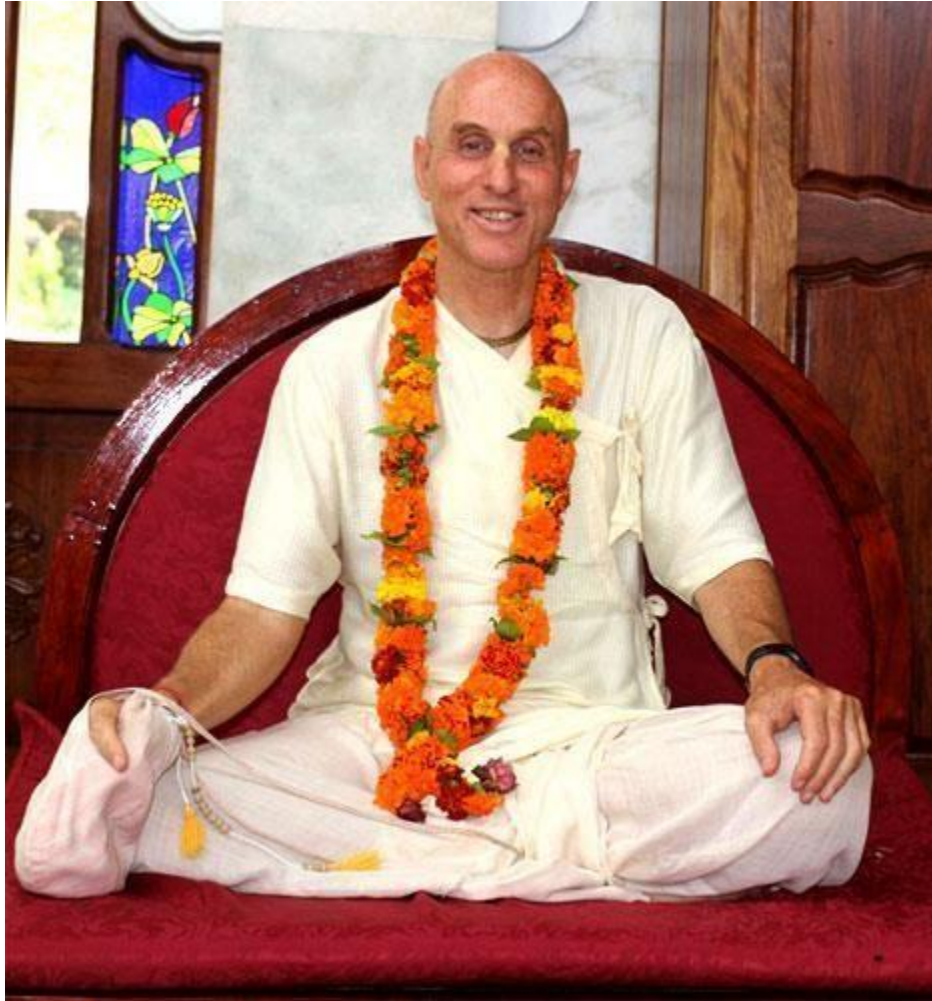




**International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness**  
**Founder-Ācārya: His Divine Grace A.C Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda**

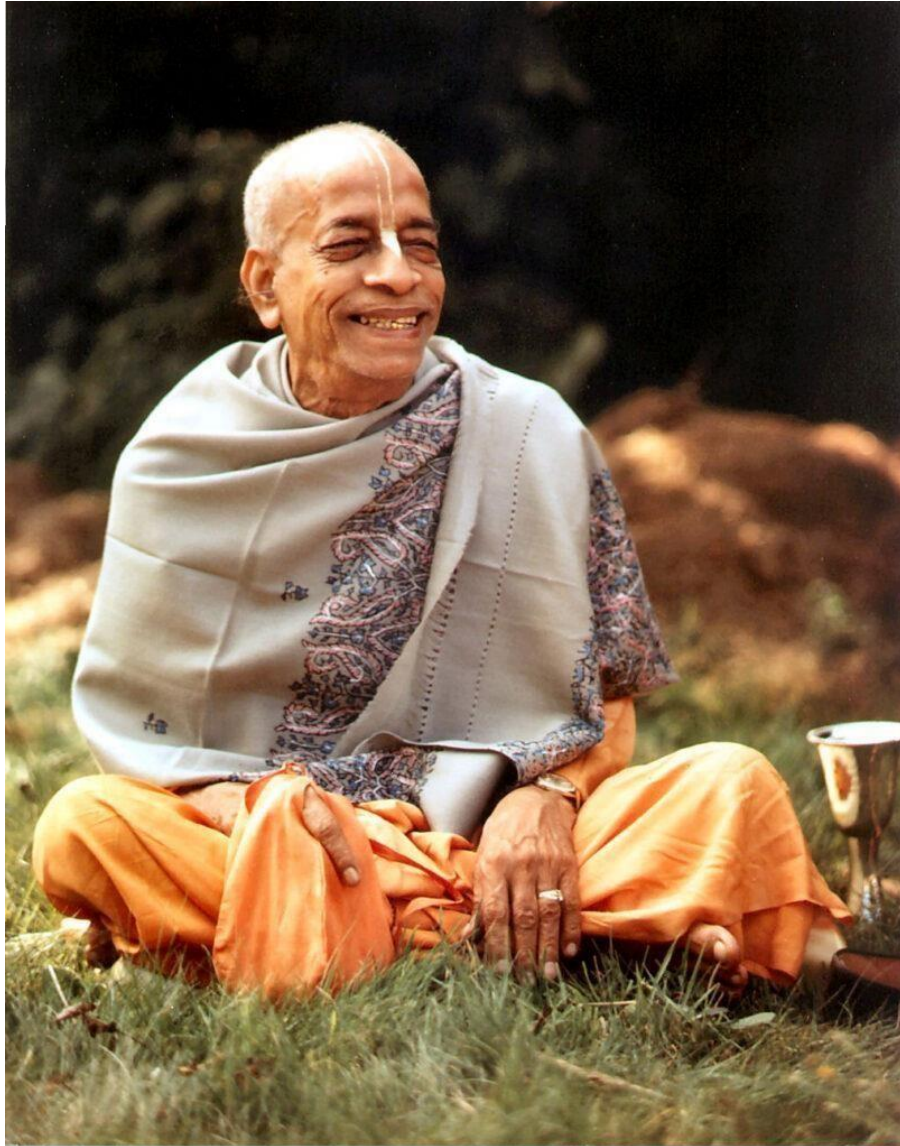
**Disciples' Package Part Two: *Guru Aśraya***  
**His Grace Mahātmā Das (ACBSP)**



**Śrīla Prabhupāda Pranāti**

*nama om viṣṇu-pādāya kṛṣṇa-preṣṭhāya bhū-tale śrīmate  
bhaktivedānta-svāmin iti nāmine  
namas te sārāsvate deve gaura-vāṇī-pracāriṇe nirviṣeṣa-śūnyavādi-pāścātya-deśa-tāriṇe*

I offer my respectful obeisances unto His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, who is very dear to Lord Kṛṣṇa, having taken shelter at His lotus feet. Our respectful obeisances are unto you, O spiritual master, servant of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Gosvāmī. You are kindly preaching the message of Lord Caitanya-deva and delivering the Western countries, which are filled with impersonalism and voidism.



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## From the Admin Team

Hare Kṛṣṇa dear devotee,  
Please accept our most sincere obeisances. Jaya Prabhupāda!  
Welcome to the second segment of the Disciple Package, titled “*Guru Aśraya*”.  
Please read this introduction carefully, as it will assist in navigating your way through this compilation.

This package has been put together with aspiring disciples in mind. If you are new to Kṛṣṇa Consciousness and/or ISKCON, and are considering taking shelter of a spiritual master, or specifically His Grace Mahātmā Prabhu, then this is the information to read through. This package aims specially to help you build your relationship with His Divine Grace Śrīla A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda, our Founder-Ācārya and preeminent *śikṣa* guru. In this segment of the package, you will find guidance on the role of the spiritual master, the disciple, the relationship between the two, as well as how to select a bona fide spiritual master.

You will also find helpful links to the reading material linked with the study requirements of this compilation, as well as to His Grace Mahātmā Prabhu’s social media platforms, to keep updated with his classes, seminars, kirtans, etc.

Should you also be inspired to do so, you will find links through which you can donate to His Grace, to assist with his preaching.

Please note that this package is available as a complete handbook (consisting of all three phases- *Prabhupāda-Aśraya*, *Guru-Aśraya* and *Dīkṣā*: Initiation), as well as three phase-specific handbooks (such as this segment), for your convenience.

We hope your experience with this package will be most fruitful and blissful. Should you have any queries and/or comments pertaining to this package (or in general), please do not hesitate to contact us at [disciplepackage@gmail.com](mailto:disciplepackage@gmail.com).

Your servant,

Līlāśaktī Devī Dāsī

Admin Team

On behalf of HG Mahātmā Prabhu [lilashaktidd.md@gmail.com](mailto:lilashaktidd.md@gmail.com)

## **Study Requirements for *Guru Āśraya*:**

### **Application for *Guru Āśraya***

Once you have adequately met the requirements of *Prabhupāda Āśraya*, you may formally apply to aspire for *dīkṣā*.

*Śāstra* states that the disciple should live with the guru and serve him for a period of one year before initiation. This period is meant for the guru and the disciple to get to know each other. In today's times, we cannot live together physically but we can live together virtually. As the disciple, your concerns should be whether His Grace Mahātmā Prabhu is the right guru for you, and how to become a qualified disciple.

To help you with this, you are requested to read the following articles and papers (if you have not already done so):

1. What is Guru? (Parts 1-3)
2. Expectations of a Guru
3. Should I Still Have a Guru If I Am Not Initiated and Not Yet Aspiring for Dīkṣā?
4. My Realizations from Reading Prabhupāda's Books
5. Deepening Your Relationship with Prabhupāda
6. Harmonizing the Lines of Authority
7. What is Initiation?
8. GBC Rules on Initiation
9. Qualifications of a Bona fide Disciple
10. How Do I Find a Guru and How Do I Know He's the Right One?
11. When Can/Should a Disciple Reject a Bona fide Guru?
12. You Promised

In addition, you are requested to listen to at least 15 hours of the following SoundCloud courses by His Grace Mahatma Prabhu:

1. Vows
2. Guru Tattva
3. Japa

As well as at least one of the following audio courses:

1. Co-operation
2. Forgiveness
3. Relationships

Lastly, you are strongly encouraged to build your relationship with His Grace by sending a monthly sadhana report to [sadhanareport@aol.com](mailto:sadhanareport@aol.com). Details of how this can be compiled can be found on <https://mahatmadas.com/sadhana-service-report>

In addition, we also ask that you complete the ISKCON Disciple Course at this time (if you have not already done so). You will find some helpful links on page 60 that will assist you in completing the course online if it is not available at your nearest temple.

Please feel free to print and make use of the checklist below to keep track of your basic study progress and writing progress:

**Guru Aśraya Checklist**

<b>Book/Article</b>	<b>Reading Completed</b>	<b>Date of Beginning (dd/mm/yy)</b>	<b>Date of Reading Completed(dd/mm/yy):</b>
What is Guru (Parts1-3)			
Expectations of a Guru			
Not initiated and Not Yet Aspiring for <i>Dīkṣā</i> ?			
My Realizations from Reading Prabhupāda's Books			
Deepening your Relationship with Prabhupāda			
Harmonizing the Lines of Authority			
About Initiation and Vows			
GBC Rules on Initiation			
Disciple's Qualities			
Finding a Guru			
When to Reject a Guru			
You Promised			
ISKCON Disciple Course Completed			
Vows Course (15 hours)			
Japa Course (15 hours)			
Guru Tattva Course			
Chosen Optional Course:			

Please send a scanned copy of your Disciples' Course certificate (upon completion) to **[disciplepackage@gmail.com](mailto:disciplepackage@gmail.com)** with the Subject "Name+ Surname, DC Certificate".

We also encourage you to send your checklist (as well as any realizations you may have had from these articles) to **[disciplepackage@gmail.com](mailto:disciplepackage@gmail.com)** with the Subject "Name+ Surname, Guru Ashraya Checklist". Please also feel free to share and discuss your realizations with His Grace Mahātmā Prabhu at **[sadhanareport@aol.com](mailto:sadhanareport@aol.com)**.



## **What is Guru?** **by HG Mahātmā Das (ACBSP)**

The *śāstras* make it clear that taking shelter of a spiritual master is fundamental to the process of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. But what is a guru, and what does it mean to take shelter of a guru? While these questions seem simple, there are nuances that some may not be aware of, and particulars that relate to the unique circumstances of the guru-disciple relationship within ISKCON.

I could write much on this important topic. This is a summary. Due to the depth of the topic, I am dividing this paper into three parts.

I hope this will be of benefit to those looking for a *dīkṣā* or *śīkṣā* guru, those who have a guru, and those who are, or may be taking, the role of guru (either *dīkṣā* or *śīkṣā*) in the future.

\*\*\*

### **Part One**

#### **We all Should Become Guru**

Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted all his disciples to become gurus. Since everyone who comes to ISKCON is a *śīkṣā* disciple of Srīla Prabhupāda, this means he is asking every one of us to be guru. Most devotees feel unqualified to be guru, and thus have difficulty understanding this instruction.

Whenever you help another person, especially one who may be junior to you in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, you are acting as a guru. Guru means one who first shows the path of *bhakti*, one who instructs about *bhakti* and/or one who initiates one into *bhakti*. If you know more than someone else does, you can help them take the next step in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. In the broader sense, you are their teacher, or guru.

#### **Śrīla Prabhupāda's Position**

Before discussing the differences and similarities between the *dīkṣā* and *śīkṣā* guru, it is essential to understand that Śrīla Prabhupāda is everyone's foundational *śīkṣā* guru. Those who begin practicing Kṛṣṇa Consciousness connect with Śrīla Prabhupāda as their *śīkṣā* guru before they think about taking a *dīkṣā* guru.

Anyone can have as intimate a relationship with Śrīla Prabhupāda as his initiated disciples, since he is personally available to everyone through his books, recordings, and service. This relationship does not replace the need for a *dīkṣā* guru or override the benefit that one can get from a living *śīkṣā* guru. It simply underscores the reality that we are all connected to Śrīla Prabhupāda. We are all guided by him and serve him (by serving in ISKCON). All gurus represent him. It is the service of gurus in ISKCON to help disciples come closer to Śrīla Prabhupāda. In this regard, the Governing Body Commission (GBC) released the following statement in March of 2013:

“Śrīla Prabhupāda, as the Founder-Acārya of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, is the preeminent guru for all members of ISKCON. All members of ISKCON, for all generations, are encouraged to seek shelter from Śrīla Prabhupāda. All members of ISKCON are entitled, and encouraged, to have a personal relationship with Śrīla Prabhupāda through his books, teachings, service, and his ISKCON society.”

## There Are Many Gurus

In traditional Indian society, the mother is accepted as the first guru. Thus, the child is taught to touch the mother's feet when they first see her in the morning. Even when Brahmānanda Prabhu's mother came to see Śrīla Prabhupāda, he was instructed by Prabhupāda to touch his mother's feet.

In India when one subject is studied for many years it is not uncommon for the students to refer to their teacher as their guru. You even find *āśramas* where "disciples" live with their guru to study subjects like music, drama, dance, wrestling, astrology, or Sanskrit.

## Honor is Given to the Guru

Although the details of etiquette may differ from relationship to relationship, the fundamentals of the guru-disciple relationship in the material sphere are similar to the guru-disciple relationship in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. The guru teaches and disciplines the student, and the student honors, respects, and follows their guru as a representative of God.

## There are Many Representatives of God

In the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (11.17.27), Śrī Kṛṣṇa says “*ācāryam mām vijānīyān*” (One should know the *ācārya* (teacher) as Myself.) This *śloka* is normally applied to one's *dīkṣā* guru, but when studied within the context of Vedic culture we find that many different persons represent God to their dependents.

The King is accepted as *naradeva*, God's representative. *Śāstra* says that even a guest represents God and should be honored as one would honor God. And as mentioned, the mother, father, and teacher represent God. The *Rāmāyaṇa* even teaches that ‘the husband is the guru for the wife’ - *strīṇām bhartā hi daivatam*.

We thus see that honoring another as a representative of God is not exclusive to an official guru-disciple relationship within a spiritual disciplic line. For this reason, the *Bhāgavatam* states that one should not take any superior role unless one is able to deliver his dependents from the cycle of birth and death. In other words, if one takes a superior role, he is responsible to be a guru for his dependents.

Some may think that the formalities of the guru-disciple relationship in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness are unique. This thought usually is a result of being raised in a society which does not demonstrate traditional Vedic dynamics of such high regard for superiors.

## Who Can be Guru?

In ISKCON, there has been - and still may be for some devotees - a misunderstanding of who is qualified to be a guru and what their position is. As mentioned earlier, in the broadest sense of the term, anyone helping you in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness is your guru. For example, while a person is giving class, that person is your guru (teacher), and should therefore be respected as such. Of course, after class, such a person may take on a different role in relationship to you, but while giving class you honor them as representing Vyāsadeva.

In the early days, Prabhupāda stated that “by 1975 I want all of my disciples to become gurus.” What did Śrīla Prabhupāda mean? His disciples were all young devotees, not highly elevated or mature in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, so it seemed they were not ready to become *dīkṣā* gurus so soon. One thing is certain:

Prabhupāda often spoke of his demise and how he was depending on his disciples to carry on the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness movement. Fundamental to this task was the instructing and initiating of disciples.

One might logically think that he should have asked his godbrothers to fulfill that role, since it appears that his disciples did not have the qualifications of guru that we find in *śāstra*, whereas many of his godbrothers were highly advanced and had been initiating disciples for decades.

Prabhupāda did not ask his godbrothers to be gurus in ISKCON; he asked his disciples. Also, Prabhupāda did not say, “I want you to become guru, but it will take you many, many years before you become qualified and perhaps you will never become qualified.”

One might question why he didn't say this, because *śāstra* defines a spiritual master as an unalloyed pure devotee; an *uttama bhakta* (topmost devotee), one who is cent per cent engaged in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, has no propensity to criticize others, is always thinking how to save the fallen souls, and never falls down. So naturally the question arises as to what Prabhupāda meant when he told his young disciples that he wanted all of them to become gurus soon. And such a question can be even more confusing in light of the fact that many of the original gurus were unable to strictly maintain their Kṛṣṇa consciousness, although they were some of the most advanced devotees in the movement at the time of Prabhupāda's departure.

### Is Guru Synonymous with “Pure Devotee?”

To answer this question, we must first understand how *śāstra*, and Śrīla Prabhupāda, define the term “pure devotee.” Prabhupāda once said, “Devotee is a big word. We are trying to be devotees.” So, if we are trying to be devotees, and the qualification of a guru is to be a pure devotee, then a guru is rare, especially in ISKCON. It would thus seem that in 1977, few, if any, were qualified to be guru. But by “pure devotee” Prabhupāda meant something different.

Once Prabhupāda was asked how many pure devotees there are on the planet. He answered with a question: “How many devotees are in ISKCON?” He was told there are about one thousand devotees in ISKCON. Then he said, “This is how many pure devotees are on the planet!”

According to *śāstra*, the stage of *madhyama-adhikārī* (the middle stage of *bhakti*) is the beginning stage of pure devotional service. *Madhyama* begins from the stage of *niṣṭhā*, steadiness in *bhakti*. Steadiness in *bhakti* comes after unwanted material desires and tendencies are sufficiently neutralized (*anārtha-nivṛtti*). In this stage, a devotee's *bhakti* is motivated by the desire to please guru and Kṛṣṇa and not by *jñāna* (the desire to be liberated, or to be free from suffering), or by *karma* (the desire for material gain).

*The Nectar of Devotion* defines pure devotional service as service free from *jñāna*, *karma*, etc. This freedom takes place on the *madhyama* platform. Thus, a *madhyama-adhikārī* is a pure devotee. (Thus, in a broader sense, *madhyama* is the beginning stage of *uttama bhakti*).

As a side point, *kaniṣṭha* devotees (the beginning stages of *bhakti*) may act as *madhyamas*, but so long as they are *kaniṣṭha*, they are not permanently situated on the *madhyama* platform. In other words, there is a difference between acting on the *madhyama* platform and being on the *madhyama* platform, just as there is a difference between experiencing *bhava* (emotion), and steadily being on the platform of *bhava* (the preliminary stage of love of God).

One who is fixed on the *Madhyama* stage is a pure devotee and is engaged in pure devotional service (service not motivated by *jñāna*, *karma*, or other desires). Therefore, such a pure devotee can accept disciples. And Prabhupāda encourages such devotees to accept disciples, if not *dīkṣā* disciples, then *śīkṣā* disciples.

### **Are *Dīkṣā* Gurus Special?**

It is a mistake to believe that because someone is a *dīkṣā* guru in ISKCON, he is necessarily on a higher platform of *bhakti* than others. This misconception often stems from misunderstanding the definition of a pure devotee (as mentioned above), or thinking that because someone gives *dīkṣā*, they must be special or have some special empowerment that others do not have.

### **How Does One Presently Become a *Dīkṣā* Guru in ISKCON?**

Presently in ISKCON, one becomes a *dīkṣā* guru as follows (this procedure may change in the future):

To nominate a prospective guru, a prospective disciple of that person will submit that devotee's name to the GBC for consideration. A local committee of those who know the candidate is formed, and they affirm that the candidate is a loyal follower of Śrīla Prabhupāda and ISKCON, has good *sādhana*, is qualified to properly guide others in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, and is visibly on the *madhyama-adhikārī* platform. The GBC is then informed that the candidate has been recommended by a local committee. After six months, if less than three GBC members voice any concerns about this devotee accepting disciples, the prospective guru receives approval to begin initiating disciples.

If more than three GBC members have concerns about the candidate, these concerns are discussed with the candidate. Subsequently, it is decided whether the candidate can initiate or not, and if not, what would need to be done to be allowed to initiate. Concerns might range from the candidate's ability to maintain the regulative principles to their loyalty to ISKCON, or about issues of integrity, but these concerns are not unique to a *dīkṣā* guru. All who seek a leadership role in ISKCON are also subject to similar concerns.

I am describing the above procedure to point out that a devotee does not become different, more special, or elevated overnight to a super status of *bhakti* by some divine *dīkṣā* guru potency, when they become a *dīkṣā* guru. In other words, becoming a *dīkṣā* guru within ISKCON is a service that some devotees feel inspired to take up. As such, there are devotees who are highly advanced in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness - sometimes more advanced than some *dīkṣā* gurus - who do not feel they can best serve Śrīla Prabhupāda by accepting *dīkṣā* disciples.

Being a *dīkṣā* guru in ISKCON is a service to Śrīla Prabhupāda and the society. It is a service that many of you reading this newsletter, believe it or not, may someday be either asked, or inspired, to take up. Long before you may officially take up this service, you will likely have opportunities to act as a guru to juniors.

In 2013, I received a letter from the GBC secretary informing me that I may now give initiation. Did I immediately have a special guru *śakti* descend on me? Have I become more special, unique, or qualified than those who are initiating? Did my level of Kṛṣṇa consciousness get automatically upgraded?

It would be nice to get an upgrade as a side benefit of taking up this service. Side benefits (mercy) are, of course, there for all of us when we please Śrīla Prabhupāda, and if we can please Śrīla Prabhupāda through this service, then we will get his mercy. And by this mercy we will further advance. And, if we surrender to this service (as with any service) we will get the empowerment to do it. Other than this, there is no unique spiritual power that only those who become *dīkṣā* gurus receive.

\*\*\*\*

## **Part Two**

### **Śrīla Prabhupāda on Guru**

I wish to begin by looking at the qualification of the *śīkṣā* and *dīkṣā* gurus in ISKCON. There may be a tendency to magnify the qualities of one's guru in an attempt to reconcile in one's mind the exalted nature of the guru described in śāstra with the position of one's own guru, thinking that if he is a guru, he must be on the topmost level of Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.

Of course, he may be on that level, but Prabhupāda has indicated many times that seeing Kṛṣṇa face-to-face, being in *līlā* with Kṛṣṇa, having descended from the spiritual world, being in direct contact with the Supersoul, knowing perfectly past, present and future, are not necessary qualifications of a guru. The *Madhyama bhakta* can also be guru if he faithfully explains and follows the teachings of his spiritual master and the previous *açāryas*.

Prabhupāda said that one who is a good follower becomes a good leader. One who repeats the message as they have heard it, without adding or subtracting anything, who strictly follows the practices of Kṛṣṇa Consciousness and dedicates their life to spreading and teaching Kṛṣṇa Consciousness is qualified to take disciples and is a "pure devotee."

It is crucial to understand these qualifications so that we do not:

1. Misunderstand the status of gurus in ISKCON;
2. Create factions of "my guru is the real guru;"
3. Minimize Prabhupāda's instructions to us to become guru (either *dīkṣā* or *śīkṣā*);
4. Deny that becoming a guru is a service that is accessible to all sincere and strict devotees.

Therefore, all of us - although we may feel we are useless and without any good qualities - can become empowered to guide and save conditioned souls if we sincerely take up the order to be guru.

Whether we take "guru" to mean *śīkṣā* or *dīkṣā* guru is not relevant to this discussion. Certainly, I do not mean to minimize the special position of the *dīkṣā* guru, but I do want to emphasize that the qualifications for both are similar.

As another point of clarification, when I use the term *śīkṣā* guru in this article, I use it in the context of a guru-disciple relationship, not in the sense of a relationship in which one sometimes gets advice from another devotee, or occasionally takes inspiration from their lectures or writings. In other words, I use it here when there is a relationship in which one is regularly guided in one's Kṛṣṇa Consciousness and is committed to following and serving their *śīkṣā* guru (although the term *śīkṣā* guru can certainly be used in less formal relationships).

**Please Note:** In this paper, I have referred to the *dīkṣā* guru as “he.” In 2020, the GBC ratified a resolution acknowledging that women can initiate. Therefore, please note that, while I may make use of the word “he”, I am referring to both male and female devotees i.e.: he and/or she.

### **Some Flawed Understandings of Guru Tattva:**

Due to improper or incomplete understandings of guru tattva, unhealthy practices regarding guru/disciple relations sometimes take place. I shall hereby list some examples.

#### **Scenario 1: You Do Not Recognize Your Guru**

A non-initiated devotee is getting regular guidance from one who acts as a *śīkṣā* guru, and the relationship develops nicely. Then, the *śīkṣā* disciple decides to aspire for initiation from another guru, not because there is any problem with the *śīkṣā* relationship, but because the disciple doesn't fully understand that their *śīkṣā* guru could be (or should be) their *dīkṣā* guru. The disciple may not understand this if they are under the impression that a guru is only someone who:

- Is already currently initiating,
- Has many disciples,
- Is a *sannyāsī*,
- Holds important positions in ISKCON or, ● Is special or serves a different purpose to that of a *śīkṣā* guru.

This misunderstanding is not uncommon, and it shows that sometimes a devotee, for reasons mentioned above (or other reasons) may not be able to recognize who their guru really is.

In the above scenario, what can happen is that a devotee's attention begins to be more focused on their *dīkṣā* guru, taking less advantage of the guidance given by the *śīkṣā* guru, which could alter the relationship in other ways. This does not always mean that the devotee will end up being worse off, but sometimes this is the case. In other words, when choosing a *dīkṣā* guru, one should not make the mistake of lessening one's connection with one's *śīkṣā* guru or feel the need to replace one's *śīkṣā* guru with a “real” guru. Of course, some *śīkṣā* gurus do not, or do not want to initiate, but still the relationship with one's *śīkṣā* guru can be as valuable, or even more so, than one's relationship with one's *dīkṣā* guru.

#### **Scenario 2: You Are Uncomfortable Changing Gurus**

One may be aspiring for initiation from a well-known guru in ISKCON and then one meets another devotee who gives them the kind of time and guidance that is not possible for that *dīkṣā* guru to give. As such, a very close guru-disciple relationship develops in a manner that the devotee feels is extremely valuable. In some cases, this relationship becomes deeper and more beneficial than the relationship one has with the *dīkṣā* guru they are aspiring for, and taking *dīkṣā* from their *śīkṣā* guru (if the *śīkṣā* guru is willing to give it) would be the natural step forward. But, again, the disciple may not recognize this person as a potential *dīkṣā* guru or know that it is okay to accept him as a *dīkṣā* guru and then maintain a *śīkṣā* relationship with the guru from whom the devotee was formerly aspiring to take initiation.

Let us look at some reasons one may feel uncomfortable changing one's choice of *dīkṣā* guru.

- Everyone in one area takes *dīkṣā* from a select group of gurus. Since one has seen these devotees as gurus from the early days of their devotional service, they feel it would be improper,

disrespectful, socially unacceptable or even offensive to not take initiation from one of them (especially if everyone else is doing this).

- The devotees in the area where the aspiring disciple lives are predominately disciples of one or two gurus, so one may feel that they wouldn't get as much support (or be a part of the "family") if one takes *dīkṣā* from someone who has few or no disciples in that area.
- One has had good or long-standing relationships with the prominent *dīkṣā* gurus in one's area, albeit with little personal association between the two.
- One feels it would be offensive to tell the guru from which one once aspired to take *dīkṣā* that they have had a change of heart and wishes to take *dīkṣā* from someone else. It is not actually offensive and it's not uncommon. If this does happen, the devotee should ask permission from the guru they once aspired for, to aspire for *dīkṣā* from another devotee. One will then receive blessings to pursue a new relationship.

And there can be other reasons. Of course, one may take *dīkṣā* from the prominent local guru, the one initially aspired for, and still have an intimate relationship with one's *śīkṣā* guru, perhaps even more intimate than with one's *dīkṣā* guru. I certainly don't want to imply that there is anything wrong in choosing a prominent guru, but such decisions should be made in full knowledge of guru *tattva*, both in terms of philosophy and how the institution of guru is meant to harmoniously function within ISKCON. In other words, one should not choose a guru simply because everyone else is choosing him.

### Scenario 3: You Only Want to Hear from Your Guru

One problem is that devotees only want to hear from their guru. Of course, one should want to hear from their guru. But it is not healthy or pleasing to one's guru if his disciples only attend his programs when he is in town but are rarely seen at other temple programs or functions when he is not present. This is certainly not the way Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted ISKCON to function.

### The Essence of Guru

In the *Nectar of Devotion* (1.1.74), Rūpa Gosvāmī says “*ādau gurv-āśrayaḥ*,” in the beginning of spiritual life one should take shelter of a guru. The main aspect of taking shelter is inquiring from the guru and following his instructions. The main function of the guru is not in giving initiation; it is in giving guidance. Of course, initiation is important, but as I said in Part One, one should take shelter of a guru and work under his guidance even if one feels they are not yet ready for formal initiation.

It is primarily through the instructions of the guru, meaning through the execution of these instructions, that we advance. Therefore, it is **important to note** that in our disciplic succession, many of the guru-disciple relationships listed in the *paramparā* are *śīkṣā* relationships, not *dīkṣā* relationships.

### The Prominent Role of the Śīkṣā Guru

There are several other common situations in ISKCON, different in nature from what we described above but similar in practice, in which a *śīkṣā* guru plays a significant role in a devotee's life, or could play a significant role if the devotee pursued such a relationship. For example,

- The *dīkṣā* guru gives up strictly following Kṛṣṇa Consciousness;
- The *dīkṣā* guru leaves ISKCON;
- The *dīkṣā* guru leaves his body;
- The disciple is doing extended study under someone other than their *dīkṣā* guru;

- The disciple is working closely with another senior devotee, especially someone who is a guru;
- The *dīkṣā* guru and disciple have little contact or interaction (for geographical or other reasons) and the disciple needs regular guidance from a senior devotee.

### ***Śīkṣā* and *Dīkṣā* Are Equal**

The prominence of either a *dīkṣā* or *śīkṣā* guru in the life of a devotee will vary according to individual circumstances, and sometimes a *śīkṣā* guru-disciple relationship develops so naturally that to minimize the relationship would be both unfortunate and disrespectful.

If one sees and treats the person they take guidance from like a guru, it is good (and proper) to acknowledge that an ongoing *śīkṣā* relationship exists (or is wanted), that one values it, and that one wants to maintain it.

\*\*\*\*



## Part Three

### The Guru's Perspective

I guide many devotees who are not ready for initiation, or not even thinking about initiation. Through the exchanges we have I can see how their willingness to be guided, to reveal their problems, to "take shelter," and to apply what I suggest helps them in many ways. I can see how this guidance will enable many of them to someday become qualified to take initiation.

Does this mean they should someday become my initiated disciples? This is a good question.

First, let us understand that I do not have to be (or may not be) the only person from whom they receive regular instructions, or with whom they have a close relationship. Since one can have many *śīkṣā* gurus, it is common that one may find guidance and inspiration in many places. One should never feel this is wrong, and thus limit oneself to the wonderful guidance they can get from the many senior devotees in ISKCON.

If we see the oneness of guru, that Kṛṣṇa is the guru, and that the guru represents Kṛṣṇa and Prabhupāda, then we see the oneness of all gurus in their guidance and desire to help us advance in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. In this sense, we should be open to taking guidance from many, and to take more shelter of any devotee that inspires us, even if he is not a *dīkṣā* guru and does not plan to become a *dīkṣā* guru.

So, should those who take shelter of a *śīkṣā* guru eventually take initiation from him? There is no right or wrong answer. Taking initiation from a guru is a matter of personal choice. For example, let us say a guru is giving guidance to someone and they are advancing well, but simultaneously they have been getting guidance or inspiration from several other devotees, including some *dīkṣā* gurus. After years of predominantly taking guidance from one guru, would it be wrong for them to one day tell him that they have been accepted by so and so to become his disciple and will be initiated in six months? As I mentioned before, this is normal and common. The case where it may be somewhat abnormal is:

1. When the *śīkṣā* relationship is stronger;
2. When the *śīkṣā* relationship is more beneficial than the relationship one has with the *dīkṣā* guru (and the *śīkṣā* guru is also a *dīkṣā* guru);
3. If the decision was made due to pressure;
4. If the decision was made for any reasons that are not fundamental to the choice of a *dīkṣā* guru (of course, if one's *śīkṣā* guru is not giving *dīkṣā*, such a choice is necessary).

### Who is My Guru?

Take *śīkṣā* from many sources. After doing so for some time, it should become more and more obvious that one of these devotees inspires, helps, guides, relates to, motivates and builds your faith and desire to surrender in a special way. That is normally the person from whom you would ask initiation (provided they give initiation).

For devotees who are making a decision about whom to approach for *dīkṣā*, and for those who help devotees in making these decisions, I would like to offer some helpful points of consideration that are gleaned from real life in ISKCON. I do not offer these points as the absolute criteria for choosing a guru, but as points to consider when deciding from whom you eventually may want to take initiation.

## **1. How Often Will You See Your Guru?**

Does he live or travel in parts of the world that are far from where you live and rarely, if ever, come to where you live? In other words, is it important for you to have some regular personal contact with your guru, or are e-mail and online classes sufficient?

## **2. Can You Correspond with Him Regularly?**

Is he too busy or does he have too many disciples for you to receive regular personal instructions or instructions via e-mail or social media? This question also should take into account how often you feel you will need personal instructions. Of course, some gurus can provide such instructions through their senior disciples whose association is more easily available; or some devotees will be able to get this kind of guidance from others and be satisfied with this. However, others might feel isolated from (or even neglected by) their guru when it is not possible for him to give regular (or even any) personal guidance.

## **3. Can You Help Him in His Service?**

For some devotees it is important to have direct service to their guru. If this is important to you, consider if there will be opportunity and facility for this?

Also, consider if he emphasizes, or works on, projects that do not relate to your service, or service that you are not interested in or inclined to work on. Is his focus, for example, on developing *varṇāśrama* and working on farm projects, whereas your nature and inclination is to develop preaching programs in big cities? Will his emphasis on these specific projects make you feel awkward – even guilty - that you are not working on his projects? Could this even undermine your enthusiasm for the projects you are working on? Does he tend to be more traditional, strict, formal, etc. in his approach to teaching or practicing Kṛṣṇa Consciousness or more liberal? Other aspects of his personality/nature that you may take into consideration are how philosophical, academic, soft, disciplinary, etc. he may be. In other words, do you relate well to his nature and style of preaching Kṛṣṇa Consciousness?

## **4. Do His Actions Represent Your Idea of Guru?**

Do you have an image of a guru who is orthodox, thereby making it difficult for you to follow a guru who does not adhere to these standards? Or does he adhere to standards that are, in your mind, too formal, strict, old-fashioned, or orthodox, and thus not relatable to you?

You may think these considerations to be mundane, but Bhaktivinoda Thākura, in quoting Sanātana Gosvāmī's advice that the guru and disciple observe one another for one year, says that part of this process of observation is to determine if the guru and disciple are a good match. It could happen in the future that you have difficulty accepting instructions or opinions from your guru because of some or all the above reasons. These are realities we should be aware of.

## Expectations

Connected to the list above is the problem of expectations. A disciple may have certain expectations at the time of choosing a guru or receiving initiation. Expectations that either the guru cannot fulfill, that no guru can or should fulfill, or that circumstances may later make it difficult or impossible for the guru to fulfill. Therefore, it is important for both guru and disciple to be clear about expectations.

It is important to know that the guru's perceived inability to fulfill some of these expectations is not simply related to his nature or limitations (he won't spend time counseling female disciples, deal with householder problems, etc.). But they may be based on a misunderstanding that you have of a guru's position. Some prospective disciples have, as I explained, a stereotyped (mis)understanding of the position of their guru, and may feel let down in the future when they find out that their guru is not a *mahā-bhāgavata* who is directly speaking to Radharani, doesn't have extraordinary powers, doesn't exhibit ecstatic symptoms, may not understand the finer points of *rasa*, etc.

One of the original eleven gurus in ISKCON tells us that his early disciples used to glorify him by saying that, "He is taking *prasādam* with Radharani." After a number of gurus fell down and ISKCON devotees became clearer about what a guru is and isn't, this kind of glorification changed to, "Thank you, Gurudeva, for steadily following the regulative principles." The understanding is that the main qualifications of a guru are to be an obedient follower of his guru, relating the teachings of his guru perfectly, and is dedicated to giving Kṛṣṇa to others.

## The Institution or the Person?

Often, more than making a personal connection with the guru, one makes a connection with the institution of the guru: the many disciples, books, programs, etc., that the guru has. For some devotees, this is exactly what inspires them. This gives them what they want and need. They feel sheltered by the guru's organization as well as programs and projects the guru has developed. Others who want or need a more personal connection would do better to find a guru who can give them more personal guidance.

On the other hand, sometimes a devotee may choose a guru with many disciples to avoid a deep personal connection with him, and in this way become less accountable to his guru. This, of course, is not the basis for choosing a guru.

## Looking Back

Some devotees today look back on the time when they accepted their guru, and realize that they made less of a personal choice and more of a social choice, sometimes even accepting the *dīkṣā* guru at the expense of recognizing the deep relationship they had (or potentially could/should have had) with their *śīkṣā* guru. In retrospect, they realize that at the time they were unable to understand or acknowledge that their *śīkṣā* guru was indeed a real guru, someone who played - and could have continued to play - a more significant role in their life if only they had recognized the importance of that relationship.

Or this happens later when they meet another guru and think, "If I have met you earlier, I would have taken *dīkṣā* from you instead."

You might then ask, "Should I necessarily take *dīkṣā* from the *śīkṣā* guru who is giving me the most significant guidance?" Ultimately, every situation is different and personal, and there may be advantages or disadvantages to this. However, Śrīla Prabhupāda does say that generally the *śīkṣā* guru can become one's *dīkṣā* guru.

## Concluding Words

What I have done in these articles is made you aware of important guru/disciple dynamics and gave various perspectives on this issue for your personal consideration. It is not a black and white issue. Sometimes, just having an advanced devotee as one's guru, knowing that he is powerfully engaged in devotional service, having access to his lectures, feeling his mercy through following his instructions, being engaged in service, and also having good *sanga* is all one needs to be perfectly situated in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. For others, they are most inspired if they can personally serve his preaching mission. And for others, having some personal contact throughout the year is essentially important.

Śrīla Prabhupāda asked all his disciples to become gurus and accept their own disciples, whether it be as *śīkṣā* or *dīkṣā* guru. Devotees accept the position of guru as a service to him, a service to ISKCON, and a service to their disciples. The success of this service depends on following the instructions of Śrīla

Prabhupāda, passing those instructions on to others, and setting an example by living those instructions. Every bona fide guru does this and is thus capable of bringing their disciples to the lotus feet of Kṛṣṇa. Still, as one of my godbrothers said, "There are different lids for different pots."

Speaking for myself - and I believe I speak for other gurus - whatever good qualities you see in us, whatever success we have, or whatever opulence we possess, are all due to Prabhupāda's mercy. Failing to follow his orders will turn us into ordinary people battling with our mind and senses, trying to squeeze out some happiness from this world. Therefore, any glorification of Prabhupāda's disciples who have become guru is direct glorification of Śrīla Prabhupāda, and any service offered to them is service to Prabhupāda. Prabhupāda wanted his disciples to be glorified. He said the more they are glorified, the more he is glorified. And of course, they are glorious because they serve Prabhupāda, the most glorious.

## Expectations of a Guru

I wrote this as a letter to one disciple who has unrealistic expectations of a guru. Then I realized that these points are relevant to many other devotees, hence I am sharing this with all of you. While I have discussed the principle of guru and guru-disciple relationship in several lecture series such as *Guru Tattva*; *Śīkṣā, Dīkṣā and Founder-Ācārya*, and *My Memories of Śrīla Prabhupāda*, as well as articles on *What is Guru* (3-part series), I realized that many devotees still have misconceptions about the guru-disciple relationship. In addition to this article, I want to specifically address the principle of expectations of a guru. I request that you read and listen to my articles and lectures on this topic.

**Also, please carefully read this document and complete the exercise at the end.**

### **\*\*\*\*\* The Guru's Service**

Prabhupāda asked his disciples to make disciples. When you take initiation or *śikṣā* from someone, the guru does this service on behalf of Śrīla Prabhupāda. The purity lies in his following the pure order of Prabhupāda. *The Nectar of Devotion* says that one should follow the *ācāryas* under the guidance of the spiritual master. The guru's service, therefore, is to help you better understand and follow Śrīla Prabhupāda, ISKCON's Founder-Acārya and to effectively serve his mission. When your guru leaves his body, you will still have the shelter of ISKCON and the many *śikṣā* gurus in ISKCON. And of course, you always have and will always have the shelter of Śrīla Prabhupāda who lives forever in his instructions.

Since the message of the guru is one, you will see your spiritual master in the many *śikṣā* gurus you can learn from, and/or take shelter of, in ISKCON.

### **Guru's Qualification**

In our temples, we daily chant the *Guruvāstakam* prayers to the spiritual master. We meditate on Prabhupāda in that song. Does this song not also describe other ISKCON spiritual masters? When you think of Prabhupāda, it is natural to think of Prabhupāda's disciples serving as your *dīkṣā* or *śikṣā* guru. So, the answer is that you are glorifying your gurus. However, when asked about this song, Śrīla Prabhupāda said that the author, Viśvanāth Cakravartī Ṭhākura, 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 Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa *līlā*, total absorption in Kṛṣṇa, 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 Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. Ordinary people can become extraordinary by the mercy of Śrīla Prabhupāda. The qualification of a guru is their fidelity to Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions and mission.

Personally, I try my best to follow the same practices that I ask others to follow; practices that Prabhupāda wanted us all to follow. If you steadily follow these practices throughout your life, you will someday become Kṛṣṇa 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 that 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 Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. This means his qualification is that he can give you Kṛṣṇa 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 *dīkṣā* guru will not be the only person guiding you. Respect all those who help you and serve and honor the senior devotees. Prabhupāda told us to honor the guru's godbrothers (and sisters) just as we honor our own guru. Therefore, try to serve and assist the godbrothers and sisters of your guru as you would serve your guru. This also applies to senior devotees and authorities in ISKCON who are not Prabhupāda's disciples.

## What Are *Your* Expectations of a Guru?

Do you need a psychologist to solve your emotional issues? A parent to run to whenever you have a problem, or even to replace the loving parent you never had? Do you expect your guru to be someone who will always do what you need or want him to do, and make time for you whenever required? Do you expect him to be so self-sacrificing that he gives up his own needs or *sādhana* for you? Do you expect or need him to answer every e-mail you send within a few days or even answer every e-mail you send at all? Will you need to get his love to feel complete? Is it important that you can write often about what's going on in your life and heart, sometimes writing very long and detailed letters and needing him to contemplate and remember all the details?

Maybe you expect him to teach important topics that Prabhupāda did not address? You might need him to be perfect, manifest ecstatic symptoms, be one of the leaders of ISKCON or be a special member of ISKCON. Do you need to always be close to him, pampered by him, even honored or loved by him above other disciples? Do you want to have a guru you can advise, or even control, when you feel he is working too hard, giving too much mercy to the undeserving or making decisions that would cause him problems? And finally, do you expect your guru to make you Kṛṣṇa Conscious without a sufficient amount of your own determined effort?

If these or similar expectations are what you are looking for in a guru, you could be let down. Sure, some gurus live up to some of these expectations some of the time, but none will ever live up to all of them. These are not the job descriptions of a guru, although individual gurus may sometimes do the above according to time and circumstance. However, expecting them to be any of these all the time is misleading and can lead to disappointment. When you become a disciple, you should know what to expect and know that the affection of a guru is transmitted primarily in his instructions.

If certain expectations are important to you, and if your guru cannot meet them, you should take this into consideration before taking initiation. And if certain expectations are important, you should ask him if he can fulfill those expectations.

## 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 Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, displaying ecstatic symptoms, etc. The guru is your connection to Kṛṣṇa, and as you serve under his direction you receive his mercy, as well as the mercy of Prabhupada, the *ācāryas*, and Kṛṣṇa. 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 Prabhupāda 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 Kṛṣṇa 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 that he always knows exactly what is best for me in all situations?" The guru is not omniscient. His qualification is how he is spreading Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. You have faith that he knows how to train and engage you in the process of *bhakti* so that you can advance in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness and go back to Godhead. Prabhupāda 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 Prabhupāda and *śāstra*, 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), and not something a guru is required to do. For example, a *sannyāsī* with no experience of marriage may do the greatest service for his *grhastha* couples by not giving them much advice about married life, but asking them to take guidance from a trusted senior *grhastha* couple.

What should you definitely expect from a guru? A guru is someone who directs you back to godhead, who takes responsibility for your spiritual life by guiding you through his writings, lectures, and classes and when and if possible, through personal interactions either face to face or via social media, and who sees that you are spiritually taken care of and well-situated in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.

He is someone who is dedicated to Śrīla Prabhupāda and firmly fixed in his spiritual practices and services. He connects you to Kṛṣṇa, continually guides you through his teachings, and prays for your spiritual advancement. He always gives you shelter and accepts you back, even after you disobeyed his instructions or left him. His life and teachings are your inspiration to continue day in and day out in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. His service is your treasure.

### **Clear Communication with Your Guru**

Again, if you expect more than this, let me know your expectations. But there are some obvious things to consider. The more disciples I have, the less time I can give each disciple. So, the time I am able to give you today may decrease in the future when I have more disciples.

The *Sādhana* Report is a way of keeping touch on a monthly basis. I receive numerous communications daily, so the *Sādhana* Report streamlines the process of communication with me. Otherwise, some devotees like to write to me often with their realizations, problems and questions, and what often happens is that I get so much correspondence that I cannot find sufficient time to devote to my projects.

### **Fly Your Own Airplane**

When a disciple didn't follow Śrīla Prabhupāda well and was having difficulty, Prabhupāda would say, "What can I do?" meaning Prabhupada has given the disciple all he needs to be Kṛṣṇa conscious, but if he doesn't take it there is nothing more Prabhupada can do. It is the mercy of the guru that enables the disciple to advance. This mercy comes through following his instructions and serving him. Following and serving Śrīla Prabhupāda and ISKCON is naturally part of what it means to follow your guru's instructions. So, when we serve in this way, Kṛṣṇa is pleased, and this is the source of the mercy we get. It is by this mercy that we become Kṛṣṇa conscious. Pleasing the guru is the secret of success in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. His mercy is usually not automatic. It comes as a result of your *sādhana*, service, and attitude.

### **Assumptions are Dangerous**

It is dangerous to make assumptions. Just because you have certain needs, or you see some gurus fulfilling those same needs with some of their disciples, it doesn't mean your guru will necessarily do the same for you. Also, you may get lots of attention when the guru has few disciples, but eventually he may not have a small group of disciples. Even if a guru appears to be fulfilling your expectations presently, it doesn't mean that he will always be able to satisfy you in this way. His responsibilities may change, his health may minimize his travel, his need for more solitary time might increase, and he may take on future projects that will occupy more of his time.

Of course, some of you will have direct service with me and write often, or be facing a crisis and will need to get advice. This is natural. But some disciples like to share many of their thoughts and feelings regularly, see me as their therapist or marriage counselor, or ask questions that are easily answered in Prabhupāda's books. So, I am not saying you cannot write me aside from the *Sādhana* Report, but I am saying be conscious that if every disciple wrote me one letter a week, that could take up about four hours a day to answer them. Yes, I do understand psychology and the *gṛhastha* asrama, so I understand why some devotees value my input to their lives, and I often give it to them, but to see me fundamentally in this role is incorrect.

In conclusion, don't make assumptions about your potential relationship with me. Be clear about what you can expect and cannot expect, and how my tendency to adapt my service as disciples increase may alter what expectations I can fulfill in the future.

Personally, I try to accommodate my disciples' needs as best as I can, but also ask them to be realistic. Some aspiring disciples that came to me with unstated unrealistic needs were disappointed. They were expecting a guru to be something that went far beyond the qualifications and "job description" of a spiritual master. So, if you suspect you might have expectations that are unrealistic, please let me know. And perhaps at some point in our relationship, if you did have unrealistic expectations, you will become more aware of this.

The *śāstras* say that the guru and disciple should live together for one year to study one another. Today we live together virtually. We exchange e-mails, Facebook messages, you listen to my classes, you get to see me when I visit, and you meet other godbrothers and sisters. By doing this we get to know one another. The disciple, in this period, is not just studying the guru to see if he or she is a bona fide guru, but also to see if the guru-disciple relationship with this particular guru is working for them. Does he understand you, inspire you, answer your questions satisfactorily? Do his classes speak to you, solve your problems, and resonate with you? You also want to see if you have reservations. Is he the right guru for you? Do you find that another guru inspires you in a unique and necessary way? Or did you start to realize that, by hearing from him, you are not yet ready to commit to a guru?

The guru will also see if you are a worthy disciple. If there are misunderstandings about what it means to be a disciple, he will tell you. If he sees you doing something improper, he will correct you. If he sees a weakness, he will point it out. And if he needs to chastise you, he will. He may even test you in some way by asking you to do a difficult service or refusing something you ask to see your response.

If and when you are convinced that I am your guru, ask me if you can chant my *praṇām* mantras and put my picture on your altar. After a year from the time you first asked for shelter, if you have been chanting 16 rounds daily and following the four regulative principles, you can ask for initiation if you feel you are ready. To be approved for initiation, you require a recommendation from a local authority who knows you. In discussion with that local authority, and also knowing you, I will determine if he thinks you are ready, and if not, what I think you need to work on to become ready to commit to initiation.

It is important to know that being officially initiated is not the means for developing a deep relationship with me or any guru. If you have faith in the guru and his instructions, and serve him faithfully, you are deeply connected. So, if you don't feel entirely ready to commit to a formal relationship, it is better to wait until you are. If you make a formal commitment, you will feel great shame and guilt if you don't follow your vows.



## Exercise

1. What does guru mean to you?
2. What kind of relationship do you want with your guru?
3. Why do I believe that HG Mahātmā Prabhu is the right guru for me (provided that you are aspiring for him)?
4. Do you think that your needs in a guru are matched by Mahātmā Prabhu's mood (provided that you are aspiring for him)?

Please send your completed exercises and/or any questions you may have about the content of the article to [disciplepackage@gmail.com](mailto:disciplepackage@gmail.com) with the subject "Expectations of a Guru+ Your Name".

## **Should I Still Have a Guru if I am Not Initiated and Not Yet Aspiring for *Dīkṣā*?**

Because it is helpful for those who are not ready for *dīkṣā* to be guided by a *śīkṣā* guru, I wanted to address the reasons one who is not initiated may not choose a guru of which to take shelter.

- One feels unqualified to take *dīkṣā* at the present time
- One feels that he will never be ready to chant 16 rounds or follow the four regulative principles in this lifetime
- One has not found anyone that he can see as his *dīkṣā* guru
- One sees Prabhupāda as his guru and feels that accepting another guru would interfere with that relationship
- One is not certain that anyone in ISKCON is qualified to be his guru
- One's *dīkṣā* guru fell down and one cannot put faith in another guru
- One doesn't feel he can be a good disciple

And there may be other reasons for not taking shelter of a *śīkṣā* guru. Although these concerns are more common when looking for a *dīkṣā* guru, they have less relevance when taking shelter of a *śīkṣā* guru.

### **Taking Shelter of a *śīkṣā* Guru**

Let's go over the above list of reasons that might cause one to not look for a guru and discuss these reasons in relation to the *śīkṣā* guru.

#### **One Feels Unqualified to Take *Dīkṣā* at the Present Time**

Not being qualified presently for *dīkṣā* has no bearing on taking shelter of, and getting regular and intimate guidance from, a senior *Vaiṣṇava*, or from having a deep spiritual relationship with this person. Moreover, doing so increases one's chances of becoming more quickly qualified for *dīkṣā*.

## **One Feels That He Will Never Be Ready to Chant 16 Rounds and Follow the Four Regulative Principles in this Lifetime**

Feeling one may not be qualified for *dīkṣā* in this lifetime should have no bearing on taking shelter of, and getting regular and intimate guidance from, a senior *Vaiṣṇava*, and having a deep spiritual relationship with him. Moreover, the chances of someday becoming qualified for *dīkṣā* will be greater if one takes shelter of a *śīkṣā* guru.

## **One Has Not Found Anyone That He Can See as His Guru**

One doesn't have to see the *śīkṣā* guru within a strict formal guru-disciple context. The *śīkṣā* relationship can be more informal and friendly, perhaps more on the lines of a coach, counselor, or mentor.

Since faith cannot be artificially imposed, if the instructions given by the *śīkṣā* guru are helping the devotee, faith will likely naturally evolve. If this happens, a strong guru-disciple relationship may naturally evolve. If the relationship doesn't evolve to this point, it is not a problem. One is still getting the valuable guidance needed to advance and one may eventually meet a devotee with whom one develops enough faith to accept as a *dīkṣā* guru.

## **One Sees Prabhupāda as His Guru and Feels That Accepting Another Guru Would Interfere with That Relationship**

One should ask one's *śīkṣā* guru to help him deepen his relationship with Prabhupāda, and act as an intermediary between himself and Śrīla Prabhupāda.

## **One is Not Certain That Anyone in ISKCON is Qualified to be His Guru (or Even Qualified to be Anyone's Guru)**

To take guidance from a senior *Vaiṣṇava*, it is not necessary to approach him as a faithful and surrendered disciple. Learn from him and take guidance from him and see if this helps (you don't have to blindly accept). In this way the relationship may naturally develop more intimately. If not, still take advantage of the wisdom you get from him, and show gratitude for this by reciprocating in whatever ways possible.

## **One's *Dīkṣā* Guru Fell Down and One Cannot Put Faith in Another Guru**

*Śāstra* advises one to take shelter of another guru if one's own guru falls down (and recommends re-initiation in some cases). Of course, many find it most natural to take shelter of Śrīla Prabhupāda if their guru falls. Yet, for some there remains a vacuum because of a need for a living personal connection. Of course, faith cannot be forced, but connecting with a higher *Vaiṣṇava* and getting his guidance is always beneficial.

## **One Doesn't Feel They Can Be a Good Disciple**

Vows are not necessarily made to a *śīkṣā* guru, so being able to chant 16 rounds or follow the four regulative principles doesn't have to be a requirement for being a *śīkṣā* disciple. The real requirement is to be sincere about advancing in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Whatever disqualification one feels they have, it is likely that one will improve more rapidly under the regular guidance of an advanced devotee.

Since getting the association of advanced *Vaiṣṇavas* is one of the most essential principles of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, both in the stage of *sādhana* and on the liberated platform, we should cultivate this kind of

association and develop close relationships with senior devotees, even before we may feel ready to be a worthy disciple.

Rupa Gosvāmī advises that we “take shelter of a guru,” but he doesn't mean that one cannot take shelter unless one is thinking of taking *dīkṣā* from that person. In fact, some devotees sometimes have a more intimate relationship with their *śīkṣā* guru than they do with their *dīkṣā* guru.

## **My Realizations About Reading Prabhupāda's Books** (Based on a Lecture by Mahātmā Prabhu)

As my disciple, or prospective disciple, I am always trying to encourage you to have your own personal relationship with Prabhupāda and his books. However, I see that many devotees struggle to do this. Here, I share some of my experiences and realizations about how my relationship with Prabhupāda through his books has guided me through so much of my own Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. I hope this will inspire you to deepen your own relationship with Prabhupada's books and use them as your compass throughout your own spiritual lives.

### **How Reading Impacts Us**

One of the most powerful aspects of my spiritual life is reading Prabhupāda's books. Prabhupāda wrote his books for us and where we are at, in order to help us cut through the illusion of material life. I have two experiences with this, one of the head and one of the heart.

### **Sharpening the Intelligence**

*Māyā* covers our intelligence so we do not see things as they are, but as we would like them to be. If you want to enjoy something, you will imagine how you can enjoy it. Even if you cannot enjoy it, you will imagine ways that you could enjoy. This is the power of the mind - the ability to create infinite illusory scenarios for our enjoyment. But when reading Prabhupāda's books, we realize he is giving our minds a new script. He's trying to protect us from the many unseen dangers that *māyā* will place in our path. Because we do not see these dangers, we resist what Prabhupāda is trying to tell us.

Prabhupāda's books are explaining how the world actually is so that we can learn to see things as they are and deal with reality. I always feel as though I am looking at the world through a camera and the lens is out of focus, but when I read Prabhupāda's books, Prabhupāda brings the lens back into focus so I can see things as they *are*.

### **Exercise**

1. Write down some examples of how your lens was out of focus about something and how reading Prabhupāda's books helped bring it back into focus?
2. In a situation where you wanted to enjoy something, what kind of excuses did you make for yourself and how did reading Prabhupāda's books help you to see past your rationalizations and see things as they are?
3. How did you feel when you realized that Prabhupāda had saved you from imminent dangers and suffering? 4. How did having these realizations improve your *sādhana*?

### **The Intelligence is the Neighbor of the Soul**

Prabhupāda said that intelligence is the next-door neighbor of the soul. When the intelligence is clarified with spiritual wisdom, we get intellectual spiritual realizations. When reading Prabhupāda's books, I always experience the strengthening and clarification of my intelligence, which is then experienced as a kind of spiritual realization because of the closeness between the intelligence and the soul.

## Exercise

Write down some of your intellectual spiritual realizations.

## Moving of the Heart

The other experience I sometimes have while reading is a moving of the heart. Imagine you are walking toward a cliff, but you do not see it and a person grabs you. You feel jolted and disoriented for a second. You may even get upset at them for grabbing you. But when you realize you were about to walk off a cliff, you immediately feel grateful to that person for saving you. Sometimes I experience being shaken in a similar way by Prabhupāda's words, saving me from imminent danger. I feel as though he is saying, "What were you thinking?" or "Why were you thinking this?" I may answer that it is because I wanted to see things a certain way, because it made me feel good, and I expected I would be able to get some enjoyment out of it. But Prabhupāda snaps me back into reality by saying this is just another one of *māyā*'s tricks. You would not have enjoyed. There would have only been suffering waiting for you. He was empowered by Kṛṣṇa to write words that would penetrate straight to the heart.

## Exercise:

Give an example of how you were jolted out of *māyā* by reading Prabhupāda's books.

## Reading is the Catalyst for Our Bhakti

When Prabhupāda was writing his books, he knew they would be necessary for our spiritual advancement. Prabhupāda often said that his books were not merely written for selling, but that they were written first for his disciples. His purports address our needs and challenges and answer our questions. Prabhupada's books are one of the most important tools with which to do our "job" of *bhakti*. When devotees write to me about their problem, I often sense that this problem exists because they are not reading enough. So, I tell them to read Prabhupāda's books every day for one or two hours a day. In almost every case, their problem is solved within a few days. So, when you read Prabhupāda's books regularly and sufficiently, you will find that your practice of Kṛṣṇa Consciousness becomes easier.

## Exercise:

1. Write down some examples of challenges that you were facing that were solved by reading Prabhupada's books.
2. How has the regular reading of Prabhupada's books improved your *sādhana*?

## Declaring War on *Māyā*

When Prabhupāda says that to take up Kṛṣṇa Consciousness means to declare war on *māyā*, it means to declare war on the very conditioning that has kept us in the material world. To fight this "war", we'll need to clearly understand the enemy. One of our weapons is espionage. We need spies to give us inside information about our enemy and their tactics so that we are prepared when we face them. This is what Prabhupāda is offering us in his books. He gives us detailed explanations about how *Māyā* will attack, where she will come from, how she will come, and what her strategy will be. She sometimes uses guerrilla warfare: we do not know where she is and how she will attack. Then suddenly we are surrounded and attacked. When devotees fall down, they often didn't see it coming.

They became proud and didn't see how dangerous that pride was. Or they became attached to something that seemed small in the beginning but later took them away from Kṛṣṇa. They didn't realize that they crossed the line and were going downhill until they fell to the bottom of the hill.

If they had knowledge that they were falling, they could have stepped back and adjusted their behavior. In reading Prabhupāda's books, you realize where the line is that you shouldn't cross because he has told you where the danger zone lies and how to avoid it. Prabhupāda knew we would need specific knowledge of the process of Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, of how *māyā* works on us, of the mistakes that we make, the illusions that we fall into, and the rationalizations we make for our illusion.

Another example is landmines. Landmines are buried so you can't see them. When you walk on one of them, they explode and kill you, or severely maim you. The material world is full of landmines that can kill or maim our *bhakti*. Prabhupāda's books show us where these landmines are located.

### **Exercise**

Give an example of a problem/situation set forth by *māyā* of which Prabhupāda warned you beforehand through his books and which thus helped you abate the problem.

### **Infinite Opportunities to Become Kṛṣṇa Conscious**

Prabhupāda's books are fathomless. Even if something appears simple or you read something over and over again, you will still realize how deep it is. The first lesson that I learned from devotees, before I even read any books, was "I am not the body." Knowing that I am the soul, that the soul is eternal and can't be killed, this isn't the only life, etc. completely changed my frame of reference on life. But after being a devotee for many years when we hear "I am not the body," we think, "I know that." But what would the result be if we really knew we are not the body? What would the world be like if we all realized that we are the soul? What would happen to all our judgments and prejudices if we saw every living being as spirit soul? Obviously, my realization of "I am not the body" can go much deeper. So, when we are reading Prabhupāda's books, what he is saying may appear simple but there are always more layers of depth to uncover.

When you are reading Prabhupāda's books, ask yourself these questions:

1. What does it mean on the surface?
2. Let me dig deeper. What realization do I get when I dig deeper?
3. How is this instruction applicable? How would things be different if I lived this instruction?

### **Exercise**

1. Give some examples of how you had read something in Prabhupada's books, but later reread that same passage and came to a deeper realization
2. Write down some ways in which you can apply what you read in your daily life

### **Practical Application**

There are three levels of knowledge: understanding what we are reading, assimilating how it applies to us, and practically applying that knowledge in our lives. It's common not to go beyond the second level. One of the reasons that we do not get to the third level is because it is difficult to apply everything we learn. We might think it's too difficult to apply.

Perhaps we are afraid to apply it (afraid to trust Kṛṣṇa enough to surrender more). Or maybe we are not detached enough to be able to apply the level of renunciation Prabhupāda recommends.

Application is a huge challenge. For example, if we were to try to apply the understanding that we are not the body, or that Kṛṣṇa is in the heart of every living entity, we would respect all living beings, be devoid of prejudice and envy, and feel ourselves lower than others. So, when we say that we have read that, know that or understand that, we often only mean we are familiar with that knowledge.

There are so many things in Prabhupāda's books that I have not tried to assimilate and apply in my life. I see it as some ideal stage that I don't have to worry about because I am not there yet. I only have to do my service and I will be fine. For example, the idea of having compassion for all living entities is difficult to live by, especially when there is disagreement with something that someone is doing, or what they are doing is contrary to what *śāstra* says. But I should be reading Prabhupāda's books asking myself "how do I apply compassion in real life?" What does it mean to show compassion at all times, not only when we are trying to give Kṛṣṇa Consciousness to others but also in our daily lives? We are all capable of compartmentalizing compassion, employing it while preaching and then putting it away and going on with "life as usual." So, we can ask ourselves, "How can I be more compassionate in every situation?" Another example is that we think ourselves the controller. How many people and situations are we trying to control every day? But what right do we have to control everything and how well can we even do it? Tolerance means that you realize that you are not the controller. You are tolerating because you realize that you are not in control of the situation.

You can take this idea with any principle - tolerance, humility, forgiveness, etc. We need to stop and look at applying these qualities practically. What would my life look like if I lived as a compassionate, forgiving, or humbler person? Even if we think that we can't do it, it is good to ask ourselves how we could do it if we were to do it. You will surprise yourself with the solutions that you are capable of coming up with. The mind is capable of imagining infinite scenarios, either good or bad.

There are actually many ways we can apply Prabhupāda's teachings into our daily lives. If you look, you will see that life gives us many opportunities to do this.

### **Exercise:**

1. Just for one day, make it a point to try to see everyone as spirit soul with Kṛṣṇa sitting in their hearts.
  - a. What experience did you have?
  - b. How did this change the way you deal with them?
  - c. What realization did you have about yourself in doing this?
2. What knowledge are you not practicing?
  - a. Imagine that it is possible for you to live this knowledge. Write down ways in which you would do it?
  - b. Can you start applying any of these practices in your daily *sādhana*?

### **Drawing Inspiration**

I was once reading the verses of *Bhagavad-gītā* from start to end, just in English, to be able to get a sense of the flow, and I decided to record the reading in a dramatic way. So, I kept reading over and over again trying to improve my recitation. One of the realizations that I got from this practice is how amazing and powerful the *Bhagavad-gītā* is. I was thinking right after I read it that I want people to read this.

I had read *Bhagavad-gītā* many times before, but by doing this exercise, I became inspired to share *Bhagavad-gītā* with other people. This is one of the benefits of reading Prabhupāda’s books: the books are helping you so much that you become inspired to share them with others.

### **Exercise:**

Give a few examples of how you were inspired to share Kṛṣṇa consciousness by reading Prabhupada’s books.

### **Prabhupāda Has Already Explained Everything**

A few years ago, I developed a course called “12 Steps to Claiming Your Happiness,” for which I had to do a lot of research on happiness and suffering. I was reading many books and also reflecting on my own experiences with happiness. After I developed the course, I started reading a section of the *Bhāgavatam* about a conversation between Prahāda Mahārāja and a *sādhu*. I was so amazed to find that everything I needed for my course, Prabhupāda had already explained it in about four or five purports. It was such a profound and amazing analysis of material suffering and how to overcome it and achieve internal happiness. I have had this same experience many times. As I grow, I start to see the world differently, and when I go back to Prabhupāda’s books, I find him explaining exactly what I have been contemplating.

Another example is the principle of simplicity. Society is being side-tracked into complexity, and there are multiple problems resulting from this. I have contemplated this and spent much energy collecting information from various outside sources in preparation for talks on this topic. While reading the *Bhāgavatam*, I then realized that Prabhupāda had already explained the subject perfectly and completely. Another thing that you will realize when you read the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, especially in the earlier cantos, is that there is a lot of discussion about how society should be run and what will happen if Kṛṣṇa conscious principles are not practiced in the world. As time goes on you see that what Prabhupāda described more than 50 years ago when he wrote the *Bhāgavatam* is happening in full force today. And he describes clearly why it is happening.

### **Exercise:**

Write down some examples of how you were contemplating something and later found that Prabhupada had explained that very principle in his books already.

### **The Proper Mood**

When we are reading Prabhupāda’s books, we should pray to Prabhupāda that his books will pull us out of ignorance and give us the correct understanding. We need to be open to being instructed. Otherwise, we will not be able to understand Prabhupāda’s books and allow them to purify us.

At times devotees read Prabhupāda’s books to validate any ideas they may be having. They may even take quotes from Prabhupāda out of context to support their ideas. However, if we read the complete body of what Prabhupāda is saying then we often see that their idea is not what Prabhupāda is actually saying. This means they are not reading Prabhupāda’s books; placing their own ideas into Prabhupāda books to “support” these ideas. This is not a good idea. We should approach Prabhupāda’s books in the mood of trying to see if our ideas hold up to what Prabhupāda has said. If not, then we should try to see what is the correct idea that Prabhupāda wants us to understand.



We can also read through different lenses or contexts. Two people can read the same thing and come up with different conclusions because they are looking at it from different angles of vision.

They are both right, even though they may externally appear to contradict one another. One may be viewing the words of Prabhupāda through a preaching context, another through a *varṇāśrama* context, and another through pure philosophical constructs. Whenever you see what appears to be a contradiction, try to see if it is just a different context in which the knowledge is being applied.

### Exercise

1. Think of an example in which you have heard two angles of vision on the same topic and try to determine the context of each of those views.

## Deepening Your Relationship with Śrīla Prabhupāda From a Lecture by Mahātmā Prabhu in September, 2018

There was a period in *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* history in which educated people did not take to Kṛṣṇa Consciousness because of many misunderstandings about *Vaiṣṇavism*. Many people thought that *Vaiṣṇavism* was for low class or immoral people. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura had the task of bringing Kṛṣṇa Consciousness to the educated/cultured people. However, he knew that he couldn't do everything alone, so he prayed to Kṛṣṇa to send someone to help him. We know the story: Kṛṣṇa sent Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura. With his help, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura established the validity of *bhakti* and Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura expanded upon the principles that his father established and had the desire to take the mission outside of India. He tried to do this and sent some disciples to the West, and asked others to go. But only Śrīla Prabhupāda became successful.

When Prabhupāda left home and took *vanaprastha*, he was able to focus more seriously on the order he received 25 years earlier to preach in English in the Western world. It was Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura's desire for preaching to be done in a cooperative and unified way. Therefore, Prabhupāda asked his godbrothers many times to support him in preaching in the West, but he received no direct help. After he established ISKCON, he invited his godbrothers to help him preach, but none wanted to give up their positions to join ISKCON's preaching mission. So, the question is: If it was Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura's desire that they cooperate and preach together, why did Prabhupāda set up his own organization?

The divisions in the Gauḍīya Math were over property, money, and who would be the next *ācārya*. The traditional system was that the *ācāryas* would appoint one disciple to be the next *ācārya*, but Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura did not do this. Rather, he wanted the devotees to establish a GBC, and he said if there were to be an *ācārya*, he would naturally manifest and be self-effulgent. Also, as a large organization with the goal of expanding internationally, the Gauḍīya Math could not be run by only one person. It needed to be run by a group and for them to work as one unified organization. Unfortunately, due to disagreements over who would be the next *ācārya*, the Gauḍīya Math divided and even fought in court over property ownership.

If we put this in the context of ISKCON today, imagine you have some devotees fighting for so-and-so Mahārāja to be the *ācārya* of ISKCON, while other devotees are arguing that another Mahārāja be *ācārya*.

Both sides are legally manipulating things to get properties in their name and promoting that they are the “real ISKCON” and everyone else is bogus. Everyone who is disturbed by this and doesn’t want to participate in this feud goes off and starts their own projects and temples. The result is that a once unified organization splits into many organizations and temples, each organization run by one *ācārya*.

Some devotees try to use the fact that Prabhupāda set up his own organization to validate setting up organizations outside of ISKCON. Prabhupāda only did this reluctantly as a last resort, and after doing so still tried to engage and unify his godbrothers.

Prabhupāda established ISKCON as the Founder-Ācārya. It is interesting that Prabhupāda chose this title as this is a combination of English and Sanskrit, which is not something that you normally see. The Founder-Ācārya keeps the fidelity of the teachings for all successive generations, and his teachings keep the lens through which we understand the teachings of the previous *ācāryas*; and all successive gurus will represent the teachings of the Founder-Ācārya. No new ‘*ācārya*’ can claim to establish something new. Prabhupāda’s teachings are the guiding principles by which we measure everything. This doesn’t mean we don’t adapt and explain Kṛṣṇa consciousness for the changing times, but it means the foundational principles and philosophy are never changed.

In 1970, ISKCON press printed a book that didn’t have “ISKCON Founder-Ācārya” after Prabhupāda’s name. Prabhupāda was very upset and instructed the devotees, making it very clear that wherever his name appears (in any public or official capacity) it should state “Founder-Ācārya of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.” Prabhupāda felt that his position was being minimized and if he is not the one and only Founder-Ācārya, then someone else can and will try to be the *ācārya*. Following the mood of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, Prabhupāda never wanted anyone to become the *ācāryas* of ISKCON. On many occasions he instructed that all his disciples should become gurus, but he never instructed that there is going to be another *ācāryas* of ISKCON.

After Prabhupāda left, many of the devotees who took the service of being guru didn’t do well. Not certain what it meant to be guru, some imitated Prabhupāda and did exactly what he did: had their own *vyāsāna*, daily guru puja, opulent living quarters, and supreme dominion of their zones. This alienated many godbrothers who left ISKCON to join other Gauḍīya societies, start their own societies, practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness on their own, or even give up devotional service altogether, being let down by what was happening in ISKCON. To make things worse, some gurus had broken regulative principles and either gave up their positions as gurus voluntarily or were asked to step down. This created a breach of trust in leadership, a lot of frustration among godbrothers, and the rise of *ritviks*, who claimed that it was obvious the gurus are not qualified, thus proving that Prabhupāda never actually appointed any of them to be anything more than officiating priests who would initiate on his behalf indefinitely. Using certain quotes out of context and stretching their meanings, they tried to support their argument with Prabhupāda’s words and gained a following among disgruntled devotees.

The challenge that faces us in a multi-guru society with one Founder-Ācārya is how to keep the focus on Prabhupāda without minimizing the strong connection one should have for their guru. The solution as proposed by the *ritviks* is that only Prabhupāda be the *dīkṣā* guru and everyone else should be *śikṣā* guru. If this were to take place, then we’d all become Prabhupāda’s disciples and as such no one would need to take *śikṣā* from anyone else. This, in theory, would create unity as everyone is a disciple of Prabhupāda, but it would do so at the cost of adulterating our philosophy. It’s true that anyone can and should take shelter of Prabhupāda, but no one can take *dīkṣā* from Śrīla Prabhupāda. This is not supported anywhere in *śāstra*.

Some devotees reacted to the challenges within ISKCON, leaving ISKCON and taking *śīkṣā* from Prabhupāda's godbrothers or disciples of those godbrothers. Some said that their guru should be guiding ISKCON on the premise that ISKCON gurus didn't have all the solutions, and were not as advanced as the senior *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* gurus. They put much emphasis on taking guidance from a living senior *Vaiṣṇava*. This was the exact opposite of *ritviks*, who wanted to put all the focus on Prabhupāda and delete living *dīkṣā* gurus from the ISKCON world.

Prabhupāda's mood was that none of us are qualified on our own, but together we are strong, and the best way to manage an organization is in a group. There is a reference where Prabhupāda says that in kali yuga, decisions should be made in groups. The vision that Prabhupāda had was to create an organization that was managed based on his teachings in the books, and everyone in the organization represented those teachings. Prabhupāda was concerned about his teachings being misunderstood, and of the infiltration of other ideas within ISKCON. When Prabhupāda established the GBC, he told them not to make the same mistakes as the Gauḍīya Math by staying united no matter how difficult it was. He stressed that we need an organization that can maintain these teachings through successive generations. His intention was that this be done through the GBC, gurus, temple presidents and leaders. The idea was not that the GBC needs to be perfect, but that Prabhupāda wanted a managerial body that would represent his interests, maintain temples and properties, be watchdogs for the movement, ensure his books were being sold, etc.

Prabhupāda established the GBC when he was present, so he could veto any resolution the GBC made and chastise any GBC member. If ever Prabhupāda saw something that was not proper within the GBC or the broader movement, he would correct it. Problems were being adjusted in real time so we could never get too far off course before Prabhupāda corrected us. Prabhupāda was running ISKCON, directing money and manpower where he felt it was best used. When Prabhupāda left, the immediate problem we faced was that we were all young and inexperienced, and we no longer had the luxury of problems being solved quickly by Prabhupāda.

As mentioned, his books enable us to understand the teachings of the previous *ācāryas*. Sometimes you even see that the previous *ācāryas* disagree. So, if there is some disagreement on *siddhānta*, we need to express the conclusions we received from Prabhupāda. Prabhupāda's books contain the teachings to which we need to be chaste. The potential problem is that there are so many books available today, and it can be confusing, as we'll hear things that are not in Prabhupāda's books, or that are explained in slightly different ways. Being grounded in Prabhupāda's books is critical to your spiritual life and to your preaching. In the future, you will all have to become gurus (of course you are all saying "No" but Prabhupāda said that you have to become guru; if not *dīkṣā*, then *śīkṣā* guru). Therefore, you need to know Prabhupāda's books so you can represent him properly.

Our next challenge is that within the next 20 years or so, most of Prabhupāda's disciples will not be here anymore. This will appear to leave a vacuum. But the fact is they, and Śrīla Prabhupāda, will be here by their teachings. The impetus for Suresvara Prabhu to teach the Founder-Ācārya seminar was that he kept hearing devotees say "you were so fortunate to be with Prabhupāda." The implication is that devotees now are unfortunate because they do not have Prabhupāda's presence. This made Suresvara Prabhu very upset, because Prabhupāda is still present in his instructions and service. The challenge now is how can we help you realize Prabhupāda's presence, feel personally connected to him, feel the same level of dedication to his mission that we, his *dīkṣā* disciples, do, so that when you continue the preaching and you preach about Prabhupāda, it will be as though you are his disciple? You can have such a strong connection to Prabhupāda that you feel that you are his disciple and you are his representative.

Just look at this statistic. Prabhupāda had 4,800 disciples. Of those, there are maybe 1,000 who are active in ISKCON or other *Gauḍīya* movements, or in some way working to spread Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. This means that many of Prabhupāda's disciples who had his *vapu* (personal association) are not doing as well as many devotees who have only Prabhupāda's *vani* (association through his instructions). It is important that your Kṛṣṇa Consciousness does not only exist in three-dimensional space. Prabhupāda's ability to come to us and give us the power to understand him and his mission and his mood, which is essential for ISKCON to move forward, is not something that is limited to his *dīkṣā* disciples.

*Dīkṣā* is not everything; *śīkṣā* is most important. If two people have the *śīkṣā* of one person, then both people have equal opportunity to connect with that person. If it is true that *dīkṣā* is more important than *śīkṣā*, then why is it that some of Prabhupāda's *dīkṣā* disciples are not doing as well as Prabhupāda's grand-disciples? Prabhupāda's *vani* is the most important for all of our spiritual life. When devotees tell me that they are reading my writings or listening to my lectures, I ask them "what about Prabhupāda's books and lectures?" You have to understand that Prabhupāda is the Founder-Acārya. He is the north star, the guiding principle. In addition to his instructions, we need to understand his mission and exactly what he came to do. When you understand what Prabhupāda's mission is, then you understand the importance of keeping the GBC together, as well as cooperating, compromising, and working together in a spirit of love, trust, and unity in diversity. Then the "guru competitions" stop, the canvassing for gurus stops, we stop the prejudice against disciples of certain gurus, we stop the "my guru is the best guru" thinking, etc.

Unfortunately, these things still happen to some degree in some places. This behaviour is a symptom of the lack of understanding of Prabhupāda and his mission. Prabhupāda wanted to have an international society where our allegiance goes to him, and all our gurus represent him. It is not a question of "my guru or your guru." All gurus are representing Prabhupāda, and Prabhupāda is representing the disciple succession and Kṛṣṇa. The guru is one, although you naturally have a special relationship with your *dīkṣā* and *śīkṣā* gurus.

Prabhupāda has his own spicing of Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, and we, his followers, are meant to cook with those same spices in order to preserve the movement, the mission, and the foundations of ISKCON for the future. The people who I speak to in my classes and when I travel are the future. Most of you are 30, 40, even 50 years younger than me. Prabhupāda left 40 years ago, and some of you are going to be around 40 years after your gurus leave. So, it is incumbent on you to understand from your spiritual master, from Prabhupāda's disciples, from Prabhupāda's teachings, what is Prabhupāda's mood and mission, what is Prabhupāda's spice? What is the GBC? What is a temple president? What is a *śīkṣā* guru? What is a *dīkṣā* guru? All of these things are incumbent on us to understand, because ISKCON is made up of all of these things. If we don't understand these things, then we are going to think in the wrong way, we are going to act in the wrong way, we are going to preach in the wrong way. Then we are going to start cooking with a spice that was not part of Prabhupāda's recipe.

The point is that you can have a relationship with Prabhupāda that is as deep or even deeper than the relationship that Prabhupāda's *dīkṣā* disciples had with him. Don't ever think that Prabhupāda is only for his *dīkṣā* disciples. Prabhupāda never said that he is the *dīkṣā* guru of ISKCON. He said that he is the Founder-Acārya of ISKCON. As the Founder-Acārya, he is personally connected to each devotee in every successive generation. Prabhupāda being someone's *dīkṣā* guru doesn't give someone a special position in and of itself.

In the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, after Nārada Muni’s mother died, he went on pilgrimage where he met Vyāsadeva. Vyāsadeva asked him about his history. After Nārada told Vyāsadeva about how he had met these *sādhus*, heard from them, and took their remnants, Vyāsadeva asked him something very interesting. He asked him “After your initiation, what did you do?” It is interesting that Vyāsadeva phrased the question this way, because there is no formal description in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* of any initiation taking place, and the word that is translated as “initiation” is not *dīkṣā*. So, hearing from a guru is also an initiation. Prabhupāda even said that if someone reads from his books, that is their initiation, because the real initiation is *śikṣā*, the instruction. If you follow Prabhupāda’s instructions and his *dīkṣā* disciples don’t, then who is the real disciple? So don’t ever think that you are not a disciple of Prabhupāda.

Don’t ever think that Prabhupāda can’t speak to you. Don’t ever think that you can’t have as intimate a connection with Prabhupāda as his *dīkṣā* disciples have. It is your duty to understand this and it is your duty to feel this way. If you don’t, then ISKCON doesn’t have a future. We can’t make statements like “I don’t understand Prabhupāda, I don’t know how to have a connection with him, I only understand my guru”. If we think like this, we will maintain many sectarian ideas within ISKCON. It is not that the personal moods and missions of present gurus are wrong; it is wrong to take what your guru says and does out of the context of Prabhupāda’s mission. So, it is really important for each of you to understand Prabhupāda’s mission, how you fit within it, and what your guru’s position is within ISKCON. Every guru is focused on a particular aspect of Prabhupāda’s mission, but they are not contrary to each other. They are all parts of the whole that Prabhupāda represents. I guarantee you that as you try to do this, you will see your personal relationship with Prabhupāda developing, and your connection with him becoming really strong and powerful.

Prabhupāda was a revolutionary, so when you hear about what Prabhupāda did and how he did it, you can imbibe his mood. If you do this, you will be able to emulate the same level of preaching and excitement that was present in Prabhupāda’s time. The more connected that you are to Prabhupāda, the more you will be connected to his revolutionary mood. He will inspire you tremendously to spread Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. Prabhupāda was always pushing us to do more, to be more, to achieve more. When you are connected to him, you will feel that push.

Statistically, religious movements tend not to last more than four generations. We have already seen that ISKCON is susceptible to fracture. When someone is trying to do something and feels frustrated because of politics or disagreement, it’s natural for them to feel they would rather be independent of the society. There is room for individual projects, but Prabhupāda felt that the power to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness is in the hands of ISKCON, and our unity is fundamental for that. Suresvara Prabhu told me that he went to a temple where devotees were not getting along well, but after he gave the Founder-Açārya seminar, they all started getting along much better. If you are in ISKCON, you have a duty to understand Prabhupāda’s mission and work unitedly with others. Prabhupāda said that there will be a golden age for 10,000 years. But if we do not connect with Prabhupāda personally and have a strong personal relationship with him, ISKCON cannot last.

By keeping Prabhupāda in the centre, we enable future generations to access Lord Caitanya’s mercy. ISKCON is a huge conduit for that mercy to flow. Keeping Prabhupāda in the centre means that there will be one teaching that secures the unity and integrity of the movement. The teachings will remain consistent over time, and Prabhupāda’s eyes will be the lens through which we understand the previous açāryas. Prabhupāda gives us the checks and balances with which to maintain the integrity of our projects and preaching.

I know that some new devotees are trying to understand how to feel connected to Prabhupāda. But you have his books, and his books are the essence of who Prabhupāda is. And while they are still alive, learn from Prabhupāda's disciples about Prabhupāda so that you are able to pass on Prabhupāda's mission and mood to future generations of devotees.

It is the hope of all of Prabhupāda's disciples that you carry Prabhupāda as he is into the future.

Thank you.

# Harmonizing ISKCON's Lines of Authority

## Preface

This paper has been voted on by the GBC and is now an official GBC policy paper. The following offers more about the paper's purpose and scope.

The topic of "Lines of Authority" is a heritage or legacy issue. By "heritage" or "legacy" issues, we mean those topics that are of core importance to the future of ISKCON. These are the issues that are going to be relevant for generations to come. How to address them in a way that reflects Śrīla Prabhupāda's intent and purpose will be expressed in papers like this one.

This "Lines of Authority" paper is not the full and final statement on this topic. Rather, it is a good first step. The GBC fully expects that the paper will be updated, made more comprehensive, and improved in the course of time.

Of special importance is the section outlining conduct for gurus, managers, and disciples. Starting implementation of these practices now will provide the GBC with valuable feedback on where the paper works and what needs to be adjusted and improved.

## History of the Topic

Several years ago, the GBC embarked upon developing a systematic plan for the future of ISKCON. They selected several issues of primary importance to the movement and formed committees to discuss those issues. One of the committees was requested to study the divergent lines of authority within ISKCON and suggest a method for settling disagreements between them. The members of this committee were HH Bhanu Swami, HH Guruprasada Swami, HH Prahlādananda Swami, HH Ramai Swami, HH Śivarāma Swami, HG Badrinārayana Dasa, and, later, HH Niranjana Swami.

After a thorough discussion, the members of this committee concluded that the most pressing issue to address was the tension created when spiritual masters sometimes act as an independent line of authority within ISKCON.

## Focus of the Essay

Hence, this essay will focus exclusively on defining principles that should be followed by initiating or instructing spiritual masters, disciples of initiating or instructing spiritual masters, Zonal GBCs, Regional Secretaries, Temple Presidents, and other ISKCON-authorized managers. The aim is to prevent misunderstandings between spiritual masters and managers, as well as to minimize the influence these potential misunderstandings may have upon devotees under their combined care.

## "Spiritual Master" Means *Dīkṣā*, *Śīkṣā*, or Both

It should be noted that, from here on, unless specified, whenever we refer to "the spiritual master," we mean both initiating spiritual masters and instructing spiritual masters (including managers who act as such). Additionally, whenever we refer to "spiritual authorities," we mean anyone (spiritual master or manager) whose instructions (*śīkṣā*) and example have formed the foundation of a devotee's faith in devotional service, and who continues to build on that foundation of the devotee's faith.

## Authority within ISKCON

This essay is not a detailed or definitive analysis of ISKCON's management system, nor is it a detailed analysis of *guru-tattva* - the requisite qualities and duties of a spiritual master and the process of choosing a spiritual master. The basic premise of this essay is as follows: Whether a devotee is an initiating spiritual master, an instructing spiritual master, a *sannyāsī*, a Governing Body Commissioner, a Zonal Secretary, a Regional Secretary, a Temple President, a congregational leader, or anyone else in a position of authority within ISKCON, the authority bestowed upon that devotee is complete only if he or she follows Śrīla Prabhupāda's instruction to serve in ISKCON under the authority of the GBC Body.

To establish this premise, we feel we need do no more than emphasize that His Divine Grace consistently and clearly established this principle in his teachings, as well as within official documents he himself signed. Śrīla Prabhupāda thus clearly established the GBC as the ultimate managing authority. He also indicated that the GBC's jurisdiction includes the responsibility to offer spiritual guidance (*śīkṣā*) to the whole of ISKCON, including all devotees serving as spiritual masters.

Reporter: "Is there anyone who is designated to succeed you as the primary teacher of the movement?"

Śrīla Prabhupāda: "I am training some, I mean to say, advanced students so that they may very easily take up the charge. I have made them GBC."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, although the GBC is the ultimate managing authority in ISKCON, the GBC's duty is not only to manage but to teach.

## Two Lines of Authority

Since every devotee accepts his or her spiritual inspiration from higher authorities, two lines of authority, with their representatives, exist within ISKCON: one is seen as primarily spiritual, while the other is seen as primarily managerial. Both lines of authority serve their own unique yet interdependent purposes in submission to the orders of our Founder-Açārya. Both are authorized by the GBC to give shelter to devotees under their care. This shelter is given through both instruction and example.

By distinguishing the two lines of spiritual authority in these terms - as primarily spiritual or primarily managerial - we are not suggesting that managerial authority is contrary to spiritual authority. Nor are we suggesting that the spiritual line of authority is somehow more privileged or intrinsically purer.



"Management is also spiritual activity. . . It is Kṛṣṇa's establishment."- Room Conversation, January 16, 1977, Calcutta.

"In our preaching work also, we deal with so much property and money and so many books bought and sold, but because these dealings all pertain to the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, they should never be considered material. That one is absorbed in thoughts of such management does not mean that he is outside of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. If one rigidly observes the regulative principle of chanting sixteen rounds of the mahā-mantra every day, his dealings with the material world for the sake of spreading the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement are not different from the spiritual cultivation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness."  
-*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 5.16.3, purport.

In a spiritual society, a manager cannot fulfill his or her duty to manage simply by declaring and enforcing rules. The rules themselves must have a spiritual foundation, and their implementation and enforcement must be applied in accordance with *Vaiṣṇava* principles. Managers who serve with this understanding will generally carry the full weight of spiritual authority for those under their charge.

We should therefore see the oneness between "spiritual" and "managerial." There is also some difference, and understanding this simultaneous oneness and difference requires the use of these two distinct terms with their explanations.

### **The Spiritual Line of Authority**

The spiritual line of authority begins with Lord Kṛṣṇa and continues to Brahmā, Nārada, Vyāsa, and the entire disciplic succession through Śrīla Prabhupāda, our Founder-Ācārya. Those who are submissive to our *sampradaya* and who serve under the authority of the GBC are authorized to give *śikṣā* and shelter in this spiritual line, under the auspices of ISKCON. This spiritual line can include Governing Body Commissioners, GBC Zonal Secretaries, spiritual masters, *sannyāsīs*, Regional Secretaries, Temple Presidents, congregational leaders, and both traveling and community preachers. In fact, anyone who strictly follows a bona fide spiritual master, both by example and precept, can be authorized to represent the spiritual line of authority.

Generally speaking, the most prominent spiritual authority is one's initiating or instructing spiritual master. The scriptures clearly say that devotees should obey and be loyal to their spiritual masters. The spiritual masters thus exert authority over their disciples, and in so doing the spiritual masters are able to train and educate their disciples in the development of *bhakti*. The spiritual masters, therefore, assume a significant role in giving their disciples the spiritual education and inspiration necessary to advance in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.

### **The Managerial Line of Authority**

In the managerial line of authority, and in accordance with Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions, the supervision of the Society and the enforcement of its rules proceed from the GBC. When we use the word "authority" in the context of the managerial structure, we do not mean an absolute, infallible authority - such as the authority of scripture - but the mandate to organize the preaching movement so that it is aligned with the instructions of Śrīla Prabhupāda. To carry out that mandate, his followers have adapted ISKCON's managerial system, given by Śrīla Prabhupāda, to take into account the proliferation of temples, congregational devotees (who are not temple residents), and projects like farms and *gurukulas*, as well as other favorable organizations and entities.

Thus, to better serve this expanding field and its members, this structure presently includes various regional, national, and continental governing bodies consisting of, but not limited to, Governing Body Commissioners, GBC Zonal Secretaries, spiritual masters, *sannyāsīs*, Regional Secretaries, Temple Presidents, congregational leaders, and both traveling and community preachers.

### **Defining the Point of Divergence**

Although in an ideal world everything would work according to Śrīla Prabhupāda's vision for ISKCON, we have seen tendencies from those in one line of authority to interfere with those in the other line of authority.

For instance, there are spiritual authorities who sometimes interfere with competent and responsible managers. They do not consider themselves part of the zonal managerial structure where their preaching has influence (though they are in fact accountable to it), but they are still either directly or indirectly managing some project(s) within that structure.

Therefore, at times they manage devotees, money, and even projects that their followers and dependents are responsible for, without a clear agreement with the managerial structure with which they intersect. By doing so, they may inadvertently undermine the managerial line of authority by encouraging their dependents to direct their service, and thus their loyalty, to their spiritual authority's own management structure.

This scenario creates not only confusion but a spirit of separatism as well. Situations such as these can also become points of contention for managers, although the more junior managers often refrain from directly voicing their grievances because they feel intimidated out of fear of committing offenses, especially to spiritual masters.

On the other hand, there are also managerial authorities who sometimes provide inadequate spiritual care. This can fuel the spiritual master's inclination to intervene by suggesting an alternative for his disciple's association or service.

For instance, managers may sometimes place greater importance on management goals than on *sādhana*, preaching purely, or the development of purity in the devotional service of those under their care. Managers may even neglect the spiritual development of those within their jurisdiction who do not offer resources to help their managerial vision, even though said managers may have done little to inspire help from them or to empower other authorities to do the same.

### **Deference to the Managerial Line of Authority**

The above-mentioned scenarios cause tension between the spiritual and the managerial lines of authority. Of course, it is understood that circumstances do arise where there are financially independent devotees who have no managerial connection with locally organized *saṅgas*. Still, it should not be assumed that no effort is being made by local management structures to include every devotee, or aspiring devotee, within their locally managed system of care for congregational devotees.

Therefore, with respect to the service performed by ISKCON managers, a spiritual master should always seek approval from the managers overseeing the area of jurisdiction in which his disciples are living before suggesting a new *saṅga* or service for them, or intervening in other managerial decisions.

Best, of course, is to train the disciples to offer respect to their local managers right from the start of the spiritual master-disciple relationship. Many ISKCON managers are carrying out the responsibility of maintaining the temples, Deities, book distribution, and other standards given to us by Śrīla Prabhupāda.

"Dependents" are not only those who are spiritually dependent. There are instances where devotees are also financially dependent upon their spiritual authorities and are financially maintained by the structures the spiritual authorities have themselves created.

Therefore, spiritual masters should teach their disciples to serve Śrīla Prabhupāda 's mission by cooperating with their local leaders and managers.

But this does not mean that a manager should assume that he or she has complete freedom to ignore legitimate needs of those under his or her care or that he or she has the freedom to ignore concerns expressed by spiritual masters who ask them to see that their disciples are properly cared for. They should be sensitive to the concerns of the spiritual masters as well as their disciples.

If the spiritual master still strongly feels that the level of care for his disciples within the local management structure is inadequate, taking into account the level of commitment and responsibilities being asked of them (his disciples), then he may appeal on their behalf to the higher levels of management, the local GBC, or other ISKCON avenues of appeal, as listed later in this essay.

More on this point will be addressed later. But before we do that, we will first briefly discuss the topic of faith. Those in both lines of authority would be well-served to consider the relevance of faith to the broader issues being discussed here.

### **Authority is Built on the Continuous Development of Faith**

ISKCON's greatest asset is the faith of its members. Even if there are no temples, no projects, no income, and only a few followers, if there is faith, there will be prosperity, in the true sense of the term. Consider what Śrīla Prabhupāda has written in the following letter:

"There is a proverb in Sanskrit literature that enthusiastic persons achieve the favor of the Goddess of Fortune. In the Western part of the world there is tangible example of this slogan. People in this part of the world are very much enthusiastic in material advancement and they have got it. Similarly, according to the instructions of Śrīla Rupa Gosvāmī, if we become enthusiastic in spiritual matters, then we also get success in that way. Take for example, I came to your country in ripe old age, but I had one asset: enthusiasm and faith in my Spiritual Master. I think these assets only are giving me some lights of hope, whatever I have achieved so far with your cooperation." - Letter to Jaya Govinda, Tittenhurst, 15 October 1969.

And in his purport to *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 9.3, Śrīla Prabhupāda writes:

"Faith is the most important factor for progress in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. It is only by faith that one can advance in Kṛṣṇa consciousness."

Those in the spiritual line of authority should preach and behave in such a way that they nourish and protect their dependents' faith in pure devotional service, in our *sampradāya*, in Śrīla Prabhupāda, and in ISKCON, including its management. Spiritual masters also have the added responsibility of nourishing and protecting ISKCON's managers' faith that they (the spiritual masters) are fit representatives of the spiritual line of authority. If the spiritual masters act in a contrary way, they will erode the faith of others.

Conversely, those in the managerial line of authority should manage, preach, and behave in such a way that they build and sustain the trust of those in the spiritual line of authority and their disciples. By the managers showing genuine concern for the devotees under their care, the spiritual masters will then naturally encourage their disciples to assist the manager in his service. But if managers act in a way contrary to spiritual principles, in conflict with the spiritual interests of those devotees for whom they are responsible, that will also erode others' faith.

Therefore, to safeguard the faith of all of ISKCON's members, it is necessary that we delineate clear principles for both lines of authority to follow.

### **Spiritual Masters Are Not Independent**

To further clarify the need to introduce well-defined principles, we will examine the position of spiritual masters within the managerial structure of ISKCON.

When Śrīla Prabhupāda was physically present, he was ISKCON's sole initiating spiritual master, its preeminent *śikṣa* guru, and the supreme managerial authority, superior to the GBC:

"We are managing our Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Movement by the Governing Body Commission, GBC. We have got about 20 GBCs looking after the whole world affair, and above the GBC I am there. Below the GBC there are the temple president, secretary, treasurer in every centre. So, the temple president is responsible to the GBC and the GBC is responsible to me. In this way we are managing." - Letter to Vasudeva, New Vrindaban, 30 June, 1976

In Śrīla Prabhupāda's physical absence, the structure is now somewhat different. His Divine Grace instructed that the GBC should be the ultimate managing authority for ISKCON. At the same time, he indicated that the Society should have multiple spiritual masters.

"Anyone following the order of Lord Caitanya under the guidance of His bona fide representative can become a spiritual master, and I wish that in my absence all my disciples become the bona fide spiritual master to spread Kṛṣṇa Consciousness throughout the whole world."  
- Letter to Madhusudana, Navadvīpa, 2 November 1967

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This gives rise to a challenging situation. Many spiritual organizations have one spiritual master operating as the sole head of the institution, whereas ISKCON has many spiritual masters within one organization, in addition to a "governing body" that operates as the "ultimate managing authority" for the institution as a whole. Those serving as spiritual masters in ISKCON are meant to follow the instructions of Śrīla Prabhupāda and work under the GBC Body.

The spiritual masters are thus obligated to follow the Society's policies and codes of conduct, including those outlined in this GBC-approved paper, and to abide by the decisions of its management. Included within that obligation is the responsibility to inspire their disciples to associate with and serve within ISKCON's already-existing managerial and devotee-care *sangas*, located within their disciple's area of residence rather than only inspiring them to associate with themselves (the spiritual masters) or with their *sangas* and projects that have no connection with the ISKCON zonal management structure.

## Disciples Should Avoid Creating Conflict Between Their Authorities

Disciples should also understand the greater picture within ISKCON. Certainly, a spiritual master may be more spiritually advanced than any given GBC member or any other ISKCON manager (while there may also be cases where the local GBC or ISKCON manager may be more spiritually advanced than a particular spiritual master). Nevertheless, concerning the spiritual management of the Society, as we have already clearly shown, Śrīla Prabhupāda invested authority in the GBC and its individual members and in other ISKCON managers.

If a disciple has the mistaken conviction that his or her spiritual master is above the GBC and ISKCON's laws and policies, that should be corrected by the spiritual master and other authorities. Otherwise, that misconception may lead to actions which create conflict between his or her spiritual and managerial authorities

Indeed, all disciples should follow their ISKCON authorities in the same way that all initiating and instructing spiritual masters should follow their own authorities within ISKCON.

By both example and precept, therefore, all spiritual masters should not only educate and train their disciples in the development of *bhakti* but should also educate and train them about their relation to the managerial structure of ISKCON, as well as about the spiritual masters' own relation to that structure.

## Education of Guru's Disciples

It is the responsibility of the spiritual masters within ISKCON to help every one of their disciples clearly understand the following:

- 1) The spiritual master draws his authority from his fidelity to Śrīla Prabhupada. This includes fidelity to Śrīla Prabhupada's order to work within his mission, ISKCON.
- 2) The spiritual master is a member of ISKCON and, as such, is accountable to the collective will of its leadership, the GBC Body.
- 3) The spiritual master does not derive any specific right or prerogative over ISKCON resources simply by dint of his being a spiritual master. Moreover, the spiritual master should not misuse his rights and prerogatives over his disciples.
- 4) The disciples should follow their ISKCON authorities in the same way that all initiating and instructing spiritual masters set an example by following their own ISKCON authorities.
- 5) Disciples have the essential task of surrendering to Kṛṣṇa through the spiritual master, and included within this task is recognizing and respecting other superiors within ISKCON's management who are helping them in their process of spiritual progress.
- 6) Spiritually mature managers may be the main *śīkṣā* gurus for devotees who are not their initiated disciples, and such relationships are to be fully encouraged by the initiating spiritual masters.

## Conduct of Gurus

Moreover, to show respect toward the managerial line of authority and to help nurture and protect managers' faith in the spiritual line of authority, every spiritual master should:

- 1) When first visiting or preferably before arriving at a recognized ISKCON temple or preaching center, ask the local manager how he (the spiritual master) may serve that yatra during his visit (rather than the spiritual master only pursuing his own agenda).
- 2) Before planning a visit to a zone or region where there is no local temple or preaching center, first ask the Zonal GBC if there is a vision local leaders have for that place or region which he (the spiritual master) could serve.
- 3) If there is a disagreement in terms of managerial decisions, do his best to cooperate with the relevant authority. If no agreement can be reached, then the spiritual master should defer to the decision of the relevant authority, with the option of appealing to higher authorities if necessary.

### **Duties of Managers**

To build cooperation within ISKCON, show respect for the spiritual line of authority, and help nurture and protect the faith of spiritual masters and their disciples in the managerial line of authority, all managers should:

- 1) Be receptive to advice given by initiating spiritual masters and other itinerant preachers visiting their area of jurisdiction, especially on matters concerning devotee care.
- 2) Protect the faith that their dependents have in pure devotional service and in the principle of accepting and serving an initiating spiritual master and instructing spiritual masters.
- 3) Encourage and support a system of devotee care (i.e., counselor system, brahminical advisory board, etc.) within their sphere of management.
- 4) Assure that the managers in their line of authority are themselves trained in the principles of devotee care.
- 5) Inform visiting spiritual masters about the spiritual health and overall well-being of their disciples.
- 6) Encourage and help visiting spiritual masters and other itinerant preachers to reach out to those disciples who are in need and who would be most responsive to their help.
- 7) Ensure that there is an equitable system for initiation recommendations which does not condone unwarranted pressure or manipulation from the local management for managerial gains.

### **Summary**

To promote the full flourishing of devotees' spiritual lives, Śrīla Prabhupāda created for ISKCON a managerial structure with clear lines of authority. Every member of ISKCON should respect this structure and learn to work within it. The goal of the managerial structure is spiritual: to facilitate the spiritual advancement of ISKCON's members through association with devotees, opportunities for service, and effective preaching strategies. Simultaneously, ISKCON affirms the fundamental importance of accepting initiation from a bona fide spiritual master.

Of paramount importance, of course, is our Founder-Açārya, Śrīla Prabhupāda, who is the initiating spiritual master of many devotees in ISKCON and the foremost instructing spiritual master of every devotee, now and in the future. Also important are the many initiating and instructing spiritual masters now serving in ISKCON.

All spiritual masters and their disciples should likewise appreciate the importance of the many managers in our society, who help guide and train disciples and oversee the facilities ISKCON provides for their spiritual advancement. All spiritual masters and their disciples should work cooperatively within ISKCON's managerial system, both to benefit themselves spiritually and to help the society flourish.

This cooperative, mutually respectful spirit is the best way to preserve the society's unity, please Śrīla Prabhupāda, and expand the *saṅkīrtana* mission.

In the mood of Lord Caitanya, Śrīla Prabhupāda desired that the *saṅkīrtana* movement be spread all over the world, "to every town and village." He demonstrated that desire by his constant traveling, writing, and speaking. He requested his disciples to open centers far and wide, distribute his books, arrange for attractive festivals, distribute *prasādam*, etc. It was Śrīla Prabhupāda's desire that ISKCON continue to expand, to rise as the benediction moon of Lord Caitanya's mercy.

It is for this purpose that Śrīla Prabhupāda established ISKCON as a spiritual institution with a managerial structure. The purpose of this structure is to maintain the standards he established, to offer shelter and spiritual nourishment to the devotees, and to support and increase the *saṅkīrtana* mission. To please Śrīla Prabhupāda by delivering the mercy of Śrī-Śrī Gaura-Nitāi to the conditioned souls, everyone within ISKCON - spiritual masters, disciples, and managers alike - should work cooperatively within this structure.

## What is Initiation?

Prabhupāda says that, "Initiation means to accept, officially, to abide by the orders of Kṛṣṇa 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 go down after initiation because they viewed *dīkṣā* as a milestone, a plateau that took much time and effort to achieve. With this attitude, devotees slack off after receiving *dīkṣā*. Initiation, however, is the opposite; it 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 Śrīla Prabhupāda spread Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. Initiation means to become increasingly more active in your personal spiritual life, and in helping others advance in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.

During an initiation in 1966, Prabhupāda 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 dakṣiṇa*.

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

If you have understood this Kṛṣṇa philosophy and if you have decided that you will take Kṛṣṇa consciousness seriously and preach the philosophy to others, that is your initiation. Śrīla Prabhupāda

Śrīla Prabhupāda: Initiation is a formality. First of all you have to decide whether you will abide by the rules and regulations and become Kṛṣṇa conscious. That is your consideration. You have to decide for yourself whether you are going to take this Kṛṣṇa consciousness seriously. That is your decision. Initiation is a formality. If you are serious, that is real initiation. If you have understood this Kṛṣṇa philosophy and if you have decided that you will take Kṛṣṇa consciousness seriously and preach the philosophy to others, that is your initiation. My touch is simply a formality. It is your determination. That is initiation.

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"I accepted him immediately. Not officially, but in my heart." (SP on SBST)

The rules and regulation are that nobody should accept blindly any guru, and nobody should blindly accept any disciple. They must behave, one another, at least for one year so that the prospective disciple can also understand, 'Whether I can accept this person as my guru.' And the prospective guru also can understand, 'Whether this person can become my disciple.' This is the instruction by Sanatana Gosvami in his Hari-bhakti-vilasa." (Śrīla Prabhupāda, Bg 13.1-2 lecture, 25 February 1975, Miami)



## What Does “No Illicit Sex” Mean?

This is an item of concern that is important to clarify. When you take *dīkṣā*, you will take a vow of "no illicit sex." What do we mean by that? 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 Prabhupāda 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?

Illicit sex, strictly speaking, is sex for any other purpose than procreation after having chanted 50 rounds. However, almost fifty years of ISKCON history tells us that even sincere devotees occasionally fall short of this standard. And other devotees, try as they may, have a more difficult time with this principle. Can restricted sex within marriage also come under the category of no illicit sex? Some will argue “yes,” and others “no.” What everyone will agree on is that it is better than sex outside of marriage. But it is not the standard that Prabhupāda wants us to strive for. After all, we must eventually become free from sex. Thus, if one cannot perfectly follow the higher standard, one should do what is necessary to gradually come to that standard as soon as possible.

Controlling sexual desire is certainly not always easy, and many after initiation do not always perfectly live up to the standard. I am not saying this to give you a license for less restrictive sex, but to be realistic about this challenge and to make you aware that not perfectly following all the time is not uncommon, especially for younger couples. However, by sincerely practicing Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, increased sense control and detachment naturally evolve. In my discussions with godbrothers and sisters who are both liberal and conservative, we have concluded, based on Prabhupāda’s own words, that first initiation can be given a little more liberally than second initiation. However, Prabhupāda required that we ensure that those taking second initiation are "strictly following."

We wish to become free from sexual attachments to advance in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, so we deal with our sexuality in a way that we can gradually become more attached to Kṛṣṇa, and more detached from bodily gratification. The reward is that when we transcend our lust, we can understand and relish the loving affairs of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, love that has nothing to do with mundane lust.

## 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 *Vaiṣṇava* sports!). Prabhupāda writes: "Finally, you should not take part in any gambling, including so-called sports, cinema, theater, or any such entertainment." This principle would also include unnecessary time spent on social media or other diversions and putting money into high-risk investments.

Do all initiated devotees in ISKCON perfectly avoid this definition of sports? No. But this is the standard Prabhupāda wanted for us. If we cannot 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 Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.

## What About Intoxication?

Do not consume any products with caffeine, use cigarettes, drugs (unless for medical purposes), alcohol, or any substance that would cause you to become intoxicated, high or addicted. I have written two newsletters on vows (available on my website) which are important in helping you better understand the proper mindset required for taking and following vows.

## GBC Rules on Initiation

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

The GBC resolutions in this regard 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-Ācārya who is the pre-eminent *śikṣā* guru for every member of ISKCON. Śrīla Prabhupada is to be worshipped through his words, his *murti*, his picture, and his devotees. Disciples of ISKCON *dīkṣā* gurus, other than Śrīla 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 *śikṣā* and *dīkṣā* gurus shall observe them in a modest way, significantly less elaborate in duration and cost, than Śrīla Prabhupāda's *vyasa-puja*. In general, devotees shall observe these *vyasa-puja* celebrations in their own locales. In ISKCON, only Śrīla Prabhupada's *vyasa-puja* books shall be published."

"In order to offer appropriate respect to Śrīla Prabhupāda as Founder-Ācārya and pre-eminent spiritual master of ISKCON, it is considered an essential devotional practice for all ISKCON devotees to observe or perform Śrīla Prabhupāda'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 Śrīla Prabhupāda and every devotee's special relationship with him, and to correct any imbalance in application between the respect offered to *śikṣā* gurus, *dīkṣā* gurus, and other senior *Vaiṣṇavas* contributing to a devotee's spiritual progress, an ISKCON *śikṣā* or *dīkṣā* guru may accept public *guru-puja* (*arati* and/or foot-bathing) in person once a year on ISKCON property as *vyasa-puja*."

"Events welcoming *Vaiṣṇavas*, including *śikṣā* and *dīkṣā* gurus to ISKCON temples, should be modest (for example, limited to presentation of garland(s) and accompanying *kīrtana*)."

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 Śrīla Prabhupāda'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 Śrīla 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 Śrīla Prabhupada. At the time of *dīkṣā* initiation, all disciples will be further instructed by their initiating guru that Śrīla Prabhupada is their pre-eminent *śīkṣā* guru as ISKCON's Founder-Ācārya, ever-present in his books and teachings. Thus, they have a recognized *śīkṣā* link to Śrīla Prabhupada."

## Other Standards for Initiation in ISKCON

Prabhupāda 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 Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura, who, while explaining the verse of *Bhagavad-gītā* beginning *vyavasāyātmikā 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." *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 4.24.15 purport

## 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 Śrīla Prabhupāda's *praṇāma* mantra and worship him as Founder-Ācārya of ISKCON and as his *śīkṣā* 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 *dīkṣā* 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 *śīkṣā* and *dīkṣā* within ISKCON is to strengthen the devotee's relationship with Śrīla Prabhupāda 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 *brāhmaṇa* 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."

-Śrīla Prabhupāda Letter 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 *dīkṣā* mantras received, second initiation will not be effective. First initiation is sufficient to become Kṛṣṇa conscious.

## 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. 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 regard is as follows:

“ISKCON devotees shall instruct new members to take shelter of Śrīla Prabhupāda and receive guidance, training, and assistance from those who are practically and directly instructing them in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. ISKCON members shall not compel or coerce new members to accept any particular *śīkṣā* or *dīkṣā* guru, or to take *dīkṣā* 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 *sādhana*, they must focus their attention on Śrīla Prabhupāda as Founder-Ācārya and their *śīkṣā* 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 *Vaiṣṇava-dīkṣā*.”

## **Qualifications of a Bona Fide Disciple** (From the GBC Book on Deity Worship)

The *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* lists the following qualifications for a bona fide disciple, a disciple who may be trained and engaged in deity worship:

- He should be devoted to the lotus feet of the spiritual master
- He should be fully capable of upholding the vows made to the spiritual master
- He should be engaged day and night in the Lord's service with body, mind, and words
- He should be desirous of knowing the Absolute Truth
- He should be spotless in character, truthful, gentle, and polite, pleasing in appearance, and intelligent
- He should show proper respect to elders, to initiated *Vaiṣṇavas* and to the Lord; he should observe silence concerning material subjects and should have control of his senses • He should have no attraction for committing sinful activities

### **The bona fide disciple should not possess the following characteristics:**

- He should not be lazy, dirty, sickly, continually afflicted or lamenting, angry, proud, lusty, or coveting material desires
- He should not show the enjoying mood; he should not indulge in sinful activities such as taking meat, intoxication, gambling, or illicit sex; he should not earn a living by unjust means
- He should not use vulgar or coarse language, should not be critical of others, and should not be miserly, malicious, devious, or envious; he should not give pain to others or be addicted to cruel activities
- He should not be ignorant, nor should he be proud of material learning; he should not indulge in non-*Vaiṣṇava* philosophies; he should not be addicted to over-eating

**Note:** I have been asked by some disciples to share what I personally look for (as an initiating spiritual master) in an aspiring disciple. Below are some of the qualities I look at:

- The prospective disciple should have a strong connection with Śrīla Prabhupāda
- The prospective disciple should be in good standing /get along with other devotees
- The prospective disciple should ideally trust, have affection for, and like to hear from me
- The prospective disciple should be doing (or have the intention to do) regular service, either in my projects or their local projects, or both
- The prospective disciple should work on themselves if they have personal problems that inhibit healthy relations, balanced living, and good *sādhana*
- The prospective disciple should be (or work towards being) steady and stable in both their material and spiritual lives

## How Do I Find a Guru and How Do I Know He's the Right One?

Initiation means putting yourself under the guidance of a superior devotee. In fact, Kṛṣṇa Consciousness means taking shelter of superior *Vaiṣṇavas*/gurus. The guru is described as *āśraya-vigraha*, the person of whom you must take shelter.

How shall we approach this guru? First is *praṇipātena* (Bg.4.34). Approach the guru humbly, bowing down. By doing so, you are acknowledging that you are approaching a superior. (Students will not learn well without respecting their teacher.) You bow the highest aspect of yourself (your head, intelligence) to the lowest aspect of the guru (their feet). The disciple's faith is that "if I dedicate myself to my guru(s), I will get everything."

Next is *paripraśnena* and *sevayā*: inquiring how to advance and how to serve. Materially, we get knowledge to use it selfishly, but we gain spiritual knowledge to learn how to surrender our false egos and awaken our serving attitude. We offer ourselves to the knowledge - and the knowledge is Kṛṣṇa.

*Upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattva-darśinaḥ*: He will impart the knowledge he has heard and realized/seen. Philosophy in Sanskrit is called *darśana*, what you see. Those who see the truth share their observations. *Sādhus* are the living scriptures. We need a living truth from a living guru who speaks to the life we are living.

How do you know this person is your guru? You know in the heart. But you will only know by your sincerity. Your sincerity is the real thing that will help you. Sincerity is invincible. If you are sincere, you will be victorious. Kṛṣṇa always guides the sincere on the right path. How to know who is your guru? First become a sincere disciple. As the adage goes, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."

## When Can/Should a Disciple Reject a Bona Fide Guru?

If a once bona fide spiritual later tells the disciple not to surrender to Kṛṣṇa or Prabhupāda, becomes adverse to *bhakti*, gives up *bhakti*, becomes a *māyāvādī*, or falls and does not rectify himself, the *ācāryas* recommend rejecting that guru and taking *śīkṣā* (and possibly *dīkṣā*) again elsewhere. (Of course, we always have Prabhupāda's *śīkṣā*).

If the guru was a bona fide *Vaiṣṇava* at the time of *dīkṣā* and is still a devotee - although no longer able to properly fulfill his role as guru - it is not required to take re-initiation. If a disciple takes shelter of a *śīkṣā* guru, that guru may decide that re-initiation is helpful or necessary for the disciple's advancement. If before joining ISKCON, one has taken *dīkṣā* from a guru who is not a *Vaiṣṇava* or not a bona fide *Vaiṣṇava* (like a family guru), then the disciple should take initiation from a bona fide *Vaiṣṇava* guru.

If one was initiated into the *Śrī Saṁpradāya*, and one wants to take *dīkṣā* in the *Gauḍīya Saṁpradāya*, one would then ask the blessings of their Śrī guru to take *dīkṣā* as a Gauḍīya. The Śrī guru will most likely give his blessings because they do not give *harināma dīkṣā*.

Also, there are variations to this situation. For example, a guru might have a slight transgression among a lifetime of impeccable service. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura does not recommend leaving that guru but states that the disciples of that guru plead to the guru to recover. If the guru does not recover, then they should take shelter of another guru.

However, in some cases, in spite of a lifetime of service and a minor discretion, one may lose one's previous faith in that guru and will feel a need to keep a distance and take guidance from another guru, or simply take shelter of Prabhupāda and ISKCON. Although this is neither recommended nor ideal, it is understandable that it may happen to some disciples. However, if the guru is properly situated in Kṛṣṇa Consciousness and one rejects him or takes re-initiation based on the newfound guru being a much superior *Vaiṣṇava*, this is improper. With the permission of one's guru, a disciple can take shelter of another advanced devotee as a *śīkṣā* guru, but rejecting one's bona fide guru and taking re-initiation elsewhere is wrong.

In some cases, the GBC will also give guidance on whether to seek shelter from another guru. In other words, the GBC may make a judgment as to the status of a fallen or deviant guru. Sometimes a guru is not fallen but takes shelter of someone outside of ISKCON. In these cases, the GBC asks that if a guru leaves ISKCON, the disciples stay within ISKCON and remain dedicated to Prabhupāda's mission. This creates a tension between institutional fidelity and fidelity to one's guru and puts the disciple in an awkward place. Thus, some devotees will leave ISKCON in the name of loyalty to their guru, and other disciples will stay in ISKCON in the name of loyalty to ISKCON and Prabhupāda, and often seek shelter from another guru. And there may be those who still are guided by that guru but who remain in ISKCON. It is difficult to legislate such decisions, and every situation is different. Still, Prabhupāda wanted us to stay in ISKCON and help make it stronger and greater.

## **You Promised**

After being in the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness movement for nearly forty years, I began to deeply ponder the reasons that I and other devotees do not always keep the vows and promises we make. I also pondered how we are being negatively affected, even unconsciously, when we make spiritual promises which we do not keep.

This chapter is both a reflection on those thoughts and what Śrīla Prabhupāda said on this subject. Also, I will give you some questions you can ask yourself to help you better look at where you stand with your commitments. I feel it is essential that we all look more deeply into this topic.

### **Why We Do Not Keep Promises**

Sometimes we make promises we don't keep. We might tell a friend we will do something for them and then we forget. Maybe we tell someone we will get back to them tomorrow and we let it go for a week or two – or we don't get back to them at all. We might promise our children or spouse to take them somewhere special, but we don't end up doing it.

Then, of course, there is borrowing. Have you ever borrowed something and promised to return it the next day? Then you keep it for a week, a month, or a year before you realize you didn't return it (or maybe you just never return it).

We also make promises to ourselves we don't keep. We promise to finish something by a certain date, to go to bed at a certain time, to not eat certain foods, to break a bad habit - and we often don't do it.

Sometimes we break more serious promises- like marriage vows, promises to pay back money to a friend, and promises to do an important job. We even break vows we make to our spiritual master.

Keeping promises, then, is a challenge. I often ask myself, “Why don't I always take seriously the promises I make?” Have you ever contemplated this question? If not, it is a good question to ask yourself.

Those of us who have taken initiation are faced with keeping the important - and sometimes difficult - promises we have made - the kind of promises that practically no one else in the world has made. Some of us made our vows at an early age; some of us made them without fully understanding what we were doing; some of us made them because we felt pressure to take initiation. However, we made those vows anyway, and the reality is that many of us have a difficult time keeping them.

I often wonder if it is really those vows themselves that are difficult to keep, or if it is that we have not developed a deep commitment to keep vows in general, no matter what they are. Granted, they can be difficult vows to keep, yet the issue of commitment in general plays into the equation.

### **A Gentleman Will Keep His Promise**

When Śrīla Prabhupāda was asked about devotees who were not keeping their vows, he did not accept any excuses. It is not that he was heavy-handed with those who did not follow their vows or that he was not willing to engage them in service. He always simply said that since they promised to do it, they must do it; he added that a gentleman will always keep his promise.



Didn't Śrīla Prabhupāda know that many would not follow their initiation vows? Didn't he realize he was taking a risk by giving initiations? He did. Still, his answer remained the same, "You promised." He forgave those who "fell down," and he wanted them to get back on their feet and again stick to their vows. He expected those who took vows to follow them.

Once a pregnant woman went to the hospital because she had become extremely weak. Since she was finding it nearly impossible to chant sixteen rounds a day, her husband wrote Śrīla Prabhupāda to ask if she could chant fewer rounds while she regained her strength. Prabhupāda said emphatically, "She must chant her sixteen rounds every day."

Prabhupāda once asked all the devotees in the Los Angeles temple if they were chanting their rounds. One devotee raised his hand and said he was not. Śrīla Prabhupāda asked, "Why?" The devotee responded that he had so much work to do that he did not have time to finish his rounds, and still he was sleeping only four hours a night. Prabhupāda forcefully replied, "Then sleep less. You must finish your rounds."

Why was Śrīla Prabhupāda so strict about this? Because he knew that if he were lenient with us, he would be opening Pandora's box. He knew we were not afraid of *māyā*, and he knew we were weak. Imagine how much more difficult it would have been to follow our vows if Prabhupāda had not been strict with us, that is, if he just told us, "Try to follow."

### **Who Should Take Initiation?**

Generally, devotees who take initiation think they will keep their vows for life. However, there are some devotees who take initiation before they are certain they can follow all the regulative principles. Understanding that a formal relationship with a guru is necessary, they feel it's important to take initiation sooner rather than later. Perhaps they feel that initiation might give them the strength and impetus to better follow the regulative principles.

There are other reasons to take initiation. Some devotees feel pressure to take initiation before they are ready. Others want to get initiated to belong, to be part of a community of initiated devotees.

Often the thinking behind this is that since some devotees have difficulty following the regulative principles, it is okay to take initiation as long as one is certain that someday he or she will follow the principles.

Prabhupāda's idea was different. He thought that devotees who took initiation should be determined to follow their vows from day one. Also, he thought that if you had taken initiation and then stopped following your vows, you should devise a plan to gradually begin following them again.

### **I Just Can't Follow**

If Prabhupāda thought that Kṛṣṇa Consciousness was not powerful enough to enable us to control our senses, he would not have initiated us. He knew that if we practiced Kṛṣṇa Consciousness properly and lived in the mode of goodness, we could follow the four regulative principles.

Once, Prabhupāda was told about a sincere devotee who was having trouble following his vows. Prabhupāda's analysis was that he was "strongly under the grip of ignorance." Keeping vows requires living in goodness as much as possible. Doing things like staying up late and watching movies full of sexual scenes will obviously make it difficult to be celibate. We often say things like, "I just can't follow," while we choose to do the very things that make it difficult or impossible for us to follow.

At times, I have entertained the idea of being more accommodating by lowering standards. In many ways, this seems more practical. If we set a lower initiation standard, more devotees will be able to keep their vows. However, since Prabhupāda never introduced a lower standard, we cannot implement it. Alternatively, to deal with the dilemma of not following, some have suggested that people can take lesser vows outside of a formal initiation. This would be a means of preparing for initiation in the future, a sort of pre-initiation.

This and similar programs have their merits. However, there needs to be education about vows. We all need to understand better what it means to take and keep a vow, and what causes us to break our vows.

### **What's Your Story?**

As I said, I often pondered the reasons that we do not always strictly follow the promises we make, even when we have the intention to do so. Late at night, when I still have a few rounds left, I often ask myself why I am thinking of going to sleep and finishing my rounds the next day? Why would I even contemplate not following the vows I made?

I think for many, not keeping a promise or agreement is like the following equation: keeping an agreement or promise = not keeping an agreement or promise + a good story. The thinking is that if you have a good story, you really have not broken your agreement. The problem with this logic is that Prabhupāda did not accept that anyone had a good story. When someone makes a promise to you and lets you down, don't you feel betrayed, hurt, disrespected, or angry? I think that on some level, we feel this way about ourselves when we break our promises. Although keeping our vows may be difficult, even painful, it is also painful - and sometimes even more painful - not to keep them.

### **Would You Break a Promise to God?**

As I thought about why I don't always keep my vows and promises, I began to imagine myself making a promise directly to Kṛṣṇa while He was standing before me. Then I asked myself a heavy question, "Would I break a promise I made directly to God?" I immediately thought, "Of course I wouldn't. How could I? How could anyone?" Then I realized that, during initiation, I had made a vow personally to Kṛṣṇa. He was standing on the altar and He was also witnessing the vow as the sacrificial fire burned. Only then did I realize how low I had fallen. I had broken a vow I made to God. That thought hit me hard. It made me think that if I could break a promise I made to God, then how seriously do I take promises and vows in general?

Thinking about breaking a promise I made to God has helped me tremendously. Has it made it easier to follow the principles? Not exactly. Has it made it easier to chant my rounds? No. However, it has given me more determination to keep the promises I made to Kṛṣṇa at my initiation. Now, when I think of not following a vow I made, or whenever not completing my rounds comes to mind, I think, "How can I break a promise I made to God? What kind of a person would break a promise to God?"

I suggest you ask yourself these same questions because, if you don't ask these questions, it is all too easy to rationalize the answers. You may think that very few devotees follow their vows strictly, so it's natural or normal not to follow them. You may think you didn't know what you were getting into when you took initiation so it's okay to back down on your promises. You may even think it's impossible to ever follow your vows.

### **It is About Attitude**

Kṛṣṇa responds to our attitude and desire. If our attitude is, "How can I follow my vows?" Kṛṣṇa will give us the intelligence, inspiration, and strength to follow them. If our attitude is to find all the reasons we can't follow our vows, Kṛṣṇa will make sure those reasons stare us right in the face. In fact, He will even convince us they are all true. Since Kṛṣṇa will help one way or the other, why not ask to go up instead of down?

I totally understand why devotees may think they cannot follow their vows and I also sympathize with their struggles. Still, we need a way of thinking that supports our vows, not one that undermines them.

*The Nectar of Devotion* tells us not to make vows we cannot keep. Devotees still can have an intimate and deep connection with their guru before they are ready to formalize their relationship. And surely everyone can have an intimate relationship with Śrīla Prabhupāda through reading his books and serving him. Prabhupāda made it simple for us. If we cannot follow our vows, we should not promise. If we promise, we must follow our vows.

### **Exercises**

The exercises for this chapter are the questions above that I suggested you ask yourself. Aside from this, consider creating a support group for chanting rounds and following the principles. You could have one support group for chanting and another one for the regulative principles. Alternatively, you might want to have a support group that focuses on one specific regulative principle – or even on other vows.

**Helpful Links:**

<b><u>Social Media Platform</u></b>	<b><u>Name of page (Language)</u></b>	<b><u>Link:</u></b>
<b>Facebook</b>		
	HG Mahatma Das (English)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/HGMahatmaDas">https://www.facebook.com/HGMahatmaDas</a>
	La Sabiduria de Mahatma (Spanish)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/LaSabiduriaDeMahatma/">https://www.facebook.com/LaSabiduriaDeMahatma/</a>
	Махатма Дас - Mahatma Dasa (Russian)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/mahatmadas_a">https://www.facebook.com/mahatmadas_a</a>
	Mahatma Das Lietuva (Lithuanian)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/MahatmaDasLietuva">https://www.facebook.com/MahatmaDasLietuva</a>
	Mahatma Das Italia (Italian)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/MahatmaPrabhUISKCONLeader">https://www.facebook.com/MahatmaPrabhUISKCONLeader</a>
<b>Instagram</b>		
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<b>YouTube</b>		
	Mahatma Das (English)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/Mahatmadasa">https://www.youtube.com/user/Mahatmadasa</a>
	Living the Wisdom of Bhakti by Mahatma Das (English)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuI2HR4zf6sk_2rcD3f6VJA">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuI2HR4zf6sk_2rcD3f6VJA</a>
	Mahatma Das en Español (Spanish)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_koPmwP_IuEOPmxawf2jfA">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_koPmwP_IuEOPmxawf2jfA</a>

<b>VK</b>		
	HG Mahatma Prabhu (Russian)	<a href="https://vk.com/mahatmaprabhu">https://vk.com/mahatmaprabhu</a>
<b>Telegram</b>		
	HG Mahatma Das daily wisdom	<a href="https://t.me/mahatmadas">https://t.me/mahatmadas</a>

## Other Helpful Links:

### WhatsApp:

- To receive regular inspirational messages, audio, and video, send a **WhatsApp** message to +44 7947 336863, or write to jennyue@hotmail.co.uk.
- To be added to the **WhatsApp group for disciples** (*dīkṣā* and *śīkṣā*/well-wishers) send a WhatsApp message to +27 849857679.

## Study Requirements

Receive access to soft copies of the books required for the study requirements, by emailing your request to [disciplepackage@gmail.com](mailto:disciplepackage@gmail.com)

Please also send us an email should you require a downloadable copy of His Grace Mahātmā Prabhu's *Īyāsasāna* picture.

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Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare  
Hare Rāma Hare Rāma  
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