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The Descending Process
of Selecting a Spiritual Master

A GBC committee report from the initiating spiritual masters.

March 1981

Mayapur, India

Introduction

The following essay is a report to the GBC and to ISKCON members from the initiating gurus of ISKCON. It is a result of the March 1981 meeting of the initiating gurus who convened at the request of the GBC. The function of initiating and training disciples in Krsna consciousness is one that is conferred upon a devotee by the descending process of disciplic succession. Thus, shortly before his disappearance from this mortal world, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder-acarya of ISKCON, assured the continuance of the ISKCON guru-parampara by appointing eleven of his senior disciples as initiating spiritual masters. At the 1978 Mayapur festival, the Governing Body Commission granted the initiating acaryas the authority to select new initiating spiritual masters according to need and qualification. The process is that the initiating gurus constitute a sub-committee of the GBC; this sub-committee's decision is then placed before the entire GBC for final judgement. At this year's Mayapur meeting the GBC body reconfirmed that the initiating guru committee should meet, discuss, and vote on matters pertaining to initiating spiritual masters in ISKCON.

Synopsis of the 1981 meeting

Since the committee was to consider expanding the number of initiating spiritual masters, we decided that criteria for selection should be defined. Under headings of "Necessity", "Qualification", and "Vows" the following items were drafted.

I. Necessity

1. If an acarya feels that his preaching area is too large to see the devotees on a regular basis, this would constitute a necessity for adding an initiating guru.
2. If an acarya feels that he doesn't want to initiate any more disciples, this could create a need.

3. When a significant number of advanced Vaisnavas recognize outstanding qualities of a particular devotee to become an initiating guru, this could create a need.

II. Qualification

1. He is learned in the sastras. Srila Prabhupada says in the first canto of the Srimad-Bhagavatam that the acarya does not deliver lectures capriciously or does not try to screw some obscure meaning out of the scriptures. His sastric knowledge should be firmly based in siddhanta, or conclusion, and he should be effective in his practical preaching.
2. He should show understanding of, and dedication to Srila Prabhupada's mission, maintaining and establishing book distribution and other projects.
3. He recognizes the GBC as the ultimate managing authority in ISKCON.
4. He has excelled in preaching activities.
5. He should be free from kamini, attachment to sense-gratification, pratistha, false prestige and personal ambition, and kancan, the accumulative spirit.
6. He should also be free from nisiddha-acar, behavior against Vaisnava principles; he should also be free of kutinati, diplomatic or duplicitous behavior; he should also be free from puja, or the desire for personal worship; and he should be free of labha, mundane profiteering.

III. Vows

1. He must agree that his personal mission is the same as the mission of Srila Prabhupada, to flood the world with transcendental literatures like Bhagavad-gita and Srimad-Bhagavatam and to "do as he was doing" in establishing ISKCON all over the world.
2. He must agree that Srila Prabhupada is represented by ISKCON and that ISKCON is governed by the GBC. Even Srila Prabhupada said he was a member of ISKCON; so when Srila Prabhupada gives one permission to be a guru, it is to be a guru for and within ISKCON, not outside.

3. He must agree that external behavior is indeed a sign of internal realization, and must harmonize with ISKCON policies in general, and never act in a way which might unnecessarily jeopardize our world-wide mission. He should understand that taking disciples restricts external behavior.
4. He must agree to carefully study and review aspiring disciples, so as not to make a mockery of the initiation process, and he must give his disciples directions and examples which corroborate with that of Srila Prabhupada and teach his disciples that they are part of ISKCON.

After compiling these criteria, the committee turned to consideration of whether to expand the number of initiating spiritual masters. At previous sessions of this year's GBC meeting there had been several proposals that the number of initiating gurus be increased immediately. The initiating gurus also wanted to increase, but as we began to examine our hearts, we realized that the reasons for immediately adding gurus were not satisfying. We began to consider the gravity of what it is to be a spiritual master.

Although the present ISKCON spiritual masters are supposed to be the most senior Vaisnava devotees of our movement, we admit that we are still learning what it is to be a guru and that we had to ~~encounter difficult learning episodes during the year.~~ We therefore ~~reasoned that if the most senior men were sometimes~~ daunted by the ~~responsibilities of guruship,~~ we would have to be extremely cautious before presenting others with the post. We feel that by Prabhupada's grace we are successfully discharging the duties of spiritual masters in Krsna consciousness, but we are becoming increasingly aware that it is a difficult and demanding burden. We, as the initiating gurus who have to nominate a new candidate, as well as the GBC, who has to consider whether to confirm our nomination -- do not feel our own qualification is as yet such that we can bestow guruship upon others as an act of our "mercy". We have to be aware that such "mercy" on our parts could possibly be an act of violence on those whom we prematurely bestowed it, as well as to their disciples. If a guru were selected under less than ideal circumstances, and later had major difficulty, the bad karmic effect of such a mistake would also come back heavily to us.

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We recognize that we gurus are still evolving in realizing the import of our eternal connection with our disciples. We are also learning better how a guru relates to his own Godbrothers. By experience and revelation we are understanding more and more. But there is evidence from this past year that all of us must try to understand better the link between the ISKCON gurus and their disciples. This understanding has to grow among all of us. In other words, we have to first fully establish and solidify the place of our present initiating gurus in ISKCON before we can consider adding more. We beg at the lotus feet of our Godbrothers asking them to help us establish the place of the guru in ISKCON. We humbly implore all devotees to cooperate together, praying for the mercy of Prabhupada to guide us in a cooperative effort.

In selecting a guru, naturally we must consider the proper standard of Vaisnava behavior. Becoming a guru should not be seen materially, as a prize feather in the cap, a higher rung on the ladder of success, or as a top administrative post. There are some interesting examples in the different Gaudiya Matha institutions where only one person is empowered to initiate and be acarya. Many other sannyasi Godbrothers are present, and sometimes Godbrothers of the previous acarya are present (who are not acaryas themselves), and they assist also in advancing the preaching work. ISKCON is the first institution in recent Gaudiya history which has a multitude of acaryas. Narayana Maharaja of Devananda Gaudiya Matha has been number two man for decades, but his service is not hampered, although he doesn't initiate anyone. And he is one of the two persons that Srila Prabhupada recommended to talk with for answering technical questions.

There is also the unique example of Krsnadas Kaviraja, the author of the Caitanya-caritamrta. He did not consider himself qualified to write about the pastimes of the Lord but was requested to do so by many senior Vaisnavas. Thus, Krsnadas Kaviraja says, "By their mercy all these devotees ordered me to write of the last pastimes of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Because of their order only, although I am shameless, I have attempted to write this Caitanya-caritamrta." Srila Prabhupada explains in the purport, "Unless one is empowered by the higher authorities, or advanced devotees, one cannot write transcendental literature As a humble Vaisnava, Krsnadas Kaviraja thus empowered, felt very much ashamed that it was he who was to narrate the pastimes of Lord Caitanya." After being given the order to write from the Vaisnavas, Krsnadas Kaviraja still felt humble and unworthy for the task, and so he also took permission from the Madana-mohana Deity. While praying to the Deity the garland fell from the neck of the Deity, giving Krsnadas the permission and blessings. A pure devotee acts as a doll in the hands of the Supreme Lord for taking higher spiritual assignments; he does not act independent of the order of Krsna or His representatives. The position of the pure devotee in dealing with confidential matters is described by Prabhupada:

"This is the position of the pure devotee. One should not take any responsibility on his own, but should be a soul surrendered to the Supreme Personality of Godhead." (C.c. Adi 8.79 p. 210)

Naturally the initiating gurus, and all sincere devotees want to expand the preaching. And it should be recognized that preaching is increasing all around the world in ISKCON to an extraordinary degree. But even if considered on the most pragmatic level, the way to increase that preaching is by striving to become pure. According to the 1981 GBC chairman, the greatest disappointment expressed to him in letters was not that the number of gurus was not increasing, but the present GBC leaders, including the gurus and other ISKCON leaders -- were sometimes quarreling among themselves. It seems that every devotee has faith in at least one leader or a few, and in most ISKCON centers things are going well -- but there is sometimes the fear that the leaders will quarrel and even split. Alarmists predict that our movement could split into factions like the Gaudiya Matha did, with different "movements" led by different gurus. These fears may be current, but they will remain unfounded in fact as long as we sincerely work and strive together. It is with this goal of unifying and strengthening ISKCON that we are taking the approach of first solidifying the performance of our present acaryas and the process of assisting them in their leadership of the new devotees, their disciples -- before adding new gurus. We are calling upon ourselves, the present gurus, as well as the whole GBC and devotees of ISKCON to work together to establish love and trust. So we, the initiating gurus, are hereby pledging to rededicate ourselves to the task before us. We have met this year in an inspired and decisive mood, and felt the unanimous confirmation of Prabhupada in our hearts.

In summary, the spiritual master selection process takes part in disciplic succession by the descending process. For the Krsna consciousness movement in the modern age, this means direct contact with His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. The descending process means to glorify the pure and dynamic leadership of ISKCON by Srila Prabhupada, who is directly in touch with Lord Krsna and is His transparent medium. In order to contact Krsna in disciplic succession we have to catch hold of the merciful disciplic link known as Srila Prabhupada. Once that connection is established then others may link on to us without any fear or doubt. Srila Prabhupada was the most perfect link and therefore we have to make perfectly sure that our link -- connection to him -- is strong and firm. All our activities should be to strengthen that link by which ISKCON is connected to Prabhupada. In this specific way we will gain the eternal protection of the Krsna conscious society and the blessings of the previous Vaisnavas. Establishing this eternal link is a most grave affair and has to be undertaken most seriously and purely. Therefore, we repeatedly prostrate ourselves before all the assembled Vaisnavas and request them to help us in living in the eternal protection of the Krsna consciousness movement.

We think for the sake of the disciplic succession we should not experiment in adding new spiritual masters at present. We thus propose an indefinite moratorium on the addition of initiating gurus. We do not do this in the mood of limitation, but in the mood of taking the full protection of parampara in order to purely establish and increase the Krsna consciousness movement in the world

When Krsna wants that more persons initiate on His behalf, that fact will be revealed in the hearts of all. Everyone will be satisfied that this is Prabhupada's and Krsna's desire. The experience will not be one of voting but will be an experience of unanimous confirmation of Prabhupada in the hearts of all the GBC members. We make this decision, feeling unworthy and yet confident that Srila Prabhupada has placed his trust in us. We are aspiring to the mood expressed by Prabhupada who wrote in his poem aboard the Jaladuta, "Although my Guru Maharaja ordered me to accomplish this mission I am not worthy of it to do it. I am very fallen and insignificant. Therefore, O Lord, I am begging for Your mercy so that I may become worthy, for You are the wisest and most experienced of all..." Let us all go forward, therefore, in confidence. Prabhupada is eternally protecting this movement. The devotees should feel confident in his protection and in the direction of ISKCON, as guided by the GBC and initiating spiritual masters. In order to insure this confidence, the decision regarding new spiritual masters should come as a clear, pure, free revelatic from antayami Krsna within the hearts of the GBC members and devotees. No trace of politics, controversy, or personal interest will be present to cloud the issue. No lobbying shall be necessary. Everyone's enthusiasm will be surcharged.