

"UNDER MY ORDER . . ."
Reflections on the Guru in ISKCON

āmāra ājñāya guru hañā tāra' ei deśa

"Under my order become guru and liberate everyone in this land."

--Cc. Madhya 7.128

Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Thākura, at the time of his departure, requested all his disciples to form a governing body and conduct missionary activities cooperatively. He did not instruct a particular man to become the next ācārya. But just after his passing away, his leading secretaries made plans, without authority, to occupy the post of ācārya, and they split in two factions over who the next ācārya would be. Consequently, both factions were asāra, or useless, because they had no authority, having disobeyed the order of the spiritual master.

--Cc., Adi-līlā vol. 3, p. 5.

Introduction

In June, 1985, the North American temple presidents met at Towaco, N.J. Having read and discussed a paper presented by Trivikrama Swami, the assembly voted to accept the thesis of Trivikrama Swami's paper: that Śrīla Prabhupāda's order, establishing how the paramparā would continue in ISKCON after the founder-ācārya's departure, was not clearly understood and hence not properly followed. As a result, the position of initiating guru has become institutionalized in ISKCON in a manner that is contrary to the desire of Śrīla Prabhupāda and incompatible with his plans for ISKCON. The assembly agreed that this deviation from Śrīla Prabhupāda's order lies at the crux of ISKCON's most grave and intractable problems.

The assembly asked me to undertake a closer investigation of the "appointment issue" with the aim of 1) precisely ascertaining the actual order of Śrīla Prabhupāda, 2) clearly understanding the nature of our deviation from that order, and 3) examining the consequences of that deviation for ISKCON.

The Order of Śrīla Prabhupāda

Two tape recordings and a letter comprise the evidence usually cited to document Śrīla Prabhupāda's desire concerning dikṣa in ISKCON after his departure. The tapes--commonly called "The Appointment Tapes"--record two room conversations that took place in Vrindaban, the first sometime in the latter part of May, the second on July 8, 1977. The letter, dated July 9, signed by Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami and initialed by Śrīla Prabhupāda, was sent

out to GBC members.

Let me direct the attention of the reader to the appended transcripts (as checked and corrected by Jayadvaita Swami) of the two conversations. In the first conversation, guru appointment is discussed. In the second, the appointment actually takes place. It is clear without doubt that the act of appointment which took place on July 8, was the appointment of rtvik-gurus. Thus, when Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami says (December 3, 1980, at Topanga Canyon), "Actually, Prabhupāda never appointed any gurus. He didn't appoint eleven gurus. He appointed eleven rtviks," he is, strictly speaking, quite right. The appointment of July 8th--which is the only appointment on record--is the appointment of rtviks.

How does the appointment of rtviks relate to the establishment of initiating gurus? Is the appointment of one simultaneously the appointment of the other? Or is the relation more subtle? We turn to the May conversation for help in this question. Many devotees have spent many hard hours studying this sometimes frustrating and baffling conversation. The parties at times seem at cross-purposes, and pronouns without clear referent abound.

However, we can point to these features which give relatively clear indications: In answer to the opening question concerning initiations after his disappearance, Prabhupāda says: "Yes. I shall recommend some of you to act as officiating acarya." By "officiating acarya" Prabhupāda means, as the next lines make clear, rtvik-guru. So, assuming Prabhupāda heard and was responding directly to the initial question, the selection of rtvik-guru has something to do with dīkṣā after Prabhupāda's disappearance, even though rtvik properly concerns ISKCON only during Prabhupāda presence.

Next, clarifying the position of rtvik, who acts on behalf of the spiritual master, Prabhupāda says: "Yes. That is formality. Because in my presence one should not become guru, so on my behalf. On my order, āmāra ājñāya guru hañā, he is actually guru. But by my order." Since "one should not become guru," in the spiritual master's presence, the statement, "he is actually guru" must refer to the devotee after the spiritual master's departure, when--āmāra ājñāya--he becomes dīkṣā-guru. Thus the rtvik-guru can continue as dīkṣā-guru. Prabhupāda's concluding statement returns to the āmāra ājñāya theme and makes the same point again: "When I order you become guru, he becomes regular guru. That's all. He [the initiate] become disciple of my disciple. Just see."

Most devotees who have studied this transcribed conversation agree that it is reasonable to conclude that Prabhupāda expected those who officiated as rtviks in his presence would continue after his disappearance as dīkṣā-gurus under his order.

Moreover, Prabhupāda returns to the subject of guru at the

end of the May conversation.

After the transcribed discussion, the conversation turns to the question of translations after Prabhupāda disappears. Prabhupāda says "but amongst our disciples I don't think there are many who can translate properly," and he goes on to explain that a realized soul must translate. His purports are liked because they are "presented as practical experience." He concludes: "It cannot be done unless you are a very realized soul. It is not A,B,C,D translation." This brings him back to the guru question, and Śrīla Prabhupāda states:

Caitanya Mahāprabhu says, "āmāra ājñāya guru hañā." One who can understand Caitanya Mahāprabhu, he can become guru. Or one who understands his guru's order--same paramparā--he can become guru. Therefore I shall select some of you.

(Prabhupāda goes on also to reiterate his answers to the questions about the GBC which opened the conversation, and the discussion ends.)

This final statement (to my knowledge, overlooked so far by students of these tapes) makes it more clear that Prabhupāda intended to "select" or "recommend" some as rtvik-gurus with the expectation that after his departure they would continue as dikṣa-gurus.

At the same time, one must clearly understand that the appointment of rtviks was not an appointment of dikṣa-gurus. The word "appointment" is inapplicable in the second case. "Appointment" means, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "The action of nominating to, or placing in, an office." Rtvik-guru is an office: as Prabhupāda says, "officiating acarya." But one is dikṣa-guru, in contrast, not by occupation of an office. A rtvik has powers by virtue of the office conferred upon him. He is qualified by appointment. But one who is "actually guru" (Prabhupāda's terms)--whether dikṣa or śikṣa--is qualified by virtue of his own spiritual realization: "One who understands his guru's order, he can become guru." Prabhupāda's rtvik appointment, therefore, indicated those whom he hoped would be able to become actual gurus; but he did not appoint them gurus.

In each of the three times in the May conversation where Prabhupāda speaks of "regular guru" he introduces Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu's "āmāra ājñāya" statement. The rtvik officiates "on my behalf," but the regular guru initiates "āmāra ājñāya." Prabhupāda uses the English "by my order" and "on my order;" the purport is made clear in his final statement: "One who understands his guru's order, he can become guru." One becomes guru by virtue of his full submission to the order of his guru. To become guru "by my order" does not mean the order appoints one to that position, for how can one be appointed to status of full surrender? Rather, one must understand (stand under, fully surrender to) the spiritual master's order.

The Misunderstanding

In his discussion at Topanga Canyon, Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami says, concerning the appointed ṛtyiks, "Obviously, Śrīla Prabhupāda felt that of all the people, these people are particularly qualified. So it stands to reason that after Prabhupāda's departure, they would go on, if they so desired, to initiate." But, Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami says, something else was added: the notion that the ṛtyik appointment of itself conferred upon an exclusive and selected status, institutionally elevating these devotees far beyond all others. The ṛtyik appointment was considered the appointment of guru.

Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami: "They [the GBC] immediately [thought] these eleven people are the selected gurus. I can say definitely for myself . . . that there was some degree of trying to control. There's a degree of this in most GBC's part, in most temple president's part. This is the conditioned nature, and it came out in the highest position of all. 'Guru, oh wonderful. Now I'm a guru, and there's only eleven of us.' I don't mean to say that was my all-encompassing approach; please don't misunderstand me. But this is what lead us into this pitfall."

20 Because the appointment of ṛtyik was taken as equivalent to the appointment of guru, the geographical considerations relevant to the institutionalization of ṛtyiks became carried over to the establishment of dīkṣā-gurus, and thus the exclusive guru zones came into being, and the initiating gurus took possession of their territories as their exclusive and private domains over which they held all spiritual and material authority.

20 In this way, through our misunderstanding of Śrīla Prabhupāda, the initiating gurus assumed a position which was not granted to them, or to anyone, by Śrīla Prabhupāda, and which came into direct conflict with his instructions for ISKCON. The initiating gurus illegitimately became ācāryas--in the very specific meaning of the word ācārya: the spiritual head of an institution; one who is elevated above all others to the seat of the institution he heads.

I have taken this definition of ācārya from the letter of August 7, 1978, from Pradyumna to Satsvarupa dasa Goswami. The reader should now turn to this letter (which I have appended) for careful study. Pradyumna's lucid statement of the misunderstanding would be difficult to improve on. Reading this letter seven years after it was written, one is astonished by the perspicuous way Pradyumna spells out the issue and by the accuracy with which he foresees the evil consequences of this misunderstanding. Pradyumna's present spiritual status does not affect the truth and accuracy of his letter.

Prabhupāda gave eleven men permission to make disciples. His order was misunderstood. Thus, in the Introduction of the

1979 Vyāsa-pūjā book for Bhagavan das Goswami, we read this:
"Desiring to prepare his disciples for his departure, His Divine Grace Śrīla Prabhupāda very wisely selected eleven of his most intimate disciples to become both his material and spiritual successors."

Thus, the appointment of ṛtviks is interpreted as the appointment, not merely of dīkṣā-gurus, but of successors, and not merely of successors, but material and spiritual successors, which is to say, ācāryas. Consequently, ISKCON itself now passes into the hands of eleven appointed "successor ācāryas" (a common phrase).

The formation of exclusive and private zones, over which the "zonal ācārya" exercises total material and spiritual authority is one symptom of the illicit creation of "successor ācāryas." The second is the way special āsanas have been established for the initiating gurus: Such an āsana is, in fact, particularly meant for an ācārya who is elevated above other to occupy the seat of the spiritual institution which he heads. Prabhupāda had such a seat as the founder-ācārya of ISKCON, and now, each zonal guru has, in the same way, his own elevated seat, exclusively for him. Thus, anyone who accepts such a seat implicitly takes the position of "successor ācārya."

Since ācārya is an office, the notion of appointment applies to it, and normally, Pradyumna says, ācāryas appoint their successors. But it is clear that Śrīla Prabhupāda, like Bhakti-siddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, rejected the idea of appointing successor ācāryas and instead established the idea of a GBC as the head of the institution. But the Gauḍīya Maṭha did not form a GBC, and tried to establish a successor ācārya. ISKCON's deviation is different: ISKCON established eleven successor ācāryas, and has tried, without success, to accommodate this illicit introduction with the GBC. But the idea of successor ācārya, whether one or many, and the idea of GBC are incompatible.

At first it seemed as if ISKCON had two systems of management: successor ācāryas and GBC. The successor ācāryas presented ISKCON this conundrum: "If we are absolute," they asked, "how can we be expected to serve under the order of the GBC? Yet Prabhupada wanted a GBC." The very fact that this question was raised shows how these disciples did not understand their guru's order. The first answer given shows the depth of this misunderstanding: "We are absolute, but on our own accord we voluntarily agree to act in a relative way. No one can require or demand our compliance with the GBC; rather, out of our own magnanimity, we agree to cooperate." Only after several successor ācāryas radically deviated did it become clear that it was the GBC's job to rectify, and the misunderstanding became to a degree corrected. How was it that an eternal disciple of Śrīla Prabhupāda could ever think of himself as absolute? Did he think becoming guru made him absolute? How so, when he is guru "under my order?" Thus guru is always subordinate and relative to the spiritual

master and his order. That order established the GBC as the "ultimate managing authority of the entire International Society for Krishna Consciousness."

The fact remains, however, that institution of successor ācāryas was created when an almost inconceivable degree of misunderstanding of the spiritual master's order was the established doctrine in ISKCON. The system of successor ācāryas is indeed part and parcel of that misunderstanding. The system continues today, stronger than ever. Indeed, it will be remembered that the proposal was recently floated by several successor ācāryas that the present zonal gurus be officially designated as ācāryas and all subsequent initiating gurus be designated merely as gurus. The presence of successor ācāryas still works in antagonism to the principle of the GBC and the order of Srīla Prabhupāda. The misunderstanding of Srīla Prabhupāda's order will not be entirely rectified, therefore, until we wholly abolish the illicit office of successor ācārya and allow the GBC to emerge as the organ specifically empowered to guide ISKCON under the inspiration of Lord Caitanya and all the previous ācāryas.

Some Consequences

The system of successor ācāryas operates against the GBC in several notable ways.

First, the GBC as the ultimate managing authority assures the unity of ISKCON as a cooperative preaching movement. The system of successor ācāryas, each with their private and exclusive zones, has in effect created many separate ISKCONs or rather, separate Zonal Societies for Krishna Consciousness. Every year the zonal walls become higher, thicker, and firmer. Successor ācāryas forbid others to initiate—even speak or visit—in their zones, and are banned in turn from others. Any project that requires interzonal cooperation is doomed from the start—witness the plight of the gurukula system, for one. Even publishing and book distribution is becoming a restricted zonal affair.

Second, the position of successor ācāryas still leads to the minimization of the authority of the GBC. The idea of successor ācārya does not inculcate the proper spirit of subordination to the GBC among the successor ācāryas, some of whom disregard GBC resolutions with impunity. How can such disciples be gurus "under my order?"

Third, the successor ācāryas, by claiming authority independently of that granted by the GBC, obscure both the role of the GBC body and the GBC member. The GBC is not a league of independently authorized leaders who unite for some common purpose. Rather, it is constituted as a unified body that deputizes individual members to act as leaders in particular areas on behalf of the whole body. The individual GBC zones, then, are

under the management of the entire GBC, which deposes one member to act in that zone on the body's behalf. All authority proceeds from the GBC body, which, when convened as a unit, and with its members submissive to the order of the spiritual master, is empowered to receive the directions of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu and Śrīla Prabhupāda. No one else, individually or collectively, is empowered to direct ISKCON in this way. We have not yet seen the potency of the GBC manifest, because we have not yet understood the order of our spiritual master.

If we do not rectify our misunderstanding, then the future will bring more schisms, defections, and fall-downs from apparently very high places. To rectify the mistake, we must first dismantle the illicit institution of successor ācārya, and reestablish the true position of guru under Śrīla Prabhupāda's order. All Prabhupāda disciples must see that a grievous mistake has been made at the outset (in 1977) and have a sincere desire to correct themselves. In such a humble state of mind, Śrīla Prabhupāda will surely inspire us how to go from the present system to a rectified system without causing personal and institutional disruption. If we desire it, and discuss it among our selves, I am sure the path will be clear. But the sincere desire to change must arise. The argument, "It's too late now," evinces only a sincere desire not to change. Once we agree to rectify ourselves, what seems impossible will be revealed as very easy, because Kṛṣṇa desires it.

If we do not change, some future ācārya, emerged out of the shambles of a dismantled ISKCON, will pass the same kind of judgment on us that Śrīla Prabhupāda passed on his deviant God-brothers. If we do not change, this future ācārya will be able to write:

"Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda, at the time of his departure, requested all his disciples to conduct missionary activities cooperatively under the authority of a governing body. He did not instruct any particular men to become the next ācāryas. But just after his passing away, his leading secretaries made plans, without authority, to occupy the post of ācārya. The single, international society established by Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda gradually split up into many small, local movements, each headed by an single self-made ācārya. Consequently, all these factions were aśāra, or useless, because they had no authority, having disobeyed the order of the spiritual master."

Let us therefore sit down together and study the order of our spiritual master, resolve to submit ourselves fully to it, and make it our life and soul. He wanted us to cooperate together, and we should make that our life study. Certainly, if I consider my own faults and shortcomings, I cannot charge anyone with a failure to follow Śrīla Prabhupāda's order greater than my own. The responsibility for misunderstanding belongs to all of us, not a select few, and I accuse no one more than I accuse myself. So let us come together, chant, honor prasadam, and remember Śrīla Prabhupāda. Then let's discuss this matter with-

out reproach, recrimination, accusations, and acrimony. Let us listen to each other sympathetically to appreciate all points of view. Let's consider the requirements of all parties: the gurus, the godbrothers, the new disciples, and make sure everyone receives full and deliberate attention. I am sure that Śrīla Prabhupāda is not taking sides in any dispute, but supports and encourages all sincere devotees, whatever our shortcomings. He does not want to exclude anyone from his ISKCON. So let us consider this matter in a tolerant and broadminded spirit—with care, with prayer, and with love.

Begging for mercy at the feet of the Vaisnavas,

Ravindra Svarūpa dāsa

August 17, 1985

(By request of the North American Temple Presidents)

Trivikrama Swami

Dadri Narayana dasa

Pencaganda dasa

Bhakti Krishna dasa

Howell Narayana dasa

Kudera dasa

Nijadhara dasa

Nijadhara dasa

Nijadhara dasa

Jeta dasa

Srinivasa dasa

Rasatala dasa

Kanugadā dasa

Bhakti Narayana Swami

Prabhupada dasa

Prabhupada dasa

Prabhupada dasa

Gokul Anand dasa

Jeta Narayana dasa

Paramananda dasa

Shubha dasa

Murali dasa

Purusottama dasa

P. Yare Mohan Das

Caturanga dasa (Knoxville)

Krishna dasa

Krishna dasa