**Chapter 1: The Spiritual Masters**

*Echoing the command of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Srila Prabhupada urged his strict followers to become gurus and spread Krsna consciousness everywhere.*

The year is 1972. In New Vrindaban, USA, it is Srila Prabhupada’s Vyasa-puja Day.1 As the sun climbs to the meridian, the thick mist shrouding the West Virginia foothills gives way to a spotless blue. Inside a hilltop pavilion, hundreds of devotees and guests—politicians, journalists, and academics among them—have gathered to observe the 76th anniversary of Prabhupada’s birth. It is to the guests especially that Prabhupada directs his address.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this ceremony….of course, those who are my students, they know what is this ceremony. Those who are visitors, for their information, I may inform you something about this ceremony. Otherwise, it may be misunderstood. An outsider may see it that, ‘Why a person is being worshiped like God?’ There may be some doubt.”2

Doubt, indeed. The 1960s and 70s have seen a spike in the number of opportunistic gurus coming to the West, streamlining Vedic revelation to suit modern tastes, and reaping the profits. To establish trust, Prabhupada begins to demystify “the guru” by connecting him to other gurus in “*parampara*,” a disciplic succession of authentic spiritual masters descending from Lord Krsna Himself, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The demystification continues:

“On the top of the mango tree there is a very ripened fruit, and that fruit has to be tasted. So if I drop the fruit from up, it will be lost. Therefore it is handed over, after one, after one, after... Then it comes down. So all Vedic process of knowledge is taking from the authority. And it comes down through disciplic succession.”

Well aware of modern antipathy to authority, Prabhupada then compares the guru to that venerable American pedestrian, the mailman:

“Just like a post peon comes and delivers you, say, one hundred dollars. So *he* is not delivering that one hundred dollars. Your friend has sent you one hundred dollars, and his business is to hand over that one hundred dollars as it is, without any change, without taking one dollar from it, no, or adding. No addition, no subtraction. His honesty, his perfection, is that he delivers you that hundred dollars which is sent by your friend….He may be imperfect in so many other ways, but when he does his business perfectly, he is perfect. Similarly…we receive perfect knowledge from Krsna through the agency of spiritual master.”

**Guru is One, Gurus are Different**

The guru as God’s mailman, down to earth yet out of this world. In this sense all genuine gurus are one. Those guests who go on to read Prabhupada’s teachings will learn how all genuine gurus also differ.

In the very first text of the *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta,* the definitive biography ofLord Krsna’s golden avatara, Lord Caitanya,Srila Krsnadasa Kaviraja Gosvami begins by offering his respectful obeisances to *gurun*, his many spiritual masters. In the book’s Introduction Srila Prabhupada notes: “He uses the plural here to indicate the disciplic succession. He offers obeisances not to his spiritual master alone but to the whole *parampara*, the chain of disciplic succession beginning with Lord Kåñëa Himself.”

Later in the first chapter, text 35, Kaviraja Gosvami offers his respects to “my initiating spiritual master and all my instructing spiritual masters.” Prabhupada comments: “A devotee must have only one initiating spiritual master because in the scriptures acceptance of more than one is always forbidden. There is no limit, however, to the number of instructing spiritual masters one may accept. Generally a spiritual master who constantly instructs a disciple in spiritual science becomes his initiating spiritual master later on.”

The last sentence indicates the natural, normative guru-disciple relationship sustainable over time. Although Prabhupada was uniquely empowered to spread Krsna consciousness worldwide within a few years, it is worth noting that he entrusted the thousands of disciples he was initiating to the care of his local leaders and senior devotees.3 Now decades on, to glimpse how his movement’s guru-disciple culture can become more local and sustainable, the way he himself describes it, let’s continue to examine Prabhupada’s presentation of *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta’s* foundational first chapter, “The Spiritual Masters.”

**Initiating and Instructing Gurus**

In the years since Prabhupada’s passing, the spotlight on the initiating spiritual master may have led members of his movement to believe that to initiate disciples requires more qualification than to instruct them. In his comments to text 34, Prabhupada disagrees: “The initiating and instructing spiritual masters are equal and identical manifestations of Kåñëa, although they have different dealings.” In his comments to text 47, Prabhupada raises the point to a warning: “There is no difference between the shelter-giving Supreme Lord and the initiating and instructing spiritual masters. If one foolishly discriminates between them, he commits an offense in the discharge of devotional service.”

Of course, the potential to have many instructing gurus doesn’t obviate the requirement to accept initiation from a singular guru. In *The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter Six, “How to Discharge Devotional Service,” Prabhupada identifies the first two principles of devotional service as “(1) accepting the shelter of the lotus feet of a bona fide spiritual master,” and “(2) becoming initiated by the spiritual master and learning how to discharge devotional service from him…” We need both rites of passage on our journey home to Krsna.

Writing in Lord Caitanya’s time, Srila Narahari Sarkara compared the relationship with one’s personal guru to the relationship with one’s father: “A faithful son may go out for earning money and subsequently bring to his father the wealth gained, and later the son may ask for some allowance from the father, and whatever he receives from the father he is entitled to spend on his own enjoyment. Similarly, a disciple may hear some instructions from another advanced Vaisnava, but after gaining that good instruction he must bring it and present it to his own spiritual master. After presenting it, he should hear the same teachings from his own spiritual master with appropriate instructions.” (*Sri Krsna-bhajanamrta*, text 48)

When a devotee once asked Prabhupada which was more important, studying the scriptures or serving a person whose life exemplified the scriptures, without hesitation Prabhupada indicated the latter: “Because the guru can pull your ear.”

In Prabhupada’s movement today, initiating gurus may act like parents, and instructing gurus like well-wishing relatives. Their relative influence, however, depends on how those relationships practically develop. Our parents are always our parents, yet sometimes we become closer with our relatives, especially if our parents are distant. Nonetheless, if all are well-wishers, serving cooperatively within the founder-acarya’s mission, harmony and spiritual progress prevail.

**The Power of Commitment**

Heavy with spiritual knowledge, all genuine gurus are teachers. At the same time their impact on our lives varies according to the depth of their commitment to us.4 Continuing his commentary to text 34, Prabhupada writes: “*Gurün* is plural in number because anyone who gives spiritual instructions based on the revealed scriptures is accepted as a spiritual master. Although others give help in showing the way to beginners, the guru who first initiates one with the *mahä-mantra* is to be known as the initiator, and the saints who give instructions for progressive advancement in Kåñëa consciousness are called instructing spiritual masters.”

Notice the progressive commitment from introducing to initiating to instructing. Whoever instructs us the most is naturally more influential in our lives. “Generally a spiritual master who constantly instructs a disciple in spiritual science becomes his initiating spiritual master later on.” Even if the guru doesn’t say a word, the guru is always teaching, especially by example, the most powerful teacher. “Example is better than precept,” and “Actions speak louder than words.”

Once in India a Western devotee approached Prabhupada with a desire and a doubt. His desire was to sail down the Ganges with a party of devotees dancing and chanting Hare Krsna, dock in hamlets, and enliven the local villagers. His doubt was that he didn’t speak their language. “Oh, they don’t care what you say,” Prabhupada replied. “They just want to see how you behave.”

**“So You, Every One of you, Become Guru”**

For the devotees listening to Prabhupada’s Vyasa-puja address, their appreciation of his unique position is increasing. Seated on a thronelike, crimson dais, Prabhupada is a guru of gurus, “a master at whose feet all masters sit.” Although their commitment to him is as green as their summer surroundings, his commitment to them is absolute, and his ongoing request difficult for most of them to imagine: “become guru.”

Prabhupada’s request is no other than the request of Lord Caitanya Himself. In the *Sri-Caitanya-caritamrta*, Madhya-lila, Chapter 7, text 128, the Lord tells the *brahmana* Kurma: “Instruct everyone to follow the orders of Lord Çré Kåñëa [as they are given in the *Bhagavad-gétä* and *Çrémad-Bhägavatam*]. In this way become a spiritual master and try to liberate everyone in this land.” The first sentence of Prabhupada’s commentary to the text says it all: “This is the sublime mission of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.”

As recorded in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase, in hundreds of lectures, morning walks, room conversations, letters, and public and private events, Prabhupada cited the above verse as a reminder of the Lord’s request. From the beginning through the middle to the end of Prabhupada’s worldwide ministry, these reminders to his followers were relentless. Here are three examples:

“I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples. Maybe by 1975, all of my disciples will be allowed to initiate and increase the numbers of the generations. That is my program.” (Letter to Hansaduta, 3 January 1969)

“So you, every one of you, can become guru. You may say that, ‘I am not interested to become a guru,’ but Caitanya Mahäprabhu says that if you are not interested, that is not very good. You should be interested. You must be guru. That is success of your life.” (Room Conversation, Teheran, 13 March 1975)

“Because people are in darkness, we require many millions of gurus to enlighten them. Therefore Caitanya Mahäprabhu's mission is, He said, that ‘Every one of you become guru.’ [If you say,] ‘But I have no qualification. How can I become guru?’ There is no need of qualification. ‘Still I can become guru?’ Yes. ‘How?’ Whomever you meet, you simply instruct what Kåñëa has said. That's all. You become guru.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* Lecture, 6.1.21, 21 May 1976, Honolulu)

**“Strictly Follow”**

While he was spreading Krsna consciousness worldwide, Prabhupada anticipated the disorder that would likely befall his movement after his passing. He even referred to it indirectly in one of his Bhaktivedanta purports: “The main business of human society is to think of the Supreme Personality of Godhead at all times, to become His devotees, to worship the Supreme Lord and to bow down before Him. The *äcärya*, the authorized representative of the Supreme Lord, establishes these principles, but when he disappears, things once again become disordered. The perfect disciples of the *äcärya* try to relieve the situation by sincerely following the instructions of the spiritual master.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam*, 4.28.48 purport)

Prabhupada anticipated that some of his leading disciples, out of immaturity, might try to imitate his unique position as *jagat-guru*, a universal teacher. At the same time, his relentless reminders to become genuine gurus indicate a greater concern: that, in their supreme esteem for their founder-acarya, his followers wouldn’t mature to become gurus in their own right and shelter others in Lord Caitanya’s mission. How, then, would Krsna’s mercy reach every town and village, as the Vedic scriptures had foretold, and how would every sincere aspirant receive the personal care and guidance they would need to make the journey home, back to Godhead?

In his writings, therefore, Prabhupada made it clear that the most important qualification to become a guru was to “strictly follow” the instructions of guru and Krsna: “A person who is liberated acharya and guru cannot commit any mistake,” Prabhupada wrote an early disciple, “but there are persons who are less qualified or not liberated, but still can act as guru and acharya by strictly following the disciplic succession.” (Letter to Janardana, 26 April 1968)

A similar message appears in Prabhupada’s purport to the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, Canto Four, Chapter 18, text 5: “This Kåñëa consciousness movement directly receives instructions from the Supreme Personality of Godhead via persons who are strictly following His instructions. Although a follower may not be a liberated person, if he follows the supreme, liberated Personality of Godhead, his actions are naturally liberated from the contamination of the material nature. Lord Caitanya therefore says: ‘By My order you may become a spiritual master.’ One can immediately become a spiritual master by having full faith in the transcendental words of the Supreme Personality of Godhead and by following His instructions.” (SB 4.18.5 purport)

One needn’t be a superman—or a superwoman—to be a regular spiritual master. Liberated or nonliberated, a guru is genuine if he or she “strictly follows” the orders of guru and Krsna. By Prabhupada’s reckoning, his movement may have more local gurus than its members recognize. They simply need to be formally approached for guidance, and formally encouraged to give it. “We require many millions of gurus….”

Pens scribbling, cameras rolling, his American guests listen to Prabhupada close his Vyasa-puja address. As he looks into their eyes, Prabhupada is concerned that they’ve correctly heard and understood his message:

“So this is the position of a spiritual master. Don't misunderstand that, ‘This person is sitting very comfortably and taking all honors and contribution.’ It is needed just to teach them how to respect the representative of God. This is the sum and substance of Vyäsa-püjä. Thank you very much.”

**Notes**

1The birthday of a bona fide spiritual master, who represents Srila Vyasadeva, the great guru who came to earth some 5,000 years ago to codify and preserve Vedic knowledge in writing.

2The entire text of Srila Prabhupada’s 1972 Vyasa-puja address may be found in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase under Audio Transcripts/1972/Sept. 2.

3For dozens of examples of Prabhupada’s requesting local leaders and senior devotees to help his newly-initiated disciples, see the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase/Contents/Correspondence.

4For more discussion of the different dealings of *diksa-* and siksa-gurus, see *The Siksa-Guru*, by Sivarama Swami, 1999, Bhaktivedanta Institute, Hungary, pp. 76-80.

*All guru-disciple relationships thrive under the shelter of the founder-ācārya, the foundational spiritual master of a disciplic line. In Chapter 2, we’ll examine the origin and development of the founder-ācārya principle, with a focus on our Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition.*