

`GBC subcommittee on Vaisnavi Initiating Gurus

We (Sivarama Swami, Badrinarayan Swami, Devamrita Swami, Malati Devi Dasi, Radha Devi Dasi, Krsnadasa Kaviraja Dasa, and Anuttama Dasa [present only for the last day]) met for three days, from July 24–26, at New Vrindavan, with the goal of creating a document, to be presented to the GBC body, containing our recommendations on the important topic of Vaisnavi initiating gurus. The discussions aimed at examining and respecting:

- Srila Prabhupada’s direct statements on the topic.
- Srila Prabhupada’s actions and mood.
- Our Gaudiya history.
- *Pancaratriki* and *bhagavata* considerations.
- The Vedic tradition.
- The need to consider the effect of this decision on the development of a *daivi varnasrama* culture within ISKCON.
- Our own *adhikara*.

We also considered the concerns of various groups of devotees in their different regions worldwide, along with other practical considerations.

In coming to our recommendations we went only so far as to feel secure that we stood on solid ground – that is, that we could support our recommendations with evidence from Srila Prabhupada’s instructions, example, and actions. When we did not feel this confidence, we considered it best to remain cautious and conservative.

Recommendations:

1. Vaisnavis who possess the qualifications presently in place for ISKCON gurus may award first initiation. Candidates wishing to take second initiation will need to approach a qualified male guru.
2. Vaisnavis giving first initiation should be at least 55 years old.
3. Vaisnavi gurus should have a healthy, stable family and/or social situation.
4. Vaisnavi gurus should be living under the protection of a husband, elder son or son-in-law, qualified householder couple, or senior Vaisnavi *sanga*.

Rationale:

1. Vaisnavis who possess the qualifications presently in place for ISKCON gurus may award first initiation. Candidates wishing to take second initiation will need to approach a qualified male guru.

Srila Prabhupada asked his disciples, male and female, to “become guru” and to spread Krsna consciousness around the world. In a letter to Hamsaduta, dated January 3, 1969, Srila Prabhupada made it clear that he considered both men and women qualified to initiate:

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

Another time, Professor O’Connell asked Srila Prabhupada, “Is it possible, Swamiji, for a woman to be a guru in the line of disciplic succession?”

Srila Prabhupada responded, “Yes. Jahnava Devi was – Nityananda’s wife. She became. If she is able to go to the highest perfection of life, why it is not possible to become guru? But, not so many. Actually one who has attained the perfection, she can become guru. But man or woman, unless one has attained the perfection ... *Yei krsna-tattva-vetta sei guru haya*. The qualification of guru is that he must be fully cognizant of the science of Krsna. Then he or she can become guru. *Yei krsna-tattva-vetta, sei guru haya*. [break] In our material world, is it any prohibition that woman cannot become professor? If she is qualified, she can become professor. What is the wrong there? She must be qualified. That is the position. So similarly, if the woman understands Krsna consciousness perfectly, she can become guru.”

While devotees did not become initiating gurus in their own right until after Srila Prabhupada’s departure in 1977, we understand from the letter to Hamsaduta and the conversation with Professor O’Connell that His Divine Grace considered women for this service.

An important additional consideration in light of the Gaudiya tradition is that in the past, Vaisnavis did not receive Brahma-gayatri initiation, so we are uncertain how Srila Prabhupada envisaged his female disciples acting as *diksa-gurus*. How would they initiate disciples with the mantra and the sacred thread?

We read in the *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*:

Govinda dasi hadn’t gone to the initiation, excusing herself as ill. Although she hadn’t told Prabhupada, she was upset that he wasn’t giving brahminical initiation to women. Disappointed, she had stayed at Swamiji’s apartment, crying. After an hour, however, she decided that by behaving so foolishly she was missing out on Prabhupada’s talk. So she hurried out of the house and ran all the way to the temple, arriving near the end of the ceremony. As she entered, Prabhupada looked up. “Oh,” he said, “I was just thinking, ‘Where is that girl?’ and Krsna has sent.”

After the ceremony Govinda dasi conferred with Jadurani, who also felt slighted. Prabhupada could detect their mentality, although they didn’t openly voice their complaints. The next morning he told Gaurasundara and Govinda dasi that he saw no harm in offering the Gayatri mantra to women – but they could not receive the sacred thread. That very night, he held a separate ceremony, initiating Govinda dasi and Jadurani into the Gayatri mantra.

Why would Srila Prabhupada not want to give women the mantra? And why did he then do so? While we can’t fully understand the mind of our founder-*acarya*, here are some important considerations:

The Brahma-gayatri is a Vedic mantra, originating in the *Rg Veda*, which, being *sruti*, is not, by Vedic standards, to be chanted by women. Additionally, the Gaudiya-sampradaya did not chant this mantra until Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura introduced it to show that Vaisnavas were also qualified *brahmanas*. Despite the innovation of offering the mantra to Vaisnavas of all castes, he still did not give the mantra to his female disciples. It follows, then, that if Vaisnavas and Vaisnavis were elevated to Vedic standards, they would also have to respect those standards. Vaisnavis were certainly eligible to chant the *maha-mantra* and other *pancaratriki* mantras, but not the Vedic ones. In following his spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada seemed to have planned not to give “second” initiation to his female disciples, although as the above *Lilamrta* passage shows, he concluded that there was “no harm” in them receiving it.

Being allowed to chant the mantra and giving it to others are two different things. In light of the aforementioned Gaudiya tradition and Vedic standards, when Srila Prabhupada wrote that he wanted his female disciples to become initiating gurus, it is not clear how he envisaged their disciples receiving second initiation, nor did he give information in this regard.

While we considered the logic that since Vaisnavis were given the mantra, they could also give it to others, our committee did not feel that we, or ISKCON, had the mandate to go beyond Srila Prabhupada’s statements. Thus we recommend that Vaisnavis give only *hari-nama* initiation and not *mantra-diksa*.

How, then, will their disciples receive *mantra-diksa*?

A Vaisnavi guru can discuss with her disciples their choice of a male *diksa-guru*. That Vaisnava can then perform the fire sacrifice, offer the Gayatri mantras, and for male disciples, offer the sacred thread.

Why not have male gurus give the Brahma-gayatri mantra and female gurus give the other (*pāñcarātrika*) mantras? Srila Prabhupada gave his disciples all the mantras at once. Since we have no precedent for any other practice, we prefer to remain on the safe side and follow Srila Prabhupada’s example.

By choosing this way forward we would also like to acknowledge the right of each devotee to accept a spiritual master of his or her choice, whether that guru be male or female. We would like to emphasize that this procedure does not dilute or diminish the relationship a candidate for second initiation has with his or her Vaisnavi guru.

The relationship disciples have with their male *mantra-diksa* guru may simply be a respectful formality or become a deep bond, There is room for variety and personal choice in devotee relationships, but *guru-kṛṣṇa-prasāde paya* – by the grace of Kṛṣṇa, the fortunate get the opportunity to associate with a bona fide spiritual master (Cc. *Madhya* 19.151).

In our proposal we are striving to honor what Srila Prabhupada said and did, the Gaudiya tradition, and the daivi-varnasrama culture.

2. Vaisnavis giving first initiation should be at least 55 years old.

While opening the door for Vaisnavis to become initiating gurus, Srila Prabhupada also made several qualifying statements. In his discussion with Professor O'Connell he mentioned "Not so many." He also said elsewhere, "Generally they do not become" and "very special case." Therefore we are suggesting criteria for Vaisnavi initiating gurus that may differ from the criteria that applies to male gurus in an attempt to incorporate the full balance of Srila Prabhupada's comments about Vaisnavis serving as initiating gurus.

As ISKCON has age considerations for *sannyasis*, and as Srila Prabhupada offered some qualifying considerations in his discussion with Professor O'Connell (quoted above), we felt it appropriate to discuss age considerations for Vaisnavis wishing to serve as initiating gurus.

The ISKCON law book already states: "[A *diksa-guru*] Should not be involved in any abnormal personal situation. An example of such a situation would be a disrupted or anomalous family life which could distract a guru from his guru duties or otherwise prove a disturbance to him or his followers."

We felt that for women, the 55-year-old age requirement honors the mood of this ISKCON law. By then, most Vaisnavis are beyond their householder years. Children will be nearing adulthood or have already left home, leaving their mothers with a greater chance to focus on their duties to disciples and their own spiritual practices. We understand that there may be exceptional cases where a Vaisnavi is especially qualified to serve as guru at a younger age. Those cases can be considered on a case-by-case basis during the selection process. We also suggest that an age requirement for Vaisnava gurus might be helpful to their selection process.

3. Vaisnavi gurus should have a healthy, stable family and/or social situation.

This criterion is similar to the criterion listed in ISKCON law and cited above. It is applicable to gurus of both sexes. That is, gurus should teach by example – both spiritually, in their execution of Krsna consciousness, and in terms of being properly situated in their social lives. Naturally, as we do with male *gurus*, the individual situations of female gurus can be discussed on a case-by-case basis if required.

4. Vaisnavi gurus should be living under the protection of a husband, elder son or son-in-law, qualified householder couple, or senior Vaisnavi *sanga*.

As stated, an underlying theme in our discussion was how to honor Srila Prabhupada's presentation on *daivi-varnasrama* while still moving forward with Vaisnavis giving initiation. We are each aware of the numerous statements Srila Prabhupada made about the need to protect women. While recognizing that the guru's service is a spiritual one, involving preaching and guiding disciples, we also felt we should not neglect Srila Prabhupada's statements about the *daivi-varnasrama* culture. In order to set an example for society, Lord Krsna and Lord Caitanya both accepted a spiritual master. There are numerous examples in *sastra* where great souls

played both a purely spiritual role and a role that honored the *varnasrama* culture. That we are making this recommendation in no way implies that Vaishnavis cannot attain the same level of spiritual realization as Vaishnavas.

In conclusion: an important consideration

Our recommendations are not intended as a commentary on or indicator of the social role Vaisnavis have in ISKCON. Neither are they intended to challenge the principle inherent in *daivi-varnasrama-dharma* that men and women have equal spiritual and social value even as they carry out different but complementary social roles.

Srila Prabhupada once stressed, “Fifty percent of my work remains unfinished – the establishment of *daivi-varnasrama-dharma*.” The GBC remains committed to fulfilling this goal. Thoughtful people see the failings of the current modern social systems. Many are seeking an alternative system that is materially and spiritually fulfilling. One of ISKCON’s core missions, to be realized through the proper practice of *daivi-varnasrama-dharma*, is to offer the world a successful example of that alternative social model.

Concluding words

The above recommendations are our committee’s humble attempt to find balance and consensus among countervailing evidence and considerations. This paper represents our best effort to respect Vedic principles and Vaisnava tradition while also acknowledging Srila Prabhupada’s innovative and expansive approach to spreading Krsna consciousness. We pray that our efforts will be pleasing to His Divine Grace, the *acaryas*, and the devotee community.