Guru Services Policy Manual

For more information on this topic, please contact the ISKCON Guru Services Committee.
Chairman: Prahlādānanda Swami
Email: Prahladananda.Swami@pamho.net
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Section 1: Introduction

For the purposes of this Guru Services Policy Manual, the term 'guru' refers to a devotee who has been authorized to give initiation within ISKCON.

A guru is expected to have spiritual qualifications even more exalted than those possessed by a brāhmaṇa. According to the Bhagavad-gītā, a brāhmaṇa should possess the following qualities:

“Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom, and religiousness—these are the natural qualities by which the brāhmaṇas work.” (Bg. 18.42)

Therefore, a bona fide guru is expected to possess the above qualities plus others such as renunciation and spiritual wisdom.

If an ISKCON guru breaks any regulative principle or displays other anarthas, a diciple’s faith in their guru and/or devotees’ faith in ISKCON gurus is diminished. Therefore, it is the duty of the leadership of ISKCON to correct a guru’s errant behavior and, when necessary, discipline him.

The discipline given to an ISKCON guru will be determined by ISKCON law and other criteria, as explained in this manual. Other ISKCON authorities such as National Councils also discipline gurus. The Guru Services Committee must be informed of such disciplinary actions and measures taken.

If the Guru Services Committee receives a complaint against an ISKCON guru, they will forward it to the appropriate ISKCON authorities to address.

If deviations by an ISKCON guru fall under concurrent jurisdictions with other ISKCON agencies, the adjudication process will be jointly shared.

The ‘Guidelines for Simple Investigations’ is an outline only but includes provisions for the fair practice of justice.

A subcommittee of the Guru Services Committee will deal with weighing evidence and giving judgments. The disciplinary steps judges should follow are the already established stages of discipline for authorities within ISKCON such as censure, probation, suspension, and removal.

In the case of disciplinary action being taken against a guru, there is a process of appeal to higher ISKCON authorities, as explained in Section 7.

Section 2: Reasons for Discipline

Depending on the severity of the improper activity, corrective steps may consist of informal discussions, written warnings or censures, or formal disciplinary measures such as placing the offending guru on probation, suspension, or removal from his position as a diksa guru in ISKCON.

The reason(s) for discipline, the process, and the standards of rectification, if any, must be provided in writing to the guru under discipline. The disciplining body or persons must ensure that the details are entered into the relevant resolutions of the disciplining body.

As with other ISKCON members, an ISKCON guru may be disciplined for the following transgressions:

A. Misconduct and Indiscipline

1. Willful violation of GBC resolutions.
2. Vilification of ISKCON or the GBC Body. Vilification is “abusively disparaging speech or writing.” Abusive is “extremely offensive.” There is a line between vilification and reasonable criticism. This is not to be used to stifle open debate and healthy criticism.
3. Misconduct in office (physical assault except in self-defense, improper relationships with the opposite sex or same sex, improper sexual behavior, abusive behavior toward devotees, improper dealings with external society, and so on).
4. Habitually or knowingly making false charges and accusations or other consistent vaiṣṇava-aparādhas.
5. Serious interference in the guru and disciple relationship. Interference is "inappropriate, disruptive, or unethical actions that negatively impact the proper relationship between a guru and a disciple." This could include actions such as abuse of authority, manipulation, or any behavior that undermines the spiritual guidance and trust expected in the relationship.
6. Duplicitous or untruthful dealings (giving false promises to devotees, lying to spiritual authorities, and other serious prevarication).

B. Improper Discharge or Neglect of Duty

1. Consistent failure to submit required reports such as a financial report.
2. Disregard of an ISKCON devotee’s requirement to accept a spiritual master and serve him.
3. Economic mismanagement of such a nature that it endangers ISKCON’s reputation or preaching mission.
4. Failing to make all necessary and prudent arrangements to defend ISKCON’s members and spiritual standards (e.g., attacks from outside groups).

C. Spiritual Discrepancy

1. Philosophical deviation.
2. Not properly following the standards of sādhana bhakti, such as:
   a. failure to strictly follow the rules and regulations as described in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books.
   b. consistently irregular attendance at the temple morning and evening programs without bona fide cause
   c. Failure to follow any of the four regulative principles or to regularly chant sixteen rounds of japa.

D. Breach of Legal and Moral Standards

It is prohibited for any guru to carry out or undertake any act that constitutes fraud, corruption, bribery, or misconduct.

Fraud: A deliberate act of deception intended to secure unlawful gain or deprive ISKCON or others of financial interests. It includes willful misrepresentation, theft, embezzlement, and misuse of valuable information or financial reports, leading to direct or indirect financial harm.

Corruption: Consists of giving an advantage to a third party in a way inconsistent with one's official duties or the interests of ISKCON in exchange for some personal benefit. This normally occurs in the acceptance of a bribe.

Bribery: Consists of giving or offering to give a private benefit in exchange for official, public action. This may be in order to obtain benefits, for example, for the benefit of ISKCON or for one's own private benefit or securing governmental approval.

Misconduct: A violation of law, regulation, or ISKCON policy involving unethical business conduct that may cause financial harm. It includes offering private benefits in exchange for official actions to gain personal, ISKCON-related, or governmental advantages. Misconduct includes Waste and Abuse:

Waste consists of thoughtless or careless expenditure, consumption, mismanagement, use, or squandering of ISKCON-owned or operated resources to the detriment of ISKCON or against ISKCON's stated policy.

Abuse consists of the excessive or improper use of something, or the use of something in a manner contrary to the natural or legal rules for its use; the intentional destruction, diversion, manipulation, misapplication, maltreatment, or misuse of resources owned or operated by ISKCON; or extravagant or excessive use so as to abuse one's position or authority.

A guru has participated in fraud or misconduct if he:

1. Knowingly –lends any assistance to prohibited acts.
2. Has knowledge of prohibited acts without reporting them.

Examples of prohibited acts:

a. Any dishonest or fraudulent act.
b. Misappropriation of funds, securities, supplies, or other assets.
c. Impropriety in the handling or reporting of money or financial transactions.
d. Profiteering as a result of insider knowledge of ISKCON's activities.
e. Disclosing confidential and proprietary information to outside parties.
f. Disclosing to other persons confidential activities engaged in or contemplated by ISKCON.
g. Accepting or seeking anything of material value from contractors, vendors, or people providing services/materials to ISKCON for one's own personal benefit without proper disclosure and authorization.
h. Destruction, removal, or inappropriate use of records, furniture, fixtures, and equipment.
i. Any similar or related irregularity.

D. Other Possible Reasons for Discipline:

Conduct: Exhibiting behavior that is eccentric or would embarrass Śrīla Prabhupāda or ISKCON.
Preaching: Classes, seminars, and other presentations not in line with Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings.
Independence from Outside Influence: Gurus must always act in a manner that is in the interests of ISKCON. Gurus must not align their interest with that of a third party unless such interest is clearly and demonstrably for the benefit of ISKCON.
Honesty and Integrity: A guru is required to act honestly, with integrity, and otherwise in accordance with the Standards of Conduct in his activities with any other devotee, employee, contractor, or person in relation to and within the scope of his responsibilities.

Section 3: Guidelines for Investigations

The Webster definition of allegation is: *"an assertion made by a party in a legal proceeding, which the party then undertakes to prove."*

When a complaint is made, an investigation may be required.

When to Conduct an Investigation:

1. To begin an investigation, the allegations should be clear enough that the subcommittee of the Guru Services Committee can determine it is worth investigating.
2. Generally, an allegation may be worthy of investigation if there is substantial evidence to support allegations of serious and/or repeated violations of:
   - Guru Codes of Conduct
   - Vaiṣṇava Etiquette
   - ISKCON Law
   - Government Law

3. During an investigation, the validity of an allegation is determined by asking the following questions:
   - What happened?
   - When did it occur?
   - Where did it occur?
   - How many times did it occur?
   - What is the evidence that it occurred? (e.g., who witnessed it?)
   - Who or what performed the action in question?
   - Who or what was impacted by the act?
   - What is the certainty of all the above?

4. Other questions:
   What are the different possible causes that could have contributed to the events?
   Why did it happen?

5. If there are little or no clear answers to these questions, the allegation is probably not substantial and probably cannot and should not be investigated.

Process of Investigation:

1. The accused must be presented with all available allegations and evidence that support the allegations. The accused must also be given the right to reply as well as to provide evidence of their own.

2. Replies by the accused must also be presented to those making the allegations for their additional comments. Both sides have a chance to enter evidence twice.
3. When all comments are received, the evidence can be weighed by the appropriate review committee.
4. The evidence has to be examined in terms of the "elements of evidence," which are as follows:

Comprehensive: The record must include all relevant admissible evidence for a charge, conclusion, proposition, premise, or element, including that from both the complainant and respondent.
Credible: Genuine and undistorted evidence is required to overcome the presumption of innocence. Unreliable evidence, including certain hearsay (i.e indirect testimony), polygraphs, hypnosis, or coercive interrogations, is inadmissible. A clear chain of custody for the evidence must be established.
Sufficient: Must consist of enough evidence to establish the truth of the conclusion.
Consistent: Compare the pieces of evidence and make sure that the stories are consistent.

5. After examining the evidence, there must a means of deciding what degree of certainty is necessary before accepting an allegation as being fully or partially valid. If one factor from the above (comprehensive, credible, sufficient, and consistent) has a low percentage of trustworthiness, then the allegation cannot be easily upheld as valid. If there are mitigating circumstances, these can also be noted.

6. Investigations can be complicated. Human emotions, perceptions, and fallible reasoning make them such. In cases of less severe deviations, mediation, consultation, and other attempts at reconciliation of differing parties are preferable. But sometimes mediation is not possible if one or both parties do not agree to conduct mediation.

7. Generally, formal investigations should only be done when there are allegations that clearly deal with grave violations of ISKCON or other laws, and sufficient evidence is presented by which the validity of the allegations can be assessed.

Reports to the Guru Services Committee

Those conducting the investigation should make a FINAL report (or reports if there is profound disagreement among those conducting the investigation). The report should contain the elements of uncertainty and disagreement among those conducting the investigation.

The report should contain the answers to the questions concerning the allegation, for example, "what occurred," "who did it," etc. If opinions are given, they should be based on the assimilation of the evidence presented and not on intuition or undisclosed information.

Section 4: Determining Jurisdiction

When there are allegations concerning a guru, the case is within the jurisdiction of the Guru Services Committee. Based upon the outcome of the investigation and the position(s) within society held by the guru, additional jurisdictions may be determined. For example, CPO, IDRO, Sannyāsa Ministry, and the local GBC representative, RGB, National Council up to the GBC Body.

Section 5: Handling Cases Where Discipline is Required

The Guru Services Committee will decide on disciplinary measures in cases that fall under its jurisdiction. It will also consider the discipline of gurus based on reports and rulings from other jurisdictions. The Committee

should communicate with the investigative team and other appropriate committees if more information is required to make a judgment.

After consideration of the allegations and evidence, the Committee will generally discipline a guru by the following steps. The verdict will be given in writing either by email or by paper to the guru. He will be reminded of his right to appeal any decision to the appropriate ISKCON body. [See Section 7]

Section 6: Disciplinary Steps

The following are disciplinary steps, which may be applied to gurus within ISKCON.

Censure
Censure is to be understood as a reprimand aimed at reformation of a guru and prevention of further offending acts. It is the warning voice of pending probation, suspension, or removal.

When ordering the censure, the disciplining authority must clearly spell out in writing to the disciplined guru the specific actions that were irresponsible, inappropriate, or in violation of ISKCON law and why they were judged so.

Probation
If, after being censured, a guru does not rectify his behavior, then he may be put on probation. Even without a censure, probation may be immediately administered if the deviation is of a more serious nature. Probation is still an opportunity for the guru to redress himself and regain his status as an ISKCON guru in good standing.

When ordering the probation, the disciplining authority must clearly spell out in writing to the disciplined guru:

1. The specific actions that were irresponsible, inappropriate, or in violation of ISKCON law and why they were judged so.
2. The specific program of rectification.
3. The specific curtailment of powers, if any.
4. The specific prerequisites for restoration, if any.
5. The time period of the probation, which shall be no longer than six months.

After the period of probation, the disciplining authority must decide as per one of the following:

1. That the guru is rectified and that any restrictions imposed for the term of probation are rescinded; or
2. That further probation under the same or modified conditions is required to complete the rectification process; or
3. That the guru has not been rectified, and further disciplinary measures may be imposed.

Suspension
In the case where there is substantial reason to believe that an ISKCON guru has acted irresponsibly, inappropriately, or in violation of ISKCON law to the extent that continuation of the guru in his position will be injurious to the properties, good name, physical assets, or other resources of the society, or a member of the society, then a guru should be suspended from that position.

Suspension is to separate the guru from their position in ISKCON so that a thorough investigation of allegations may be conducted and the suitability of the guru to continue in his position is determined.

The disciplining body must conduct an immediate investigation to-minimize disruption. After completion of the investigation, the body shall make a determination as to the truth of the allegations and a future course of action. They may order as per one of the following.

The suspension shall be revoked, and the guru shall be restored to his original position; or

There shall be a probationary period with a program of rectification as described under probation above, with or without restoration of service position during the period of probation; or

It is not expected that the guru can be rectified within a reasonable period of time, and therefore it will be considered if he will remain as an ISKCON guru.

Removal

Under normal circumstances, a guru will be removed from being a guru in ISKCON only after being put on probation or suspension and not rectifying his situation.

In urgent situations, a guru may be removed from his position as a guru in ISKCON in case of the following:

Any violation of either ISKCON, local, or national laws that endangers ISKCON's stability and security locally, nationally, or internationally and which cannot wait for the usual process of censure, probation, or suspension.

Severe spiritual, philosophical, or moral deviation.

Rebelling against and rejecting the authority of Śrīla Prabhupāda, the GBC Body, or other regional, national or local ISKCON authorities.

Resignation

If a guru in ISKCON wants to change his sannyasa ashrama or his service as an initiating guru, he should first consult the Guru Services Committee.

Section 7: Appeals

If the guru wishes to appeal a decision, he has three months to do so. After that, the decision is final. The guru must first present his appeal to the GBC Executive Committee. The guru's appeal must be made in writing, state all evidence, and reasoning why the decision should be overturned or modified. The guru should also send a copy of his appeal to the Guru Services Committee. If a majority of the GBC Executive Committee agrees, the appeal will be presented to the GBC Body. A decision concerning an appeal will be made by a majority vote of the GBC Body. However, during any appeal, the original decision remains in effect. A guru who does not abide by the decision shall be subjected to penalties according to ISKCON Law.

Grounds for appeal can be based on:

a. an error in applying the legal principles or rules for arriving at the decision (e.g., incorrect standard of proof applied) or
b. an error in fact (e.g., the facts were incorrectly understood by the decision-maker) or
c. on the grounds of procedural irregularity (e.g., inadmissible evidence such as hearsay evidence was accepted by the decision maker) or
d. Severity of sentencing (as referenced in section six—Disciplinary Steps—of the Guru Services Policy Manual).