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Authorizing Diksa-gurus in ISKCON

This paper explains the authority of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission (GBC) to create a system for approving *diksa-gurus* within the society, focusing on the principles behind the system.

Through many written and spoken instructions, Srila Prabhupada made it abundantly clear that after his departure the GBC should serve as ISKCON's ultimate managerial authority. In his will he states:

> 1. The Governing Body Commission (GBC) will be the ultimate managing authority of the entire International Society for Krishna Consciousness. [LD 6: Declaration of Will, June 1977]

Although within the Vedic literature we may not find specific references describing a system of management with Vaisnavas working under a central authority such as the GBC, Srila Prabhupada created one. In doing so he followed the order of his Guru Maharaja, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, who requested his disciples to create a governing body. The significance of this is discussed in *Caitanya-caritamrta, Adi* 12.8, purport.

> Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, 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 acarya. But just after his passing away, his leading secretaries made plans, without authority, to occupy the post of acarya, and they split into two factions over who the next acarya would be.

Similarly, in the Vedic scriptures we will not find directions for Vaisnava institutions to endorse or authorize spiritual positions like *sannyasa* or *diksa-guru*. Our evidence for the legitimacy of the GBC establishing such processes consists of Srila Prabhupada's instructions and activities.

Concerning such important functions as approving *sannyasa* candidates, during his time with us Srila Prabhupada gradually turned these over to the GBC. In ISKCON's early years Srila Prabhupada personally awarded *sannyasa* to those he thought qualified. Later he asked the GBC Body to establish systems for assessing potential *sannyasis:*

> For taking sannyasa you may consult your GBC member as we shall be starting a new policy where the sannyasa candidate must meet certain requirements to be determined by the GBC. [Letter to Danavir, 6 February 1973]

> Your program for those who are desiring to take sannyasa is approved by me and I request that you make something concrete and distribute it to all the other GBC

> members and amongst yourselves you may decide who will take sannyasa. [Letter to Satsvarupa, 10 February 1973]

Since Srila Prabhupada's disappearance, the GBC Ministry for Sannyasa Services has developed systems for assessing and training candidates for *sannyasa* and recommending them to the GBC for the GBC's final approval.

Just as Srila Prabhupada established that the qualifications of prospective *sannyasis* should be assessed, he similarly indicated that diksa gurus should have certain qualifications.

Srila Prabhupada expected that after his physical departure his disciples would continue the disciplic succession, serving as gurus and accepting disciples into the *parampara*. He stated this as early as 1967:

> Anyone following the order of Lord Chaitanya under the guidance of His bonafide representative, can become a spiritual master and I wish that in my absence all my disciples become the bonafide spiritual master to spread Krishna consciousness throughout the whole world. I want it. . . . [Letter to Madhusudana, 2 November 1967]

In 1975 he wrote that after his departure he wanted his disciples to become *diksa-gurus* if they developed the necessary qualifications.

> 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 Krsna consciousness very widely. That will make me and Krsna very happy. [Letter to Tusta Krsna Swami, 2 December 1975]

Srila Prabhupada wanted his disciples to attain a certain level of spiritual advancement before taking up the service of giving *diksa*. The minimum level he expected is expressed in the following quotes:

> Generally the spiritual master comes from the group of such eternal associates of the Lord; but anyone who follows the principles of such ever liberated persons is as good as one in the above mentioned group. . . . A person who is liberated acharya and guru cannot commit any mistake, but there are persons who are less qualified or not liberated, but still can act as guru and acharya by strictly following the disciplic succession. [Letter to Janardana, 26 April 1968]

> **Tamal Krsna:** Well, I have studied myself and all of your disciples, and it's a clear fact that we are all conditioned souls, so we cannot be guru. Maybe one day it may be possible . . .

Prabhupada: Hmm.
Tamal Krsna: . . . but not now.
Prabhupada: Yes. I shall choose some guru. I shall say, "Now you become *acarya*. You become authorized." I am waiting for that. You become all *acarya*. I retire completely. But the training must be complete.
Tamal Krsna: The process of purification must be there.
Prabhupada: Oh, yes, must be there. Caitanya Mahaprabhu wants that. *amara ajnaya guru hana*. "You become guru." [*laughs*] But be qualified. Little thing, strictly follower . . .
Tamal Krsna: Not rubber stamp.
Prabhupada:: Then you'll not be effective. You can cheat, but it will not be effective. [Room Conversation, 22 April 1977, Bombay]

An example of training and assessment for initiating spiritual masters that could be further developed is scriptural training and tests. As early as 1969 Srila Prabhupada explained a future program of sastric training so that his disciples would have the necessary philosophical knowledge to act as initiating spiritual masters:

> Next January there will be an examination on this Bhagavad-gita. Papers will be sent by me to all centers, and those securing the minimum passing grade will be given the title as Bhakti-sastri. Similarly, another examination will be held on Lord Caitanya's Appearance Day in February, 1970 and it will be upon Srimad-Bhagavatam and Bhagavad-gita. Those passing will get the title of Bhakti-vaibhava. Another examination will be held sometimes in 1971 on the four books, Bhagavad-gita, Srimad-Bhagavatam, Teachings of Lord Caitanya, and Nectar of Devotion. One who will pass this examination will be awarded with the title of Bhaktivedanta. 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. So we should not simply publish these books for reading by outsiders, but our students must be well versed in all of our books so that we can be prepared to defeat all opposing parties in the matter of self-realization.
> (Letter to: Hansadutta -- Los Angeles 3 January, 1969)

While neither Srila Prabhupada nor the GBC put the specifics of this idea in place, the principle is clear that devotees who accept disciples are subject to specific training, standards and oversight before they are allowed to initiate disciples.

After creating the GBC in 1970, Srila Prabhupada wrote: "I have formed this GBC for that purpose, to keep the devotional standards at the highest level and at the same time to manage a world-wide organization." (Letter to Rupanuga, 4 Nov 1970) Certainly the qualifications of gurus (and the qualifications of disciples) fall within the "devotional standards" mentioned by Srila Prabhupada to be safeguarded, and in some cases clarified, by the GBC.

Srila Prabhupada indicated the need for sastric degrees for many levels of service in ISKCON, and he

left the duty to clarify and codify those degrees and levels to the GBC: "As far as the Bhakti-sastri and other examinations are concerned, that we will discuss at the GBC meeting." (Letter to Nitai, 24 Jan 1976)

> The persons best able to ascertain whether a proposed guru has been sufficiently steady in his service and loyal to Srila Prabhupada are the senior devotees who have known and served with the candidate for many years; that is, his peers and seniors in his geographic areas of service. Prospective diksa-gurus are assessed by a group of senior ISKCON leaders from the area where they reside and preach to determine whether they have the minimum qualifications required to accept disciples according to Srila Prabhupada's instructions. A final review is done by the GBC.
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> The GBC has also provided the "Spiritual Leadership Seminar: Being a guru in ISKCON" to assist diksa gurus in their service of caring for disciples and serving within Srila Prabhupada's ISKCON. There are also regular sangas where the gurus, sannyasis and GBC associate with each other.
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> The GBC, following Srila Prabhupada's example and instructions, thus understands that's one of its duties is to implement systems of assessment and training so that qualified devotees may take up the service of becoming initiating spiritual masters in ISKCON .