

Gurus in ISKCON

ISKCON is still trying to perfect its guru system. I'm convinced some critical adjustments must be made for the good of the institution and the spiritual lives of our members. I'd like to contribute to this discussion by offering my views and recommendations on the subject of gurus in ISKCON. Basically there are three key problems: 1) the criteria and governing rules we currently have for identifying diskha-gurus, 2) misunderstandings as to the role of the diksha-guru and 3) not recognizing the vast importance of our shiksha-gurus and the founder-acharya, Srila Prabhupada.

Preliminary Assumptions

First, I believe Srila Prabhupada has given us all the core knowledge we need to go back home, back to Godhead and reunite with Krishna in an intimate blissful relationship. He has given us so much transcendental knowledge in his books, approximately 30 thousand pages, that few devotees even manage to once read it over, what to speak of actually study it in detail and fully absorb it. Because we now have his printed books in so many languages and his recorded lectures, letters and conversations available to anyone, anywhere in the world – Prabhupada's presence today is actually greater than it was when he was physically present in the planet.

Secondly, I believe that despite the vast store of knowledge brought to us by Srila Prabhupada, we all need gurus to help us first find out about Krishna Consciousness, help us understand it, engage us in practical service, remove our doubts, give us encouragement, etc.

Lastly, ISKCON is a society of gurus. A missionary society is one that is dedicated to teaching spiritual knowledge – and teaching spiritual knowledge is exactly what makes one a guru. I firmly believe all active members of ISKCON, from the newest enthused bhakta or bhaktin to the most senior GBC or sannyasi members, are gurus. Further, we live in the Internet and Information Era. Never before has information been so abundant, and this applies to spiritual information as well. Members of ISKCON have a vast selection of devotional classes in audio or video, essays, websites, blogs, tweets, social networking sites, etc. – in all these there is a chance to learn more about Krishna. And anyone who comes in contact with any of our active members, in person or via some other media, has come in contact with a guru and has a chance to make progress in Krishna consciousness. For a typical member of ISKCON today, literally hundreds of such gurus will contribute to his or her progress, from the very beginning to the very end.

The role of a guru

The role of a guru is primarily to teach (for me this includes encouraging, guiding, being an example, etc.). I here firmly reject all mystical claims as to the role of the guru. These claims are not to be found in the Bhagavad-gita or Srimad Bhagavatam. Any such claims made by our acharyas, including Srila Prabhupada, are to be properly understood in light of the scriptures, not in contradiction to them. Krishna Consciousness is a spiritual science – things are rational and make sense. There is no reason to throw in mystical claims which are not a prominent part of the teachings of Krishna as seen in the Gita or Srimad Bhagavatam.

Though in normal circumstances a diksha-guru in ISKCON should have a prominent role in the life of a disciple, his or her role must be properly understood in light of the fact that we have so many active shiksha-gurus in our life and, above all, we have Srila Prabhupada. The current emphasis generally given to the diksha-guru in ISKCON simply does not properly take into consideration this fact. As such, I believe it is not an overstatement to say that no diksha-guru in ISKCON is our lifeline to Krishna or our ticket to Vaikuntha. No diksha-guru in ISKCON is our sole and only source of transcendental knowledge. No diksha-guru in ISKCON is the only one capable of engaging us in service, nor is service to the diksha-guru our main concern. The reality in ISKCON is very different. All those wonderful verses we find about the guru in our tradition do not apply exclusively to the person of our diksha-guru. For members of ISKCON they refer to the sum total of the gurus in our life, first and foremost in the person of Srila Prabhupada, but also extending to our past acharyas and including the thousands of other gurus in ISKCON. If one's diksha-guru should happen to quit his or her practices, change his or her mind, commit a terrible mistake or reveal to the world that he or she has always privately been struggling with one or a sum of character flaws – this in no way affects one's spiritual life. This fact must become common knowledge in ISKCON. We must demystify the role of the diksha-guru in ISKCON.

So who should be our diksha-guru in ISKCON?

Of these hundreds of gurus one comes in contact with in his progress in Krishna Consciousness, generally one assumes a more prominent role. One experienced member with whom we connect, create a bond of trust, have good and easy communication with and whose life we feel honors and reflects well our spiritual goals. There should be a real relationship between these two, the guru and the disciple. They should work together, talk, and see one other. If the guru feels the disciple is sincere and has met ISKCON standards, he or she can accept him. If the disciple wants this person to be his guru then this special shiksha-guru should become his diksha-guru. This is the traditional method. This is the Vedic system.

I believe it would be much healthier in general if diksha-gurus were local, or at least local in the sense of being the most active and present guru in our lives. A guru who is close to us will be able to help us much more than one that is not – this is just simple common sense.

Contrary to common belief in ISKCON, a guru need not be a liberated soul, nor the most advanced kind of devotee. There is both scriptural confirmation and the teachings of Srila Prabhupada to support this statement (see CC Adi-lila 1.47, for one such example).

A disciple of such a non-perfect guru has nothing to lose in ISKCON, because all of us have Srila Prabhupada and access to hundreds or thousands of other gurus in ISKCON who constantly offer their guidance, teachings and practical help. Diksha is our formal, official connection to this wonderful Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, to Srila Prabhupada and to the ever-growing and rich association of sincere practitioners of Krishna Consciousness, of gurus, we find in ISKCON. We are thus not limited by our diksha-guru as someone in the past might have been, when the relationship was that of an individual with another individual, in isolation, without the resources we have at hand, and without full access to a powerful founder-acharya.

Practical recommendations

ISKCON should, therefore, abolish the ecclesiastical guru stamp. Instead, it should empower its thousands of active missionary devotees who today are not properly recognized as gurus. ISKCON should allow its members to choose their own diksha-guru as they see fit. The burden of verifying the guru's qualities should rest with the disciple, not the GBC, not the administrative authorities. The decision of accepting a disciple should rest with the guru (of course following minimum ISKCON requirements). This system has worked for thousands of years and it can work today, to the benefit of ISKCON as an institution and the individual members.

This is not a new idea. It's the suggestion made by the Shastric Advisory Committee (SAC) to the GBC years ago. Click [here](#) to read that report.

The following is a quote from a Srimad Bhagavatam class by Bhakti Caru Swami on October 5th in Vrindavana [no year is given]:

“...but since we are not putting the importance on shiksha, Srila Prabhupada's position as the pre-eminent shiksha guru of this movement for all the devotees for all time has been minimized.”

ISKCON is a society and as such it naturally polices itself. Bad Temple Presidents, GBCs, congregational members, lecturers, etc. are quickly identified and dealt with, to minimize damage to the society. The same thing will naturally happen with those acting as diksha-gurus – it need be no different. The pre-approval of the authorities has not protected the society from damage caused by diksha-gurus gone bad. Our society has dealt with diksha-gurus gone bad many times. The situation, however, was made worse by the very fact that there was a pre-approval by the authorities and by the unrealistic understanding of the role of the diksha-guru in ISKCON. Without this pre-approval and with a more realistic understanding of the role of the diksha-guru, we will be much better equipped to deal with such fall downs.

This is a more practical, safer, more Vedic, more down to earth view of gurus in general and especially of diksha in ISKCON. Such a system would end the suffering caused by guru misconceptions in ISKCON, end personality cults, would more appropriately put the focus on Srila Prabhupada, end the parallel lines of power created by bigger-than-life gurus, and empower thousands of sincere preachers.