

LOOKING AFTER THE NEW BHAKTAS IN A MANY GURU TEMPLE

by Vipramukhya Swami

In the last few months I have been acting as the "big brother" of the New Bhakta Program here in New York, personally giving most of the classes and overseeing the curriculum. Due to my experiences in England during the days of Jayatirtha and it's aftermath, I have been feeling a tremendous need to "put Srila Prabhupada more in the center" in the eyes of the new Bhaktas.

To accomplish this, considering that we encourage the new men that they can take initiation from any of a variety of Prabhupada disciples both here in New York and elsewhere, Janaka prabhu, the Bhakta leader, and I have taught the new devotees to take shelter of Srila Prabhupada. We teach them that when they offer their obeisances, they should do so with the pranam-mantra for Srila Prabhupada, and after some time, Srila Prabhupada will reveal to them who is their spiritual master.

This mood encourages the new devotees from the beginning to take shelter and develop a relationship and dedication to the Founder-Acarya of ISKCON as their Siksa-guru. In addition, we encourage them mainly to listen to Srila Prabhupada's lecture tapes and bhajan tapes, as well as read his books. Of course, they are also taught that they must eventually take shelter and initiation from a bona-fide spiritual master, who can be any Prabhupada disciple who meets the GBC standards as outlined in New Vrindavan.

We do not encourage the new devotees to prematurely accept a spiritual master based on social conventions or peer pressure. They are asked to be patient and wait some time, so that they may properly observe the various devotees. After 4 or 6 months they are told they should begin the challenge of finding an initiating spiritual master. So far this system has been going very well, and the new devotees here are advancing very rapidly in Krsna consciousness.

The other day I was approached by one devotee who wants to become my disciple. He said he couldn't wait to "see my picture on the platform next to Srila Prabhupada's Vyasasana along with the pictures of the other gurus." In response, I told him that I didn't want my picture on that platform. If he is seeing me every day, I told him, then what is the need for having the picture there.

Here in New York we have one Vyasasana next to Srila Prabhupada's Vyasasana, and it is quite a large seat. This devotee asked if I would sit on this vartman-acharya Vyasasana after I initiated him, but I replied that I didn't like that big seat because I would have to sit above my Godbrothers. "Why should I sit on a big seat in front of my Godbrothers," I told him, "just because

EXISTING PROBLEMS WITHIN ISKCON

The purpose of this paper is to outline what I see to be the basic problems existing within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in its inter-relationships between fellow disciples of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, what the causes of those problems are, and what the solutions could be to solve them.

Before addressing these issues, it is necessary to first of all establish that some problems do, in fact, exist. I hold this to be a self evident truth established by the obvious fact that there are a fairly large body of Srila Prabhupada disciples, both from within America and from abroad who are expressing as much. The obvious case in point are the recent series of temple president and sanniyasi meetings in North America. Many voices from overseas have also expressed similar feelings. Indeed, it would be naive and self-centered to overlook this obvious point. There are in fact alarmingly increasing numbers of Prabhupada disciples who feel frustrated and stagnant in their service, and where they could be doing much more to push forward the progress of our all-important mission, they find themselves unable to work to their fullest capabilities due to feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction.

On reflection of countless discussions I have attended and participated in over the last six months, it appears that the underlying philosophical problems can be narrowed down to a few succinct points. It would also appear that many other points that have been brought up in the discussions are symptomatic of the deeper philosophical problems, and when mentioned as official conclusions or resolutions appears to be nothing more than nit-picking. All expressions outside the fundamental philosophical problems are therefore peripheral and unnecessarily derogatory. As such, these "external" points only serve to anger those to whom it is hoped will reform.

It is the contention of this paper that the root problems which cause all of these external complaints can be isolated and narrowed down to only a few. They are as follows:

1. The principles of true Vaisnava behavior are often overlooked both by GBC members, gurus, and other general body Prabhupada disciples.
2. There is a weakness of senior men in following the regulative principles, and a tendency to cover-up the truth.
3. There is a lack of concentration on keeping Srila Prabhupada the central figure in our ISKCON movement.

Many points have been raised by temple presidents, regional secretaries and sanniyasis, but it appears that the above three points are at the root of all of the others. Each of the

above points gives rise to many other causes for complaints, but unless these three issues are properly addressed, there can be no real solutions. Clarification of these main issues is required in the hope that the solutions will automatically become revealed.

The first point contends that the principles of true Vaisnava behavior are often overlooked by GBC members, gurus, and other general body Prabhupada disciples. This point is expandable into almost every aspect of present day life in ISKCON, from how we relate to one another as Godbrothers, subordinates and superiors to how we present ourselves to the public as carriers of the baton of the disciplic succession. It is such a broad sweeping point that if not corrected can have devastating consequences for all involved, be they pot washers, presidents, GBC's or gurus. Within this broad topic, there is the concern that certain individuals, at times appear to some to be carried away by their positions, forgetful of the importance of the service of other, perhaps less prominent, Prabhupada disciples. According to this view, this mood leads to condescending attitudes, and consequently feelings of frustration by those in the ranks. Lack of recognition for service rendered to ISKCON then results in exasperation. This topic also includes, as mentioned earlier, how we present ourselves to the public as the carriers of the disciplic succession. Hence questions arise whether the seats should be this big or that small, whether we should have regal bedrooms or mud hut dwellings, simultaneous guru-pujas and five birthday parties a year for one guru. Related issues concerning throwing prasadam all over the temple inevitably come to mind.

In a nutshell, the first point addresses the mood of Vaisnavas, most notably humility. It is a serious concern by many senior members of our movement that this principle is now all too often overlooked. Thus a serious reevaluation of all of our relationships based on the principles of humility would automatically solve many of the existing problems. It would furthermore lead us into an era of listening and learning, of taking gold even if from a dirty place, what to speak of a clean place, and applying what we learn from other Godbrothers. It would truly become a united ISKCON family.

Also within the realm of Vaisnava behavior comes the relationship between guru and Godbrother, guru and disciple, and disciple and guru-Godbrother. In other words, Vaisnava behavior unavoidably includes etiquette. It is the contention of some that they are treated no differently than disciples by their initiating Godbrothers, and that, learning from their guru, new devotees have come to think of their spiritual God-uncles no differently than their own Godbrothers. Although it is true that all disciples of Srila Prabhupada should keep themselves in a humble mood, unconcerned with honor and prestige, it is also a fact that this is a clear violation of Vaisnava principles. The consequence of this is that the proper Vaisnava mood is not being transmitted to the next generation of disciples, which is a disruption in the disciplic succession.

The solution to the point of proper etiquette is again humility. Not only do those disciples of Srila Prabhupada in the ranks have to understand their positions, but also those in the role of initiating gurus have to actively train their disciples how to be respectful of all disciples of Srila Prabhupada working within ISKCON. Srila Prabhupada may not have taught by personal example how to work with Godbrothers because he was not part of the Gaudia Math institution, but his instructions to us was cooperate together and work with one another. In this regard we must not just look toward the way Prabhupada delt with his own Godbrothers, but with the instruction he gave us to work cooperatively together.

The second point outlined in this paper contends that there is a weakness of senior men in following the four regulative principles and in chanting 16 rounds a day, and a tendency to cover-up the truth. Needless to say, this is a serious issue. In many places throughout Srila Prabhupada's books it is stated: If the leaders of our ISKCON movement remain strictly following the principles and chanting their prescribed numbers of rounds, this movement will be successful. If they don't, then this movement may not be successful. Nothing else can stop this movement but this thing. We must not delude ourselves that our falldowns go unnoticed by the agents of the Supreme Lord, Krsna. Especially now that Srila Prabhupada is no longer physically guiding our society, those in the position of initiating guru and GBC men must be of indisputable character, which is not determined by men, money, power and charisma, but by purity in following the principles. Failure to maintain strict purity at the top rungs of the ladder, and then covering up details in hope that no one comes to know that such things ever happened are eventually exposed by the Lord Himself, and only result in the undermining of faith of both the disciples of Srila Prabhupada and the next generation. We should always remember that Lord Krsna appeared as Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu in order to teach how one should surrender to Krsna. In so doing he accepted the renounced order of life and led the life of the ideal sannyasi. Although the Lord's pastimes cannot be imitated, we should take lesson from them. For example, when Jagadananda Pandit brought Lord Caitanya scented oil to use for massage, Lord Caitanya refused to accept it because it was against the principles of sannyasa life. On another occasion, when someone made a nice quilt for Lord Caitanya to sleep on, He became angry and refused to sleep on such a nice bed. The Lord was not accustomed to sleeping on nice beds, smearing scented oils on His body, or spraying Himself with the finest perfume. Nor did He like to live in opulant abodes. Now, it may be argued that these things can all be used in Krsna's service, but we must also be fully aware that these things are also dangerous, especially for the sannyasi.

It has actually been seen in the lives of some of our leaders and even gurus who became attached to the opulances of the material world, fell from their positions and created a disgrace for our society. These things eventually come to light amongst the general body of Prabhupada disciples, whether they were officially publicised or not. As disciples of Srila Prabhupada, we should all recognize that we are no longer children and should not deal with one another as such. Such deviations from the principles eventually comes to be known by all of us, and if it is seen further that attempts are made to minimize the significance of such falldowns, or cover them up completely, it sours the faith of the devotees in the Governing Body. This results in the undermining of our entire movement.

This further results in discussions about the effectiveness of the Privilege Committee which is supposed to deal with such matters, and has even led to the concept of proposing non-GBC appointees to be included in the committee. Although this may or may not help the GBC body determine the validity of rumors, it is my belief that certain measures should be enforced when it is found that someone is not following the regulative principles. They are, 1) if he be an initiating guru, that he be requested not to initiate further disciples; 2) if his fall-downs continue repeatedly, that the disciples be advised to seek reinitiation; 3) if he be a GBC member, and such fall-downs continue, that he be removed from his post as GBC; 4) if he be a sannyasi, that he be asked to travel with another fixed-up sannyasi for purification; 5) if the sannyasi continues to fall-down in spite of traveling with another sannyasi, that his ashram be changed to the grhastha ashram.

Although we witnessed Srila Prabhupada's extraordinary tolerance toward his fallen leaders and disciples, we should note that now times have changed. In the role as the absolute authority in ISKCON the members of the Governing Body, and especially gurus, must set the highest exemplary behavior in order to preserve the sanctity of the society.

The third and final contention is also a much discussed issue now days in our movement. It is the feeling of many that there is a need to place Srila Prabhupada somehow more in the center of our activities. Recently I had a powerful, personal realization of the importance of this point. After searching through a drawer of about seventy lecture tapes for a tape of Srila Prabhupada giving a class, I found none. Instead I found Srila So-and-so in Somewhere, and Srila This-one-and-that-one in the such and such farm, etc. There were many lecture tapes, but none of Srila Prabhupada! Upon enquiring from the proprietor of the desk where the Prabhupada lectures were stored, I was informed that this devotee didn't have any tapes of Srila Prabhupada. He only listened to tapes of his own guru and other ISKCON acaryas, but found Prabhupada's lectures too difficult to follow. This person has brahminical initiation and has been doing responsible service in New York for the last 7 years as a devotee.

The point I realized was that new devotees are thinking that they want to listen to tapes of their spiritual masters, and the Prabhupada disciples can listen to tapes of their spiritual master. In this way, projecting into the future, I could see how Prabhupada might be regarded as just some ordinary past acarya, and nothing more. We may have some realization of Srila Prabhupada's importance, but to future generations it may not be so unless the emphasis is specifically and deliberately directed in that way. Other devotees also express the concern of having so many seats for ISKCON acaryas in one temple room, as they do in New York, of having such big seats, of placing our pictures on the walls of equal size and height along side of pictures of Srila Prabhupada, of cookie throws, etc., etc.

Thus it can again be seen how from this one point many other more detailed complaints and points of contention can come up. The solution is to stop putting ourselves artificially on a platform we are not on, come off the big seats, and just be humble devotees. We should learn not how to demand respect, but rather how to command it.

In conclusion it is the position of this paper that many of the discussions and resolutions of the recent presidents' meetings have dealt more with the symptoms than the real underlying issues. There are in fact existing problems within ISKCON, but as far as I can see, they all narrow down to these three points, and everything else is an extension of that. Therefore these are the issues which should receive the most attention. Otherwise we may be labeled as nit-pickers.

Desiring the association of my Godbrothers and a united ISKCON,

The utterly useless!

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