

An Alternate Analysis: Prabhupada's May 28th Conversation and July 9th Letter (1977)

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Introduction

What is the value of yet another examination of Srila Prabhupada's May 28th conversation with members of the GBC and July 9th letter authorizing eleven men to initiate as ritvik priests? Hasn't this already been analyzed to death? After nearly four decades, haven't Prabhupada's instructions been clearly understood and implemented? I'm not convinced that they have.

This is important because if the instructions of the spiritual master are not correctly interpreted and followed then the entire sampradaya will veer off course and become asara, or useless. Prabhupada explained, "Persons who strictly follow the orders of the spiritual master are useful in executing the will of the Supreme, whereas persons who deviate from the strict order of the spiritual master are useless [asara]." ¹

I first heard about this famous conversation and letter—in which Prabhupada allegedly appointed eleven advanced disciples to succeed him—in 1978 when I joined ISKCON and began serving Prabhupada's mission as a disciple of one of the zonal acaryas. I learned more about this conversation and letter in 1983, when Satsvarupa dasa Goswami's *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta, Volume 6: Uniting Two Worlds* was published. At that time I accepted Satsvarupa's conclusion that these two documents were a "clear and conclusive" appointment of eleven men to "become gurus and accept disciples of their own." ²

Recently, however, I have had the good fortune to become acquainted with a devotee who lived in Vrindaban, India during the summer of 1977 when Srila Prabhupada was making arrangements for the future of ISKCON in preparation for his inevitable passage from this world. This person is Yasodanandan dasa, who, at that time 38 years ago, served as headmaster at the Vrindaban gurukula. He shared with me many entries in his 1977 diary that described important conversations with leading GBC members about the future of ISKCON. While what he shared with me is not new information (it was published as early as 1989 in *Vedic Village Review*), it was new to me. I was surprised (but also not surprised, considering the disastrous history of the zonal acarya era in ISKCON) that his recounting of events contradicted Satsvarupa's version.

Yasodanandan's eye-witness accounts were extremely revealing, and after conducting further investigation, I compiled my research into this essay which I humbly submit to the worldwide community of Vaisnavas who follow in the disciplic succession continuing from His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

—The author (September 5, 2015: Krsna Janmastami)

From rags to riches

Abhay Caranaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896-1977), a former manager for a Calcutta chemical factory who had a profound religious fervor for his Gaudiya-Vaisnava faith, left his Indian fatherland on an ocean freighter in August 1965, shortly before his 69th birthday. After a month-long sea voyage, he arrived in New York City with a suitcase, a crate of his books (three volumes of the hardcover *Srimad-bhagavatam* and the paperback *Easy Journey to Other Planets*), a three-tiered brass cooker, a pair of kartals (small bell-metal cymbals) and forty rupees (worth at the time about seven U. S. dollars).

The short, charismatic man (five-feet five-inches tall, but filled with life and energy and love for his Lord) came to America solely on a solo missionary expedition to spread the Gospel of Lord Caitanya (1486–1534)—the Medieval scholar, saint and mystic who is regarded by his followers not as an ordinary mortal man but as an incarnation of the Supreme Godhead. Three decades earlier Bhaktivedanta Swami’s spiritual master, His Divine Grace Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur Prabhupada (1874-1937), knowing his disciple Abhay Caranaravinda to be an educated man who spoke English, had requested him to preach to the English-speaking people.

After nine months in the United States with little success, Bhaktivedanta Swami unexpectedly found a promising source of enthusiastic converts. Word spread among young hippies and seekers of spiritual truth that an Indian Swami had come with a “far out” yoga method: chanting Hare Krsna. His mission expanded and in June 1966 Bhaktivedanta Swami rented a tiny storefront on Second Avenue in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and incorporated the International Society for Krsna Consciousness, Inc.

After twelve years of preaching in the West, Bhaktivedanta Swami (venerated by his disciples with the honorable title “Sri Prabhupada” beginning in December 1967) achieved remarkable success: a worldwide preaching mission with thousands of initiated disciples and many more thousands of followers and supporters. When he passed away on November 14, 1977, he had initiated several thousand disciples (one reliable source claims 4,734), established more than one hundred temples and agricultural communities in dozens of countries, and written and published sixty volumes of translations of and commentaries on Sanskrit and Bengali sastra (scriptures).

The institution he founded was also a financial success. By 1977, ISKCON had collected tens (if not hundreds) of millions of dollars through lucrative fundraising, book selling and business ventures. With the profits, Prabhupada’s disciples printed hundreds of thousands of their master’s books, purchased luxurious mansions, historic churches, thousands of acres of

land, and in India constructed imposing marble temples and guest houses for pilgrims—all for the glory of Krsna.

In India, most gurus maintain one or two humble ashrams where their disciples (perhaps numbering a few dozen—at most a hundred) live and study. These disciples have personal association with their spiritual master and get to see him and hear him speak frequently. But ISKCON grew so rapidly in North and South America, Europe, Asia and Australia that Prabhupada could not maintain intimate relationships with all of his disciples; he had to delegate responsibilities to his senior disciples in order to keep his growing mission functioning.

As a service to his disciples, Prabhupada’s lectures and conversations were recorded on magnetic tape, copied and distributed to his many centers around the world so his disciples could become transcendently enlivened by hearing his words of wisdom. He stressed that his words were more important than his physical presence. “We should take advantage of the vani [the words], not the physical presence [vapu] [of the spiritual master],” Prabhupada instructed, “because the vani continues to exist eternally.”³

Prabhupada creates the GBC

In 1970, four years after incorporating ISKCON, Prabhupada created a committee within ISKCON—the Governing Body Commission (or GBC)—and began training his senior disciples to take over the management of his society. Eventually, he hoped to retire from management completely and have the GBC become the “ultimate managing authority” in ISKCON, so he could complete his translation of and commentary on *Srimad-bhagavatam* without disturbance.

Prabhupada also expected that members of the GBC, when fully trained, would also take over the duty of initiating new disciples after his death. Hamsadutta Swami (Hans Kary),⁴ a senior disciple who was appointed to the original GBC in 1970, recalled, “He [Prabhupada] told me personally, ‘I am training you

to be guru. I am training you to be perfect, so that in my absence [after my death] things will go on.”⁵

During a June 1976 interview in Los Angeles, Prabhupada explained that he was presently training his most “advanced students” to become his successors. In addition, the ISKCON of the future would have not one but many leaders. “There is no need,” he said, “of [only] one person.”

Interviewer: Is there anyone who is designated to succeed you as the primary teacher of the movement?

Prabhupada: I am training some, I mean to say, advanced students so that they may very easily take up the charge. I have made them GBC. They are under my direct training, and I think they will be able to conduct this movement.

Interviewer: Do you expect to name one person as your successor or have you already?

Prabhupada: That I am not contemplating now. But there is no need of [only] one person.⁶

A month later, Prabhupada spoke to a *Newsweek* reporter in New York and indicated that he was training his leading GBC secretaries to succeed him in the future.

Interviewer: Do you have a successor to take your place when you die?

Prabhupada: Not yet settled up. Not yet settled up.

Interviewer: So what process would the Hare Krsnas...?

Prabhupada: We have got secretaries. They are managing.

Disciple: He has appointed from all the disciples a group of secretaries [the GBC]. Each one is in charge of a different sector of the world.

Interviewer: How many secretaries?

Disciple: Presently there's eighteen.

Interviewer: And so that group of eighteen secretaries will choose another leader?

Prabhupada: I am training each one of them as leader so that they can spread extensively. That is my idea. ⁷

Despite Prabhupada's attempts to train his leading secretaries, by November 2, 1977 (less than a fortnight before his death), his confidence in his most "advanced students" had declined considerably. When asked by a news reporter, "Who will succeed you as the leader of the Hare Krsna movement?" instead of suggesting, as he did earlier, that his leading GBC secretaries would become his successors, he responded with a broad statement, "All of my disciples will take the legacy. . . . I—one—may soon pass away, but they [my disciples] are hundreds, and this movement will increase. It's not that I'll give an order, 'Here is the next leader.' Anyone who follows the previous leadership is a leader. . . . All my disciples are leaders, as much as they follow purely." ⁸

Why did Prabhupada change his mind about who would become his successors? Did he lose confidence in the spiritual progress of his most "advanced students?" He gave an important clue when he said, "All my disciples are leaders, as much as they follow purely." Apparently he thought his senior-most disciples were not following purely.

Guru must be on the topmost platform

Although Prabhupada publicly announced that he wanted all of his disciples to carry on his legacy by becoming leaders after his demise, he admitted that few would actually develop the necessary spiritual qualifications to become bona fide gurus. Only the devotees who had reached the topmost stage of bhakti, Prabhupada said, should take up the grave responsibility of initiating disciples.

According to Vaisnava siddhanta (doctrine) there are three stages of spiritual advancement for those on the path of bhakti: (1) the kanistha-adhikari (third-class neophyte), (2) the madhyama-adhikari (second-class mixed devotee) and (3) the uttama-adhikari or maha-bhagavat (first-class topmost devotee).

Prabhupada described the three classes: “Those who go to the temples of the Lord and offer worshipful respect to the Deity without sufficient knowledge in the theological science and therefore without any respect for the devotees of the Lord are called materialistic devotees, or kanistha-adhikari, the third-grade devotees. Secondly, the devotees who have developed a mentality of genuine service to the Lord and who thus make friendships only with similar devotees, show favor to the neophytes and avoid the atheists are called the second-grade devotees. But those who see everything in the Lord or everything of the Lord and also see in everything an eternal relation of the Lord, so that there is nothing within their purview of sight except the Lord, are called the maha-bhagavats, or the first-grade devotees of the Lord. Such first-grade devotees of the Lord are perfect in all respects.”⁹

In *The Nectar of Instruction*, Prabhupada described some of the qualities of the perfect maha-bhagavat devotee: “The uttama-adhikari, or highest devotee, is one who is very advanced in devotional service. An uttama-adhikari is not interested in blaspheming others, his heart is completely clean, and he has attained the realized state of unalloyed Krsna consciousness.”¹⁰

In order to reach the highest level of transcendental realization in Krsna consciousness, according to Gaudiya-Vaisnava siddhanta, one’s heart must be completely cleansed; all desires for self-gratification must be eliminated. By faithfully practicing the tenets of bhakti yoga and avoiding offenses, a devotee’s false ego is burned up by the fire of devotional service and only the pure spirit soul remains, free from material contamination. Such a self-realized soul no longer has any desire for sense gratification, mental speculation, profit, fame, adoration, or merging into the absolute; he is self-satisfied in both happiness and distress, and exists only to serve the Lord unconditionally, who he sees everywhere at all times. Krsna describes such a liberated soul in *Bhagavad-gita* (5.21-22):

A person who neither rejoices upon achieving something pleasant nor laments upon obtaining something unpleasant, who is self-intelligent, unbewildered, and who knows the science of

God, is to be understood as already situated in transcendence. Such a liberated person is not attracted to material sense pleasure or external objects but is always in trance, enjoying the pleasure within. In this way the self-realized person enjoys unlimited happiness, for he concentrates on the Supreme.

Only the transcendental uttama-adhikari—the liberated soul who desires neither wealth, nor comfort, nor followers, but only service—Prabhupada claimed, should accept disciples: ¹¹

One should not become a spiritual master unless he has attained the platform of uttama-adhikari. ¹²

The guru must be situated on the topmost platform of devotional service. . . . When one has attained the topmost position of mahabhagavat, he is to be accepted as a guru. . . . Only such a person is eligible to occupy the post of guru. ¹³

Humbler than a blade of grass

Of supreme importance for an aspiring Gaudiya-Vaisnava on the path of perfection is the attainment of true humility: to consider oneself lower than the straw in the street. Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu instructed his followers, “One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.” ¹⁴

The uttama-adhikari thinks of himself not as the master, but as dasa-dasa-anudasa (the servant of the servant of the servant). ¹⁵ Prabhupada, like Jesus Christ some 2,000 years earlier, admonished his disciples to serve others. If a devotee thought of himself as the master, he would “go to hell.” “We are servant of [the] servant. That is Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s instruction,” Prabhupada explained. “The more you become servant of the servant, the more you are perfect. And if you all of a sudden want to become master, then you go to hell. That’s all.” ¹⁶

Prabhupada knew that out of his thousands of disciples, only a handful might become advanced in Krsna consciousness, and of those who became advanced, hardly one would attain true humility and achieve the topmost stage of transcendence. Yet Prabhupada hoped that at least one of his disciples might become an *uttama-adhikari* and understand Krsna in full.

“I do not expect that everyone will be Krsna conscious,” Prabhupada admitted. “That is not possible. But if there is one moon in the sky, that is sufficient to eradicate the darkness. You don’t require many stars. . . . If one man understands perfectly what is this Krsna consciousness movement . . . he can do tremendous benefit to the other people.”¹⁷

“If I create one moon, that is sufficient,” Prabhupada later said. “I don’t want many stars. . . . What is the use of having [any] number of fools and rascals? If one man understands rightly, he can deliver the whole world.”¹⁸

Originally Prabhupada thought that as soon as he was satisfied with the spiritual advancement of his senior-most disciples, he would authorize them to become gurus and initiate disciples after his passing. Without the personal order from the spiritual master, a disciple cannot become guru. Prabhupada explained:

A guru can become guru when he’s ordered by his guru. That’s all. Otherwise nobody can become guru.¹⁹

Guru cannot be self-made. No. There is no such single instance throughout the whole Vedic literature. . . . You must be authorized.²⁰

Caitanya Mahaprabhu says, “*amara ajñáya*,” [Cc. Madhya 7.128] “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.”²¹

But by early 1977 at the age of 80, Prabhupada’s health had taken a turn for the worse and his leading disciples were still far from qualified to take over his mission. During May of that year, he became seriously ill and decided to spend his last days in

Vrindaban, India—the most-highly regarded tirtha (holy place) for Vaisnavas on earth. Prabhupada said, “I cannot speak. I am feeling very weak. . . . The condition of my health is very deteriorating. So I preferred to come to Vrindaban. If death takes place, let it take [me] here.”²²

ISKCON successors: fully trained or rascals?

In Vrindaban, as Prabhupada’s condition worsened, members of the GBC became especially concerned because their spiritual master had not fully explained to their satisfaction how new disciples would be initiated after his passing. How would the parampara (guru lineage) continue in his absence? Who would become his successor(s)?

During a room conversation in India, Prabhupada agreed that none of his disciples at that time were qualified to become genuine gurus, but he hoped that as soon as someone became qualified—when his training was complete—he would appoint him. If a disciple were to begin initiating without being fully trained, he would become a “rascal guru.”

During that conversation, Tamal-Krsna Goswami (Thomas G. Herzig)—an influential ISKCON sannyasi and GBC member who served as Prabhupada’s secretary during the summer of 1977—frankly admitted that Prabhupada’s disciples (including himself) were all spiritual neophytes in that they were still influenced by material desires.

Prabhupada: You become guru, but you must be qualified first of all. Then you become [guru] . . . What is the use of producing some rascal guru?

Tamal-Krsna: Well, I have studied myself and all of your disciples, and it’s clear fact that we are all conditioned souls, so we cannot be guru. Maybe one day it may be possible, 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, [it] must be there. Caitanya Mahaprabhu wants that. “Amara ajñāya 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. ²³

One month later, his leading disciples hadn’t made much progress. During May 1977, in Vrindaban, Prabhupada chastised his disciples, including Bhavananda Swami (Charles Bacis)—the GBC representative for Vrindaban, Central India, and the co-GBC for Mayapur and Michigan, “You are all children. None of you has any intelligence.” ²⁴

In October 1977, Bhavananda frankly admitted to Prabhupada, “We have not grown that much. . . . We’re still children.” ²⁵

Disorder and conflict in ISKCON

Even under Prabhupada’s personal direction, ISKCON had never been a smooth-running, efficient organization. On an almost ongoing basis, he had to resolve new crises caused by blunders of management and bickering amongst his senior disciples. Prabhupada lamented, “Now this displeasing of godbrothers [my disciples] has already begun and gives me too much agitation in my mind. Our Gaudiya Math people fought with one another after the demise of [my] Guru Maharaja [Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur Prabhupada] but my disciples have already begun fighting even in my presence. So I am greatly concerned about it.” ²⁶

Ravindra-Svarupa dasa (William H. Deadwyler, III)—a scholar and president of the ISKCON Philadelphia temple—described some of the problems caused by senior leaders:

Prabhupada’s own movement also soon provided him with ample reason for discouragement. From the very outset there was trouble: his authority was challenged; his position compromised;

his instructions distorted, neglected or selectively followed; his teachings moulded to various fancies; his assets misused, mismanaged and misappropriated; his standards broken; his dependents neglected, exploited and abused. And the worst of this was committed by men Prabhupada entrusted with responsible positions. Prabhupada travelled continuously around the world, grappling with problems. Each day his mail washed up to him a jumbled deposit of scandals, failures and disappointments. Internal weaknesses and shortcomings turned the eleven years of Prabhupada's personal supervision into a concatenation of crises. ²⁷

For a long time, Prabhupada had been aware of a conspiracy to take over ISKCON after his death. On May 27, 1977, he tried to warn a few leading men to be on guard lest some unqualified men pose as gurus, bewilder his disciples, and usurp the position of acarya. His disciples most likely thought he was referring to the Vrindaban Caste Goswamis or his Gaudiya Math godbrothers, such as B. R. Sridhara Maharaja and others, whom he sometimes criticized as "envious" but in fact, the most dangerous enemy to ISKCON was within ISKCON; from the ranks of his "most advanced" disciples.

Prabhupada: Just now everything is going on, but after my demise it may be taken away from your hand. I understood it long ago. . . . So how are you going to guard yourself? That is the problem. . . .

Bhavananda: There will be men, I know. There will be men who want to try to pose themselves as guru. . . .

Prabhupada: Very strong management is required and vigilant observation.

Questions about future initiations

The following day, May 28, 1977, more than a dozen leading disciples (Tamal-Krsna Goswami, Kirtanananda Swami, Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, Bhavananda Goswami, Ramesvara Swami, Jayapataka Swami, Jayatirtha dasa, Bhagavan dasa, Gopal-Krsna Swami, Bhakti-Caru Swami, Giriraja dasa, Rupanuga

dasa, Jagadisa dasa, and Bali-Mardan) ²⁸ met with Prabhupada in Vrindaban, especially to inquire about the process for initiating new disciples in the future. Satsvarupa dasa Goswami (Stephen Guarino)—the GBC representative for Miami, Gainesville, Houston, Dallas, St. Louis and Denver, and editor-in-chief of *Back to Godhead* magazine—was chosen as spokesman.

Unfortunately Satsvarupa didn't seem to understand the difference between the initiation ceremony conducted by a ritvik acarya (deputy priest) and the actual initiation itself—the internal spiritual contract between a qualified and duly-appointed uttama-adhikari diksa guru and a sincere disciple. Diksa, or formal initiation into the sampradaya, is commonly regarded as the sacred contract between the guru and the disciple in which the guru accepts the disciple as his student and the disciple accepts the guru as his master. Although diksa occurs in the heart, it is usually (but not always) marked by a ceremonial ritual during which the disciple participates in an agnihotra yajñá (fire sacrifice) and makes certain vows. ²⁹

Prabhupada tried to answer Satsvarupa's questions but due to doctrinal misunderstandings, they were inconsistent and contradictory. The answers, therefore, were not easy to understand, and since then, scholars and pundits have espoused very different and diametrically opposed interpretations of Prabhupada's statements.

It is important to note that the tape recording of this important conversation was hidden for several years. When the transcripts were finally made available to the public, there were three or four different versions. Even the tape itself has anomalies that suggest splicing: strange clicks, changes in background noise, changes in voice volume levels, etc. ³⁰

Most likely, the transcripts, and perhaps the tapes themselves, had been doctored. Why was this particular conversation hidden and altered? The following transcript of the May 28, 1977 conversation comes from VedaBase 2014.1.

Satsvarupa: . . . our next question concerns initiations in the future, particularly at that time when you're no longer with us.

We want to know how first and second initiation would be conducted.

Prabhupada: Yes. I shall recommend some of you. After this is settled up, I shall recommend some of you to act as officiating acaryas.

Tamal-Krsna: Is that called ritvik-acarya?

Prabhupada: Ritvik, yes.

Satsvarupa asked how initiations should be conducted in the future, particularly after Prabhupada's passing. Prabhupada's answer is simple and straightforward: he would recommend some of his disciples to act as ritvik acaryas (deputy priests). The ritviks do not initiate their own disciples; the ritviks officiate at ceremonies in which the disciple accepts initiation from the actual acarya (Prabhupada in this case) by proxy. Prabhupada, in this statement, made it clear that in the future after his death, initiations in ISKCON should continue by ritvik representation.

If Prabhupada's leading disciples had been advanced uttama-adhikaris, or even if they had been madhyama-adhikaris with a sincere and submissive service mentality, the conversation might have ended there. They would have simply replied something like, "Thank you, master. Our questions about initiations in the future have been answered to our satisfaction. We will follow your orders without question, O wise and merciful Gurudeva, for we have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do we desire beautiful women (or men or boys), nor do we want any number of followers. We only want your causeless devotional service birth after birth."

Prabhupada's answer, however, was not the answer his leading disciples wanted to hear. They hoped that he would have said, "Well done, my good and faithful servants. You have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. I shall appoint some of you to become successor acaryas and, after my departure from this world, I order you to carry on the disciplic succession by initiating your own disciples—my grand disciples—who will worship and obey you just as you worshiped

and obeyed me. Take your deserved place on elevated thrones and enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

Prabhupada’s disciples were stunned by their spiritual master’s order to continue the disciplic succession as ritvik acaryas and they tried to re-phrase the question to get the answer they wanted to hear.

Satsvarupa: Then what is the relationship of that person [the ritvik acarya] who gives the initiation and the...

Prabhupada: He’s guru. He’s guru.

Here Prabhupada interrupts Satsvarupa because his disciple is talking nonsense. Satsvarupa refers to the ritvik acarya, “that person who gives the initiation,” but actually the ritvik acarya does not give the initiation. The initiation is given by the acarya (Prabhupada), who is the diksa guru. The ritvik is merely officiating on behalf of the acarya. Prabhupada immediately noted the inconsistency in his disciple’s question, interrupted Satsvarupa before he could finish, and said, “He [meaning the acarya] is guru. He’s guru.”

Satsvarupa: But he [the ritvik priest] does it on your behalf.

Prabhupada: Yes. That is formality. Because in my presence one should not become guru, so on my behalf, on my order. “*Amara ajñāya guru hana.*” Be actually guru, but by my order.

Satsvarupa appears to understand now that the ritvik priest does not accept disciples for himself. Prabhupada, it seems, replies that if he had a qualified disciple who was sufficiently advanced to become a bona fide diksa guru, that disciple would not initiate until Prabhupada had passed away (“that is formality”). The disciple would initiate his own disciples after the acarya passed away, but not without first receiving a direct order from the spiritual master: “Be actually guru, but by my order.”

Prabhupada is explaining philosophy; how a duly appointed uttama-adhikari diksa guru waits to initiate his own disciples until after his own spiritual master passes away. Although such an uttama-adhikari disciple has the sanction of Krsna and his spiritual master to initiate, he does not do so when his guru is

still present, so in the meantime he acts as ritvik acarya—initiating disciples on behalf of the diksa guru, who is Prabhupada.

But Prabhupada, during this conversation, does not appoint any disciples to become diksa gurus; he is merely explaining Gaudiya-Vaisnava philosophy.

Satsvarupa: So they may also be considered your disciples.

Prabhupada: Yes, they are [my] disciples. Why consider? Who?

Here Satsvarupa appears to understand that the new disciples will be Prabhupada's disciples, even after he passes. Prabhupada agrees, and starts to question his disciple, but, Tamal-Krsna, who seems none too happy with the direction of the conversation, interrupts.

Tamal-Krsna: No, he's asking that these ritvik-acaryas, they're officiating, giving diksa. . . . The people who they give diksa to, whose disciple are they?

Here Tamal-Krsna appears to be just as confused as Satsvarupa. They both seem to think the ritvik priest gives the diksa, but Prabhupada is trying to explain that the uttama-adhikari guru—the acarya: Prabhupada himself—gives the diksa, even though he may be thousands of miles away or even after having passed away from this mortal world.

Prabhupada: They're his disciple.

Tamal-Krsna: They're his disciple.

Prabhupada: Who is initiating. He is grand disciple.

Satsvarupa: Yes.

Tamal-Krsna: That's clear.

Although Tamal-Krsna says it's clear, in retrospect, he was just as confused as before. Here Prabhupada seems to be explaining that when one of his disciples achieves the perfection of the uttama-adhikari stage and begins to accept disciples, the new initiates become Prabhupada's grand disciples. But Tamal-Krsna does not understand that the ritvik acarya does not automatically become a diksa guru after the acarya passes. The

disciple must first receive the personal order from his spiritual master to become a diksa guru. If he does not receive the personal order, he must remain a ritvik representative. Otherwise, as Prabhupada said earlier, he becomes a “rascal guru.”

Satsvarupa: Then we have a question concern...

Prabhupada: When I order, “You become guru,” he becomes regular guru. That’s all. He becomes disciple of my disciple. That’s it. . . .

Here Prabhupada confirms again, that when a disciple reaches the *uttama-adhikari* stage and after his guru gives him the order, only then the disciple may become a diksa guru after the death of his spiritual master and begin initiating his own disciples, who become the grand disciples of Prabhupada.³¹

At this point in the conversation Satsvarupa asks questions about Bhaktivedanta Book Trust issues, which I will not quote in this essay. Then suddenly Prabhupada returns to the guru issue. It seems he wanted to stress a particular point to help his disciples understand the philosophy of guru.

Caitanya Mahaprabhu says, “*amara ajñāya guru hana.*” One can understand the order of Caitanya Mahaprabhu, he can become guru. Or one who understands his guru’s order, the same parampara, he can become guru. And therefore I shall select some of you.

At a superficial glance, it seems that Prabhupada is telling his disciples, “I shall select some of you [to] become guru.” This is what Satsvarupa, Tamal-Krsna, Kirtanananda and some others desperately wanted to hear. They wanted to hear Prabhupada tell them that he will select some of them to become guru, and after he passes, they will initiate their own disciples.

This interpretation might be plausible, but only if this passage is taken *completely out of context*. Remember, just a few minutes earlier at the beginning of this question and answer session, when Satsvarupa asked about “initiations in the future, particularly at that time when you’re no longer with us,” Prabhupada *clearly, plainly* and *deliberately* told his disciples, “I

**shall recommend some of you to act as officiating acaryas. . . .
Ritvik [acaryas], yes.”**

Could Prabhupada have changed his mind so quickly about such an important issue after only a few minutes of discussion? Could he have suddenly decided that his leading disciples had become completely pure *uttama-adhikari*, self-realized devotees free from material desires who were now qualified to become *diksa gurus* and initiate their own disciples? Considering all that had happened up to that point, the very idea is ludicrous. Who would possibly think that Prabhupada had changed his mind so abruptly?

Satsvarupa: That's all the questions.

Notice Satsvarupa's response. As soon as he heard Prabhupada say, "I shall select some of you [to] become guru," they got what they wanted to hear. Therefore Satsvarupa tries to end the question and answer session. But Prabhupada is not finished, and he continues the discussion.

Prabhupada: So there is no question of changing GBC.

Satsvarupa: No.

Prabhupada: Rather, one who is competent, he can be selected to act by the board of the GBC.

Tamal-Krsna: Of course, if someone has a falldown, just like in the past some GBC men have fallen down—

Prabhupada: He should be replaced.

Tamal-Krsna: Then he should be replaced. But that's a serious falldown, not some minor discrepancy.

Prabhupada: They [GBC] must be all ideal, acarya-like.

Here Prabhupada states that a GBC representative (or ritvik acarya, I might add) who falls down from his vows should be replaced. This will naturally cause a disturbance in the minds of the new initiates who received guidance and counsel from the ritvik acarya who had fallen away, but it should not have devastating effects because the new initiates understood from the beginning that they were receiving *diksa* from Prabhupada,

not the ritvik acarya. Their spiritual master, the uttama-adhikari diksa guru, would never fall down.

Prabhupada: In the beginning we have done [permitted unqualified men to serve as GBC leaders] for working [expanding ISKCON]. Now we should be very cautious. Anyone who is deviating, he can be replaced. ³²

Here we hear Prabhupada's explanation of why he kept so many unqualified men in positions of power for so long: to expand ISKCON. While he was present, he felt he could control these men and keep them from causing havoc, but after his passing, he wanted these errant disciples removed from their positions of power.

Unfortunately, during the May 28th conversation, the leading secretaries heard only what they wanted to hear: that Prabhupada would appoint some of them to become diksa gurus after his death and initiate new disciples, who would be Prabhupada's grand disciples. Soon after this discussion, a few of the most ambitious GBC secretaries began quietly discussing amongst themselves exactly how ISKCON should be managed after they became acaryas and began initiating their own disciples.

Prabhupada appoints eleven ritvik priests

Eventually, a backlog of disciples requesting initiation during Prabhupada's illness necessitated the official appointment of eleven "ritvik priests." The ritvik priests are not considered spiritual masters of the disciples; they are only representatives of the spiritual master.

Gurukripa Maharaja, the GBC representative for Hawaii, Japan and Hong Kong, who spent much of the summer of 1977 with Prabhupada in Vrindaban, explained:

In the beginning Srila Prabhupada did the diksa [initiation], the yajñá [fire sacrifice ceremony] and the name giving. As the numbers [of disciples] increased, he authorized [the] GBC, and senior sannyasis to pick names and chant on the beads, etc. In

1977 during the months of May, June, July, 1977, I was in Vrindaban with Srila Prabhupada, giving him his massage in his bed between one a.m. and mangal-aroti [early-morning worship ceremony for deities in the temple].

During the day, many letters would arrive. Satsvarupa Swami was the secretary and we decided that only letters that would give joy to Srila Prabhupada would be read, like numbers of books sold, etc. A maximum of five letters daily were read to Srila Prabhupada.

After some weeks like this, there were stacks and stacks of letters, all relating to initiation. Hundreds of people were panicking that Srila Prabhupada would leave the planet [pass away] before they were given initiation. At this time, this situation was brought before Srila Prabhupada in his room by Satsvarupa, Tamal, myself, and maybe some others.

Up until this time it was a very simple matter that we were doing the initiations, but we first had to ask permission. Srila Prabhupada *never* refused any recommendation from his senior men. And personally, I would sometimes argue with some GBC that they were giving it too easily. At this meeting, Srila Prabhupada basically said, “From here on, if you feel they are ready, then you may give the initiation on my behalf.”

I understood this for what it was, simply extending the authority a little further than it had been. Tamal-Krsna Swami began to say, “But who will do it? Which devotees will do this?” Srila Prabhupada said, “The nearest one will do it. Whoever is closest.” Tamal said, “Can Bhavananda do? Can Jayapataka do?” Thus these eleven names came out. ³³

Soon after his conversation with members of the GBC, Prabhupada officially appointed eleven senior disciples to act as ritvik (representative) for the acarya. Prabhupada’s secretary, Tamal-Krsna Goswami, explained in a July 9, 1977, letter:

Recently when all of the GBC members were with His Divine Grace in Vrindaban, Srila Prabhupada indicated that soon He would appoint some of His senior disciples to act as “ritvik”—representative of the acarya, for the purpose of performing initiations, both first initiation and second initiation. His Divine

Grace has so far given a list of eleven disciples who will act in that capacity:

**His Holiness Kirtanananda Swami
His Holiness Satsvarupa dasa Goswami
His Holiness Jayapataka Swami
His Holiness Tamal-Krsna Goswami
His Holiness Hrdayananda Goswami
His Holiness Bhavananda Goswami
His Holiness Hamsadutta Swami
His Holiness Ramesvara Swami
His Holiness Harikesa Swami
His Grace Bhagavan dasa Adhikari
His Grace Jayatirtha dasa Adhikari**

In the past, Temple Presidents have written to Srila Prabhupada recommending a particular devotee's initiation. Now that Srila Prabhupada has named these representatives, Temple Presidents may henceforward send recommendation for first and second initiation to whichever of these eleven representatives are nearest their temple.

After considering the recommendation, these representatives may accept the devotee as an initiated disciple of Srila Prabhupada by giving a spiritual name, or in the case of second initiation, by chanting on the Gayatri thread, just as Srila Prabhupada has done. The newly initiated devotees are disciples of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the above eleven senior devotees acting as His representative.

After the Temple President receives a letter from these representatives giving the spiritual name or the thread, he can perform the fire yajñá in the temple as was being done before. The name of a newly initiated disciple should be sent by the representative who has accepted him or her to Srila Prabhupada, to be included in His Divine Grace's "Initiated Disciples" book. ³⁴

It is important to note the use of the word "henceforward" in Prabhupada's July 9th letter, which indicates that the representatives Prabhupada appointed as ritvik priests would continue to act in that capacity as ritviks not just during Prabhupada's lifetime but after his death. In other words, Prabhupada indicated that the disciplic succession in ISKCON

should continue in perpetuity by ritvik representatives (siksa gurus) of the Founder-Acarya, not by diksa gurus.

This interpretation is supported by Prabhupada’s “Declaration of Will” (June 4, 1977) which states, “The system of management will continue as it is now and there is no need of any change.” Prabhupada had been initiating new disciples by ritvik representation for four years already (which will be discussed later), and there was “no need of any change” in the future after he passed away.

The day after Prabhupada signed the ritvik-authorization letter, Tamal-Krsna Swami admitted to Yasodanandan Swami ³⁵—the headmaster for the Vrindaban gurukula who was well known as an excellent pujari—that Prabhupada said the ritvik system would continue after his death. Yasodanandan Swami wrote down the July 10th conversation in his diary:

Tamal-Krsna: Yasoda, did you see this?

Yasodanandan: No. What is it?

Tamal-Krsna: This is signed by Prabhupada.

Tamal-Krsna showed Yasodanandan the July 9th letter and pointed to Srila Prabhupada’s signature on the left hand bottom corner. Yasodanandan read the entire letter and then asked Tamal-Krsna some questions:

Yasodanandan: What does all of this mean?

Tamal-Krsna: Devotees have been writing to Prabhupada asking for initiations, and now Prabhupada has named eleven ritviks who can initiate on his behalf. Prabhupada said that others can be added.

Yasodanandan: And when Prabhupada departs?

Tamal-Krsna: They’ll be ritviks. That’s what Prabhupada said. It’s all on tape. ³⁶

Ritvik system began as early as 1972

Prabhupada's July 9th letter was not the first time he had appointed disciples to officiate at initiation ceremonies as ritvik priests; he had been doing this for at least five years. As early as June 1972, Prabhupada had authorized Kirtanananda Swami—a senior disciple and the first sannyasi in ISKCON—to chant on new initiate's beads and officiate at the fire sacrifice at an initiation ceremony in Brooklyn, New York. Vaiyasaki dasa confirmed, "Kirtanananda chants on everyone's beads, authorized by Prabhupada to do so on his behalf. This is the first time someone other than Prabhupada chants on beads for new initiates." ³⁷

One year later in 1973, encouraged by Kirtanananda Swami's success, Prabhupada had begun training his other GBC secretaries to serve as ritvik priests by asking them to (1) approve candidates for initiation, (2) choose Sanskrit names for new initiates, (3) chant on new initiates' japa beads, and (4) officiate at fire sacrifices. One disciple, Ameyatma dasa, ³⁸ an ISKCON book distributor who also served at the First American Transcendental Exhibition (FATE) museum in Los Angeles, recalled:

I was given first initiation in 1973. Srila Prabhupada presided over the initiation, he handed us our beads. Karandhar was the GBC for Los Angeles (where the initiations took place) and was also the leading GBC man at the time. Karandhar told me details about that initiation that he did not share with everyone.

In 1973 when I was initiated Karandhar told me that he had chosen the names of the devotees, and not Srila Prabhupada. It was widely accepted that Srila Prabhupad had selected our names. But, Karandhar told me that he was being trained to perform ritvik [deputy priest] initiations, in which he, as well as other ritviks, would eventually perform the entire process, from making the final decisions who was qualified . . . to chanting on the beads . . . to selecting the devotee name, to actually performing the ceremonial sacrifice. This way, Srila Prabhupada could be totally free of the initiation process and it could be carried out by a system of ritviks. . . .

Srila Prabhupada set up a very well structured system by which all other training and guidance was carried out by the

GBC-system of management. This way, the system was able to function while he was physically present, but at the same time physically removed (he may have been in Hawaii translating, and through this structure he was still accepting disciples via a full ritvik system all over the world). The system he set up did not require his physical presence or on-going input. From the selection and qualification process to the training and guidance to the performance of the ceremonies, he had set up a system that did all this for him without the need for his physical involvement at all.

That is unique. There is no question. This system is unique in the history of our sampradaya. Once that system was set up, in place and fully tested and running smoothly, it no longer needed his vapu [personal] presence to sustain it. It could go on functioning in the way he set it up for years and years, 10,000 years, or even 10 billion years.

The fact that no other acarya in the past has done this does not make it un-bona fide. . . . Srila Prabhupada . . . has chosen to be very merciful to the fallen souls of this age. He worked hard at setting up an elaborate system that he fully tested out. A system by which all training, guidance was handled by the GBC-system of management, a system of selecting who was qualified, how to select candidates. A process for performing the initiations—all in proxy. All without needing his vapu presence. This no other acarya has done. But, Srila Prabhupad did. . . .

Srila Prabhupada wanted to encourage us as much as possible to become qualified acaryas, and if we can, this is best. But, he also provided the system of on-going ritvik so that it can be used should we not come up to the standard. Srila Prabhupada was humble. In one sense he did not put himself into that position of [creating the ritvik succession system by] his own desire. But, he was also practical, and was always willing to do the needful. So, he provided that an on-going ritvik system could be followed. ³⁹

Unfortunately, soon after Tamal-Krsna spoke to Yasodanandan, he changed his story: after July 10th he claimed that Prabhupada ordered that the eleven would serve as ritvik-acaryas only while Prabhupada lived. After his death, the eleven would be promoted

to diksa gurus. “In a tape-recorded conversation (the tape is . . . with the tape ministry),” Tamal-Krsna Goswami explained, “the GBC asked the question: In the absence of Srila Prabhupada what is the procedure for first and second and sannyasa initiations? And what is the relationship of the person who gives this initiation to the person he gives it to? Srila Prabhupada said he would appoint several devotees who shall perform initiation in the future, even after his disappearance. The disciples they accept shall be their disciples and Srila Prabhupada would be their grand spiritual master. . . . Srila Prabhupada clearly appointed eleven successors for giving initiation. . . . Everything is clearly documented, either by tape recordings or signed letters, so there is no room for any doubt whatsoever. Anyone who expresses doubt or disbelief is in ignorance of the facts.”⁴⁰

Tape recordings disappear

Not everyone, however, was free from doubt or disbelief, especially those who had been privy to conversations with Prabhupada in Vrindaban during the four months before his death. It was already unclear as to whether or not the ritvik system was meant to continue after Prabhupada passed away.

According to Gauridasa-Pandit (Gary Lund),⁴¹ a junior disciple who rendered personal service to Prabhupada in Vrindaban during the summer of 1977, Prabhupada spoke extensively with his personal secretary Tamal-Krsna Goswami in the garden behind the Krsna-Balaram Mandir about the ritvik system for initiating new disciples after his death, but the recordings of those conversations were somehow lost (or hidden or destroyed). Gauridasa-Pandit recalled:

The dictation, signing and discussing of the July 9th newsletter was done in the garden. That was the routine; the secretary would read letters to Srila Prabhupada in the late mornings in the garden. Srila Prabhupada would dictate a response to the letters and the secretary would type them up and later read them to Prabhupada for his approval and signature before mailing. There was only Tamal-Krsna Goswami and myself during these times. I

was fanning Prabhupada with the camara [a yak-tail whisk used to keep away flies] all the time he spent in the garden. . . .

My duty was to move his recording equipment around to where he was and always make sure his conversations were recorded. Tamal-Krsna Goswami did that most of the time but I'd do it if he wasn't around. And yes, there are quite a few tapes missing that I know were made; especially right after July 9th when more questions were asked.

For example: [I remember] Tamal-Krsna Goswami asked Prabhupada if there could be more ritviks appointed in the future and Srila Prabhupada said, "Yes, the GBC can elect at Mayapur."

Tamal-Krsna Goswami: "What if a ritvik falls down?"

Prabhupada said: "Then the GBC can remove."

Tamal-Krsna Goswami: "Should we put vyasasanas [elevated thrones] in the temples for the ritviks?"

Prabhupada said: "No, that would create enmity among my disciples."

These conversations were recorded but the tapes are not available from the archives. ⁴²

The number of missing tapes is substantial. Between July 9 and October 2, 1977, there are only fifteen tapes in the archive. Even more astounding is that between August 18 and October 1, there are no tapes in the archive. What could have happened to all these tapes?

Gauridasa-Pandit, a young and enthusiastic devotee, was excited to hear Prabhupada's instructions to Tamal-Krsna regarding the perpetual establishment of the ritvik initiation system in ISKCON, and when he saw his friends back at the ashram he repeated what he heard his spiritual master say. He did not, however, anticipate the anger directed toward him when Tamal-Krsna heard that he had talked about Prabhupada's conversations about the ritvik system with others. Gauridasa-Pandit recalled:

After I informed Yasodanandan about Srila Prabhupada's instructions, Tamal-Krsna Goswami called me into his office and

said: “I told you never to say anything about what Prabhupada says to anybody without clearing it through me first! You’ll never do anything for Prabhupada again!” He told me to “get out.” I was devastated! He had the authority to “fire me” and he did. I went to my room and lamented. Upendra Prabhu came to see me and tried to encourage me. He said he was working on Tamal-Krsna Goswami to try to get me back.

The next day Upendra returned and said Tamal-Krsna Goswami didn’t realize how much service I was actually doing, and they needed me back. I was going to get another chance. It was one of the happiest days of my life! I relished my service even more after almost losing it. ⁴³

Other disciples also felt that inquiry about the ritvik system had been stifled by Tamal-Krsna. As Prabhupada’s personal secretary, Tamal-Krsna controlled who got to see Prabhupada and he was not always willing to allow certain people to speak to Prabhupada. Yasodanandan witnessed a conversation between leading GBC members which he recorded in his diary:

Gurukrpa to Bhagavan: Why don’t we go and ask Prabhupada what he means by this ritvik acarya thing? How is it supposed to work? Can anyone else do this besides the eleven named in the letter? What is the GBC’s role in all of this? Let’s go and ask him.

Bhagavan dasa to Tamal-Krsna: Let’s go and see Prabhupada and clarify this ritvik acarya thing.

Tamal-Krsna to Gurukrpa: Prabhupada is not well. Besides, I think he’s busy. Let’s not disturb him with this. It’s clear anyway.

44

A wolf in sheep’s clothing

It seems that Tamal-Krsna Goswami attempted to silence Gauridasa-Pandit and stifle discussion amongst others regarding Prabhupada’s instructions about initiations in the future. He had hidden (and perhaps destroyed) the tape recordings of important conversations (some which Gauridasa-Pandit overheard while he fanned his master in the garden) during which Prabhupada

described how he wanted the disciplic succession to continue by ritvik representation after his death.

Was Prabhupada’s secretary, Tamal-Krsna, a leading member of the conspiracy to take over ISKCON and install themselves as Prabhupada’s successors? Actually, Tamal-Krsna had a long history of wanting to be Prabhupada’s successor, years even before Prabhupada passed away.

Naranarayan dasa Visvakarma (Nathan Zakheim)—who was initiated in San Francisco in 1968 ⁴⁵ (five months after Tamal-Krsna)—described Tamal-Krsna’s all-consuming “manic fervor” to become Prabhupada’s successor:

I knew Tamal extremely well from the very early days of the movement onward. . . . From the very beginning, he wanted to be Srila Prabhupada’s *only* guru successor. . . . Tamal took me aside in 1969, and said, “Srila Prabhupada has said that there are many stars, but I want a *moon!*” Tamal said to me with manic fervor: “*I am that moon!*”

The problem is, that Srila Prabhupada never recognized Tamal as any sort of moon and Tamal could not reconcile his own self-perception with the idea that Srila Prabhupada certainly did not see him as his sole successor as acarya after Srila Prabhupada. ⁴⁶

Ameyatma dasa also claimed that Tamal-Krsna wanted to be the next acarya:

Back in 1975 I shared an office with Karandhar. . . . One day Tamal-Krsna came in and began talking with Karandhar. . . . [Tamal-Krsna] told Karandhar that he had a big plan—a big, big, big plan—but he could not execute [it] by himself. He needed the help of someone else, someone who was a strong person: a leader. He wanted Karandhar to join him. He said if he can carry out his plan, Srila Prabhupada will be so pleased. He said that he and the person who does this with him would become Srila Prabhupada’s favorite disciples.

He asked Karandhar to speak with him, in private, about this, and looked at me and asked if I could leave the room. Karandhar asked me to go into the back room, which I did, and they closed the door. Tamal-Krsna then began speaking very softly, so I could not overhear.

Afterward I asked Karandhar what it was all about. Karandhar told me that Tamal-Krsna was extremely motivated, extremely egotistical. Karandhar said he told Tamal-Krsna he wanted nothing to do with the big, big plan. Karandhar would not tell me what the plan was; he said he promised Tamal-Krsna he would not [tell anyone], but Karandhar said Tamal-Krsna was mad. . . .

Mad in the sense of someone who was possessed—who had a strong drive, a big ego—and Karandhar said that Tamal-Krsna wants to become the next acarya. He wants to make it so that when Srila Prabhupada leaves this world, Tamal-Krsna will become the next acarya. ⁴⁷

Tamal-Krsna's unfulfilled ambition to become Prabhupada's successor became such a heavy psychological burden that it eventually manifested itself in unbearable emotional angst, vicious anger and ultimately madness. As Karandhar indicated to Ameyatma, "Tamal-Krsna is mad." In a moment of sanity, Tamal-Krsna himself admitted, "When I was temple president in L. A., I used to beat the hell out of people. That's why I was the king of the heap there." ⁴⁸

However, unbridled ambition, envy and uncontrolled anger are hardly symptoms of an advanced devotee; they are symptoms of a very imbalanced person. Krsna reminds us, "From anger, delusion arises, and from delusion bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost, one falls down again into the material pool." (*Bhagavad-gita* 2.63)

Unfortunately, it would be only a matter of time until Tamal-Krsna's unfulfilled zeal and festering anger forced him to lose his intelligence, push Prabhupada aside and take his master's seat. "In India," Prabhupada said, "we have a saying: *guru-mara-vidya*. You sit opposite a guru, learn from him everything, then you kill him, move his dead body aside, and sit in his place, and then you become the guru." ^{49 50}

Is it any wonder that Prabhupada sometimes lamented about the neophyte or mixed status of his "most-advanced" disciples? "Krsna did not send me any first-class men,"

Prabhupada said. “He sent me only second and third-class men.”

51

Prabhupada passes

As Prabhupada’s physical condition deteriorated he feared disaster would come to ISKCON after his death and begged his disciples to reassure him that they would remain faithful to his written instructions. Only this promise, he said, would guarantee him a peaceful death. “In this condition, even I cannot move my body on the bed. Only chance you should give me—let me die little peacefully, without any anxiety,” Prabhupada requested Tamal-Krsna, Hari-Sauri, Brahmananda, Upendra and others. “I have given in writing everything, whatever you wanted—my will, my executive power, everything. Disaster will happen if you cannot manage it.” ⁵²

Three weeks later, Prabhupada’s anxiety for the future of his society had not diminished. “That I am thinking, that such a big society, the aims and object may be dismantled,” he said. “I am thinking from that vision.” ⁵³

One of Prabhupada’s godbrothers, Bhakti-Vaibhava Puri Maharaja (1913- 2009), ⁵⁴ **the founder of Sri Caitanya-Candra Ashram in Puri, visited Prabhupada at the Krsna-Balaram Mandir and (speaking in Bengali) shared his deep misgivings about the eleven ritvik acaryas and the future of ISKCON. Years later, B. V. Puri Maharaja remembered:**

Here [in Vrindaban late in 1977] when Prabhupada was lying [in bed], I said, “Maharaja, you should survive ten more years.”

“How can I survive?” [Prabhupada replied.] “You see my pulse.” I saw [his] pulse was not beating. “Then how can you say that I must stay ten [more] years? I cannot stay ten years.”

[I answered], “Unless you stay there will be no peace and unity among these Westerners. They are very strong heads. They won’t unite. After your demise, the institution will be nowhere. At least you must put them in line. They should have some tradition.

In India there is some tradition, but in Western countries no tradition.”

Then he said, “What to do? Everything [is] Krsna’s will.” And he passed away.

Previous to that occasion I asked, “Maharaja you have established eleven gurus. There is no harmony. This can be no harmony. Guru must be one. You have selected eleven gurus.”

He said, “I have not selected [eleven gurus]. I have appointed eleven ritviks.” I said, “Ritviks, as long as you survive, they are ritviks. After your demise they are gurus. And unless guru blesses a disciple to sit on the throne and continue this service, he cannot survive. He cannot sit then. He must go down. And that sure it is happening now.” Then he said, “What shall I do now? What shall I do now?” . . .

Then he stopped discussion. So it was not under his control in the last moment. ^{55 56}

The founder and acarya of the International Society of Krsna Consciousness, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, took his last breath surrounded by his disciples on Monday, November 14 in Vrindaban, India, at the age of 81. “Prabhupada spent his last three days with his disciples at the Krsna-Balarama Mandir, and the last day he didn’t speak. His only words were in the morning, when the kaviraja [doctor] asked him to drink some juice and he replied, ‘*meri kuch iccha nahin*’ (‘I have no desire’),” remembers Giriraja Swami (Glenn Phillip Teton), the president of ISKCON Bombay who became a sannyasi (a renounced mendicant) in 1978. “After that, Prabhupada didn’t speak. He was in a completely internal state of consciousness, and the devotees surrounded him with kirtan. And for the last few hours, in the afternoon, the leaders opened up the doors to everyone. Young, old, children, men, women—all were allowed to be in the room with Srila Prabhupada and reciprocate love with him. Then, at about 7:26 p.m., his tongue and mouth moved—‘Hare Krsna’—and he left.” ⁵⁷

Subhananda dasa (Steven Gelberg), a BBT scholar who had written introductions to some of Prabhupada’s books, recalled the “monumental sadness” experienced by all who were

personally present when their spiritual master took his last breath. Subhananda wrote in his journal, “For several minutes there was complete pandemonium. Devotees lay on the ground sobbing or, blinded by tears, wandered aimlessly, wailing and crying unashamedly, falling into walls and into each other. The sadness was monumental, but there was also exultation. We’d witnessed, after all, a cosmic drama. To the loving eye of a disciple, Prabhupada had left his mortal body in a blaze of glory; a triumphant warrior exiting the battlefield, a sage departing to distant lands.” ⁵⁸

***The New York Times* and other major newspapers published Prabhupada’s obituary, and *Yoga Journal* and *Rolling Stone* ran heartfelt condolences. Clearly, many loved him and he would be sorely missed. Yet even as Prabhupada’s followers mourned their loss, some of his leading disciples had already begun to plan how they were going to become spiritual masters themselves.** ⁵⁹

The zonal acarya system established

During the March 1978 GBC meetings, four months after Prabhupada’s death, the GBC officially recognized the eleven senior disciples named by Prabhupada as ritvik acaryas in his July 9th, 1977 letter, as diksa gurus and thus established the ISKCON zonal acarya era. The zonal acaryas claimed that they had been miraculously promoted from the neophyte or mixed stage of devotional service to the uttama-adhikari stage by the inconceivable power of Prabhupada (they had that much faith in Prabhupada).

The eleven entrusted their godbrothers with the solemn and sacred duty of teaching their new disciples how to worship them properly, as Prabhupada had been worshiped. Novices were taught that their gurus were as good as God; that their spiritual master’s words were equal to God’s words. The authority of the eleven gurus over their disciples (and their godbrothers, for the most part) was absolute. They were considered infallible and beyond criticism.

Large and ornate vyasasanas (elevated thrones) were installed in Prabhupada's temples for the new self-appointed acaryas. They were offered elaborate daily guru-puja (a ceremony to honor the guru) with incense, lamps and flowers by both their disciples and godbrothers. Special pranam mantras (personalized Sanskrit verses that glorify an individual acarya) were composed for them and were sung in public. They received honorary titles like Visnupada, Gurupada, Acaryapada, Acaryadeva, Tirthapada, and Bhaktipada to indicate that they now represented the lotus feet of Visnu or had taken the position of Visnu to "deliver their disciples from the material world."

In essence, the self-appointed gurus conveniently assumed that everything that Prabhupada had taught about bona fide acaryas were applicable to themselves. They took to heart Prabhupada's instructions, such as, "It is recommended in authoritative scriptures that the spiritual master should be worshiped on the level of the Supreme Personality of Godhead."

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Each zonal acarya ruled his kingdom with an iron fist. Because they were pretenders who achieved their power and positions by deception and cheating, they were extremely fearful of skeptics. Dissenters were not tolerated. Some were beaten bloody, one was murdered. All were shunned and forced to leave ISKCON. One zonal acarya boasted, "In my zone, it's simple. It is my way or the highway." ⁶¹

However, due to ambition, which blinded them from recognizing their own neophyte status, the eleven had foolishly erected a house built upon sand; it was doomed to fall. The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

A handful of astute disciples recognized early on that the zonal acaryas were frauds, but their numbers were too few to defeat the menace. Yasodanandan explained:

The eleven zonal acaryas were frauds. They were never appointed by Prabhupada as acaryas or diksa gurus. While Srila Prabhupada was here there was no public announcement that he

had appointed eleven acaryas or diksa gurus. Immediately after Prabhupada passed away, there was no public announcement that these eleven had been appointed by Prabhupada as acaryas or diksa gurus. Only at the March 1978 Mayapur meetings, they announced that they had been appointed as acaryas and diksa gurus.

If Prabhupada had actually appointed them, Prabhupada would have announced their appointment during his manifested presence, or they would have announced it shortly after his passing. But no, they waited four months to announce their appointments. Why? Because Prabhupada never appointed them.

During those four months (and probably even before Prabhupada departed) they were colluding between themselves. Not the entire GBC; only select members were involved in this conspiracy. It was a conspiracy of silence. They knew what they wanted to do, but they kept quiet about it until the March 1978 GBC meetings. ⁶²

Although Tamal-Krsna (in collaboration with Kirtanananda Swami) ⁶³ was obviously the mastermind behind the conspiracy that allowed the eleven to take over ISKCON, in 1978 none of the eleven refused their so-called appointments as *uttama-adhikari diksa-guru zonal acaryas*.

The naked emperors

The eleven were, in many respects, similar to the main character in the Hans Christian Andersen tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in which a Medieval king, deceived by two shrewd and dishonest traveling cloth merchants, boldly paraded throughout his capital city completely naked while the gullible citizens pretended that he was wearing invisible royal garments.

The ten-year-long reign of the naked ISKCON emperors nearly destroyed the society (thousands of devotees defected or were forced out of ISKCON), and it took years of fighting by the temple presidents, from 1984 to 1987, to finally knock the pretenders down a few notches and restrain their atrocities.

But even today, according to Prabhupada's final instructions to establish the ritvik system in perpetuity, the current ISKCON guru system is based on a falsehood: that Prabhupada gave the order to the GBC to authorize (rubber stamp) diksa gurus. No order to grant (or recognize) diksa was given and Prabhupada's actual order (to continue the disciplic succession by ritvik representation) had been suppressed and ignored.

Many of the ritviks may have been blissfully ignorant of Tamal-Krsna Goswami's deception; which he probably kept only between himself and Kirtanananda Swami (who was also possessed by the same driving ambition to become Prabhupada's successor). The other nine ritviks might have actually believed that Prabhupada had appointed them to serve as diksa gurus after his death. But thinking that they had, by the grace of Prabhupada, advanced to the perfect stage of uttama-adhikari? That is a far stretch of the imagination and strong evidence that they were all blinded by illusion.

Without Tamal-Krsna's all-consuming ambition and shrewd duplicity, the zonal-acarya take over probably would not have happened. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Prabhupada's disciple Tamal-Krsna betrayed his master in the garden of the Krsna-Balaram Mandir, just as Jesus Christ's disciple Judas Iscariot betrayed his master in the garden of Gethsemane. Every great guru, it seems, has a powerful disciple who betrays him and causes havoc.

Suppressing Prabhupada's instructions about the continuation of ISKCON's disciplic succession in perpetuity by ritvik representation can certainly be considered treason. If the rest of ISKCON had been aware of Prabhupada's final order and followed it, they could have avoided many of the abuses, falldowns, tragedies and schisms that caused so much grief to thousands.

What if?

Imagine if the eleven ritvik priests had understood and implemented Prabhupada's final order to continue serving as ritviks after his death. They wouldn't have sat on elevated seats, they wouldn't have demanded worship from their godbrothers, they wouldn't have had to consult with B. R. Sridhara Maharaja, they wouldn't have formed the acarya board which dominated GBC meetings for a decade, and, in all probability, they would have avoided many of the temptations that caused so many to fall down. Prabhupada would have remained the center of everyone's lives.

Of course, new devotees who accepted the ritviks as their siksa gurus would probably have loved and adored them, and why not? The ritvik acaryas deliver Prabhupada and Krsna to the novices. But if one of the ritviks deviated and was ejected from ISKCON by the GBC, the new initiates would have not been permanently demoralized because they knew from the beginning that their actual diksa guru was His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

Even if some of Prabhupada's disciples achieved the perfection of the uttama-adhikari stage, as submissive disciples they would still have obeyed their spiritual master by following the system he established. There would be no loss if they officiated at initiation ceremonies as ritvik acaryas; new disciples would still be connected to Lord Krsna through the disciplic succession and they would be more secure in their connection.

Yes, ritvik representation after the death of the acarya had never been done in the history of Gaudiya-Vaishnavism, but Prabhupada taught that the bona fide acarya can make adjustments to fit the need of the times. "The acarya knows how to adjust things, at the same time keep pace with the spiritual interest," he explained. "That is acarya. It is not that the same thing to be applied everywhere. He is eager to engage actually the people in the real benefit of life, but the means may be different." ⁶⁴

In the end, it seems that the perpetual ritvik acarya system would have been a win-win situation for mature devotees and novices alike, given that Prabhupada had the potency to create and authorize a system of ritvik initiation. What's more, the system appeared to work perfectly well in ISKCON from 1972 to 1977, and the system has been used successfully for the last sixteen years by the ritvik acaryas of ISKCON Bangalore in Karnataka, which today consists of twenty temples and preaching centers in South India.

The ritvik system also works for members of the Hare Krsna Society ⁶⁵ in Los Angeles, California; Sedro Woolley, Washington; Pahoa, Hawaii; Vancouver, British Columbia; Montreal, Quebec; Toronto, Ontario; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Port Dickson, Malaysia; Fiji and elsewhere, to this day. Even within ISKCON, educated and dedicated supporters of the ritvik system are demanding change, such as the members and supporters of the ISKCON Reform Movement (IRM). ⁶⁶ It is my conclusion that the ritvik system, if implemented in ISKCON, could work for the next 10,000 years.

About the author

Henry Doktorski, III (Hrisikesa dasa) was a disciple of the zonal acarya Kirtanananda Swami and lived at New Vrindaban from 1978 until 1993. He has written dozens of articles which were published by the Brijabasi Spirit (1982-2014) and the Sampradaya Sun (2006-2013). His articles have also appeared in ISKCON News, Dandavats.com, ISKCON.net, Srila Prabhupada's ISKCON Spiritnet, El Tambor Rugiente, and elsewhere.

Doktorski co-wrote the chapter "Guru Authority, Religious Innovation, and the Decline of New Vrindaban" for the book *Homegrown Gurus: From Hinduism in America to American Hinduism* (SUNY Press: 2013), with the scholar of ISKCON, E. Burke Rochford, Jr. He is currently working on a history of the zonal acarya era in ISKCON and a biography of Kirtanananda Swami.

Endnotes

- ¹ Prabhupada, *Caitanya-caritamrita* (Adi 12.10), purport.
- ² Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta, Volume 6: Uniting Two Worlds*, 325.
- ³ Prabhupada, letter to Suci, Bombay (November 4, 1975).
- ⁴ Hamsadutta was initiated in New York City in May 1967.
- ⁵ Prabhupada, cited by Hamsadutta Swami, “Detailed reply to specific points of the letter addressed to all GBC, dated 16 September, 1978, from Giriraja Swami” (October 25, 1978).
- ⁶ Los Angeles interview with reporter (June 4, 1976).
- ⁷ Conversation with *Newsweek* reporter (July 14, 1976).
- ⁸ Prabhupada, room conversation (November 2, 1977), cited in “Srila Prabhupada Speaks Out: His Final Instructions,” *Back to Godhead*, vol. 13, nos. 1-2 (1978), 25.
- ⁹ Prabhupada, *Srimad-bhagavatam* (1.12.17), purport.
- ¹⁰ Prabhupada, *Nectar of Instruction*, 5, purport.
- ¹¹ Prabhupada also admitted that in emergency situations a neophyte or madhyama-adhikari can “accept disciples,” but their guidance would be “insufficient” and their disciples “cannot advance very well.”—*Srimad-bhagavatam* (11.2.48), purport.
- ¹² Prabhupada, *Nectar of Instruction*, (5).
- ¹³ Prabhupada, *Caitanya-caritamrita*, (Madhya 24.330), purport.
- ¹⁴ Caitanya Mahaprabhu, *Siksastakam Prayers*, 3.
- ¹⁵ See *Caitanya-caritamrita* (Madhya 13.80).
- ¹⁶ Prabhupada, *Caitanya-caritamrita* class, Mayapur (March 28, 1975).
- ¹⁷ Prabhupada, Boston (April 25, 1969).
- ¹⁸ Prabhupada, morning walk, Bombay (March 23, 1974).
- ¹⁹ Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita* class, Nairobi (October 28, 1975).
- ²⁰ Prabhupada, *Srimad-bhagavatam* class, Mayapur (February 27, 1977).
- ²¹ Prabhupada, lecture, London (August 3, 1973).
- ²² Prabhupada, arrival speech, Vrindaban (May 17, 1977).
- ²³ Room conversation, Bombay (April 22, 1977).
- ²⁴ Prabhupada in Vrindaban (May 1977), cited by Bhavananda Goswami, Room Conversation with Prabhupada in Vrindaban (October 26, 1977).
- ²⁵ Bhavananda Goswami, room conversation with Prabhupada in Vrindaban (October 26, 1977).
- ²⁶ Prabhupada, letter to Kirtanananda (October, 18, 1973).
- ²⁷ Ravindra-Svarupa, “Pillars of Success: The Principles and Practices of Reform in ISKCON,” *ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (December 1999), http://content.iskcon.org/icj/7_2/72rsd.html (accessed March 21, 2015).
- ²⁸ Tamal-Krsna Goswami mentions the names of seven GBC members who spoke with Prabhupada (see letter to Upananda [December 13, 1978]). The

names of the other seven are found in the VedaBase 2014.1 transcript of the May 28th, 1977 conversation.

²⁹ Prabhupada explained, “Initiation is a formality. If you are serious, that is real initiation. . . . My touch is simply a formality. It is your determination. That is initiation.” (Prabhupada, cited in “The Search for the Divine,” *Back to Godhead*, No. 49.)

³⁰ Puranjana dasa, who served as manager of the Spanish BBT in 1976, explained, “What happened in brief in regards to the May 28th appointment tape was: it was not being circulated at all. I got a few sentences on a paper in 1979 after badgering Vicitravirya dasa in England, but it was barely more than a little snippet. Then in 1984 Sulocana dasa got a copy of the ‘appointment tape’ by bribing a member of the archives. We listened to it together, over and over, and thought it had been spliced due to many strange clicks, changes in background noises, changes in voice volume levels, and the general chaotic nature of the conversation.” Puranjana dasa, “May 28th Appointment Tape” (April 15, 2012), <http://prabhupadavision.com/2012/04/may-28th-appointment-tape/> (accessed September 4, 2015).

³¹ In this passage Prabhupada states, “He becomes regular guru. That’s all.” But what exactly is a “regular guru?” In the entire VedaBase this is the only time when Prabhupada mentions “regular guru.”

Some of Prabhupada’s disciples interpret “regular guru” to simply mean “siksa guru,” and others interpret it to mean a madhyama-adhikari guru who has not yet achieved perfection and therefore must follow the regulations (regular refers to regulation) of vaidhi-sadhana bhakti: devotional service according to scriptural rules and regulations. The uttama-adhikari, on the other hand, is situated on the higher stage of raganuga-sadhana bhakti, which is devotional service inspired by spontaneous love of the Lord in one of five rasa (flavors), at which stage the devotee may disregard the rules and regulations.

In the author’s opinion, whatever the correct definition of “regular guru” may be doesn’t change any of the points which Prabhupada made during the May 28th, 1977 conversation.

³² GBC Meets with Srila Prabhupada (May 28, 1977), Vrindaban.

³³ “Gurukrpa Speaks on ISKCON History,” <http://Krsna.org/gurukrpa-speaks-on-iskcon-history/> (accessed April 27, 2015).

³⁴ Tamal-Krsna Goswami, letter to: All G. B. C., All Temple Presidents, Vrindaban (July 9, 1977).

³⁵ Yasodanandan was initiated in New York in August 1969.

³⁶ Conversation between Tamal-Krsna and Yasodanandan Swami, cited by Yasodanandan dasa, “The Ritvik System: Yet More Evidence,” *Vedic Village Review*, No. 11 (December 1989).

³⁷ Vaiyasaki dasa, *Radha-Damodara Vilasa*, 507.

³⁸ Ameyatma dasa was initiated in Los Angeles in December 1973.

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- ³⁹ Ameyatma dasa, “ISKCON’s System Of Management: There Is No Need Of Any Changes” (June 21, 2004), <http://www.harekrsna.org/pada/documents/nochange.htm> (accessed August 27, 2015).
- ⁴⁰ Tamal-Krsna Goswami, letter to Upananda (December 13, 1978).
- ⁴¹ Gauridasa-Pandit was initiated in Chicago in July 1975.
- ⁴² Gauridasa-Pandit, e-mail to Ameyatma Prabhu and All (May 14, 2009), “Gauridasa-Pandit Dasa: There are quite a few tapes missing.” <http://prabhupadanugas.blogspot.com/2011/12/gauridasa-pandita-dasathere-are-quite.html> (accessed August 4, 2015).
- ⁴³ Gauridasa-Pandit, “On My Behalf: Srila Prabhupada’s Initiation System,” <http://www.harekrsna.org/gurupoison/support/gauridas.htm> (accessed August 21, 2015).
- ⁴⁴ Conversation between Gurukrpa Swami, Bhagavan dasa, Yasodanandan Swami and Tamal-Krsna Swami just outside the Krsna-Balaram Temple courtyard (late July, 1977).
- ⁴⁵ Naranarayana dasa was initiated in San Francisco on September 24, 1968.
- ⁴⁶ Naranarayana dasa Visvakarma, Facebook post (December 25, 2014).
- ⁴⁷ Ameyatma dasa, e-mail to Gauridasa Pandit (May 14, 2009).
- ⁴⁸ Tamal-Krsna Goswami, “Topanga Canyon Pyramid House Talks” (December 3, 1980), <http://www.harekrsna.org/gbc/themes/topanga.htm> (accessed September 7, 2015).
- ⁴⁹ Prabhupada, cited by Mukunda Goswami, *Miracle on Second Avenue: Part One, New York—the Bowery Swami*.
- ⁵⁰ Evidence has been discovered that suggests that Tamal-Krsna may have actually administered poison to Prabhupada during his last days to hasten his spiritual master’s death.
- ⁵¹ Prabhupada, cited by Ravindra-Svarupa dasa, “Cleaning House and Cleaning Hearts: Reform and Renewal in ISKCON,” *ISKCON Communications Journal*, no. 2.1 (January/June 1994).
- ⁵² Prabhupada, room conversation, Vrindaban, India (October 2, 1977).
- ⁵³ Prabhupada, room conversation, Vrindaban, India (October 26, 1977).
- ⁵⁴ “Srila Bhakti-Vaibhava Puri Goswami Maharaja,” <http://purimaharaj.com/pages/GuruMaharaj.htm> (accessed September 18, 2015).
- ⁵⁵ Puri Maharaja, cited in “Puri Maharaja Confirms Srila Prabhupada’s Ritvik Order,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oET00KzBRk> (published October 23, 2013) (accessed September 18, 2015).
- ⁵⁶ The full transcript of Puri Maharaja’s talk, cited by Balarama dasa, “If Base Is Wrong, All Is Wrong,” can be found at <http://www.prabhupadanugas.eu/news/?p=43961#comments> (accessed September 18, 2015).

⁵⁷ Giriraja Swami, lecture “Srila Prabhupada’s Disappearance Day,” Mayapur, India (November 14, 2007), published at <http://www.dandavats.com/?p=7812>, accessed on October 26, 2009.

⁵⁸ Subhananda dasa, cited by Nori Muster, *Betrayal of the Spirit* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana: 1997), 7.

⁵⁹ Some claim that Prabhupada was murdered (poisoned) by his senior disciples. See “Someone has poisoned me,” <http://www.iskcon-truth.com/poison/prabhupada-poisoned-overview.html> (accessed July 10, 2015).

⁶⁰ Prabhupada, *Krsna Book*, vol. 2.

⁶¹ Bhagavan Maharaja in a conversation with Tamal-Krishna Goswami, cited by Yasodanandan Swami in his diary (August 1978).

⁶² Yasodanandana dasa, telephone conversation with the author (July 19, 2015).

⁶³ Tamal-Krsna, during a 1978 conversation with Gauridasa-Pandit, implicated Kirtanananda Swami in the plot which (1) suppressed Prabhupada’s conversations about continuing the ritvik acarya system of initiation for perpetuity and (2) claimed that Prabhupada had appointed the eleven as diksa gurus. See Gauridasa-Pandit, “On My Behalf: Srila Prabhupada’s Initiation System,” <http://www.harekrsna.org/gurupoison/support/gauridas.htm> (accessed August 21, 2015).

⁶⁴ Prabhupada, *Srimad-bhagavatam* lecture, Auckland (February 20, 1973).

⁶⁵ The Hare Krsna Society website can be found at <http://krishnaconsciousnessmovement.com/index.php> (accessed September 4, 2015).

⁶⁶ The ISKCON Reform Movement website can be found at <http://www.iskconirm.com> (accessed September 4, 2015).