

## THE DISOBEDIENT GURU A Case Study

### Introduction

The guru reform movement in ISKCON has not removed or exposed any "gurus." Krsna has done that. But Krsna has waited, significantly, until the reformers called "the gurus" to judgment.

Each of these "gurus" believed that his position as "the guru" placed him above such judgment and that those who passed it were in maya, not recognizing the position of "the guru."

The error of this belief lies in holding that "the guru" is above and beyond the judgment of his peers. Indeed, the error wrongly holds that "the guru" is one who has no peers.

"The guru," in this case, denotes what we have called the "institutional acarya"—one who, taking the seat at the head of the institution, has no peers or colleagues. Everyone in the institution is, in effect, his disciple. Any judgment of him is thus an aparada.

The reform movement has challenged this understanding of "the guru." It has challenged it in two ways: intellectually and existentially.

Intellectually, it has argued that the establishment of "the guru" in this way is contrary to the order of Srila Prabhupada and Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura. Both rejected the post of single acarya at the head of their institutions. Both ordered in its place a governing body commission. This commission is a group of men who work cooperatively as a single team, and each man on it acknowledges the others as peers and colleagues. Thus, the reform movement has argued, to establish "the guru" as the peerless institutional or zonal acarya is directly contrary to the order of Srila Prabhupada.

Existentially, the reform movement, having dispelled the false mystique of "the guru," judged the words and acts of "the gurus" according to the teachings of Srila Prabhupada. The gurus subjected to such judgment saw the reforms as offensive and impudent. They asserted that the reformers had no standing to judge "the gurus." It is true that the reformers were doing what the GBC ought to have done but failed to do. But Krsna, acting providentially, has shown the reformers to be behaving correctly.

It has come about that three gurus who felt themselves strongly challenged by the reform movement—Bhagavan, Bhavananda, and Ramesvara—have all been publicly exposed as cheaters. Their material contamination, their pride, and their personal ambition

has been made evident. It is important to remember that this exposure was not caused by the reform movement. It happened coincidentally that the truth about them was revealed. This is the action of daiva.

The reformers are not the doers; Krsna is. But Krsna did not act until some of His devotees--devotees who had not mistakenly been misled by the intelligence of the truth and truthfully. Then Krsna acted decisively.

As a result of Krsna's acting, the reform movement has begun to achieve some success.

Now Kirtanananda Swami asserts that the reformers--happily expanded to include most of the GBC--do not understand the position of "the guru." Smaller players having been swept off the board, Kirtanananda Swami now emerges as the most open advocate and the boldest grasper of the position of the single acarya.

It is the duty of the reform movement to respond to the challenge of this pretender to the position outlawed in ISKCON by Srila Prabhupada. It is the duty of the reformers, in this case just as in the others, to speak and act truthfully and to let Krsna do the rest.

### Imitations

Srila Prabhupada clearly left the GBC at the head of the movement as the ultimate managing authority. He did not trust anyone to become the acarya.

That not one but a dozen men, dividing ISKCON up among themselves, tried to become the acarya does not mitigate the disobedience. A dozen acaryas just as effectively destroy the position of the GBC as one. The acarya possesses his own "turf" over which he exercises sole and exclusive spiritual and material dominion. He need brook no outside interference in his zone. Thus the sovereignty of the GBC over ISKCON is destroyed. Each acarya is instead sovereign power. Recognizing no peers, he is unable to act in a collegial fashion as a member of a cooperative team; recognizing no higher authority, he sees no reason to submit himself to the collective decision of the group. Thus the institutional acarya is an anartha in ISKCON, in what ever numbers. It is contrary to Srila Prabhupada will.

More than all the others, Kirtanananda Swami holds and maintains the position of institutional acarya. His major defense is to argue that he is simply following Prabhupada.

But Prabhupada, in this case, ordered us not to follow--rather not to imitate--him. His order is explicitly not to be the acarya in the institutional sense. To become the actual

acarya one has to follow the order of the previous acarya, not imitate him.

But Kirtanananda Swami insists on imitating. He thinks that to be "the guru" he has to imitate Srila Prabhupada. He says that if he doesn't imitate Srila Prabhupada, the disciplic succession will end. On the contrary, as he disobeys Srila Prabhupada's order, and thus in his attempt to become the disciple ceases to be the disciple, he brings the disciplic succession to an end.

How does Kirtanananda Swami imitate Srila Prabhupada? Here are some ways:

As Srila Prabhupada was the founder-acarya of ISKCON, so Kirtanananda Swami claims to be the founder-acarya of New Vrindaban. How can this claim be valid? If New Vrindaban at the time of its founding was part of ISKCON, it follows that the founder-acarya of ISKCON is the founder-acarya of New Vrindaban. Or is it that Srila Prabhupada and Kirtanananda Swami are both the founder-acaryas? That makes them partners, and hence not master and disciple.

And that of course is the purpose of one who imitates and not follows. He want to become the person he imitates, just as the Mayavadis imitate Krsna because they envy Him and want to become Him.

All the disobedient gurus in ISKCON created zones which were, in effect, their own movements, which they could rule over as Prabhupada ruled over ISKCON, but Kirtanananda Swami certainly has taken this to the extreme. Other disobedient gurus merely ignored the GBC's order or worked around it whenever it suited them, but Kirtanananda Swami not only ignores the GBC, but openly defies it, blasphemes it, and preaches against it.

Another prominent fashion in which Kirtanananda Swami imitates rather than follows Srila Prabhupada is in his maintaining the system, long ago forbidden by the GBC, of simultaneous guru-puja.

To imitate Srila Prabhupada means to sit on the seat of honor and receive worship as he receives worship at the very same time, at the same place, and in the same manner. To imitate Srila Prabhupada means to try to become the master. To follow Srila Prabhupada means to demonstrate to others, including one's own disciples, by one's own example, how to worship the spiritual master. To follow Srila Prabhupada means to remain the servant in all circumstances.

Kirtanananda Swami justifies the simultaneous guru-puja with the specious argument: "Guru-puja is always simultaneous." The spiritual master is always offering whatever honor and worship he receives to his spiritual master. When he receives guru-puja his spiritual master is simultaneously receiving guru-puja.

This argument, however, ignores the fact that the bona fide spiritual master is above all a teacher, who teaches by his own example. Thus, Srila Prabhupada taught us how to worship the spiritual master, not by exacting worship from us, but by allowing us to see the way he worshipped Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura. The guru-puja is a teaching occasion, when we externally display to others how a disciple relates to his guru. The prescribed form of worship is puja, i.e., a visible ceremony or ritual of honor. When our spiritual master, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, is being publicly worshipped at guru-puja, how shall we refrain from displaying our relation to him as disciples in the proper way? Can we imagine Srila Prabhupada thus avoiding the prescribed form of worship of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura?—

Once an Indian gentleman told Srila Prabhupada that he was a miracle worker. Prabhupada laughed and refused the compliment. "I am not a magician," he said. Then he paused, reflecting. And then he said: "Only one thing is to my credit. I have never tried to become the master. I have always remained the servant."

One who always remains the servant will never think to be the master even as his master is being honored as such.

A third area in which Kirtanananda Swami imitates Srila Prabhupada is his introduction of innovations in the practices of our tradition. We understand that Srila Prabhupada, as founder-acarya of ISKCON, was empowered to do so. Thus, his innovations--sixteen rounds a day, the establishment of a brahmacarini asrama, etc.--are not concoctions. Although such practices or standards may not be previously seen, they exactly fulfill the purposes of the the Lord and the previous acaryas.

Let us consider an innovation introduced by Kirtanananda Swami. I have before me two photographs. One is of Srila Prabhupada's murti in New Vrindaban. In the photograph Srila Prabhupada is dressed up like the Shah of Iran, wearing a crown on his head and bearing a mace. The second picture shows Kirtanananda Swami on the Vyasasana on the day his disciples honor Srila Vyasa: Kirtanananda Swami too is wearing a crown and holding a mace.

The crown on Srila Prabhupada has long offended many disciples of Srila Prabhupada in ISKCON. The Prabhupada in regal garb has become, so to speak, the particular icon or central symbol of Kirtanananda Swami's movement. But what does it mean as a symbol?

Kirtanananda Swami asserts that the uneducated masses who tour the palace will not appreciate Srila Prabhupada garbed as the renunciate he actually is; but they do appreciate royalty. Thus some "cultural accommodation."

In accommodating to Western culture, however, the "Prabhupadada Rex" icon utterly negates a vital feature of Vedic

see  
Prabhupada's  
letters &  
Kirtanananda  
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wherein  
Prabhupada  
points  
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culture. It strikes at the purity and integrity of the renounced order of life, upon which Vedic culture depends. The symbol or icon of "Prabhupada Rex" destroys the distinction between sannyasa and monarchy. A sannyasi should never be depicted as the legitimate enjoyer of the power, prestige, fame, wealth, etc., that belongs to a king. So recent and authoritative a teacher as Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu instructed us very strongly in his dealings with Maharaja Prataparudra how a sannyasi should behave toward the regal. This is what the founder-acarya of ISKCON says in this connection:

"He [Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu] did not agree to see the King [Maharaja Prataparudra] because a king is a mundane person interested in money and women. Indeed, the very name "king" suggests one who is always surrounded by money and women. As a sannyasi, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu was afraid of both money and women. The very word "king" is repugnant to one who is in the renounced order of life" (Cc. Madhya 12. 61, purport).

How has it happened that the teacher who wrote just a few years ago that "the very word 'king' is repugnant to one who is in the renounced order of life," should find himself "honored" by being dressed up all repugnantly as a king? Are his teachings already obsolete to be thus traduced by the "next acarya"?

Some insight into the origins of the unauthorized "Prabhupada Rex" is provided by the photograph--worshipped, we are reliably informed, in India--of the "Bhaktipada Rex." One recalls the T-shirts in New Vrindaban that appeared some years ago bearing the slogan: "Bhaktipada is King." Since these T-shirts proliferated, the very name of "king" was apparently not repugnant to the sannyasi in question. Thus it appears that the "Bhaktipada Rex" came first, and the "Prabhupada Rex" second.

In other words, Kirtanananda Swami has made Srila Prabhupada over into his own image--that of the royal or imperial sannyasi. To concoct an object of worship fashioned after one's own image is to create an idol. He has imposed his own misconception of guru, based on violation of Prabhupada's order, onto Prabhupada himself. This idol of the imperial guru or sannyasi threatens to become the central symbol of a deviant, asara cult or sect, all of whose acaryas will ritually take up the mace and crown.

Kirtanananda Swami remains the boldest upholder of the institutional acarya, which, as established in ISKCON, was precisely that of the royal guru, the imperial sannyasi. To become an institutional acarya in defiance of the order of Srila Prabhupada ensures that that position will naturally degenerate into that of a mundane king. This we have all seen over and over again.

Therefore, the idol of Kirtanananda Swami is the emblem of all that has gone wrong with the establishment of the guru in ISKCON. It imposes our own deviance onto Prabhupada himself. The idol pollutes the very life force of Vedic culture, which

depends for its purity on the purity of the renounced order. It must be rejected for the illicit concoction it is.

### Where Have These Impurities Come From?

As long as Kirtanananda was a devotee, he was a devotee. In the Vedic culture, no one cared to remember his low origins. But when, out of pride, he failed to honor Lord Balarama, the forgotten and buried past was resurrected.

No one wishes to remember, either, the period in 1967-1968 when Kirtanananda Swami disobeyed Srila Prabhupada, but his present disobedience perforce brings that earlier black period to mind. A perusal of Srila Prabhupada letters to and about Kirtanananda Swami from that time make this startlingly clear: the present is a uncanny repetition of the past. Therefore what Srila Prabhupada had to say about Kirtanananda Swami then can enlighten us now.

In these letters Srila Prabhupada describe some major symptoms of Kirtanananda's disease: thinking himself out of pride the equal of the spiritual master, consequence disobedience of the spiritual master, the desire to become the spiritual master himself, the contamination of impersonalism, and the introduction of concoctions by adapting to Western forms.

"Kirtanananda was giving me direct service," Srila Prabhupada explained to Madusudan (12/28/67) "but later on by dictation of Maya, he became puffed up, so much so that he thought his Spiritual Master a common man, and was existing only on account of his service." "He thinks too much of himself," Prabhupada told Pradyumna (10/17/67), "even at the risk of disobeying his spiritual master and talking nonsense about Krishna."

Because of pride, Prabhupada went on to explain to Pradyumna, Kirtanananda thought himself much more advanced than he actually was: "Simply by his Sannyas dress he thought himself as cured of all material diseases and all mistakes, but under the influence of maya, he thought himself a liberated patient, just as the foolish patient thinks himself cured from the disease. Under the spell of maya, he deliberately disobeyed me by not going to London and consequently his disease has relapsed."

Kirtanananda Swami's disobedience, Prabhupada wrote Gargamuni (9/9/67), "has given me a great shock. Once he disobeyed my order and we lost \$1200 in connection with Mr. Payne. This time he has again disobeyed me. If he sets such example in the Society it will be a great impediment. Obedience is the first law of discipline. We are thinking of a great world wide organization which is not possible to be executed if there is disobedience."

"Kirtanananda is a crazy man," Prabhupada wrote to Rayarama (11/9/67). "That is proved. He says that he has become equal to the spiritual master but he is such a fool that he does not understand the principle of disciple even in ordinary worldly affairs. Even if one becomes equal to the spiritual master in education and knowledge, still one has to maintain the disciplinary principle of obeying one chief man in any establishment. If such principle is not maintained, how will the establishment can make any progress?"

Prabhupada further explains to Madhusudan (11/4/78) how disobedience and personal ambition are related: "Kirtanananda was awarded the position of a Sannyasi because he wanted it, although I could understand it that he wanted to be a spiritual master himself. . . I wish that in my absence all my disciples become the bona fide spiritual master . . . . I want it but Kirtanananda was too much puffed up and artificially he took up a certificate from me that he has been awarded the order to a Sannyasi. In the spiritual field nobody can become a bona fide spiritual master by dissatisfying his spiritual master. It is said that one can satisfy the Supreme Lord simply by satisfying the spiritual master and one who dissatisfied the spiritual master has no place in the spiritual world. Kirtanananda wanted to become a spiritual master by dissatisfying his spiritual master and as such he has fallen down."

The desire to become the master by ceasing to be the servant naturally causes one to think he has the authority to concoct. Srila Prabhupada quotes to Brahmananda (10/14/67) from a letter to him from Damodara: "'Swami Kirtanananda has returned to the United States and is causing quite a stir among the devotees. Following his suggestions, we have stopped wearing robes and have cut off our flags [sikas]. He said these appurtenances are too strange looking to outsiders and only make it more difficult for them to consider chanting Hare Krishna.'" Prabhupada continues: "Swami Kirtanananda has said we must avoid appearing to be Orientalists if we are to have 108 centers in the US. This is very much disturbing to me and has caused me great pain. Please therefore stop Kirtanananda from making his mental concoctions. Do not be misled by him." — *now K. Swami is doing the same thing with his Haddi's*

These features of external dress—sika, tilaka, and neck beads—Prabhupada goes on to instruct Brahmananda, are not something whimsically to be given up. Rather, "they are the essential feature of a Vaishnava." Not only did Kirtanananda instruct the devotees to give them up, but he even further misled them by doing so in Srila Prabhupada's name, as Prabhupada himself notes in a letter to Kirtanananda Swami (10/28/67): "Since you have returned to N.Y. you have falsely dictated that I do not want the robes or flags. Why are you disturbing the whole situation in my absence? I never ordered you to speak like that. do not misrepresent me. You have been given sannyas to follow my principles and not to disturb me. If you do not agree with my philosophy you can work independent and not within the walls of ISKCON. You have not understood Krishna properly." — *Messiah choir etc. Mixing Kram. "Consciousness" & Christianity in the name of "Cultural conquest"*

The final sentence refers to the fact that Kirtanananda Swami was also preaching mayavada philosophy to the devotees, and Srila Prabhupada had to preach constantly to his disciples against the impersonal doctrines of Kirtanananda Swami.

Prabhupada repeatedly refers to this as relapse into disease, as in this letter to Pradyumna (10/17/67). "Kirtanananda has very recently developed the 4th stage malady (i.e., impersonalism) on account of his negligence and disobedience to his spiritual master. Sometimes a foolish patient when is out of feverish attack by the grace of the physician, thinks that he is cured and does not take precaution against relapse. Kirtanananda's position is like that. . . . Simply by his Sannyas dress he thought himself as cured of all material diseases and all mistakes, but under the influence of maya, he thought himself a liberated patient, just as the foolish patient thinks himself cured from the disease. - Under the spell of maya, he deliberately disobeyed me by not going to London and consequently his disease has relapsed."

Prabhupada has here very completely described a disease, the disease of the "disobedient guru." - Of all those who became gurus in ISKCON by trying to become successor acaryas by imitating Srila Prabhupada, Kirtanananda Swami certainly has the most severe case of this disease. Even the contamination of impersonalism has become evident in him. "The guru is not a personality," he has taught on various occasions. This doctrine appears most sinister when it is coupled with the well-known utterance that has become his shibboleth, his mahavakya: "Guru is one."

"Guru is one," however, is only half of our philosophy. Impersonalism is not completely false: it is partial truth made the whole. "Krishna is certainly one and different," Prabhupada explains to Rayarama (10/16/67) in criticism of Kirtanananda's preaching, "but his oneness is stressed by the impersonalists, which is distinct from our philosophy."

If we forget the aspect of difference we will think that we are identical with our spiritual master, and, by imitating him, try to become him. If we remember the aspect of difference, then we will try to become one with him by obeying his order as the eternal subordinate servant. Retaining always our distinct individuality or personality, we maintain our service relationship with our spiritual master. This is real oneness, as understood by the Vaishnava acaryas. The oneness as stressed by Kirtanananda Swami is distinct from our philosophy.

"Kirtanananda is one of my faithful disciples," Prabhupada wrote Hayagriva (9/27/67), "and if he does like that how can I prosecute my programmes? . . . It is all my misfortune." It is still Prabhupada's and ISKCON's misfortune that the disease of the disobedient guru has so deeply infected so many important devotees and faithful disciples. A cure has begun in the form of the guru reform movement, but still many of the diseased patients



refuse the cure and fight those who would help restore them to health.

After Kirtanananda Swami came to his senses, Prabhupada wrote this to him (5/23/67): "Sometimes I silently cried and prayed to Krishna than how I have lost this child, Kirtanananda. But I am sure that you cannot be lost, because you chanted very nicely in Vrindaban. Anyone who once sincerely chanted the Holy Name of Krishna cannot be separated from the Krishna Consciousness atmosphere. So I was sure that you were never lost and you would come back."

This should be our prayer and hope for Kirtanananda Swami and all others who have fallen victim to the terrible disease that still so seriously threatens our society. "I wish that in my absence all my disciples become the bona fide spiritual master to spread Krishna consciousness throughout the world," Prabhupada wrote to Madhusudan (11/4/67). We are all ordered to be guru, and all of us must learn how to do so without falling victim to the disease of pride and personal ambition. We must learn to be guru by never trying to become the master but by remaining always the servant. If we learn this lesson well from this terrible chapter in ISKCON's history, then our pain and anguish will not be in vain.

Praying for mercy at the feet of the Vaisnavas,

Ravindra Svarupa dasa

February 11, 1987

Appearance day of Sri Nityananda Rama