, to abide by the orders of Krsna and His representative." Of course, when you are ready to take initiation it means you have already been chanting sixteen rounds and following the four regulative principles for at least one year. Initiation means to formally vow to continue this process under the guidance of a bona fide spiritual master (it is something like a wedding in that it formalizes a relationship and a vow).

We have seen devotees' spiritual lives actually go down after initiation because they viewed *diksa* as a milestone, a plateau that took much time and effort to achieve. With this attitude, devotees slack off after receiving *diksa*. Initiation, however, is the beginning. Initiation is the point at which we are formally committing to accept the orders of the guru as our life and soul, and are dedicating ourselves to help our guru and Srila Prabhupada spread Krsna consciousness. Initiation means to become increasingly more active in your personal spiritual life, and in helping others advance in Krsna consciousness.

During an initiation in 1966, Prabhupada said that he is giving knowledge, and the initiates are becoming obliged, by accepting initiation to distribute these teachings widely. He said this is their guru-daksina.

Initiation also means the spiritual master is promising to help you become Krsna conscious. So it is the establishment of a working relationship of guru and disciple in helping one another, and in serving Prabhupada's mission together. It is also your second birth and your guru becomes your father. Thus you receive a new name identifying yourself as a servant of God. In fact, Prabhupada said the initiation is not complete unless the disciple's name is changed.

Other Standards for Initiation in ISKCON

Prabhupada writes:

After being initiated and receiving the orders of the spiritual master, the disciple should unhesitatingly think about the instructions or orders of the spiritual master and should not allow himself to be disturbed by anything else. This is also the verdict of Çréla Viçvanätha Cakravarté Öhäkura, who, while explaining a verse of Bhagavad-gétä (vyavasäyätmikä buddhir ekeha kuru-nandana, Bg. 2.41), points out that the order of the spiritual master is the life substance of the disciple. The disciple should not consider whether he is going back home, back to Godhead; his first business should be to execute the order of his spiritual master. Thus a disciple should always meditate on the order of the spiritual master, and that is perfectional meditation. Not only should he meditate upon that order, but he should find out the means by which he can perfectly worship and execute it. (SB 4.24.16)

GBC resolutions regarding first initiation:

In order to receive first initiation one must have been engaged favorably in devotional service, strictly following the four regulative principles, and chanting sixteen rounds a day, for at least one year without interruption.

During the first six months of following the four regulative principles and chanting sixteen rounds daily, a new devotee who is aspiring for initiation should not commit himself to a particular initiating guru. Rather, he should chant Srila Prabhupada's pranama mantra and worship him as founder-acarya of ISKCON and as his siksa guru.

After six months of living in the temple, or a year of being a congregational member of a temple, one may approach a guru and be accepted as an aspirant for future shelter and initiation. Candidates for initiation should accept initiation from a spiritual master only after developing firm and mature faith in that devotee and in his ability to take them back to Godhead.

Each member of ISKCON has a right to accept diksa from a guru of his or her choice. Similarly, the initiating spiritual master is free to accept or reject anyone as a disciple. A spiritual master is not obliged to initiate a devotee simply because a proper recommendation has been given. It should be understood that the purpose of siksa and diksa within ISKCON is to strengthen the devotee's relationship with Srila Prabhupada in terms of fidelity, attachment, and affection. — ISKCON Law 7.2.1

Second initiation:

Regarding your questions, second initiation is real initiation. First initiation is the preliminary, just to make him prepared, just like primary and secondary education. The first initiation gives him chance to become purified, and when he is actually purified then he is recognized as a brahmana and that means real initiation. The eternal bond between disciple and spiritual master begins from the first day he hears. Just like my spiritual master. In 1922 he said in our first meeting, you are educated boys, why don't you preach this cult. That was the beginning, now it is coming to fact. Therefore the relationship began from that day. — SPL to Jadurani, 4 September, 1972

The GBC resolution regarding second initiation states, “*There is a one-year wait between 1st and 2nd initiation.*”

You should strive to eventually become qualified to take second initiation as second initiation will help you. But if you are not qualified for second initiation, it is not necessary to take it as a formality. Unless one is situated in the mode of goodness, chanting the gayatri and other *diksa* mantras received, second initiation will not be effective. First initiation is sufficient to become Krsna conscious.

What Does “No Illicit Sex” Mean?

This is an item of concern that is important to clarify. When you take *diksa*, you will take a vow of “no illicit sex.” What do we mean by “no illicit sex?” Are we breaking the principles if we have sex within marriage more than once a month for the sake of procreation, and then only after chanting fifty rounds?

First, if one is not married, any kind of sex is illicit because Prabhupada has defined illicit sex as “sex outside of marriage.” But this would lead us to believe that if one is married, sex within marriage is acceptable as part of one’s vow of no illicit sex. Is this true?

The ideal is mentioned above. A couple only have sex for procreation, and only after first chanting fifty rounds. However, almost fifty years of ISKCON history tells us that this standard is difficult for everyone to perfectly maintain. This is indeed the goal, and a lesser standard of sex within marriage (more than once a month and not even solely for procreation) should be acknowledged as something which is of a lower standard. Thus, if one cannot perfectly follow the higher standard, one should gradually work towards coming to it. Thus, when vowing to follow the principle of no illicit sex, in the broadest sense we are vowing to remain celibate until marriage, and within marriage aim to follow the highest standard as best we can.

This might seem like an overly liberal approach and not consistent with the mood of achieving excellence in everything we do. However, problems may ensue when devotees who take *diksa* cannot perfectly follow this principle (I refer to this as “The Fourth Principle”), and I have discussed this issue at length with god-brothers and sisters who are both liberal and conservative. We have concluded, based on Prabhupada’s own words, that first initiation can be given a little more liberally than second initiation. However, Prabhupada required that we insure that those taking second initiation are “strictly following.” If you wish to take second initiation and are not sure that you are strictly following “The Fourth Principle,” you can consult me or another senior devotee.

We wish to become free from sexual attachments to advance in Krsna consciousness, so we deal with our sexuality in a way that we can gradually become more attached to Krsna, and more detached from bodily gratification.

What about Gambling?

You may be thinking that since you have rarely (or never) gambled in your life, taking this vow is easy. Gambling also includes wasting time in idle sports and mundane entertainment (however, wrestling and swimming are considered vaisnava sports!). Prabhupada writes:

“Finally, you should not take part in any gambling, including so-called sports, cinema, theater, or any such entertainment.”

Do all initiated devotees in ISKCON perfectly avoid this definition of sports? No. But this is the standard Prabhupada wanted for us. If we can't entirely give up these things immediately, they should be minimized as far as possible. The point is that our time on this planet is limited, and therefore we should utilize as much time as possible to cultivate Krsna consciousness.

What about intoxication?

Do not consume any products with caffeine, or use cigarettes, drugs (unless for medical purposes) or alcohol.

I have written two newsletters on vows, (available on my website www.mahatmadas.com) that are important in helping you better understand the proper mindset required for taking and following vows.

What to expect from your guru

It is important to have realistic expectations about what your guru can do and what he can offer you. The guru gives you instructions that can take you back to Godhead, but he can't force you to take those instructions. He also may not always be able to solve every problem you have, give you as much time as you would like, answer in minute detail every question you have, or be on the highest level of Krsna consciousness, displaying ecstatic symptoms, etc. The guru is your connection to Krsna, and as you serve under his direction you receive his, Prabhupada's, the acaryas' and Krsna's mercy. It is this mercy that embodies the most important aspect of the relationship you have with a guru. As your love for your guru(s) and Prabhupada continues to grow, you show that love by following their instructions and example. Thus, the love and affection you show to your gurus becomes your wealth in advancing in Krsna consciousness.

You may ask, “How can I place my faith in my guru if I don't believe that he knows everything about me and always knows exactly what is best for me in all situations?” The guru is not omniscient. His qualification is how he is spreading Krsna consciousness. You have faith that he knows how to train and engage you in the process of bhakti so that you can advance in Krsna consciousness and go back to Godhead. Prabhupada promised that this process can take us back to Godhead. The guru delivers this very process. When he does this, teaching what he has heard and realized from Prabhupada and the sastra, what he gives is perfect – and the result is perfect. This is not to minimize the spiritual potency, insight, wisdom and expertise of any specific guru. It is true that many gurus insightfully and deeply understand their disciples, and thus know what is best for them in every situation (materially and spiritually). But again, this is not a necessary qualification of a guru (although certainly a bonus).

Making disciples

It is sometimes found that disciples want others to appreciate their guru because they are inspired by and benefited from his teachings, association and service. This often leads to telling others how much you are gaining from your spiritual master, and guiding them to his books, website, music, lectures, etc. This is fine if done in a genuine mood to help someone, but it should not go beyond that, i.e. it should not be with the intention of canvassing disciples for your guru. Yes, it's natural to want to tell others about your guru. But when it comes to telling someone who their guru should be, that is not your position. You can invite them to hear from your guru if you think it will help them, and if they are inspired to hear and learn more, then encouraging or facilitating this is fine. But they must make up their own mind about who to accept as their guru.

The GBC resolution in this regards is as follows:

ISKCON devotees shall instruct new members to take shelter of Srila Prabhupada and receive guidance, training and assistance from those who are practically and directly instructing them in Krsna consciousness. ISKCON members shall not compel or coerce new members to accept any particular siksa or diksa-guru or to take diksa initiation at any particular point in time. New members shall choose when and from whom they wish to request initiation, however, for a minimum of six months of strict sadhana, they must focus their attention on Srila Prabhupada as founder-acarya and their siksa-guru. After having established a solid relationship with His Divine Grace's vani, they may accept an ISKCON guru and after a subsequent minimum of six months, accept vaisnava-diksa.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I offer this as a guide to devotees in general on the topic of guru (and also for any devotee who is interested in accepting me as a siksa or diksa guru).

If you have any questions on what I have discussed, please write me.

I hope this meets you blissfully engaged in devotional service.

Yours in the service of Srila Prabhupada,

Mahatma Das