

BALANCING THE ROLES OF THE GBC AND THE DISCIPLE IN GURU SELECTION

A paper by the Śāstric Advisory Council (SAC)

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“The rules and regulation are that nobody should accept blindly any *guru*, and nobody should blindly accept any disciple. They must behave, one another, at least for one year so that the prospective disciple can also understand, ‘Whether I can accept this person as my *guru*.’ And the prospective *guru* also can understand, ‘Whether this person can become my disciple.’ This is the instruction by Sanātana Gosvāmī in his *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*.” (Śrīla Prabhupāda, Bg 13.1-2 lecture, 25 February 1975, Miami)

“In the *Mantra-muktāvalī*: By living together for one year they can ascertain from seeing each other’s nature whether they can act as *guru* and disciple. Indeed, there is no other way to determine this.” (*Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* 1.74)

“It is imperative that a serious person accept a bona fide spiritual master in terms of the śāstric injunctions. Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī advises that one not accept a spiritual master in terms of hereditary or customary social and ecclesiastical conventions. One should simply try to find a genuinely qualified spiritual master for actual advancement in spiritual understanding.” (Śrīla Prabhupāda, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Adi 1.35 purport)

“Self-deceived persons sometimes accept leaders or spiritual masters from a priestly order that has been officially appointed by the codes of material life. In this way, they are deceived by official priests.” (Śrīla Prabhupāda, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Madhya* 17.185 purport)

SAC’s Mandate given by the Executive Committee of the GBC

Early in 2004, the Executive Committee (EC) of the Governing Body Commission (GBC) of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) wrote to the Śāstric Advisory Council:

“Śrīla Prabhupāda states that it is the responsibility of the prospective disciples to examine and test their prospective *guru* prior to initiation. Given that the GBC gives tacit approval to *gurus* via their no-objection procedure, it could be that the prospective disciple’s desire to examine their prospective *guru* prior to initiation is compromised. Although there are many glorious descriptions of the qualities of *guru* in *śāstra*, it is the duty of prospective disciples to not automatically assume those

qualities are possessed by all ISKCON *gurus*. Rather, they should objectively examine their prospective *guru*. There is *prima facie* evidence that suggests that prospective disciples do not take this responsibility seriously. Therefore we request the Śāstric Advisory Council (SAC) to research the balance between the responsibility of ISKCON to protect its members from unqualified *gurus* and the duty of the prospective disciples to give proper attention to the study of their prospective *gurus* prior to initiation.”

The SAC is free to accept or reject requests from the GBC. We decided to accept this particular request because we accept that there is truth in the premise of the EC's statement.

Normally, the SAC submits papers to the GBC containing only philosophical and historical evidence, but in this case we felt that we could not address the philosophical issue of the responsibility of the aspiring disciple to test the prospective *guru* without also addressing practical issues of policy within ISKCON. We wrote to the EC expressing this, and they said that the GBC would be willing to receive a paper from SAC that included not only philosophical points but also policy recommendations.

Introduction

In *śāstra* we find some rare examples of aspiring disciples being directed to particular *gurus*. For example, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura was directed by his father, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, to approach Śrīla Gaurakiśora Dāsa Bābājī. In earlier times, Lord Brahmā told the demigods to accept Viśvarūpa:

“O demigods, I instruct you to approach Viśvarūpa, the son of Tvaṣṭā, and accept him as your *guru*. He is a pure and very powerful *brāhmaṇa* undergoing austerity and penances. Pleased by your worship, he will fulfill your desires” (Bhāg. 6.7.25)

These above examples do not contradict the statements found in *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* seen later in this paper. Even if advice is received from others, the aspiring disciple still has the full responsibility of making the ultimate decision. The aspiring disciple is responsible for choosing, testing, and evaluating a *guru*. The *śāstric* injunction is that a *guru* and disciple mutually test each other for a year in the course of personal association.

There are, however, several aspects of current ISKCON practice and understanding that make it difficult for an aspiring disciple to personally test a *guru*. The current procedure and understanding of the *guru* authorization process is one such obstacle. And there are others. Therefore SAC recommends that the GBC consider the following initial suggestions:

- 1) Devotees should be helped to understand that it is their responsibility to test their prospective *guru*, as recommended by Śrīla Prabhupāda and the previous *ācāryas*.

Generally, this should be done in consultation with trusted senior devotees.

- 2) Devotees seeking initiation from a spiritual master in ISKCON should be informed that they can choose any qualified senior devotee in good standing as their *dīkṣā-guru*, not just those who are already initiating.
- 3) The GBC should openly encourage all senior devotees in good-standing who are qualified ISKCON representatives to accept the role of a spiritual master.

The Responsibility of the Disciple to Test the Spiritual Master

When it is clear to aspirants that their choice is not limited to those already taking disciples, it should also be clear that they have the opportunity to study the qualifications of a whole range of possible spiritual masters, apart from those who are already initiating.

In ISKCON the range of acceptable spiritual masters is, however, limited by a certain principle. There are different *sampradāyas* and *saṅgas*, and the members of those *sampradāyas* and *saṅgas*, although respecting each other, follow their own leaders. The eternal leader of our *saṅga*, ISKCON, is Śrīla Prabhupāda, and he had his own special vision about how to practice and spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Devotees in ISKCON have decided to follow Śrīla Prabhupāda because he is the one who saved them and is bringing them to Śrī Kṛṣṇa. They understand Prabhupāda as the most empowered Vaiṣṇava *ācārya* of modern times mainly because his vision and method of world-wide preaching is most effective for people in general. Not every Vaiṣṇava *guru* in the world has this same personal vision and mood. Accepting a *guru* who does not have the same vision and mood as Śrīla Prabhupāda would create disharmony in the Society he created. Therefore, if someone is attracted to a *guru* who is functioning outside of ISKCON, the best arrangement is that he or she goes outside ISKCON to associate with that *guru* in the kind of environment the *guru* has created. Thus ISKCON members are limited to choose as *guru* only qualified devotees serving in ISKCON. (Note: This point could be explained to new devotees in a brochure on this topic to help them understand why such an ISKCON policy exists.)

But before making a final choice, they should personally test the *guru*. The testing may be in terms of basic qualifications: “Is this *guru* representing Śrīla Prabhupāda and the previous *ācāryas* in the best way? Am I capable of accepting instruction from this *guru*?” Or the testing may extend to more personal requirements. A disciple may wonder, “Will this *guru* deal with me personally? Will this *guru* respond to my letters? Will I have a chance to personally serve this *guru*?” These considerations should be tested in advance.

This is in line with the instructions of Śrīla Prabhupāda, who recommended that a disciple personally test a *guru* for at least one year before accepting initiation. Such recommendations can also be found in *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*, which gives practical

instructions for executing devotional service in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava line. This responsibility to personally test and judge the *guru* remains whether or not the prospective *guru* already has *dīkṣā* disciples. In other words, a prospective disciple should not think, "Well, this *guru* already has disciples. This means that he is qualified, and so I don't have to test him myself." The disciple still must examine the *guru*.

"Blind following and absurd inquiries. These things are condemned in this verse. Blind following means: "Oh, there is a *svāmī*. So many thousands of people are following. Let me become his disciple." This is called blind following. You do not know what is that *svāmī*, whether he is a *svāmī* or a rascal. You do not know. But because everyone is going, "Oh, let me become his disciple." This is blind following, without any knowledge, blind following." (Prabhupāda BG lec. 4.34-39, 12 Jan. 1969, LA)

References for a *Guru-śiṣya* Mutual Examination Period

Hari-bhakti-vilāsa—a section from the first *vilāsa*
(translation by Gopīparāṇadhana Prabhu)

Text 73 *tayoḥ parīkṣā cānyonyam / ekābdaṁ saha-vāsataḥ*
vyavahāra-svabhāvānu- / bhavenaivābhijāyate

The two of them should live together and test one another for one year. This test is fulfilled by observing one another's behavior and character.

atha parīkṣaṇam

The mutual examining is described as follows.

mantra-muktāvalyām,

74 *tayor vatsara-vāsena / jñātānyonya-svabhāvayoḥ*
gurutā śiṣyatā ceti / nānyathaiveti niścayaḥ

In the *Mantra-muktāvalī*: "By living together for one year they can ascertain from seeing each other's nature whether they can act as *guru* and disciple. Indeed, there is no other way to determine this."

śrutiś ca,

75 *nāsaṁvatsara-vāsine deyāt*

There is also the statement of *śruti*: "One should not give (the *viṣṇu-mantra*) to one who has not resided with one for a year."

sāra-saṅgraha 'pi,

76 sad-guruḥ svāśritaṁ śiṣyaṁ / varṣam ekaṁ parīkṣayet

77 rājñi cāmātyajā doṣāḥ / patnī-pāpaṁ sva-bhartari
tathā śiṣyārjitaṁ pāpaṁ / guruḥ prāpnoti niścitaṁ

And in the *Sāra-saṅgraha*: “A proper *guru* should test for one year a disciple who has taken shelter of him. The faulty acts of a minister accrue to the king, and a wife’s sins fall on her husband. Similarly, a *guru* certainly obtains the sinful reactions accumulated by his disciple.”

krama-dīpikāyām tu,

78 santoṣayed akuṭilārdratarāntarātmā
taṁ svair dhanaiḥ sva-vapuṣāpy anukūla-vāṅyā
abda-trayaṁ kamala-nābha-dhiyāti-dhīras
tuṣṭe vivakṣatu gurāv atha mantra-dīkṣām

“The *Krama-dīpikā*, however, says this: ‘Without deception and with a heart moist with affection, one should satisfy him with one’s own wealth, with the work of one’s body, and with favorable words. He should do this for three years, remaining sober and thinking of the *guru* as non-different from the lotus-naveled Supreme Lord. Then, when the *guru* is satisfied, he may speak the *mantra* in the initiation ceremony.’ ”

Commentary

evaṁ “varṣam ekaṁ parīkṣā ca tato dīkṣeti niścitaṁ” tatra śrī-gopāla-mantra-vara-dīkṣāyām varṣa-traya-guru-sevānantaram eva dīkṣeti tatra tattva-vidāṁ mataṁ likhan dīkṣā-prāktana-guru-sevā-vidhiṁ ca saṅkṣepena darśayati, santoṣayed iti... abda-trayaṁ ity atra viśeṣo granthāntarād draṣṭavyaḥ; tathā hi, “triṣu varṣeṣu viprasya ṣaṭsu varṣeṣu bhū-bhṛtaḥ / viśo navasu varṣeṣu parīkṣā tu praśasyate // samāsv api dvādaśasu teṣāṁ ye vṛṣalādayaḥ” iti. yac ca śārada-tilakādāv uktam, “ekābdena bhaved viprā bhaved abda-dvayān nṛpaḥ / bhaved abda-trayair vaiśyaḥ śūdro varṣa-catuṣṭayaiḥ” iti. tad atyanta-pūrva-pariśīlita-viṣayam iti vivecanīyam.

“It has thus been said that ‘There should be testing for one year, and then initiation.’ In this regard, when the initiation is with the best of *mantras*, the Śrī Gopāla *mantra*, *dīkṣā* should be performed only after serving the *guru* for three years; this is the opinion of those who know the truth. Recording this opinion, the passage beginning *santoṣayet* briefly sets forth the processes of initiation, along with the preliminary service to the *guru*... Further particulars about this three-year period can be found in other books, as for example, ‘It is best to test a *brāhmaṇa* for three years, a *kṣatriya* for six years, a *vaiśya* for nine years, and *śūdras* and others for twelve years.’ It is also said

in the *Śāradā-tilaka* and other texts, 'A *brāhmaṇa* is tested in one year, a king in two, a *vaiśya* in three, and a *śūdra* in four.' This, we should distinguish, refers to what was practiced very long ago." (Dig-darsinī-ṭika by Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī)

Statements by Śrīla Prabhupāda on a Mutual Examination Period

1) "Unless one is prepared that 'I am accepting somebody as my spiritual master. I must accept whatever he says,' if there is any doubt, that 'I cannot accept his words verbatim,' then one should not accept him as spiritual master. That is hypocrisy. One must be first of all convinced. Therefore it is the duty of the spiritual master and the disciple to associate—that is the injunction of Sanātana Gosvāmī—for some time, and both of them should study. The disciple should study "whether I can accept this saintly person as my spiritual master." And spiritual master also will see "whether I can accept this boy, this person, as my disciple." That is the way. But sometimes the time is reduced. That doesn't matter. But the principle is this, that before accepting a spiritual master you can examine him, you can scrutinize him, but not after accepting him." (Śrīla Prabhupāda Initiation lecture, 13 July 1971, LA)

2) "First of all you find out the person, that one who is better than you. Then you submit. Therefore the rules and regulation are that nobody should accept blindly any *guru*, and nobody should blindly accept any disciple. They must behave, one another, at least for one year so that the prospective disciple can also understand, 'Whether I can accept this person as my *guru*.' And the prospective *guru* also can understand, 'Whether this person can become my disciple.' This is the instruction by Sanātana Gosvāmī in his *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*."

(Śrīla Prabhupāda Bg 13.1-2 lecture, 25 February 1975, Miami)

3) "So therefore the process is before accepting a *guru*, one must hear him at least for one year. And when he's convinced that "Here is actually a *guru* who can teach me," then you accept him, *guru*. Don't accept whimsically. This system now should stop that somebody's coming for three days—"Prabhupāda, initiate him." Why? First of all see whether he's fit for becoming a disciple; then recommend. Otherwise, don't recommend. Because the cheap recommendation is creating havoc. One is not fit for becoming a student, disciple, and he's accepting discipleship, and after three days he's going away. This should not be allowed. Therefore, in the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* by Sanātana Gosvāmī it is directed that the spiritual master and the disciple must meet together at least for one year so that the disciple may also understand that "Here is a person whom I can accept as my *guru*," and the *guru* also can see that "Here is a person who is fit for becoming my disciple." Then the business is nice."

(Śrīla Prabhupāda SB 1.16.25 lecture, 21 January 1974, Hawaii)

4) "First of all, you must find out a person who if you can surrender there. *Tasmād gurum prapadyeta. Tad viddhi pranipātena* [Bg. 4.34]. *Pranipāta*, surrender, that is required first. If you think somebody that he's not worth surrendering, then don't

make him *guru*. Don't make a fashion. **First of all you test** that "Whether I can surrender?" *Pranipātena*. Then try to understand."

(Śrīla Prabhupāda SB 7.6.2 lecture, 18 June 1976, Toronto)

5) "...acceptance of spiritual master must be selected, you see, after careful examination, just like one selects his bride or bridegroom after careful examination. And in India they are very careful because the marriage of the boys and girls take place under the guidance of the parents. So the parents very carefully see. So one has to accept a spiritual master whose guidance will make his life perfect. That is the relation between spiritual master and disciple. It is not a formality. It is a great responsibility both for the disciple and for the spiritual master.

(Śrīla Prabhupāda BG lecture, 2.7-11 2 March 1966, NY)

6) "**But if you want to know who is a spiritual master, then you have to test him** whether he is speaking exactly like the bona fide spiritual master. Śrī Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura has explained about this, who is spiritual master. What is that? He says, *sādhu śāstra guru vākya, tinete kariyā aikya*. If you want to advance yourself in spiritual science, then you have to test these three things. What is that? *Sādhu*, saintly person. *Sādhu*, *śāstra*, scriptures, and spiritual master. Now suppose you want to know who is a spiritual master. Then **you have to test** whether he's speaking just like other saintly persons and whether he's following scriptures. *Sādhu śāstra*. **So you have to test a spiritual master** by corroborating whether he is speaking according to the scriptural injunction, whether he's speaking (according) to other saintly persons."

(Śrīla Prabhupāda TLC lecture, 25 September 1968, Seattle)

7) "Suppose you are going here. You are coming here to learn something. When you are convinced that "Swamiji knows the thing," when you are convinced, then you accept. Then you ask for initiation. Otherwise don't do it hesitatingly or knowing half. Therefore in the system it is enjoined that the spiritual master also observe the disciple at least for one year, and **the disciple also studies the spiritual master at least for one year**. So when both of them are convinced that "He can be my spiritual master" or "He can be my disciple," then the relationship is established. We initiate our students."

(Śrīla Prabhupāda BG lecture 4.34-39, 12 January 1969, LA)

8) "**It is imperative that a serious person accept a bona fide spiritual master in terms of the śāstric injunctions**. Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī advises that one not accept a spiritual master in terms of hereditary or customary social and ecclesiastical conventions. One should simply try to find a genuinely qualified spiritual master for actual advancement in spiritual understanding." (Śrīla Prabhupāda, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Adi 1.35 purport)

This last reference makes it clear that a real candidate is one who is serious and has studied *śāstra* to the point of being able to recognize who is a genuine spiritual master; not that ISKCON should base its *guru* system on the uninformed neophyte. We would do better to lean towards a system that educates its aspirants. It is also obvious that

such aspirants are the ones who then make the choice. Furthermore, the above condemnation of the acceptance of a spiritual master in terms of ecclesiastical convention casts a negative light on our present system. Finally, the last sentence places the onus on the aspirant to find out who is genuine and compatible.

Gurus Should Test Disciples

Although in this paper we are emphasizing the duty of the disciple to personally test and evaluate a prospective *guru*, it follows from the statements of the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* and Śrīla Prabhupāda that the *guru* should personally test and evaluate his prospective disciple.

In fact, a *guru* who does not test a disciple runs the risk of committing the offense of preaching the holy name to the faithless. A *dīkṣā-guru* takes the responsibility of recommending the disciple to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, and suffers if the disciple commits some mistake.

1) “If a servant makes a mistake, the master is punishable because he is responsible for the offense.” (Bhāg. 6.3.30 purport)

2) “But when a living entity plays the part on behalf of Kṛṣṇa, he also takes the responsibility for the sinful activities of his devotees. Therefore to become a *guru* is not an easy task. You see? He has to take all the poisons and absorb them. So sometimes—because he is not Kṛṣṇa—sometimes there is some trouble. Therefore Caitanya Mahāprabhu has forbidden, “Don’t make many *śiṣyas*, many disciples.” But for preaching work we have to accept many disciples—for expanding preaching—even if we suffer. That’s a fact. The spiritual master has to take the responsibility for all the sinful activities of his disciples. Therefore to make many disciples is a risky job unless one is able to assimilate all the sins... Therefore your question was—when I suffer is it due to my past misdeeds? Was it not? That is my misdeed—that I accepted some disciples who are nonsense. That is my misdeed.” (PQPA 6: The Perfect Devotee)

We should also note that if a *guru* does not properly test devotees before accepting them as disciples, the bad behavior of unqualified disciples will hurt the reputation of the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Movement, not just the individual *guru*. Therefore, the responsibility of a *guru* to test disciples should be taken as very important. This duty of the *dīkṣā-guru*—the one who officially brings someone into the *sampradāya*—is similar to the responsibility of a university admissions officer who wants to bring in students who will have a high chance of academic success and of whom the school will be proud.

Delegation of the Responsibility to Personally Test

Personal testing should always be considered the standard because it is declared by *guru*, *sādhu* and *śāstra*. But this standard has been modified in ISKCON in the following ways: (1) A disciple sometimes delegates his responsibility of testing the *guru* to others such as leaders or committees in the institution. (2) A *guru* sometimes

delegates his responsibility to test his prospective disciples to others such as temple presidents. These modifications do not relieve the *guru* or disciple of their ultimate responsibilities in this matter. The prospective disciple is ultimately responsible for the choice of *guru*, and the *guru* is ultimately responsible for accepting a disciple.

The choice of a *guru* should always be considered primarily the personal responsibility of a prospective disciple. Therefore, delegation of that responsibility to others should not be encouraged, and what to speak of mandated. Rather, official policy should always encourage personal and direct testing. Similarly, it is the responsibility of the *guru* to test prospective disciples. Therefore, delegation of that responsibility to others should not be mandated. Rather, official policy should always encourage personal and direct testing of disciples. It is better to risk having disciples and *gurus* make their own mistakes and thereby acknowledge their own responsibility, not least of all because doing so is the śāstric injunction.

It is presently ISKCON law that a *guru* cannot accept a disciple unless there is a recommendation from a temple president or a similarly situated person. In this way, some of the responsibility for mutual testing has been delegated to a third person who could possibly interfere with the process. Although Śrīla Prabhupāda himself established the precedent of delegation, even he experienced problems with it, as when he said that devotees were being recommended too easily for second initiation and called for a “boiling of the milk”. SAC, in their discussions, have not tried to resolve this issue, but feel that it should be considered in the future.

According to *śāstra* there is a great responsibility for the aspiring disciple to personally test the *guru*. But in ISKCON this is not always possible, especially when *gurus* have large numbers of disciples. Disciples’ delegating their responsibility to the institution for testing *gurus* has become quite common in ISKCON, so much so that many take it to be the standard. This is especially true for devotees aspiring for initiation from *gurus* who already have many hundreds of disciples and who may not often visit the aspirant’s geographical location.

The aspiring disciple is confronted with some important decisions: “Shall I choose a *guru* whom I can test in a personal way through direct association? Or shall I choose a *guru* I am not able to test through direct association?” These considerations are individual, and individuals have the freedom to decide for themselves. We hope, however, that the aspirant will consider the choice of *guru* very carefully in reference to *śāstra*, in consultation with trusted senior devotees, and on the *recommended method of direct personal association*. But no matter which of these methods the aspirant applies, he assumes the ultimate responsibility for testing the *guru*’s qualifications.

Conclusion

We can conclude that *śāstra*, tradition and Śrīla Prabhupāda place the ultimate responsibility to test whether or not a *guru* is bona fide on the prospective disciple.

Therefore, if we wish that new aspirants understand their need to examine a guru, we should move our guru-authorizing system as close as possible to the traditional form and terminology.

Policy Recommendations

As SAC members explored the concept of disciples testing their *guru*, they began to understand that ISKCON's process of *guru*-authorization is an integral factor in this topic. Therefore the SAC team was led to research and write about the process of *guru*-authorization in this paper. We hope that our suggestions will be viewed as supportive and positive contributions.

As a modern international organization, ISKCON must express Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition and practice in ways appropriate for the modern world. This has meant giving the institution a role in the *guru*-selection process in ways that depart from the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. If there are going to be such departures from the tradition in the name of institutional integrity, they should be minimal.

Such departures should be minimal in regards to (a) the way a devotee assumes the role of *guru* in ISKCON, (2) the way a *guru* is tested by disciples, and (3) the way a *guru* tests his disciples. In whatever ways these functions differ from tradition, they should be grounded in other, similar aspects of tradition to ensure protection from deviation.

In the next section of this paper, the SAC team has tried to draw examples from Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava history and tradition to offer credence to the present *guru*-authorization system in ISKCON. However, we had no choice but to do so from examples not specifically related to the topic of *guru* and disciple. In other words, ISKCON is using a system that can only be scripturally justified by referencing unrelated principles and examples and then extrapolating them to match the present system. This suggests that our present *guru*-authorizing system is not close enough to tradition.

The remaining portion of this paper focuses on the topic of *guru*-authorization which is integral to an aspirant's testing and choosing a spiritual master.

Blessing-Seeking

Presently, members of ISKCON generally use the term "authorization", "nomination" or "no-objection" when discussing the procedure for devotees accepting the service *dīkṣā-guru*. Although we do not find śāstric evidence for bureaucratic entities granting authorization to *gurus*, we do find evidence that devotees who are ordered to begin an important service first take the blessings or permission of senior Vaiṣṇavas. For example, when Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī was ordered to write the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, he took the permission of the senior Vaiṣṇavas, his *gurus* and the Deity as

well. Kavirāja Gosvāmī did this because it was considered standard Vaiṣṇava etiquette. And at that time and place, this etiquette was well-established within Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava society. But today, in our Society, these etiquettes are not so well-established. Therefore ISKCON has institutionalized the process of blessing-seeking.

It is a principle of Vaiṣṇava etiquette that one receive blessings or permission from senior Vaiṣṇavas before performing an important service. This is, however, specifically for the benefit of the prospective *guru* himself, not for the organization. Blessings provide spiritual protection and security to keep one free from Māyā's influence. Therefore it should be highly recommended that all prospective spiritual masters take advantage of Vaiṣṇava blessings and approach those senior Vaiṣṇavas with whom they have a relationship. In this way, the blessings become meaningful and potent.

Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī, on his own volition, took blessings or permission from the leading Vaiṣṇavas in Vṛndāvana before taking up the service of writing the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*:

a) "I took permission from Śrīla Vṛndāvana dāsa Ṭhākura by praying at his lotus feet, and upon receiving his order I have attempted to write this auspicious literature."

PURPORT

"Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī took permission not only from the Vaiṣṇavas and Madana-mohana but also from Vṛndāvana dāsa Ṭhākura, who is understood to be the Vyāsa of the pastimes of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu." (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi-līlā* 8.81)

Mahārāja Pratāparudra, on his own volition, took the permission of the devotees before massaging the legs of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu:

b) "Following Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya's instructions, the King had given up his royal dress. He now entered the garden in the dress of a Vaiṣṇava. Mahārāja Pratāparudra was so humble that with folded hands he first took permission from all the devotees. Then, with great courage, he fell down and touched the lotus feet of the Lord. As Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu lay on the raised platform with His eyes closed in ecstatic love and emotion, the King very expertly began to massage His legs. The King began to recite verses about the *rāsa-līlā* from *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*." (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya-līlā* 14.6)

To refer to the process of seeking blessings as an act of Vaiṣṇava etiquette does not trivialize it. Rather, it exalts it:

"My dear Sanātana, although you are the deliverer of the entire universe and although even the demigods and great saints are purified by touching you, it is the characteristic of a devotee to observe and protect the Vaiṣṇava etiquette. Maintenance of the Vaiṣṇava etiquette is the ornament of a devotee. By observing the etiquette, you have satisfied My mind." (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta Antya-līlā* 4.129-130, 132)

It is consistent with our tradition that a prospective *guru* asks for the blessings or permission of senior devotees before starting to take disciples. Our present system has

institutionalized a process of senior devotees voting or offering no-objection to prospective *gurus*. But we do not find that this institutionalized blessing-seeking process is mentioned by *guru*, *sādhū* or *śāstra* as the way that one is authorized to become a *guru*.

This system has been created to enable some institutional oversight. The institutional oversight of prospective *gurus* is needed, but it can be performed in a different way as we shall suggest later. The very first point to understand is how a devotee is actually authorized or empowered to assume the service and role of a spiritual master in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and in our ISKCON movement.

Empowerment

The actual order or empowerment to initiate disciples comes from the order of one's spiritual master:

Svarūpa Dāmodara: [The professor asked me] how do you know that guru is qualified, spiritual master is qualified? Then I said [answered] everything is written in the sastras, so we have to follow according to the injunctions written in the sastras. So all the qualifications of a pure devotee, of a bona fide guru, is written there. Just like you are a professor of physics in the university. Before you came, you had some qualification, degree of doctors. And then there is a committee to decide you whether you are qualified for the post. So it is selected by a committee of members and then they interview and then they find out your qualifications. If they find that you are qualified for the post, so you are selected as a professor. It's like that in the spiritual field also. There are revealed scriptures and there everything is written what will be the qualification of a guru and then how to choose a bona fide one. So everything is written, you should follow the injunctions of the revealed scriptures accordingly.

Prabhupāda: Committee is his spiritual master, he orders that you do this.

(Morning Walk, 1-3 October 1972 LA)

Therefore Caitanya Mahāprabhu says, *amara ajnaya guru haya tara sarva-desa, tara ei desa*. He's asking everyone to become a spiritual master. So how everyone can become a spiritual master? A spiritual master must have sufficient knowledge, so many other qualifications. No. Even without any qualifications, one can become a spiritual master. How? Now the process is, Caitanya Mahāprabhu says, *amara ajnaya*: 'On My order.' That is the crucial point. One does not become spiritual master by his own whims. That is not spiritual master. He must be ordered by superior authority. Then he's spiritual master. *Amara ajnaya*. Just like in our case. Our superior authority, our spiritual master, he ordered me that 'You just try to preach this gospel, whatever you have learned from me, in English.' So we have tried it. That's all. It is not that I am very much qualified. The only qualification is that I have tried to execute the order of superior authority.

(Bg. 2.2 Lecture, 3 August 1973 London)

Brahmananda: He's asking when did you become the spiritual leader of Kṛṣṇa consciousness?

Prabhupāda: When my Guru Maharaja ordered me. This is the guru-parampara.

Indian: Did it...

Prabhupāda: Try to understand. Don't go very speedily. A guru can become guru when he's ordered by his guru. That's all. Otherwise nobody can become guru.

Indian woman 2: (Hindi)

Prabhupada: (Hindi) Sadhi mam prapannam. "I am surrendered to You. Whatever You say, I shall carry out." That's all.

Indian man: When did he tell you to...?

Prabhupada: What is the business, when did he tell me? And why shall I disclose to you? It is so very insignificant thing that I have to explain to you?

Indian man: No, I am just curious when...

Prabhupada: You should be curious within your limit. You should know that one can become guru when he is ordered by his guru, this much.

(Lecture, Bhagavad-gita 7.2, Nairobi, 28 October 1975)

In the case of Śrīla Prabhupāda's *dīkṣā* disciples, a general order to become spiritual master has been given many times by His Divine Grace both orally and in writing. Therefore, all *dīkṣā* disciples of Śrīla Prabhupāda who are properly following his instructions are in fact already authorized and empowered to initiate disciples. To work within ISKCON, however, a preacher must agree to cooperate with the organization and thus seeks the blessings of senior Vaiṣṇavas within the Society. But this seeking of blessings would be best performed if it were not officially mandated. Rather, it could be done at the discretion of the devotee who plans to accept disciples.

The references in the next section demonstrate that Śrīla Prabhupāda intended and ordered all of his disciples to become spiritual masters.

Śrīla Prabhupāda's Intentions

Śrīla Prabhupāda made his intentions clear about all of his disciples becoming spiritual masters:

Ātreya Ṛṣi: How many qualifications does a spiritual master have in terms of being a spiritual master?

Prabhupāda: One qualification: he is a devotee of God. That's all.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: Does he have to be designated by the former spiritual master? He has to be devotee...

Prabhupāda: Oh, yes, oh yes.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: ...surrendered and designated. That is..., identifies disciplic succession: both surrender and designation.

Prabhupāda: And by the result.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: And the result of activity.

Prabhupāda: So far designation is concerned, the spiritual master authorizes every one of his disciples. But it is up to the disciple to carry out the order, able to carry out or not. It is not that spiritual master is partial, he designates one and rejects other. He may do that. If the other is not qualified, he can do that. But actually his intention is not like that. He wants that each and every one of his disciple become as powerful as he is or more than that. That is his desire. Just like father wants every son to be as qualified or more qualified than the father. But it is up to the student or the son to raise himself to that standard.

Ātreya Ṛṣi: Yes, I understand.

Prabhupāda: If you are incapable of raising yourself to the standard of becoming spiritual master, that is not your spiritual master's fault; that is your fault. He wants, just like Caitanya Mahāprabhu said, *āmāra ājñāya guru hañā* [Cc. Madhya 7.128], By My order, every one of you become a guru. If one cannot carry out the order of Caitanya Mahāprabhu, then how he can become a guru? The

first qualification is that he must be able to carry out the order of Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Then he becomes guru. So that carrying out the order of Caitanya Mahāprabhu depends on one's personal capacity. *Amāra ajñāya guru hañā.* (Room Conversation, 29 June 1972, San Diego)

Every student is expected to become Acarya. Acarya means one who knows the scriptural injunctions and follows them practically in life, and teaches them to his disciples. ...Keep trained up very rigidly and then you are bona fide Guru, and you can accept disciples on the same principle. But as a matter of etiquette it is the custom that during the lifetime of your Spiritual Master you bring the prospective disciples to him, and in his absence or disappearance you can accept disciples without any limitation. This is the law of disciplic succession. I want to see my disciples become bona fide Spiritual Master and spread Krishna consciousness very widely, that will make me and Krishna very happy. (Letter to Tusta Krsna, 2 Dec. 1975)

I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. Those possessing the title of Bhaktivedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples. Maybe by 1975, all of my disciples will be allowed to initiate and increase the numbers of the generations. That is my program. (Letter to Hamsaduta 3 Jan. 1969)

Now is the time for the members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness to distribute krsna-bhakti all over the world and thus follow the orders of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. The Lord has ordered everyone to become a guru (Cc. Madhya 7.128): *amara ajnaya guru hana tara' ei desa.* (Cc. Madhya 15.41 purport)

So there is no bar against anyone; anyone can become a spiritual master provided he knows the science of Krsna. This is the only qualification, and this science in essence is contained in Bhagavad-gitā. At the present moment, thousands of spiritual masters are needed to spread this great science throughout the world. (Raja Vidya ch.7)

He must not take on unlimited disciples. This means that a candidate who has successfully followed the first twelve items can also become a spiritual master himself, just as a student becomes a monitor in class with a limited number of disciples. (Easy Journey ch.1)

Ordered by Śrī Guru and Gaurāṅga

The following are just a few of the numerous instances wherein Śrīla Prabhupāda ordered his disciples to take up the duty of becoming spiritual masters:

So our request is that every one of you become a guru. That is Caitanya Mahaprabhu's order. He wants that everyone must become a guru. How? That He says: *yare dekha tare kaha 'krsna'-upadesa amara ajnaya guru hana tara' ei desa.* (Bg. 7.1 Lecture, 20 Dec. 1975 Bombay)

Who is actually guru in the parampara system? *Evam parampara-praptam imam rajarsayo viduh* [Bg. 4.2]. So we have to take the authority of become guru from Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, the same thing. Within five hundred years His order is that *amara ajnaya guru hana:* [Cc. Madhya 7.128] "You cannot become guru all of a sudden. You must take order from Me." He is jagad-guru. So Caitanya Mahaprabhu says you, all of you, to become guru and deliver. Because there are so many innumerable fallen souls in this age-*mandah sumanda-matayo manda-bhagya hy upadrutah* [SB 1.1.10] -- we require hundreds and thousands of gurus. But not cheaters. This is the time when requires hundreds and thousands of gurus. But who will become guru? That is Caitanya

Mahāprabhu's injunction, amara ajnaya: "By My order you become guru. Don't be all-of-a-sudden guru. Become guru on My order." (Speech to Devotees, April 7, 1976 Vrndavana)

"I give you order. You, every one of you become a spiritual master." "Oh, I have no qualification. How can I become spiritual master? It requires high knowledge, Sanskrit understanding." "No, you don't require anything. Simply you speak kṛṣṇa-upadeśa." What is kṛṣṇa-upadeśa? Kṛṣṇa says, sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekam saranam vraja [Bg. 18.66]. You simply go door to door and say, "Please surrender to Kṛṣṇa." Then you are spiritual master. I have done this. What I have done? I have gone to your country to say this thing, that "Here is Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. You surrender; you become perfect." That is being done. So it is not very difficult to become spiritual master. Simply you have to become very serious and sincere to the service of Kṛṣṇa. (Bhag. Lecture, 4 Nov 1973 Delhi)

"Take My order and you become a spiritual master." How? "Simply speak Kṛṣṇa consciousness, that's all. Simply speak on Kṛṣṇa's message, kṛṣṇa-kathā." There are two kinds of kṛṣṇa-kathās. One is the Bhāgavad-gītā, and the other is Srimad-Bhāgavatam. So this is the propagation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. (Lecture 11 Dec 1968 Los Angeles)

Lord Caitanya says that "Every one of you become the spiritual master, every one of you. Why one, two? Every one of you." "Oh, spiritual master is very difficult job." No. No difficult job. Caitanya Mahā... Āmāra ājñāya: "Just try to carry out My order. That's all. Then you become spiritual master." And if you interpolate, if you put something nonsense, rubbish, to show your so-called rascal's education, then it is spoiled. Immediately spoiled. And if you present as it is, then it is pure. (Lecture 9 May 1969 Columbus)

So our request is that every one of you become a guru. That is Caitanya Mahāprabhu's order. He wants that everyone must become a guru. How? That He says: yāre dekha tāre kaha 'kṛṣṇa'-upadeśa āmāra ājñāya guru hanā tāra' ei deśa. This is guru. Suppose you are family member. So many living entities, you sons, your daughters, your daughter-in-law, or children, you can become their guru. Exactly like this you can sit down in the evening and talk about the Bhāgavad-gītā, yāre dekha tāre kaha kṛṣṇa-upadeśa. You haven't got to manufacture something. The instruction is there; you simply repeat and let them hear—you become guru. It is not difficult at all. So that is our preaching. We do not want to become alone guru, but we want to preach in such a way that every, the chief man, or any man, he can become guru in his surroundings. Anyone can do that. Even a coolie, he can also, he has got family, he has got friends, so even though he is illiterate, he can hear the instruction of Kṛṣṇa, and he can preach the same. This we want. (Lecture, 20 Dec 1975 Bombay)

Since the order to become spiritual master has been amply given by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu and Śrīla Prabhupāda, strict disciples of Śrīla Prabhupāda are already authorized to accept disciples. Preachers have agreed to cooperate and obtain the blessings of senior devotees within our Vaiṣṇava community. But it would be better if this seeking of blessings was not officially mandated because it would then be closer to tradition. It could be done at the discretion of the devotee who plans to accept disciples. Such a devotee should be encouraged to seek blessings from whomever he sees fit.

Once this more traditional system is established, gradually it will become clearer to new aspirants that they are not limited in their choice of spiritual master only to *gurus*

who are already accepting disciples. ISKCON leaders should explain to devotees that they can choose any devotee in good-standing who has the proper qualifications as *guru* as given in the scriptures.

In light of this understanding, the GBC may wish to consider other changes in the current procedures.

Increasing the Number of Gurus

If the GBC are seriously interested in emphasizing the role of the aspiring disciple in personally testing his prospective *guru*, then they may wish to increase the number of initiating spiritual masters in ISKCON. Otherwise, the GBC will find itself in the position of trying to place the burden of examination on the aspiring disciple, while in reality he or she has little chance to do this. If there were more *gurus*, this would increase the chance that an aspiring disciple could actually observe and test a *guru* for a year.

There are several ways that an increase in *gurus* could be accomplished:

- a) New devotees aspiring for initiation should be instructed in all possible ways that they are not limited in their choice of *guru* to devotees who are already initiating. In this way, there can be a disciple-driven increase in the number of *gurus*. Presently, there are devotees in good-standing who are qualified to be *gurus* but are not coming forward on their own accord to “apply for the post.” But if approached by sincere aspirants, this will encourage them to take up the responsibility.
- b) There may be qualified devotees not currently initiating who have been approached by aspirants but who are still reluctant to take up this service. ISKCON leaders could positively encourage such devotees to take up the service.
- c) Two years ago the GBC passed a resolution that disciples of living *gurus*, in exceptional circumstances, may also become spiritual masters in ISKCON. The GBC may want to encourage *gurus* with senior disciples to give blessings to such qualified disciples to begin taking their own disciples. In other words, new devotees can approach anyone in good-standing as *guru*, even a disciple of a living *guru*, but that prospective *guru* would require the blessings of his *guru* in order to begin initiating.

The Traditional System for Choosing Gurus was Not Bureaucratic

The traditional system for becoming a *guru* was not similar to the bureaucratic system for producing the ordained clergy of modern religions. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura gave warnings against overly bureaucratized systems.

Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura writes in *Śrī Caitanya Śikṣāmṛtam* (p. 242) that Pūtana represents a deceitful *guru*. Obviously, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* does

not wish to have deceitful persons taking the role of *guru*. It might seem that one way to avoid this is to institute bureaucratic controls. However, in his commentary, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura argued that bureaucratic systems for producing ordained clergy are not the way to ensure qualified *gurus*:

“It is not from any deliberate opposition to the ordained clergy that these observations are made. The original purpose of the established churches of the world may not be always objectionable . . . But no mechanical regulation has any value even for such a purpose. The bona fide teacher of the religion is neither any product nor the favorer of any mechanical system. . . The mere pursuit of fixed doctrines and fixed liturgies cannot hold a person to the true spirit of doctrine or liturgy.” (Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, printed in the January 1932 edition of *The Harmonist*, or *Shree Sajjanatoshani*, “Putana”, part 1)

Some devotees may discount these words of Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, bringing up the seemingly contradictory fact that he started and led a spiritual organization. However, that would be a mistake. Referring to a properly qualified spiritual personality, Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura said, “In his hands no system has likewise the chance of degenerating into a lifeless arrangement.” So Sarasvatī Ṭhākura does not reject all systems. Some system should be there, but it should be, as much as possible, like the traditional system of *guru* selection, with minimal bureaucracy. We should not rush into imitating the bureaucratic systems for ordaining clergy found in modern religions.

Śrīla Prabhupāda has also written against officially appointed *gurus*:

"Self-deceived persons sometimes accept leaders or spiritual masters from a priestly order that has been officially appointed by the codes of material life. In this way, they are deceived by official priests." (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Madhya* 17.185 purport)

Śrīla Prabhupāda has also given many general warnings against the over-centralization and over-bureaucratization of ISKCON.

“Forget this centralizing and bureaucracy.” (letter to Karandhara, Bombay, 22 December 1972)

“Krishna Consciousness Movement is for training men to be independently thoughtful and competent in all types of departments of knowledge and action, not for making bureaucracy. Once there is bureaucracy the whole thing will be spoiled.” (letter to Karandhara, Bombay, 22 December 1972)

Our point in bringing up these warnings is not to say that the current system is completely wrong, or that the *gurus* that have gone through this system are just official priests. However, we do think that it would be an improvement if the system for *guru* authorization in ISKCON resembled more the traditional system and resembled less the modern systems for appointing official priests. We are not advocating the removal of all institutional oversight of the *guru* authorization and

selection process. Some minimal institutional oversight should always be there. We are simply suggesting that it would be better to emphasize the education of devotees to choose the right *guru* by personal testing as the primary system, with institutional oversight applied afterwards to correct things if wrong choices are made.

A decentralized and non-bureaucratic institutional form of disciples and *gurus* engaging in mutual testing meets the criteria given by Śrīla Prabhupāda and Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, and it avoids the pitfalls they mentioned. Perhaps the main pitfall is the fact that with a bureaucratic process, once a person starts taking disciples, other prospective disciples get the impression that the *guru* has been “certified”; thus they often forgo the proper process of mutual testing.

We should also note that there are religious and secular organizations which have decentralized and non-bureaucratic forms. Such forms are not anarchies. Some of these organizations are very effective in achieving their purposes and protecting their core principles.

Again, ISKCON has a legitimate concern over who represents it and who can officially accept disciples. However, the leaders of ISKCON also have an obligation to fulfill this duty according to *guru*, *sādhu*, and *śāstra*. There are enough admonitions against bureaucracy and centralization to at least conclude that our institutional concern about the purity and loyalty of *gurus* is possible to accomplish in ways that are decentralized and non-bureaucratic.

“Bhakta Joe”

One argument against a decentralized system is the “Bhakta Joe” argument. Those who put forward this argument are convinced that Bhakta Joe or Bhaktin Mary are completely incompetent to hold the primary responsibility for choosing a *guru* (although *guru*, *sādhu*, and *śāstra* clearly state that aspiring disciples have the primary responsibility for this choice). To those who make the “Bhakta Joe” argument, we draw their attention to the following points: (1) If we cannot train our Bhakta Joe’s and Bhaktin Mary’s to differentiate a bona fide *guru* from a hole in the wall, or if they are not intelligent enough to be so trained, we are in big trouble. They should learn about the qualifications of a bona fide *guru* from *śāstra*, *sādhu*, and *guru* and then make their decision ideally on the basis of the recommended process of personal association with *gurus* or prospective *gurus* who are members of ISKCON in good standing. (2) SAC also advocates that Bhakta Joe consults with senior devotees about their choice of *guru*, and (3) in the last resort, if after all good training and advice, Bhakta Joe makes a decision that turns out to be incorrect, then the organization will step in to rectify the situation by taking action against the wayward *guru*; this is what is already happening in practice anyway.

SAC does not believe that exams are required, but it should be required that aspirants read a booklet that we prepare, or sit in some lectures based on this booklet.

General Recommendations

From *guru*, *sādhu*, and *śāstra* we learn that it is the duty of an aspiring disciple to test a prospective *guru* for a year. To help establish this principle in practice, the GBC may wish to consider the following recommendations:

- 1) The GBC should state clearly and repeatedly that devotees are free to choose any qualified devotee in good-standing as *guru*, not just those who are already initiating.
- 2) The GBC should suggest that a devotee, by his heart, intelligence, study of the scriptures, and consultation with trusted senior devotees, carefully try to choose his *guru*. And once he has some indication, he should study that person's qualifications very carefully in light of *śāstra* and not assume that the person is qualified due to having received permission to act in that role.
- 3) The GBC should inform new aspirants that delegating the responsibility for testing the *guru* is not traditional and thus risky. The aspiring disciple and the prospective *guru* have a grave responsibility to take every possible precaution in making a thoroughly informed decision, for which they themselves are ultimately accountable.

A Suggestion for Balancing the Responsibilities

The mandate given to SAC by the EC puts the question of *guru* choice in terms of the relative responsibilities of the individuals and the institution. This reflects the underlying fact that Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted us all to carry out our practice of Kṛṣṇa consciousness within the framework of an institution, the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness, in which the ultimate managerial authority is the Governing Body Commission. This means that the GBC has an interest in the qualifications of the *gurus* chosen by individual members of the Society. And therefore the GBC has, through decisions taken over the past thirty years, come up with the present system for a devotee accepting the role of a *guru*. But, if SAC reads the mandate for this paper correctly, the GBC also wishes to emphasize the traditional responsibility of the prospective disciple in evaluating the qualifications of a *guru*.

The GBC desires to exercise some control over who represents ISKCON as initiating *gurus*. The SAC proposes, however, that the present system does not provide effective safeguards, and at the same time it stifles initiative. In other words, applying for the *guru* post and approaching devotees for recommendations does not sit well with truly humble Vaiṣṇavas. And it's the truly humble who are most worthy to become our Society's *gurus*.

We should also be aware from the history of other *sampradāyas* and religions of the real danger of gradual corruption. Even if apparent purity were maintained for some time by a bureaucratic regulating system of authorization, the eternal temptations of

misusing the status of *guru* for self-aggrandizement could ruin the system and the institution. In future generations we, like other *sampradāyas*, could become burdened with *gurus* who collect disciples mainly for money and power. Such corruption could occur even while maintaining the external appearance of bureaucratic purity. Therefore SAC suggests that the GBC *shift their oversight to mainly after-the-fact*. Exactly how this is to be implemented should be decided by the GBC.

SAC members also feel that the procedure of determining no-objection to giving initiation should be simple. The main questions to ask are, “Is this devotee chanting a daily minimum of sixteen rounds and following the four regulative principles?” and “Is he loyal to Prabhupāda and ISKCON?” These questions can be answered easily, even without the separate procedure of no-objection that leaves the GBC to blame when no-objection has been granted to someone who later deviates.

Śrīla Prabhupāda gave instructions about how to recognize and expose false or incompetent *gurus*:

“The whole situation has been spoiled by these so-called rascal *gurus* who gives his own opinion. This is our plain declaration: Let any rascal *guru* come. We can convince him that he is not *guru*, because he is speaking differently. We can challenge any rascal.” (Prabhupāda Lecture: What is a *Guru*? -- London, August 22, 1973)

Journalist: I think an awful lot of our readers, and an awful lot of people in the United States, are terribly confused with the many people who claim to be *gurus* and gods and who pop up in this country, one after the other after the other, and they say that -

Srila Prabhupada: I can declare that they are all nonsense.

Journalist: I wonder if you could elaborate on that a little bit.

Srila Prabhupada: I can say, furthermore, they're all rascals.

Journalist: For example, the famous one who sells meditation mantras?

Srila Prabhupada: He is rascal number one. I say it publicly.

Journalist: Could you explain, give me a little background on that, and why, because our readers --

Srila Prabhupada: From his behavior I can understand he is rascal number one. I do not want to know about him, but what he has done makes it obvious. But the wonderful thing is that people in the Western countries are supposed to be so advanced -- how are they befooled by these rascals?

(Journey of Self Discovery 4.1 Show-bottle Spiritualists Exposed)

It appears that the Vaiṣṇava system relies principally on the “exposure” system for maintaining the quality of *gurus*. In fact, this is how ISKCON has also practically operated in the past. Bureaucratic processes about the suitability of a person to function as *guru* before the person has actually functioned as a *guru* have not proved successful as an effective guarantee. The actual behavior of the person as *guru* has, in practice, turned out to be the only effective basis for determining merit. One might argue that such a system does not guarantee that a *guru* will remain fixed on the spiritual platform, but that is true of any system.

It seems to us that if a devotee is apparently in good-standing and wishes to accept disciples it is best to let the devotee accept disciples after a period of mutual testing

between *guru* and disciple for at least a year. The institutional check against unfit *gurus* should be applied not *a priori* but *a posteriori*, in terms of attention to the actual behavior of the *guru*. If it turns out that the *guru* is unfit, this fact will be exposed.

This *a posteriori* system is mentioned in the *Śrī Harināma-cintāmaṇi*: “The *guru*-disciple relationship is eternal. If both maintain their pure positions and are bona fide, their eternal relationship is never jeopardized. However, if the spiritual master is later exposed as perfidious, the disciple must immediately repudiate him. The same is to be done by the spiritual master if the disciple is similarly exposed. If such repudiation is not carried out by both parties when necessary, they stand to be doomed.” (*Śrī Harināma-cintāmaṇi*, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, Ch. 6)

End