

Association Internationale pour la Conscience de Kṛṣṇa

Founder-Acarya: His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivāḍanta Swami
Prabhupada

ALL GLORIES TO SRI GURU AND GAURANGA

ISKCON New Mayapur
Valencay, France
(reply: 10 Soho St, London)
September 21~~2~~, 1984

Dear Subhananda Prabhu,

Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

I've heard that you are drafting some sort of paper in regard to the issue of expanding the number of initiating spiritual masters in ISKCON.

This is a topic to which I've given some thought.

For whatever it may be worth, I'm enclosing a summary ~~infix~~ of some arguments in favor of such expansion. No doubt you've seen Hridayananda Maharaja's letter on the subject. So these arguments are in addition to his. Each one, of course, could be expanded ~~consider~~ considerably.

~~There~~ There are also ~~potential~~ potential problems--serious ones--that could arise from unwise expansion. This is something I want to think about more.

There seems to be broad agreement that expansion is desirable (sooner or later). The needed thing now seems to be to come up with a sober, careful, reasonable way to proceed, as an ~~alternan~~ alternative to keeping everything bottled up or ~~letting~~ letting everything fly willy-nilly.

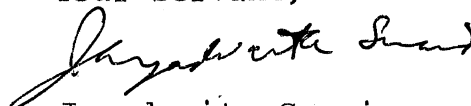
I think an important point is point 10 on my list. After much struggle, it has now been established that a guru, though absolute, can and indeed must work under the GBC body as a whole. The next essential step is to recognize that the guru can, and again must, work under the local GBC man. Unless this principle is clearly established, expanding the number of gurus can only be messy.

I'll be grateful if you can send me a copy of ~~whatsoever~~ what you finally draft.

I'm ~~enclosing~~ sending the enclosed list in hopes that it may in some way be helpful. But I request that you not photocopy it for circulation.

Hoping this finds you in good health,

Your servant,


Jayadvaita Swami

1. In many parts of the world, we are missing the opportunity to offer people a guru who speaks their own language and is personally nearby to train them.

2. We are missing the chance to attract new devotees through diversity. In most parts of the world we have, as it were, only one item in stock. Customers who find this item unappealing go away without buying. Diversity would give us more to offer.

3. Diversity will invite variegated contributions of spiritual vision, ability, and accomplishment. It's not that only ten or fifteen men have a special contribution to make. We are restricting greater contributions by preventing other devotees from accepting disciples.

4. Diversity in choice will encourage spiritual competition for greater strictness in sadhana, accomplishment in preaching and book distribution, and conformity to proper norms of philosophy and behavior.

5. Some prospective devotees have an affinity for devotional service implanted and nurtured by a particular preacher. Upon finding out that this preacher cannot become his guru, the candidate unable to invest the needed faith in anyone else loses interest.

6. Some of Srila Prabhupada's disciples are being held back in preaching essentially because they are effective, persuasive and attractive. When they preach, people start thinking of accepting them as guru. This makes the zonal guru feel uncomfortable about the preacher's presence, or makes the preacher feel awkward being there.

7. Some Godbrothers, though not personally discouraged about not being able to initiate, find it discouraging to see qualified Godbrothers held back.

8. According to Srila Jiva Goswami, a preacher has to accept many disciples to expand the cult of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. (see Cc. Madhya 8, p. 397) Srila Prabhupada wrote to his spiritual master, "Anyone who accepts the holy name from you is qualified. If everyone who has attained this qualification goes and makes disciples, then the suffering conditioned souls in the material world will all be delivered." (Viraha-astastakam)

9. Under the present system, ISKCON in effect tells a man who his guru ought to be, rather than encouraging the individual to consider and choose for himself. Although this offers obvious managerial advantages, it does so at a heavy price:

a. This way of choosing one's guru has a certain shallowness that makes our Society itself less appealing, both to those already in it and those who have not yet joined.

b. It discourages candidates who find the recommended guru uninspiring or unacceptable, leaving them with the choice of moving elsewhere to get a guru they can accept, staying where they are but being "odd man out," surrendering under pressure to someone they don't really trust, looking for an alternative outside ISKCON, putting off accepting a spiritual master, or giving up altogether.

c. It discourages devotees who are expected to recommend or "preach on behalf of" a guru they find unappealing, untrustworthy, or unacceptable. Such devotees face a similar array of bleak alternatives.

d. To uphold our present system, devotees sometimes feel obliged to stretch Vaisnava philosophy in strange ways to make a guru's discrepant or quirky behavior seem acceptable or even "divine."

e. Our present system places ISKCON in the awkward position of practically guaranteeing that each of its appointed gurus is fully qualified. Such a guarantee, once issued, can be revoked only in the most extreme circumstances. Thus we continue to officially certify a guru's perfection even after we know that his character or behavior is substandard or even fallen. This is hypocritical. It cheats prospective disciples. It erodes the prestige of our Society, its preachers, and its governing body. And it brings discredit upon our founder-acarya.

f. And while certifying the perfection of the shakey or fallen, we withhold from steady, well-situated men the privilege to initiate candidates who wish to accept them.

g. Sometimes a simple person, acting in good faith, surrenders to the local guru merely in compliance with what he is told is the ISKCON way. Later, however, after reading our books and becoming conversant with the philosophy, he may come to see serious discrepancies in his guru's character or behavior. He also learns that he should have carefully considered his choice of guru before initiation. And he discovers that the guru's spiritual characteristics are more important than his zonal territory. But now it's too late to back out. The disciple may therefore go through serious spiritual problems (especially if his doubts are well founded).

h. Our philosophy teachers that the disciple, before accepting someone as his eternal spiritual master, should carefully study that person's qualifications (TLC, p. 181; Cc. Madhya 9, p. 267-268). When we boil this down to the formula that one should surrender to the guru appointed for one's zone, are we doing justice to our philosophy? (Note that Srila Prabhupada's books, when discussing the qualifications of the spiritual master, never mention either appointments or zones.)

10. Unless we envision a GBC whose members number more than fifty, a hundred, or even several hundred, we shall eventually have gurus who serve under, but not within, the GBC. Yet the longer we hold to the status quo, the more the role of guru and that of GBC man--two separate roles--become merged and confused.

11. Although in the future (perhaps soon) our Society will surely have many, many spiritual masters, we are tailoring our institutions--our liturgy, our customs, our management, and even our architecture--in a way to fit a Society in which the gurus are few. Are we forming social institutions we may later have to slip out of in embarrassment?

12. We need to build up our institution in such a way that many gurus can work together within it. But this aspect of our structure won't properly take shape until we actually have many gurus. In that sense, we are holding back the growth and development of our Society.

13. Instead of organizing ISKCON along the lines of the varnasrama Vedic social culture (in which sannyasis and other senior Vaisnavas traditionally initiate), we are placing more stress on zones and our own evolving managerial formulas. This may not be a good idea.

14. While sending down word that devotees shouldn't indecorously clamor for position, we are holding to a status quo in which the GBC has "blessed" only those who clamored loudest (and from within its own ranks). Where is the inspiring, generous example of blessings bestowed on the loyal, silent, hardworking, and patient?

15. Enforcing a tight monopoly on the position of guru is one means by which we seek to prevent independent-minded ISKCON members from assuming too much power and getting out of control. But this strategy has its limitations: Pull the reins too tight, and the horse throws its rider and bolts. How much control does that leave us?

16. We live in a society of personal reciprocations. Our senior devotees have for the most part taken a humble role--and more than a few have put up with much personal difficulty, insult, and pain--to support our first ISKCON guru. Are we returning their loyalty in a manner that befits them?

17. Following a suggestion given by Sripada B.R. Sridhara Maharaja, we have institutionalized the idea of "zonal gurus." Did Srila Prabhupada instruct us to do this? If not, perhaps we should consider how to follow more closely what Srila Prabhupada intended us to do.

18. The institutionalization of a handful of "super-gurus," each absolute in his zone, has inadvertently detracted from Srila Prabhupada's centralness in ISKCON.

Our present acaryas have done wonderful things to glorify Srila Prabhupada. Thus we have a splendid palace and biography in Srila Prabhupada's honor, and much has been done to satisfy him by carrying out his orders to distribute books, increase the preaching, and carry forward his ISKCON mission, despite all opposing elements.

Yet there are signs that not all is well:

After seven years, Srila Prabhupada's samadhi in Vrndavana lies still unfinished. Are we really to attribute this only to such mundane causes as a shortage of cement? Or is there not a deeper underlying spiritual problem? Has our Society really lacked the resources to complete this monument promptly? Or does the unfinished samadhi symbolize some kind of neglect?

This year's Vyasa Puja book for Srila Prabhupada was produced to the standard of garbage. It literally fell apart in our hands. The BBT Newsletter blames the "difficulties" on a few late offerings and a printer who skimmed on glue.

Since Srila Prabhupada's departure, a main theme for us has been to "establish the position of guru." What this in effect often means is establishing for our present acaryas a standard of opulence and honor equal to and even surpassing that which we offered Srila Prabhupada during his presence. This in itself may not be objectionable.

But our Society now is out of balance. We have a dozen "super gurus" who are central to everything. Meanwhile Srila Prabhupada's ^{other} disciples can find meaning in their lives only when "lined up" with one of the chosen few. And Srila Prabhupada himself becomes less important.

Proper balance should be restored.

19. The way we are doing things now places our present spiritual masters in too great a danger of corruption.

The spiritual master who plays the part of Krsna's representative has to consume all the sinful reactions of his disciple. So the spiritual master sometimes risks being overwhelmed by these sinful reactions. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu therefore advised that one not accept many disciples. (see Bhagavatam, Canto 4, Part 3, p. 98. Also Cc. Madhya 8, p. 397.)

Lord Caitanya also said, na dhanam na janam na sundarim. In this way He indicated that wealth, followers, and beautiful girls present powerful temptations that can lure one off the path of pure devotional service.

Yet we now have a system in which all the wealth, all the followers, and all the beautiful young girls who come to the Krsna consciousness movement are placed at the feet of one person only, in each of twelve parts of the world.

Can this weight corrupt our men?

In a word: Yes.

Two have utterly fallen. Others have had serious problems. Do all our present acaryas chant sixteen rounds a day and follow the four regulative principles? Do they all keep the same standard of sadhana we expect of our rank-and-file men?

In our present system, even a man struggling under the weight he already carries feels dutybound to take on more. In this way, we are doing our own acaryas (and their disciples) a great disservice.

20. In a system offering a choice of gurus, when a guru's Godbrothers see a guru discrepant in his behavior and unresponsive to pleas for change, they can stay on in their service but lead prospective disciples to someone else. The Godbrothers can keep working in their service undisturbed, new candidates can approach a person of surer qualifications, the guru feels pressure to reform, and no one need take on more weight than he can bear.

In our present system, if the Godbrothers see a guru veering off and uninclined to straighten out, all they can do is recommend him anyway or abandon their field of preaching and go elsewhere.⁺ Meanwhile the guru, already in trouble, goes on accepting disciples more and more. This is precisely what led to the loss of our temple in Berkeley and the devastation of our preaching in Malaysia.

21. With the present system, we "put all our eggs in one basket." If an acarya falls, not only entire temples but even entire nations can collapse with him.

22. The present system encourages the idea that each of our appointed gurus possesses unique, extraordinary, even inconceivable qualifications that non-gurus simply don't have. Once appointed, our gurus become "uttama-adhikaris," while their Godbrothers are still ordinary Joes.

But how much of this comes from our scriptures, and how much from contemporary invention?

We concocted the idea of "pure devotee by appointment," only to have it smashed by the departure of Jayatirtha and Hamsadutta. Yet the idea still has its defenders even today.

Lately we have heard fledgling attempts to put together an ideology with two kinds of gurus--the "guru" and the "acarya." Is this mentioned anywhere in Srila Prabhupada's books?

And is being a sannyasi or having a GBC zone prerequisite for being an uttama-adhikari? For that matter, is a post in management a credential every uttama-adhikari must have? Vasudeva Datta was such an exalted devotee that Lord Caitanya said, "I am Vasudeva Datta's man. He can sell Me anywhere." But Vasudeva Datta was so extravagant in spending money that Lord Caitanya had to appoint Sivananda Sen to control his expenses. (Cc. Adi, Vol 1, p. 275) Would Vasudeva Datta qualify as a spiritual master in our modern ISKCON? (He became the spiritual master of Yadunandana Acarya, who initiated Raghunatha dasa, who later become Raghunatha dasa Goswami.)

Another suggestion is that when Lord Caitanya says "yei krsna-tattva-vetta, sei guru haya" He means merely that anyone can become a siksa-guru by preaching Krsna consciousness. But no one ever suggested

⁺In present ISKCON parlance this is praised as "finding someone you can work with."

this meaning while Srila Prabhupada was still with us. Clearly it is a recent adjustment that tries to bring our teachings in line with our present structure, instead of the other way around.

What Srila Prabhupada taught is very clear: "Whatever position one may have, if he is fully conversant in the science of Krsna, Krsna consciousness, he can become a bona fide spiritual master, initiator, a teacher of this science. In other words, one can become a bona fide spiritual master if he has sufficient knowledge of the science of Krsna, Krsna consciousness. The position does not depend on a particular position in society or on birth. This is the conclusion of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, and it is in accordance with the Vedic injunctions." (TLC, p. 319, emphasis supplied)

When Srila Prabhupada discusses the qualifications of the guru, there is one theme which throughout his books is the dominant theme to which he constantly, invariably returns:

yei krsna-tattva-vetta, sei guru haya

Why is this not the dominant theme in our preaching?

Another point:

23. We are leaving our great society--ISKCON--wide open to the criticism that it is following a system of disciplic succession that is hypocritical, short-sighted, and ill-fitting with Srila Prabhupada's teachings and instructions.

Many former ISKCON devotees--including ~~the~~ those now preaching devotional service under alternative auspices--criticize ISKCON precisely on these grounds.

Preachers fully dedicated to defending and supporting ISKCON ought to be able to argue that such criticisms are groundless. We could do so more wholeheartedly and persuasively if the criticisms had less truth on which to stand.

And another:

24. The more disciples each acarya initiates, the less attention he can give to each individual disciple, and the less he can concentrate on his duties as a member of the GBC. This is especially so for acaryas who initiate in far-flung zones.