**Chapter 2: The Founder-Acarya Principle**

*Although the English-Sanskrit compound “founder-acarya” is less than a century old, its seeds in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition date from the time of Lord Caitanya.*

Especially in ISKCON’s early years, when Srila Prabhupada’s teachings were just beginning to see print, his first followers would often write him questions—some lofty, some lame—and with endless patience, Prabupada would reply.

In late 1968, after a major American publisher came out with an abridged edition of Prabhupada’s *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, several devotees wrote letters asking about the disciplic succession of spiritual masters listed at the end of the Introduction. Why, for example, was the *Gita’s* hero, Arjuna, not listed?

To one such letter Prabhupada replied that “disciplic succession does not mean one has to be directly a disciple of a particular person.” For example: “Arjuna accepted Krsna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and we also accept the same truth under the disciplic succession of Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Things equal to the same thing are equal to one another.”1 In other words: “Disciplic succession means to accept the disciplic conclusion.”2

Out of those who accept the disciplic conclusion, a few may live it so wonderfully that they inspire many who come later to surrender to Krsna. It is that rare soul Prabhupada’s own spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, had in mind when he compiled the list Prabhupada gave us as “The Disciplic Succession.” Srila Bhaktisiddhanta called his list the “Bhagavata-parampara,” the line of great *acaryas* (exemplars) whose lives embody the teachings of the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, “the beautiful story of the Personality of Godhead.”

In his commentary to *Bhagavatam* 10.2.31, Prabhupada describes the necessity of following the “*acarya-sampradaya*,” the line of great exemplars, to please Krsna and return to His eternal kingdom:

The *acarya* gives the suitable method for crossing the ocean of nescience by accepting the boat of the Lord’s lotus feet, and if this method is strictly followed, the followers will ultimately reach the destination, by the grace of the Lord. This method is called *acarya-sampradaya*….Therefore one must accept the *acarya-sampradaya*; otherwise one’s endeavors will be futile.

After Lord Caitanya’s time (1486-1534), the *acarya-sampradaya* culture nurtured the seeds that would eventually blossom as the English-Sankskrit phrase “founder-*acarya*.” We will now look at four of those seeds, as well as the great Gaudiya *acaryas*3 who sowed them.

**An Organizational Seed**

Circa 1545 Lord Caitanya’s chief disciples, the Six Gosvamis of Vrindavan, founded the Visva Vaisnava Raja Sabha, which Srila Bhaktisiddhanta later identified as the gathering or congregation of devotees who worship “the King of all Vaisnavas in the world,” Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu.4

As the Sabha’s most prolific writer and philosopher, Srila Jiva Gosvami also emerged as the group’s most skillful organizer. For example, he founded Vrindavan’s famous Radha-Damodara temple, where he established a library of all the Gosvamis’ works. Sri Jiva had those worked copied, and then dispatched his three best students—Srinivasa, Narottama, and Syamananda—to Bengal on the first Gaudiya Vaisnava book distribution party.

The story of what happened to that party—how the books were stolen by a king’s thieves, how they were recovered, and how the king and his accomplices later surrendered to Krsna—foreshadowed dramas Lord Caitanya continues to enact through ISKCON and other cooperative Gaudiya groups today. Suffice it to say that the Gosvamis’ Sabha—dedicated to articulating, preserving, and distributing the Lord’s teachings—planted the founder-*acarya* principle’s organizational seed.

**A Philosophical Seed**

Around 1552, seven years after the Sabha’s founding, Srila Rupa Gosvami finished his landmark work *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* (“The Ocean of the Pure Nectar of Devotional Service”). In his commentary to the *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Adi-lila*, Chapter 5, text 203, Prabhupada writes: “Srila Rupa Gosvami is described as the *bhakti-rasacarya*, or one who knows the essence of devotional service. His famous book *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* is the science of devotional service, and by reading this book one can understand the meaning of

devotional service.”

So essential for devotees did Prabhupada consider Sri Rupa’s masterwork that, for more than six months in 1969, he suspended his *Bhagavatam* writing to produce a summary study of *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* he called *The Nectar of Devotion.* In his Introduction Prabhupada writes that “in our mental activities we should always try to think of Krsna and try to plan how to please Him, following in the footsteps of the great *acaryas* and the personal spiritual master.”

Later in the book Prabhupada repeats the distinction between “the great *acaryas* and the personal spiritual master” by the way he translates Sri Rupa’s phrase *sadhu-vartmanu-varttanam*:5 “following in the footsteps of great *acaryas* (teachers) under the direction of the spiritual master.”6

In Chapter 1 we learned that initiating and instructing spiritual masters are like parents and relatives respectively. As a child may at first see his parents and relatives as everything, then matures to see them in perspective, so a disciple may initially see his spiritual parents and relatives as everything, then matures to appreciate them in relation to “the great *acaryas.*”

To help us understand this philosophical seed of the founder-*acarya* principle, we will now hear how the *acarya-sampradaya* culture inspired one famous disciple to appeal to his great guru in relation to their worshipable *acarya.*

**A Cultural Seed**

Before the Gaudiya Vaisnava saint Srila Narottama dasa Thakura was born, Lord Caitanya told Lokanatha Gosvami: “Within a short time a prince named Narottama will become your disciple. He will be a gifted devotee, full of love and devotion, and empowered to save the fallen conditioned souls from hellish life. His enchanting, beautiful *kirtana* will melt even wood or stone.” (*Narottama-vilasa*) After the Lord left this world, however, Sri Lokanatha was so distraught that he withdrew from everyone and vowed never to accept disciples.

Later in Vrindavan, when Sri Jiva noticed that Narottama was drawn to the saintly Lokanatha, Sri Jiva told his student Narottama to approach Lokanatha for initiation. But as ardently as Narottama approached Lokanatha, just as

adamantly Lokanatha refused. Desperate, Narottama, the son of a king, vowed to become Lokanatha’s menial servant and took to cleansing the area where the saint performed his early-morning ablutions.

Although Lokanatha was absorbed in his solitary Krsna meditations, he noticed that someone was doing this service, but didn’t think much about it. One day, after an entire year had passed, he decided to find out who was so conscientiously cleaning up after him. The next morning, he came earlier than usual and hid behind a tree. When Narottama approach, Lokanatha saw who is was. Narottama fell at the saint’s feet and begged to be accepted as his disciple. Lokanatha refused at first, then later relented, conquered by the pure devotion of this saintly devotee.7

Although Srila Narottama dasa Thakura was the only initiated disciple of Srila Lokanatha Gosvami, in Song 17, verse 4, of Narottama’s famous song collection *Prarthana*, he longs for Lokanatha to bring him to their ultimate shelter in the disciplic succession, Srila Rupa Gosvami:

*prabhu lokanatha kabe sange laina jabe sri rupera pada padme more samarpibe*

“When will my lord and master, Lokanatha Gosvami, take me with him and place me at the lotus feet of Srila Rupa Gosvami?”

As “the chief of the Six Gosvamis,”8 Srila Rupa Gosvami was Narottama and Lokanatha’s *bhakti-rasacarya*, the master most expert at relishing the moods of pure devotional service to Lord Krsna. And as Narottama’s *diksa-guru*, Sri Lokantha had the pleasure and privilege to bring his disciple closer to the foundational leader of the Six Gosvamis’ Sabha. “*Rasacarya*” may sound close to “founder-*acarya*, but by Lord Caitanya’s inscrutable will, the organizational, philosophical, and cultural seeds sown early for “founder-*acarya*,” would have to wait another three centuries, within a crucible of disgrace, before finishing seeds arrived to conclusively establish the founder-*acarya* principle.

**Literary Seeds**

In the late nineteenth century the great Gaudiya Vaisnava acarya Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura identified and exposed more than a dozen counterfeit Vaisnava groups who, starting just a century after Lord Caitanya’s departure, had effectively disgraced Vaisnavism. Not only did Srila Bhaktivinoda restore within India the Lord’s teachings and the glories of the Vaisnavas, he also conceived a mission to propagate Krsna consciousness globally, thus helping to fulfill a sixteenth century scriptural prophecy: “In every town and village, the chanting of my name will be heard.” (*Sri Caitanya-bhagavata, Antya-khanda 4.126*)

When reports reached Srila Bhaktivinoda of a rising Western interest in Indian culture, and Sanskrit in particular, the Thakura sent a copy of his Sanskrit work *Sri-Krsna-samhita* to the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. When Emerson gratefully replied, requesting books in English, Srila Bhaktivinoda penned *Lord Caitanya--His Life and Precepts*, and sent copies to several Western intellectuals and universities. But it was a Bengali work by the Thakura, published in 1900 as *Harinama-cintamani*, that contained conclusive literary seeds for the founder-*acarya* principle.

In Chapter 6, Srila Bhaktivinoda describes three kinds of megamasters in a disciplic tradition. The first is the *sampradayera adi-guru*, the primeval guru of the tradition, directly enlightened by the Lord Himself. Following the primeval guru are the *siksa-guru-pratisthita*, greatly revered preceptors who keep the tradition’s teachings intact over long spans of time. But when the Thakura identified the third guru, he described him in the superlative: “However, the *adyacarya*, or original guru of a disciplic line, is appropriately worshiped and respected as the *guru-siromani*, the topmost crown jewel of the spiritual masters. His perfect philosophical conclusions are to be followed by all in his succession; any contrary instructions will not be accepted.”9 The stage was set for the founder-*acarya* seeds to bear fruit.

**The Seeds Bear Fruit**

In the 1880s, while envisioning a worldwide Krsna consciousness movement, Srila Bhaktivinoda revived the Vaisnava Raja Sabha and launched a Bengali

spiritual journal, *Sajjana-tosani* (“For the Satisfaction of the Devotees”). Four decades later, Srila Bhaktivinoda’s illustrious son Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura reinvented the Sabha as the Gaudiya Mission and transformed his father’s journal into *The Harmonist*, an English-language periodical, with the Thakura’s scholarly disciple Professor Nisikanta Sanyal as his co-editor.

Timed to coincide with the launch of the Mission’s grand new Calcutta headquarters, the October 1930 *Harmonist* carried the first of a three-part series by Professor Sanyal about “The Gaudiya Math.” It was in this article that the “founder-*acarya*” phrase, seeded for centuries, finally fructified:

The Gaudiya Math is also identical with its founder Acharyya. The associates, followers, and abode of His Divine Grace are limbs of himself. None of them claim to be anything but a fully subordinate limb of this single individual. This unconditional, causeless, spontaneous submission to the Head, is found to be not only compatible with, but absolutely necessary for the fullest freedom of initiative of the subordinate limbs.10

During the Gaudiya Mission’s finest hour—the first Vaisnava preaching expedition to Europe—the book Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s leading preachers took with them was *Shree Krishna Chaitanya*, written by Professor Sanyal and edited by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta. The work was written with sufficient breadth, depth, and excellence to impress the intelligentsia of the West. In its front matter, the elaborate Table of Contents highlighted the intimate connection between the *adi-gurus* (the primeval preceptors of the four Vaisnava *sampradayas*) and the *sampradayas’* four founder-*acaryas* (the *adi-gurus’* extraordinarily empowered representatives, who revitalized their disciplic successions within recorded history):

The systems of Sree Vishnu Swami, Sree [Nimbarka], Sree Ramanuja, and Sree Madhva….are connected with the ancient times by their recognition of the [remote] authority of the eternal ancient teachers, [namely] Lakshmi, Brahma, Rudra, and the four [Kumaras] respectively. The four Founder- Acharyas of the Iron Age professed to preach the views of those original teachers of the religion.

*Shree Krishna Chaitanya* strictly applied “founder-*acharyya*” to the four *sampradayas*’ revitalizers, otherwise known as *sampradaya-acaryas.* Since Srila Bhaktisiddhanta founded but a branch of the Gaudiya-sampradaya, itself but an extension of the Brahma-Madhva-sampradaya, he knew some would consider him presumptuous if he used the title. For the written record, however, he allowed Professor Sanyal to confidently refer to him as the Gaudiya Mission’s “founder acharyya” within the pages of *The Harmonist.*

In Chapter 4 of this book, we’ll see why Srila Bhaktisiddhanta could, with similar confidence later, forgo the founder-*acarya* title: he could foresee what would soon befall his own institution, as well as the one disciple who would be ready, willing, and able to start a fresh branch of Lord Caitanya’s mission, far away from Mother India.

**Notes**

1Letter to Kirtanananda, 25 January 1969. 2Letter to Dinesh, 31 October 1969. More letters from Prabhupada about the disciplic succession can be found in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase under Contents/Siksamrta/Spiritual Master and Disciple/Our Parampara and other Sampradayas. 3Spiritual masters following Lord Caitanya, who appeared in Bengal, India, sometimes called Gaudadesa. 4For more about the origin and evolution of the Visva Vaisnava Raja Sabha, see Bhakti Vikasa Swami’s *Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Vaibhava*, Volume 1, pp. 70-73. 5*Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu*, 1.2.100. 6*The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter 6, devotional principle (4), p. 53. 7A complete account of Lokanatha’s accepting accepting Narottama may be found in Dr. O.B.L. Kapoor’s *The Gosvamis of Vrindavan.* 8*The Nectar of Devotion*, Preface, sentence 2. 9This version is based on Jayapataka Swami’s translation of *Harinama-cintamani* texts in his 1989 Vyasa-puja offering, as well as Bhanu Swami’s narrative version of the texts, both available on the Bhaktivedanta Veabase. 10For the evolution of the founder-*acarya* phrase within the literature of the Gaudiya mission, see Ravindra Svarupa Dasa’s definitive *Srila Prabhupada, the Founder-Acarya of ISKCON*, pp. 32-46, at [www.founder-acharya.com](http://www.founder-acharya.com). 11 *The Harmonist* 28.5:131 & 33.4:90-96.

*Having looked at the historical development of the founder-acarya principle in the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition, in Chapter 3 we will see how Srila Prabhupada emerged as the founder-acarya of a dynamic new branch of Lord Caitanya’s community, The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).*