

A Critical Evaluation of ISKCON's Initiation System

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As a developing spiritual movement, ISKCON faces many challenges; among the most crucial, perhaps, is how to continue the disciplic succession, the line of spiritual masters who initiate devotees. The movement's leadership began wrestling with this issue in 1977, during the departure of Śrīla Prabhupāda, ISKCON's founder-*ācārya*. What has been practiced from 1978 onward has produced numerous contentious issues and conflicting groups. For example, the leaders in India now threaten ISKCON with a schism because they reject the idea of officially approved Vaiṣṇavī (female) *dīkṣā-gurus*. This article explores the problems of implementing guru-ship by historically examining how ISKCON tackled them and developed a *dīkṣā-guru* system that controls and authorizes initiating gurus. I look at how the broader Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava tradition approaches initiations, specifically in reference to its scriptures. Then I discuss my own experience as an ISKCON leader, which led me to question ISKCON's guru-approval system and become part of a discussion group seeking to reform it. So far, the group's efforts have culminated in a 2022 resolution by ISKCON's Governing Body Commission (GBC) to review and elucidate the system's rationale.

I contribute to this initiative as a member of a new subcommittee commissioned to undertake the review. Finally, I discuss a number of principles underlying an alternative approach to initiations.

The zonal-*ācāryas*

In the months preceding his departure, Śrīla Prabhupāda discussed the disciplic succession with his senior disciples. With his health deteriorating, he deputed eleven leaders to initiate new disciples on his behalf. This became known as the *ṛtvik* system, named after the title of an officiating priest at Vedic rituals. It was clear then that disciples thus initiated were Śrīla Prabhupāda's disciples, but what would happen after his departure? Would new disciples continue to be his or those of the person doing initiations? Questioned on this point, Prabhupāda, in keeping with the tradition, replied that they would become "disciples of his disciples" (Conversation in Vrindavan, 28 May 1977). He had already given such instructions, for example, in his letter to Tuṣṭa Kṛṣṇa Dāsa (2 December 1975):

Keep trained up very rigidly, and then you are a 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 [*sic*] and spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness very widely. That will make me and Kṛṣṇa very happy.

There were various such instances when Śrīla Prabhupāda pointed out that it was simply a formality that prevented his followers from accepting disciples while their guru was present. Furthermore, throughout his books, lectures, and conversations, Prabhupāda often exhorted his followers to become spiritual masters. He frequently cited this verse from *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (2.7.128): "Instruct everyone to follow the orders of Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa

as they are given in the *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. In this way become a spiritual master and try to liberate everyone in this land.” Commenting elsewhere on this verse, he wrote:

There is no authority superior to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, and if we stick to this principle, we can become gurus. We don’t need to change our position to become a guru. All we have to do is follow in the disciplic succession stemming from Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Caitanya Mahāprabhu has advised: *āmāra ājñāya guru hañā tāra’ ei deśa* (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.7.128). Caitanya Mahāprabhu instructed people to learn from Him and then go teach people within their own villages. One may think, “I am illiterate and have no education. I was not born in a very high family. How can I become a guru?” Caitanya Mahāprabhu says that it is not very difficult. *Yāre dekha, tāre kaha ‘kṛṣṇa’-upadeśa*: “Simply speak whatever Kṛṣṇa speaks. Then you become a guru.”¹

Thus, based on all the evidence, it was concluded that Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted his disciples to become *dīkṣā-gurus* after his departure. Naturally, the first to assume this role were the eleven already existing *ṛtviks*. The GBC accepted that others could also become gurus, but these eleven were accorded a special status and were, as mentioned in a 1978 GBC resolution, even charged with selecting the candidates to become future gurus:²

16. The GBC will consider each year at Gour Poor-nima the appointment of new spiritual masters to be approved by a 3/4 vote. However, for 1978, no new spiritual masters shall be appointed other than the 11 selected by Srila Prabhupada.

17. A GBC committee will be formed consisting of GBC members who are initiating gurus. They will choose new gurus once per year in Mayapur. This is an amendment to resolution 16 of March 19, 1978, 9:30 a.m.

The eleven *ṛtviks* were senior leaders and were dispersed around the world, but apart from that, there were no other apparent reasons for their selection. Nor did Śrīla Prabhupāda explain why he chose them instead of other prominent leaders, so when he departed, these eleven *ṛtviks* became ISKCON's initiating gurus. The GBC divided the world into eleven zones in which only the eleven gurus could initiate newcomers to the movement. Hence, they became collectively known as the zonal-*ācāryas* ("*ācārya*" means "exemplary guru," though generally it refers to the head of a spiritual institution). During the first few years under this system, new devotees were obliged to accept the zonal-*ācārya* presiding over the area in which they joined and would have to relocate if they desired initiation from any other guru from another zone. Devotees could not accept a local leader as their guru. It took a few years for the GBC's committee of *ācāryas* to nominate and authorize the next three senior leaders to become *dīkṣā-gurus*.

The eleven putative *ācāryas*, viewed as Śrīla Prabhupāda's 'chosen ones,' were accepted as practically equal to him and worshiped on the same level (if not more lavishly on their birthdays). During the daily ceremony of guru worship conducted in ISKCON temples, the individual zonal-*ācārya* was honored — even if not physically present — along with Śrīla Prabhupāda, who previously was solely honored. It was assumed that the zonal-*ācāryas* must have special spiritual qualifications, and even their godbrothers and godsisters were expected to revere them.

Not surprisingly, from mid-1978 onward, this system was met with resistance, most notably through a letter written by Pradyumna Dāsa (Śrīla Prabhupāda's former Sanskrit editor). Pradyumna wrote to Satsvarūpa Dāsa Goswami, a zonal-*ācārya*:

At the time of Srila Prabhupada's disappearance, it was most clearly understood by all of us present that Srila Prabhupada MADE NO SUCCESSOR. Everyone admitted that fact and understood it clearly. Instead, the GBC was to jointly manage ALL affairs of ISKCON, just as had been the case previously. This was the same solution as desired by Om Visnupada Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, who also had not made any successor,

although his wishes were NOT followed. In addition to the GBC management, Srila Prabhupada also selected 11 somewhat advanced disciples to grant initiation to newcomers. However, it was never mentioned at any time by His Divine Grace that these 11 were to be known as ACARYAS. He simply instructed that they may now accept disciples. Otherwise, as it was understood and practiced at that time, there was NO SPECIAL POSITION given to these 11, either in the society as a whole or in relation to their Godbrothers. (7 August 1978)

Pradyumna's letter was disregarded and only resulted in his removal from his service of translating the remaining three cantos of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust edition of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. It was only in 1999 that he received an official apology from the GBC.³

The system with zonal-*ācāryas* continued, and they effectively became ISKCON's highest authorities. All were GBC members but were accorded particular respect, even occupying higher seats than their colleagues at the GBC's annual general meetings in Mayapur.⁴ They used honorific titles, their pictures were placed on altars, *praṇāma-mantras* (mantras for venerating the guru) were chanted to them during daily *kīrtanas*, and temples provided them with *vyāsāsanas* (seats of honor) reserved for them alone (another *vyāsāsana* was even reserved for a visiting zonal-*ācārya*).

I joined ISKCON in 1979 and was told that the local zonal-*ācārya* was an exalted, pure soul and a bona-fide guru capable of introducing me to God. As it transpired, within a couple of years he began experiencing difficulties in keeping his vows, and by 1982 he was suspended from initiating, along with another zonal-*ācārya*.⁵ Gradually the zonal-*ācārya* system was collapsing, and in the mid-1980s, a fifty-man committee of senior devotees organized their resistance to it. They stated their grievances during the GBC's 1986 annual meeting in Mayapur, which led to guru reforms in early 1987.

During the 1980s, the number of gurus expanded to around thirty. However, the prevailing conception persisted that they were exceptional personalities—indeed, almost equal to Prabhupāda. It seems that the die had been cast by the initial misreckoning of the eleven *ṛtviks* as Prabhupāda's chosen successors, picked for their

spiritual qualifications. The fact that they were slipping from their positions did little to dispel this notion. However, the GBC passed resolutions moderating the gurus' worship to prevent Prabhupāda's position from being diminished. Nevertheless, the gurus were still held in the highest possible esteem, and their extravagant Vyāsa-pūjā (birthday) ceremonies were attended by hundreds, or in the cases of a few, by thousands of disciples — even godsiblings — and consisted of eulogies, foot-bathing, elaborate public worship, and opulent feasts (first offered to the guru). Those were heady times.

Eventually it became clear that the emperors were not quite as well attired as had been supposed, and by 1987, five of the eleven had suffered downfalls. The GBC then ruled against the public worship of gurus, disallowed their separate *vyāsāsanas* in temples, and all gurus were allowed to accept disciples from anywhere in the world. Eventually, the zonal-*ācārya* system collapsed, and the term “*ācārya*” was to refer exclusively to Prabhupāda. (GBC resolutions, 1987)

The *ṛtviks*

About this time, a split was developing within ISKCON concerning its approach to gurus. Several senior devotees questioned whether the *ṛtvik* system should ever have been discarded. Referring to the letter in which the *ṛtvik* system had been presented to ISKCON (dated 9 July 1977, signed on behalf of Prabhupāda by Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami), they pointed out that it said the system should operate in ISKCON “henceforward,” an order that Prabhupāda had never rescinded or countermanded. Thus they declared that Prabhupāda should be ISKCON's only *dīkṣā-guru*, with all others initiating on his behalf. This doctrine, ardently and rigorously espoused in papers and periodicals, became known as *ṛtvikism*. Despite many rebuttals from the GBC, it garnered a substantial following, and in 2000 the *ṛtviks* formed an organization called the ISKCON Revival Movement, which to this day challenges the legitimacy of ISKCON *dīkṣā-gurus*, going so far as even taking the GBC to court. However, based upon much evidence — not least Prabhupāda's direct statements about the status of gurus after his departure — the GBC emphatically

rejected the possibility of posthumous *dīkṣā* initiation from Prabhupāda, which it views as a major heresy. Indeed, anyone in ISKCON espousing this philosophy is liable to expulsion.

The doctrine that Śrīla Prabhupāda desired to continue to act as *dīkṣā-guru* after his departure from this world and did not desire any of his disciples to give *dīkṣā* in succession after him is a dangerous philosophical deviation. Ṛtvikism directly goes against the principle of *paramparā* itself (of successive *dīkṣā*- and *śikṣā-gurus*), which sustains the pure teachings and practices of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. This principle has been established by Kṛṣṇa and is upheld by all *ācāryas*. Indeed, it is accepted by all followers of Vedic culture. Ṛtvikism is thus an extreme deviation. It is utterly erroneous to espouse it, deluding and misguiding to teach it, and blasphemous to attribute it to Śrīla Prabhupāda. No one who espouses, teaches, supports in any way, or practices ṛtvikism can be a member in good standing of ISKCON.⁶

In place of the zonal-*ācāryas*, the GBC created a Multiple *Ācārya* Successor System (MASS), though it soon dropped this name after it ruled against calling the gurus *ācāryas*. Fifteen more gurus were appointed, raising the number to almost fifty. More fell away, and until 1987, when the GBC made it optional, the disciples of fallen zonal-*ācāryas* or other gurus were required to retake initiation from another guru. In 1987, the GBC also established the procedure for appointing new gurus that has remained fundamentally the same until today. In essence, a *dīkṣā-guru* candidate must first be approved by a body of local leaders (Local Area Council), after which his or her name is submitted to the GBC, which then has the final word. If the GBC does not object to the candidate, he is approved to initiate devotees. This is known as the no-objection system. The terminology has undergone tweaks, but the basic process is unchanged. Gurus are slowly added to the approved list, and they currently number a hundred and five, eight of whom, for various reasons, no longer accept disciples.⁷

Questioning the system

Leaving the history there, I will now recount my own experience. In 1986, my wife, Cintāmaṇi Devī Dāsī, and I opened an ISKCON center in Manchester, England. After our second zonal-*ācārya* guru gave up his position, in 1987, we decided to bide our time before accepting another spiritual guide. We found refuge in Prabhupāda through his writings and recorded lectures. We began acting as guides for others as they came to our fledgling project, but we soon found that the guru-approval system militated against our center's growth and success. New devotees would quickly learn the importance of accepting a spiritual master, but we were not considered, as we lacked institutional approval and even a guru in good standing. As less important teachers in ISKCON — some leagues below what are called the 'ISKCON gurus' — we found it difficult to retain the loyalty and support of those we had introduced to ISKCON. They would select someone from the existing list, who would naturally supersede us as their mentors and guides. So, as devotees drifted away to follow their gurus, we always struggled with a skeleton crew. Conversely, we observed that centers run by disciples of approved gurus tended to do better, as the gurus could send other disciples to assist. As spiritual 'orphans,' however, we lacked that advantage.

I therefore began questioning the wisdom of having a select few individuals as authorized gurus, with everyone else consigned to the "nonapproved" category, which called into question their spiritual credentials. As the elite group of gurus amassed ever more disciples, they assumed a still loftier status. Consequently, new devotees rarely looked elsewhere for initiation and almost invariably chose someone in the authorized group. The no-objection system was devised with the intent that new devotees might be free to select any qualified devotee as a *dīkṣā-guru*. Their nonapproved chosen teacher would merely need to go through the authorization process to receive the institutional imprimatur.

Plainly, though, this hardly ever occurs. Since 1987, the movement has expanded from around two hundred centers to over eight hundred, with an even greater growth in followers, as the membership shifted away from temple residents to congregation members. The following GBC statement is from 2018:

Whereas there is a critical need for many more devotees to serve as *dikṣā-guru* in ISKCON;

Whereas there are at least 9 million congregational members in ISKCON;

Whereas ISKCON has less than 80 devotees available to give *dikṣā* to potentially 9 million people;

Whereas if every congregational member sought initiation, each ISKCON guru would have to accept approximately 112,500 disciples.

Since then, the number of approved gurus has increased by about twenty percent, a pace of three to four per year.

In 1994, dismayed by what I had observed, I penned my first paper about 'ISKCON gurus,' entitled "Do We Need a Guru-approval System?" I argued that a guru's and disciple's relationship was between two persons — a private matter that is no one else's concern, certainly not the GBC's. Would, for example, the GBC ever consider intervening in one's selecting a marriage partner? The *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* (1.147) even says that three things should be kept secret: your guru, your revered deity, and your mantra. Thus, I posited that the guru should not be an institutional post, as it has become, in which the guru wields executive power while falling outside the managerial structure.

I acknowledged the need to preserve standards and protect devotees from being misled, but I suggested other ways to achieve that, without creating the issues I have described (plus numerous others). I also pointed out that the scriptures ask only that the prospective disciples test gurus (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.24.330), never stating that the disciples can only make this decision with oversight from others. Lists of the bona-fide guru's qualifications, found in the *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* and other scriptures that ISKCON recognizes, enable aspiring disciples to understand who is qualified. However, the 'ISKCON guru' system is predicated upon the assumption that disciples lack sufficient discernment to make this assessment, and thus it has been mandated that the GBC and

the Local Area Council must also pass their judgment before a guru can be accepted.

Fear of extreme societal disruption tends to be the main response to any suggestion that ISKCON stop approving or appointing gurus, and my 1994 paper produced this very anxiety. While there were some encouraging responses, it did not meet with universal acclaim, and a senior GBC member nearly had me excommunicated. Thankfully, my ISKCON authority came to my rescue, explaining that I meant well and was not trying to create anarchy in ISKCON. I subsequently wrote several more papers on the same theme, which all encountered similar opposition. (A few can still be found online.⁸)

Weighing the problems

The concerns are understandable. Surely we must ensure that gurus are properly qualified. Would a university allow a random individual to lecture on campus? Does a hospital not have systems to ensure that its surgeons underwent training and passed exams? In the same way, how can ISKCON not have safeguards to ensure that its most important spiritual teachers are fit for the role? And is it not obvious that inexperienced devotees are liable to make an unwise choice?

These are reasonable questions. They must, however, be weighed against the problems that guru approvals generate and other ways in which the apprehensions may be addressed.

Regarding the problems, I discovered, for example, that my experience in Manchester was not singular. Other ISKCON preachers reported how devotees they had carefully nurtured into the movement virtually discarded their relationship with them in favor of a guru they had never met.

Another issue is that aspiring disciples, reassured by the institutional approval, do not undertake sufficient due diligence in examining their prospective gurus. Scripture, however, requires such examining, and Prabhupāda also often stressed this point.

The rules and regulation are that nobody should accept blindly any *guru*, and nobody should blindly accept any disciple. They must behave [interact with], 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 Sanatana Gosvami in his *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*.⁹

The *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* (1.73 et. seq.) cites various scriptural sources wherein this testing period is mentioned. Some call for an even longer period than a year, but the principle is that both parties must be assured that the relationship will work. Aspirants often neglect this principle and the essential step of testing, thinking that the guru is already tested because he has other disciples. The GBC recognized this as a problem and in early 2004 commissioned its Sastric Advisory Council (SAC) to research the matter and suggest a solution. The GBC's instruction to the SAC included this:

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. . . . There is *prima facie* evidence that suggests that prospective disciples do not take this responsibility seriously. Therefore we request the Sastric Advisory Council 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.

Fulfilling this request, the SAC wrote the paper "Balancing the Roles of the GBC and the Disciple in Guru Selection."¹⁰ It says:

We conclude that *sastra* [scripture], tradition, and Srila Prabhupada place the ultimate responsibility

to test whether 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.

Like me, the SAC concluded that disciples should be free to select their guru without GBC involvement. It proposed additional ways to regulate the situation, but the GBC did not adopt these suggestions and gave no official response to the paper.

As both the SAC and I noted, we find within the scriptures and the tradition that ISKCON follows hardly any instances of gurus being appointed. Priests such as *rtviks* might be assigned to officiate at rituals or sacrifices, but gurus are generally chosen independently by disciples. Determining the guru's qualifications is the disciple's sole responsibility and vice versa.¹¹ Either party can consult with others regarding the qualifications of the other, but scripture does not make consultation obligatory.

Other problems have developed over the years. The gurus often accrue more disciples than they can personally and effectively manage in their key role of teaching. In the seminal verse about gurus in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (4.34), Kṛṣṇa advises, "Try to learn the truth by inquiring from a spiritual master." Prabhupāda writes in his commentary: "Not only should one hear submissively from the spiritual master, but one must also get a clear understanding from him, in submission and service and inquiries." Between the guru and disciple, there should be a teacher-student relationship.

This became impossible in many cases in ISKCON, and therefore a mentoring system developed in which the aspirants and new disciples come under the care of more mature devotees. These mentors, however, are not GBC-approved gurus, which arguably defeats the purpose of the approval process.

Those who teach others in spiritual life are called *śikṣā-gurus*, and Prabhupāda writes that "generally" the *śikṣā-guru* becomes the *dīkṣā-guru*.¹² A *śikṣā-guru* may also assist the *dīkṣā-guru* in training the disciples. In fact, the scriptures state that there is no difference

between the *śikṣā-* and *dīkṣā-gurus*. Although they may have different dealings, they are to be respected equally. There is no difference between the shelter-giving Supreme Lord and the initiating and instructing spiritual masters. If one foolishly discriminates between them, he commits an offense in the discharge of devotional service.¹³

However, according to the GBC, although *dīkṣā-gurus* must be approved, for *śikṣā-gurus* there is no such requirement. The GBC has tried to encourage *śikṣā-gurus* to become *dīkṣā-gurus*, as in this statement:

By regular association with, and service to, such instructing spiritual masters, the spiritual aspirant may develop a particularly strong reciprocal connection with one of the *śikṣā-gurus*, who demonstrates both willingness and practical ability for the ongoing guidance of the spiritual aspirant. After testing this connection for an extended period by further association, inquiries, and service, the candidate may desire to solidify that relationship by taking initiation from this *śikṣā-guru*. He or she should then approach the local ISKCON authorities for further guidance as to accepting this devotee as one's *dīkṣā-guru*.¹⁴

Still, it hardly occurs. Despite the equivalence of *śikṣā-* and *dīkṣā-gurus* mentioned in the scriptures, a considerable disparity has arisen between them in ISKCON. The prominent *dīkṣā-gurus* have become virtual celebrities, given 'top billing' at preaching events and special treatment in temples. This only adds to the mystique created by institutional appointments and makes such gurus still more attractive to new devotees seeking initiation.

This places ISKCON in some peril, as it has severe public-affairs ramifications when approved gurus fall from their position. Moreover, it damages the devotees' faith in ISKCON leadership and even in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. When a guru amasses many disciples, he poses a logistical threat to ISKCON, as became evident when

temples lost much of their workforce in the wake of their zonal-*ācāryas*' downfalls. It took those temples many years to recover, and some still struggle. Nowadays, there are gurus with many more disciples than any of the zonal-*ācāryas* ever accumulated, and these numbers continually rise as ISKCON's congregational growth far outstrips the rate at which new gurus are authorized.

How much protection "guru approvals" provide is questionable. Since the fall of some zonal-*ācāryas*, many more approved gurus have fallen. In the GBC resolutions since 1987, I counted a further forty or so who have been suspended. There are also concerns about gurus not following the second-initiation standards established by Śrīla Prabhupāda. The GBC noted this in 2020 and called for an in-depth study of the situation. The SAC wrote a paper on it, which is yet to be published, and the GBC has passed several resolutions based on the paper.

In addition to gurus failing, I know many disciples who have lost faith in their ISKCON-approved gurus after realizing that they disagreed with them, or because their over-stretched gurus could hardly give them any time, or because they discovered that their guru was not the exalted pure devotee they had thought when they accepted him — which are all related to inadequate testing by the aspirants and the institutional approval of gurus.

A second schism

Besides the *ṛtvik* schism, about twenty years ago a further issue around gurus became noticeable in ISKCON, which has now become the real threat of a second schism. It involves the question of whether Vaiṣṇavīs (female devotees) should be *dīkṣā-gurus* and initiate devotees. Amid much debate, the GBC again commissioned the Sastric Advisory Council to research the issue. It examined a preponderance of evidence and concluded that Vaiṣṇavīs could indeed be *dīkṣā-gurus*. In 2005, this conclusion was duly accepted, but it was only in 2009 that the GBC permitted it to be implemented:

1. That resolution #425/2005 “Female Diksa Guru” is amended to read as follows: “The GBC accepts the philosophical conclusion presented in the SAC’s Female Diksa-Guru Paper that a mature, qualified, female devotee may accept the role of an initiating spiritual master.”
2. The GBC Body authorizes local-area committees to put forward for approval as initiating guru any devotee in their area, male or female, who is qualified according to existing GBC Law.”⁵

Vigorous opposition continued and built, particularly in India. Notwithstanding the 2009 resolution, the debate was intensified by the Indian side, and it was only in 2022 that the first female devotee was finally authorized to give *dīkṣā*. However, immediately after she initiated her first disciple, ISKCON’s India Bureau, claiming to represent the Indian temples, raised further objections based on their understanding of scripture and threatened to completely reject the GBC’s authority. It made the following statement to the GBC: “[The Indian Bureau] may not be in a position to control the repercussions ensuing from the genuine feelings of disenfranchisement unleashed by this resolution.”⁶ The Bureau asked that the GBC impose a moratorium on any further initiations by Vaiṣṇavī gurus for up to three years, while the whole question of initiations (*guru-tattva*) is discussed. In November 2022, the GBC acquiesced, and despite much protest, Vaiṣṇavīs currently cannot offer initiation.

To be fair, the call for an extended discussion on *guru-tattva* is reasonable. There is no role definition for *dīkṣā-gurus*, particularly on how they should be viewed in relation to Prabhupāda. His books are the basis of ISKCON’s philosophy, and therefore he is the principal *śikṣā-guru* for everyone in the movement. In 2014, the GBC published a small book entitled *Śrīla Prabhupāda: The Founder-Ācārya of ISKCON*. In its preamble, the GBC Executive Committee

says that Prabhupāda’s “presence is to be felt in the life of every ISKCON devotee today, and in the lives of devotees many centuries into the future.” (p. 9) Prabhupāda’s role, according to Ravīndra Svarūpa Dāsa, the author, is to be “The single prominent *śikṣā-guru* immanent in the life of each and every ISKCON devotee—a perpetual, indwelling, active guiding and directing presence.” (p. 22) Prabhupāda’s instructions are the means by which ISKCON devotees attain spiritual perfection, so what does that mean for those accepting the role of initiator and, indeed, for their disciples? In his books, Prabhupāda stressed the importance of accepting a devotee of the highest caliber as one’s guru:

One should not become a spiritual master unless he has attained the platform of *uttama-adhikārī*. A neophyte Vaiṣṇava or a Vaiṣṇava situated on the intermediate platform can also accept disciples, but such disciples must be on the same platform, and it should be understood that they cannot advance very well toward the ultimate goal of life under his insufficient guidance. Therefore a disciple should be careful to accept an *uttama-adhikārī* as a spiritual master.¹⁷

So should we view the approved gurus as *uttama-adhikārīs*, even after seeing so many fall? If not, how should we deal with the fact that a less-qualified guru can only give “insufficient guidance”? These and other questions concerning *guru-tattva* need to be carefully discussed, and the GBC accepted this very point in two resolutions:

Based on the sacred *siddhanta* of *guru-tattva*, and with a positive and enthusiastic spirit, the GBC undertakes the responsibility to provide for present and future generations of devotees, a comprehensive and inclusive understanding that delineates how *dikṣa-* and *sikṣa-gurus* unitedly work within the framework of ISKCON.¹⁸

Whereas the GBC stated it “is steadfastly dedicated” to accomplish the above; Resolved: The GBC recommits to

its statement of #310/2015, and begins by dedicating at least two days at either every Annual General Meeting or Midterm General Meeting to this subject until the relevant aspects of this topic are resolved satisfactorily.³⁹

Proposing change

Around 2010, I joined with a number of other devotees who shared my concerns. We formed the Guru Laws Discussion Group in the hope of influencing the GBC to review its approach to initiations. After two years of discussions, we made a proposal to the GBC in 2012, entitled “Aligning ISKCON’s guru-authorization procedures with *sastra*, thereby enhancing the GBC’s credibility and strengthening its authority.” We pointed to the issues caused by approvals and proposed that devotees held in good standing by temples be allowed to initiate, if approached by prospective disciples. Senior devotees, including several initiating gurus, supported the proposal. The GBC, however, did not. But it mandated its Guru Services Committee to write a paper on the issue.

We argued that the approval process effectively amounts to appointments. We recognized that the GBC was not selecting gurus but was nevertheless creating them by its authorization. Those approved and added to the official list were considered ‘ISKCON gurus,’ advertised as such within and without ISKCON. We posited that this process was causing all the issues I have already described. Apparently in response to our arguments, the GBC asserted in 2014 that it was not appointing gurus:

Whereas a multi-tier vetting process for a *diksa-guru* candidate will further clarify that the GBC does not directly appoint *diksa-guru* candidates;

Whereas the current ISKCON Law terminology of GBC’s authorizing or approving *diksa-gurus* adds to the perception that the GBC certifies and appoints *diksa-gurus* . . .

All references in ISKCON law to authorization or approval in relation to being allowed to serve as a *diksa-guru* are changed to appropriate forms of “will/may commence the service of *diksa-guru*.”²⁰

The GBC thus changed the terminology but not the system. Gurus continued to be authorized by the same process, and with the same results. Clearly, though, the GBC feels that it should not be appointing gurus, even though this is exactly what it does.

The Guru Services Committee took five years to write that mandated paper, finally publishing a three-page rationale for the guru system in 2017 (GBC Resolution 312). Several of the main arguments were seemingly answering our points. The first was that although our scriptures do not describe any formal systems of guru authorization, they also do not mention institutions like ISKCON and its governing body, which were nevertheless desired by our *ācāryas*. The second was that Prabhupāda asked the GBC to oversee the qualifications of *sannyāsīs* (also not mentioned in scriptures), and overseeing *dīkṣā-gurus* is a natural extension of that process. The paper also explained how Prabhupāda wanted his disciples to qualify as spiritual masters. It argued that someone must ensure the necessary training and qualifications are present and that this task must fall to the GBC, as ISKCON’s ultimate authority and overseer of devotional standards. Thus the GBC has set up courses for *dīkṣā-gurus*, and councils of local senior devotees (who best know the prospective gurus) to assess their qualifications. Then the GBC itself makes the final decision.

While we did not object to the key points of this short dissertation, such as the need for guru training and qualifications, and the responsibility of the GBC to oversee spiritual standards in ISKCON, we still questioned whether these imperatives could not be accomplished in a different way. Since this had not been addressed, the assumption seemed to be that the GBC’s approval process is the only way.

Our group, therefore, worked on a further proposal. We asked the GBC to provide a more thorough explication of the thinking

behind the approval system. We hoped to begin a discussion that analyzed its intentions so we could examine whether these were being effectively achieved or whether another approach might avert the problems already identified.

A precondition of submitting our proposal was that we were supposed to engage in a dialogue with the Guru Services Committee. At our first and only meeting, we tried to present our suggestions. We acknowledged the GBC's concerns about unqualified individuals masquerading as gurus and that it must be able to prevent any misleading of novices. However, we questioned whether the approval process was effectively doing that or merely giving the illusion of doing so.

Once it was understood that we opposed guru approvals, the Guru Services Committee's chairman summarily terminated our dialogue. Apparently, the GBC felt that a crucial boundary, a red line, was crossed, for it perceives the notion of permitting any devotee to initiate, solely based on the aspirants' faith and a mutual evaluation, as fraught with risk, because of the devastation caused by guru deviations. Allowing unauthorized devotees to occupy the immensely influential institutional position that the 'ISKCON guru' has become is thus considered tantamount to insanity.

Despite the breakdown of dialogue, we pressed ahead and discussed our proposal with GBC deputies, who then tabled our proposal. To our surprise, the GBC passed it, in May 2023, as follows:

It is resolved that the GBC Body hereby approves in principle a revision of its position paper 702.03 "Principles for creating a *diksa-guru* system for ISKCON — 2017." The GBC Body shall oversee the formation of a group to revise the paper in order to provide clarity on this important topic and to enhance the GBC's credibility and strengthen its authority. The GBC Body will approve the final revision.²¹

A six-man GBC subcommittee that includes me is now producing the required review.

Is there another way?

What are the possible alternatives to ISKCON's current guru system, and how can we avoid the associated problems while preserving the GBC's oversight of ISKCON's standards? Is it reasonable to discontinue authorizing gurus before they initiate? Let us examine the latter point. As discussed, the GBC's primary concern is that untrammelled, unregulated individuals may create chaos within the organization. However, is this fear well founded? It is only when the institution confers the title of 'ISKCON guru' on individuals that they become a potential threat; otherwise, like every other devotee in ISKCON, a guru must operate within the established managerial structures. If someone causes a disruption, there are managerial procedures in place to confront it. Being a guru does not exempt one from these controls. Nevertheless, appointing gurus presents a managerial challenge, as our scriptures encourage disciples to follow their guru's orders rather than those of a temple official. Acknowledging this predicament, in 2013 the GBC produced a paper that said:

... there are spiritual authorities who sometimes interfere with competent and responsible managers. They do not consider themselves part of the zonal managerial structure where their preaching has influence (though they are in fact accountable to it), but they are still either directly or indirectly managing some project(s) within that structure. Therefore at times they manage devotees, money, and even projects that their followers and dependents are responsible for, without a clear agreement with the managerial structure with which they intersect. By so doing, they may inadvertently undermine the managerial line of authority by encouraging their dependents to direct their service, and thus their loyalty, to their spiritual authority's own management structure.²²

This 2013 paper asserts that gurus should acknowledge ISKCON's managerial structure and recognize the GBC as the

“Ultimate Managerial Authority,” in accordance with Prabhupāda’s last will. However, the GBC’s authorization of gurus potentially compromises its power and authority and challenges its status within the organization. By authorizing gurus, the GBC creates or at least exacerbates the very issue it claims to solve. Without official appointments within ISKCON, gurus chosen solely by disciples would not pose a significant threat. Without being globally advertised as ‘ISKCON gurus,’ they would be less able to acquire large followings. They would more likely initiate only those individuals with whom they have personal relationships. That, of course, is the traditional model in which the *śikṣā-guru* gradually transitions into the *dikṣā-guru*, a model that encourages natural relationships and one in which there would be multiple *dikṣā-gurus*, each with a reasonable, viable number of disciples, instead of having a hundred or so gurus with many hundreds or even thousands of followers whom they struggle to properly train, manage, and instruct.

What about the risk of unqualified persons posing themselves as *dikṣā-gurus* and enticing inexperienced devotees to become disciples? First, as outlined in scripture, the disciple and guru must evaluate each other’s qualifications. If there were no official list of ‘ISKCON gurus’ to choose from, disciples would have to take their responsibility more seriously. Second, ISKCON’s objective is to train and instruct devotees in the science of Krishna consciousness, including recognizing the symptoms of authentic spiritual progress. Such fundamental knowledge can be found throughout Prabhupāda’s writings, and Prabhupāda instructed GBC members to thoroughly discuss it with the devotees under their care. Thus, these scriptures, adequately taught by the GBC, will serve as a guide to recognize and avoid unqualified gurus, minimizing the risk of impostors and ensuring that devotees make informed choices.

It is the duty of the GBC to maintain the devotees, keep them in the highest standard of Krishna Consciousness, and give them all good instruction, and let them go out and preach for making more devotees. Your first job should be to make sure that every one of the devotees in your zone of management is reading regularly our literatures and discussing the subject

matter seriously from different angles of seeing, and that they are somehow or other absorbing the knowledge of Krishna consciousness philosophy.²³

Although Prabhupāda's instruction has been frequently reiterated, I believe that it has yet to be adequately implemented. Consequently, the GBC relies on laws to control devotees, assuming they lack the ability to identify an authentic guru. Does this not suggest that ISKCON's education systems are deficient or failing, or worse, that the GBC considers new devotees to be intellectually incompetent? Besides, despite the legislation and oversight, devotees continue to be misled and cheated, even by approved gurus, a significant percentage of whom have been removed from that position. In fact, Prabhupāda stated that laws alone are insufficient to resolve such issues:

Simply enforcing laws and ordinances cannot make the citizens obedient and lawful. That is impossible. Throughout the entire world there are so many states, legislative assemblies and parliaments, but still the citizens are rogues and thieves. Good citizenship, therefore, cannot be enforced; the citizens must be trained.²⁴

As Prabhupāda noted, the principle that good citizenship cannot be imposed but must be instilled through training should be obvious. The GBC is concerned that devotees may be misguided, yet it is difficult for the GBC to prevent this by control mechanisms, given the pervasive nature of materialistic influences these days. For example, social media, TV, and films all serve to degrade our consciousness daily. We tend to choose our association according to our desires, which must be spiritually elevated through proper training to provide genuine protection. Devotees will then be equipped to resist potentially damaging influences from wherever they may come, including a deviant spiritual authority. An incident from the *Rāmāyaṇa* illustrates this point. When Sitā returned to Ayodhyā, she was first carried in a veiled palanquin, but Rāma ordered that the citizens see her, as “a woman is protected by her conduct, not by mere cloth or walls.”²⁵

Another important aspect to consider is Kṛṣṇa's role in the initiation process. Śrīla Prabhupāda's early disciples were guided to select him as their spiritual master amidst the multitude of guides who were then plying their trade in the West. This raises the question, Why did they not choose one of the others? According to scriptural teachings, the Supersoul, or Kṛṣṇa in the heart, serves as the soul's internal guide, especially while selecting a spiritual master. The following verse reinforces the idea that choosing a guru should be based more on an aspirant's inner spiritual prompting than external factors such as an authorized institutional status.

According to their karma, all living entities are wandering throughout the entire universe. Some of them are being elevated to the upper planetary systems, and some are going down into the lower planetary systems. Out of many millions of wandering living entities, one who is very fortunate gets an opportunity to associate with a bona fide spiritual master by the grace of Kṛṣṇa. By the mercy of both Kṛṣṇa and the spiritual master, such a person receives the seed of the creeper of devotional service.²⁶

Finally, in this regard, we find this statement:

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.²⁷

While this statement obviously pertains to the traditional acceptance of a hereditary family guru, the term "ecclesiastical conventions" conveys something more. It specifically relates to Christianity, but I understand Prabhupāda to mean any official religious procedures, which would include ISKCON's institutional guru appointments.²⁸

Ceasing approvals would not necessarily result in the GBC losing control over gurus anymore than it would over any other member of ISKCON. The GBC would continue to operate as the “ultimate managing authority,” with lines of managerial accountability permeating the organization. Furthermore, by refraining from approving gurus, the GBC would simplify its management responsibilities. The authorizing and overseeing of ‘ISKCON gurus’ necessitates a sizable body of rules, currently running to some thirteen pages in the ISKCON lawbook. If the GBC is concerned about the qualification of gurus, it could simply stipulate that initiations will be accepted as valid only when the guru meets certain criteria, such as passing the Bhaktivedanta examination or taking courses provided by ISKCON. This will obviate the need for approvals and eliminate all the issues they create. In this way, ISKCON would merely control the *consequences* of choices rather than the choices themselves. It would also provide objective standards by which disciples could assess their prospective gurus.

Education is the answer

ISKCON should offer training to everyone, such as the Bhaktivedanta diploma, which Śrīla Prabhupāda suggested for those wishing to be gurus:

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.²⁹

This training should not be specified as “guru training,” as that will lead to the idea that certain individuals are qualified as gurus, undermining the aspiring disciples’ incentive to properly examine them. Instead, let anyone take the training and potentially be a guru, as Prabhupāda desired. Then aspirants can consider whether their prospective guru underwent such training if that is a concern.

After all, it is quite possible that a qualified individual may not have passed any examinations or undergone institutional training. One great teacher in the Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava line was famously illiterate. The aspirants must make their own judgment.

Regarding maintaining ISKCON standards, when does it matter if you have a GBC-approved guru? Uninitiated devotees perform many services in ISKCON, and the temple managers decide whom they consider qualified. There are only certain services for which initiation is required, such as cooking for the deities, worshiping on the altar, occupying official posts, or perhaps giving lectures. Even then, the status of one's guru is usually a secondary consideration. One's guru may not be in good standing, but one can still perform any of those services without impediment.

Conversely, one may be Śrīla Prabhupāda's disciple and yet not be accepted for such services for many other reasons. The main factor is one's personal qualifications. Temple managers tend to make their own decisions about this, and that is quite in accord with Prabhupāda's desire, for he wanted ISKCON's centers to be autonomous. Although the GBC has the ultimate managerial authority, Prabhupāda did not want it to control temples, as evinced by a letter he wrote to Girirāja Dāsa.

GBC does not mean to control a center. . . . The president, treasurer, and secretary are responsible for managing the center. GBC is to see that things are going nicely but not to exert absolute authority. That is not in the power of GBC.³⁰

GBC members should provide education and ensure that temples run smoothly, offering guidance and support if there are problems. In any event, they have the ultimate veto if all else fails. But if the GBC provides proactive teaching and guidance, using force should hardly be required. Moreover, the right training will ensure that devotees have sufficient discrimination to select their gurus, and this will remove the need for excessive administrative controls. Again, Prabhupāda wanted devotees to think for themselves and not be subjected to a centralized bureaucracy.

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.³¹

Stopping official approvals, which create the post of 'ISKCON guru,' would help defuse issues like *ṛtvikism* and Vaiṣṇavī *dīkṣā-gurus*. Once disciples select gurus based on their scriptural discernment and not because of the guru's conferred institutional status, detractors would have to direct their objections toward the disciples rather than ISKCON and its GBC; otherwise, such protests would be absurd. As I showed, scripture makes it entirely the disciples' prerogative whom they wish to accept as their gurus. One may ask, Why should anyone be concerned with that choice, and what basis or right would there be for suggesting that that choice is faulty? Moreover, assessing other devotees tends to be highly personal — one person's saint can be another's sinner — and even the current GBC-approval process is largely subjective³² and is not decided based on any formal qualifications, such as the Bhaktivedanta exam. Indeed, the stark division between the approved and nonapproved rests on the often-mistaken judgments of others, as the high failure rate of approved gurus demonstrates.

Conclusion

It appears that approving gurus creates numerous problems but solves hardly any. Surely it is time for the GBC to abandon that system and trust devotees to make their own important life decision about whom to accept as *dīkṣā-guru*. If the GBC really wants to increase the number of gurus, then what better way could there be? It is now almost fifty years since Prabhupāda departed, yet among possibly thousands of qualified devotees, just around a hundred of his followers are authorized to initiate.

ISKCON should educate newcomers on how to think for themselves and discriminate, rather than trying to control their thinking with legislation, which encourages blind following. Once ISKCON

approves someone as an authorized guru, the disciples fully commit and emotionally invest in that person, and many find it devastating when a guru falls. Even when their guru has clearly deviated, it can be difficult to abandon him. Indeed, to this day, there are followers of fallen and disgraced zonal-*ācāryas*, and the *samādhi* tombs of two of them can be seen in a prominent Vrindavan temple.

Local temple leaders should also be allowed to think for themselves in exercising discrimination as to who can serve in their projects, based upon the devotees' own understandings and practices, regardless of whom their guru is.

Of course, gurus may deviate or fall away even when disciples freely choose them, but if disciples chose gurus after forming a meaningful relationship and after having been properly equipped with scriptural discrimination, it is reasonable to assume that such occurrences will be minimized. Furthermore, even if their guru slips or falls, the disciples will not be faced with dealing with ISKCON institutionally, which may or may not remove the guru's authority. However, it must always be the disciple's decision to accept or reject the guru. This is shown by a famous instance in the *Bhāgavatam* (Eighth Canto) wherein King Bali rejected Sukrācārya, his spiritual master, whom he felt was misguiding him. Sukrācārya was not overtly fallen (his other disciples did not reject him), and Sukrācārya supported his position by citing scriptural evidence. His predictions about what would occur if Bali ignored him even proved wholly accurate, but Bali's decision was correct, as the *Bhāgavatam* shows.

The subtle dealings between gurus and disciples are affairs of the heart, which no institutional controls can ever properly manage. Education is the only answer, and, in my view, this is where the GBC must concentrate its efforts. Let's create independently thoughtful devotees, capable of making their own decisions without institutional oversight and control. I see ISKCON as a great spiritual university, training and empowering devotees to freely practice *bhakti* in all walks of life. Will not such liberated devotees, like university alumni, feel a debt of gratitude to ISKCON for so educating them and thus remain its lifelong supporters?

How to implement such education is another issue, but I believe our present approach is deficient, as shown by the fact that devotees are not trusted to rely upon their own intelligence and

inner spiritual prompting. It discourages them from thinking for themselves. The GBC-created system has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, a prediction that causes itself to become true. The GBC expects (predicts) that aspiring disciples will be too naive to independently choose their gurus. Thus it created a system that does the disciples' testing for them, turning them into potential blind followers who make uninformed choices. The system is predicated on a lack of trust in both aspiring disciples and Kṛṣṇa. The GBC should rethink this process. Allow devotees to freely select their *dīkṣā-gurus*. After all, they were intelligent enough to choose Kṛṣṇa as their guide, so why not their gurus, too? As they say, "Let go and let God!" We may be amazed by the results.

NOTES

- 1 *Teachings of Lord Kapila*, chapter 7, verse 13, purport.
- 2 Since 1978, those within the GBC charged with voting on the selection of gurus has changed fifteen times, according to the minutes of the GBC meetings. See "History of Diksa-guru in ISKCON: 1979–2014," by Nṛsimhānanda Dāsa, located in <http://www.dandavats.com/?p=12630>.
- 3 GBC resolution #403, 1999.
- 4 "History of Diksa-guru in ISKCON: 1979–2014," by Nṛsimhānanda Dāsa, located in <http://www.dandavats.com/?p=12630>.
- 5 GBC resolution, 1982.
- 6 GBC resolutions, 2005.
- 7 Accessed in July 2023: <https://gbc.iskcon.org/list-of-initiating-gurus-in-iskcon/>.
- 8 Located in <http://www.dandavats.com/?p=96697> and <http://www.dandavats.com/?p=81209>.
- 9 Śrīla Prabhupāda, lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā*, 25 February 1975.
- 10 Located in <https://gbc.iskcon.org/balancing-the-roles-of-the-gbc-and-the-disciple-in-guru-selection/>.
- 11 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.24.330.
- 12 *Bhāgavatam* 4.12.32, purport.
- 13 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 1.1.47, purport.
- 14 GBC resolutions, 2014.

- 15 GBC resolutions, 2009.
- 16 <https://iskconnews.org/gbc-pauses-vaishnavi-diksa-gurus-again/> .
- 17 *The Nectar of Instruction*, text 5, purport.
- 18 GBC resolution #310, 2015.
- 19 GBC resolution #308, 2018.
- 20 GBC resolution, 2014.
- 21 GBC resolution D22-04 2022.
- 22 *Harmonizing ISKCON's Lines of Authority*. Available at http://gbc.iskcon.org/gbc_res/Harmonizing_ISKCON%27s_Lines.pdf .
- 23 Śrīla Prabhupāda, letter to Satsvarūpa, 16 June 1972.
- 24 *Bhāgavatam* 9.10.50, purport.
- 25 *Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddha-kāṇḍa* 114.26 (Gita Press, 1992).
- 26 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.19.151.
- 27 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 1.1.35, purport.
- 28 It is important to note that the current system of selecting a guru in ISKCON does involve a moderate amount of training and mutual evaluation of prospective guru and disciple, before authorization by the GBC. ISKCON's guidelines and standards for guru selection are based on both scriptural guidance and practical considerations. But because there may be some overlap with ecclesiastical conventions and arguably some violation of this injunction against choosing a guru based solely on authorization, the system and criteria for creating official ISKCON gurus must be critically examined to assess whether they align with scriptures and promote the disciples' free choice, not limit it by imposing official third-party interventions.
- 29 Śrīla Prabhupāda, letter to Hanṣadūta, 3 Jan 1969.
- 30 Śrīla Prabhupāda, letter to Girirāja, 12 August 1971.
- 31 Śrīla Prabhupāda, letter to Karāndhara, 22 Dec 1972.
- 32 The current criteria used by the Local Area Council (ten-man committee) to evaluate the *dīkṣā-guru* candidates are: (1) is twice-initiated for at least ten years; (2) has been requested to initiate by the candidate's own *dīkṣā-guru*, if physically present; (3) is in good standing in ISKCON; (4) has good *sādhana*, including chanting a minimum of sixteen rounds daily and following the four regulative principles; (5) has shown consistent adherence to the principles of his *āśrama asrama* in terms of acceptable Vaiṣṇava behavior (*sadācāra*) and engagement in Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission; (6) has

substantial knowledge and realization of *śāstra* and a Bhakti-śāstrī degree; (7) preaches according to Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings; (8) works cooperatively with local authorities; (9) recognizes the GBC as the ultimate managing authority in ISKCON, supports the GBC system, and follows the GBC; (10) has no loyalties that compete with or compromise his loyalty to Śrīla Prabhupāda, his teachings, and ISKCON.

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