

The Buddhification of Prabhupāda and the Female Dīkṣā-Guru Issue

Respected Mahārājas, Prabhus, Mātājīs, officers of the GBC, and my respected colleagues representing the other RGBs from around the world, please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to ISKCON Founder-Ācārya, His Divine Grace Śrīla A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda. All glories to Śrī Śrī Gaura-Nitāi. All glories to the Eternal, Divine Couple, Śrī Śrī Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. **Jaya Jagannātha!**

On the topic of the process for taking a decision on the female dīkṣā-guru issue, and despite everyone’s best intentions, the way this is being decided is misguided and will lead to the further fracturing of ISKCON. I want to focus today not on the specific theological details of female dīkṣā-gurus, but on the deeper methodological problem underlying this and many other issues we face.

The Terms of Reference for this forum and certain GBC resolutions reveal a fundamental flaw in how we are approaching authority and decision-making. These are not minor procedural matters. They are symptoms of what I call the “Buddhification of Prabhupāda”—elevating his words or actions above śāstra, not unlike how the Buddhists regard Buddha as “the only source for the attainment of knowledge.” This approach contradicts our ācārya-paramparā and risks the internal fracturing of ISKCON and its disunification.

Some Objections to the Terms of Reference and GBC Resolutions

Although there are other objections, we will focus on the most important here. On page 1 of the TOR, it states: “Importantly, only Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books, teachings and instructions will inform the final proposal. Fidelity to the Founder-Ācārya’s teachings is sacrosanct for the Committee’s work.”

While our adherence to Prabhupāda must be without deviation, this restriction is problematic. Śrīla Prabhupāda himself repeatedly directed us to consult the previous ācāryas. In his purport to Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.1.1 he writes,

“Within the past five hundred years, many erudite scholars and ācāryas like Jīva Gosvāmī, Sanātana Gosvāmī, Viśvanātha Cakravartī, Vallabhācārya, and many other distinguished scholars even after the time of Lord Caitanya made elaborate commentaries on the Bhāgavatam. And the serious student would do well to attempt to go through them to better relish the transcendental messages.”

This is reinforced by Rūpa Gosvāmī’s famous statement from *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*, which appears throughout Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books:

śruti-smṛti-purāṇādi-pañcarātra-vidhiṁ vinā
aikāntikī harer bhaktir utpātāyaiva kalpate

“Devotional service of the Lord that ignores the authorized Vedic literatures like the Upaniṣads, Purāṇas and Nārada Pañcarātra is simply an unnecessary disturbance in society.”

All these sources must be accepted as legitimate pramāṇa. Limiting ourselves to Prabhupāda’s published works, letters, conversations, etc.—while purporting to follow his will—actually goes against both śāstra and his instructions. This provision from the Terms of Reference, whether from the GBC or agreed upon here, is therefore unacceptable.

Likewise, the cultural sensitivity resolution made by the GBC and its application to the female dīkṣā-guru issue is unacceptable. It contradicts Rūpa Gosvāmī in Upadeśāmṛta Text 1, where one who controls the six urges is qualified to “make disciples all over the world.” Any geographical restriction on dīkṣā-gurus—whether male or female—is thus prohibited by śāstra. This resolution is against Prabhupāda’s teachings. It should not be there, but there it is. There are others like it, and they are numerous. This points to a much larger problem.

Why Not Just Prabhupāda’s Words Alone?

Many sincere devotees ask: “If Prabhupāda is a pure devotee, why can’t I take his words alone?” The problem is that everyone has his own favorite Prabhupāda statement. In a 2007 essay titled “ISKCON’s Search for Self-Identity,” Dr. Thomas J. Hopkins says,

“Many of the disagreements within ISKCON . . . involve claims that ‘Prabhupad said this’ versus claims that ‘Prabhupad said that.’ . . . the volume of Prabhupad’s statements and writings over the years is so great . . . that a careful search . . . can usually turn up something to prove almost any point.”

The sheer volume of Prabhupāda’s recorded words makes it possible to find some statement of his to support almost any position.

The ritviks provide a clear case study. They elevate one letter and subordinate the rest of Prabhupāda’s teachings to it, resorting to heavy speculation and unnatural interpretations. The authority of their understanding, however, rests entirely on Prabhupāda’s own words as being the topmost authority. But that is not what Prabhupāda taught. However, this is what most devotees in ISKCON have been trained to believe, and this in turn has given rise to other contentious issues. Consequently, against our expectations, considering Prabhupāda as guru, sādhu, and śāstra—all reposed in a single person—has made us less united. Something more is needed.

The Solution — Śāstra as the Center

The solution proposed is that śāstra must be the center. As Śrīla Prabhupāda states in his purport to Bhagavad-gītā 16.24:

“These four principal defects in conditioned life disqualify one from putting forth rules and regulations. Therefore, the rules and regulations as described in the śāstra—being above these defects—are accepted without alteration by all great saints, ācāryas and great souls.”

You may have your preferred Prabhupāda quotes, and I might have mine, but whatever understanding is put forward should not be against śāstra or our ācāryas. Just like the cultural sensitivity concession on female dīkṣā-gurus the GBC sought. It is against Rūpa Gosvāmī. That is not allowed.

Thus, on such matters, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu said śāstra-dvāre, by śāstra we should understand spiritual topics and how to act and not act. In the purport to this statement (CC Madhya 20.352), Prabhupāda says:

“One should accept a thing as genuine by studying the words of saintly people, the spiritual master and the śāstra. The actual center is the śāstra, the revealed scripture. . . The śāstra is the center for all.”

The “revealed scripture” is that knowledge which has no human origin, and that is the Vedas. From CC Madhya 6.136, we find that śruti (Vedas) are considered the foremost evidence.

pramāṇera madhye śruti pramāṇa — pradhāna
śruti ye mukhyārtha kahe, sei se pramāṇa

“Although there is other evidence, the evidence given in the Vedic version must be taken as foremost. Vedic versions understood directly are first-class evidence.”

And in the purport, Prabhupāda, after noting corroborating evidence from ācāryas and the Brahma-sūtra—śāstra-yonitvāt (Vs. 1.1.3), tarkāpratiṣṭhānāt (Vs. 2.1.11) and śrutes tu śabda-mūlatvāt (Vs. 2.1.27)—only the uninterpreted śāstras, one for which some interpretation (anumāna) has not been made, counts as direct evidence, because interpretations are still liable to the four defects. Prabhupāda says “only a direct presentation can be considered evidence.” An interpretation cannot be accepted “but may be considered proof of evidence.”

A doubt may be raised that if a liberated soul’s words, like Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura’s, are as good as śāstra, then why make a distinction? Among the śāstras and words of the ācāryas there is a hierarchy of stronger and weaker sources. Just like in mathematics, multiplication takes precedence over addition. $4 + 3 \times 2 = 10$, not 14. Multiplication is always done before addition. Mathematical statements cannot be interpreted whimsically. Similarly, śāstra and statements of the ācāryas cannot be interpreted whimsically. There are rules that govern their correct understanding, especially when one statement appears to have come into conflict with another.

Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī in his Sarva-saṁvādinī commentary on Tattva-sandarbhā 11 explains that when there is a conflict between two statements from different śāstras, one should determine which source is stronger and which is weaker. For example, he says, śruti-smṛti-virodhe tu śrutir eva balīyasī, in a conflict between śruti and smṛti, the śruti is stronger. Both

the śruti and smṛti are śāstra, but the stronger source is to be understood directly and the weaker source interpreted in deference to the stronger.

Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī also explains rules related to assessing the relative strength of interpretations of the same statement. Nevertheless, whether it is between statements from different śāstras or different interpretations of a statement within a single śāstra, assessing stronger and weaker sources or interpretations is fundamental to how conflicts between statements are resolved.

Śrīla Prabhupāda shows this principle in action: In Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 6.19.13, a description of Lakṣmīdevī is given. Śrīla Madhvācārya comments that Viṣṇu is the Supersoul even of Lakṣmī, raising the question as to whether She is a jīva, since Madhvācārya posits that there are only the independent and the dependent. If you are not independent, then you are dependent. If you are not Viṣṇu, you are a jīva.

Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa in his Prameya Ratnāvalī, however, cites Viṣṇu Purāṇa (considered the stronger source) to affirm a third category—parā śakti. Thus, in light of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Madhvācārya’s statement (considered the weaker source) about Lakṣmī being dependent means she is understood to be a jīva who is a śaktyāveśa avatāra of Lakṣmīdevī. Alternatively, if Lakṣmīdevī is Viṣṇu’s internal potency, His parā-śakti, then She is not a jīva but is Lakṣmīdevī Herself, who is all-pervasive with Lord Śrī Viṣṇu. In this way Prabhupāda’s principle of śāstra being “the center for all” is demonstrated.

Like Madhvācārya’s words, Prabhupāda’s words are perfect; our understanding of them is not necessarily so. Reconciling Prabhupāda’s words with śāstra is a check on our own understanding. We are not fact-checking our Founder-Ācārya. Therefore, for our own, correct understanding, Prabhupāda’s words must be understood in a way that aligns with śāstra, which remains the ultimate authority. An ācārya’s words should not be understood in a way that is against śāstra, as do the ritviks or any other unauthorized sampradāya. In order to arrive at a correct understanding, there are many rules to observe. For the present, it is enough to know that they exist and that we should learn them.

What Happens When We Ignore this Hierarchy of Pramāṇas?

When we ignore or reject this system of pramāṇas, serious problems arise. Ritvikism could have been defeated early if, in addition to full-faith in Prabhupāda, devotees also had a similarly strong faith in śāstra. Evaṁ paramparā-prāptam imaṁ rājarṣayo viduḥ. The text of Bhagavad-gītā does not support stopping the paramparā and taking initiation from a departed guru. Yet because Prabhupāda’s statements were regarded as above śāstra, the Ritvik deviation took root and persists to this day.

The conflict with the Śrī Jagannātha Temple Administration over Rathayātrā dates offers another example. For over twenty years, the Gajapati Mahārāja has written detailed letters,

several of them filled with śāstric references and extensive Prabhupāda quotations about following śāstra. GBC responses have typically avoided philosophical engagement and sometimes have been dismissive. Despite the best of intentions, the result has damaged relationships, cancelled projects worth crores, threats of violence against devotees in Odisha, and ISKCON’s increasing isolation from mainstream Hindu society. In the public eye, this hurts Prabhupāda’s legacy as an authentic ācārya of Sanātana Dharma.

The Buddhification of Śrīla Prabhupāda and Its Consequences

The similarity between how Buddha’s followers regard Buddha and how we in ISKCON regard Prabhupada is striking. In his purport to Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya 9.49, Prabhupāda says,

“According to the Buddhists’ fifth principle, Lord Buddha is the only source for the attainment of knowledge. We cannot accept this, for Lord Buddha rejected the principles of Vedic knowledge. . . . If everyone is an authority, or if everyone accepts his own intelligence as the ultimate criterion — as is presently fashionable — the scriptures will be interpreted in many different ways, and everyone will claim that his own philosophy is supreme.

Similarly, in ISKCON, we treat Prabhupāda more as a Buddha-like figure whose words are absolute and above even śāstra. The TOR’s provision that “only Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books, teachings and instructions will inform the final proposal” reflects this attitude. Despite the best intentions, the fact that the majority approved this provision shows how all-pervasive this attitude is. This notion of Prabhupāda as a Buddha-like preceptor accounts for much of the internal dissension that simmers on several key issues, not limited to—but certainly including—the female dīkṣā-guru issue. We can do much better than this, but we have to adopt śāstra-as-center in order to make any real progress toward actual unity-in-diversity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current deliberations on the female dīkṣā-guru issue—as with others—are based in part on a misunderstanding of pramāṇa. The Terms of Reference and related GBC resolutions on certain points contradict śāstra and Śrīla Prabhupāda’s intent. There are other problems with the Terms of Reference and other GBC resolutions that we have not touched on, as well as problems with the SAC’s own “unchallenged” research.

Because Prabhupāda’s own teachings and śāstra must be understood in a harmonious way, with śāstra as the center, we believe the GBC, despite its members’ best intentions, is not leading the society in the right direction. Stronger measures may now be necessary to save Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mission from its current, self-destructive path.

Bhavatām dāsaḥ,

Kṛṣṇa-kīrti dāsa

Convenor, ISKCON India Scholars Board

On behalf of the Governing Council of ISKCON (the India Bureau)

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