Harmonizing ISKCON's Lines of Authority

Preface

This paper has been voted on by the GBC and is now an official GBC policy paper. The following offers more about the paper's purpose and scope.

The topic of "Lines of Authority" is a heritage or legacy issue. By "heritage" or "legacy" issues we mean those topics that are of core importance to the future of ISKCON. These are the issues that are going to be relevant for generations to come. How to address them in a way that reflects Srila Prabhupada's intent and purpose will be expressed in papers like this one.

This "Lines of Authority" paper is not the full and final statement on this topic. Rather, it is a good first step. The GBC fully expects that the paper will be updated, made more comprehensive, and improved in the course of time.

Of special importance is the section outlining conduct for gurus, managers, and disci-ples. Starting implementation of these practices now will provide the GBC with valuable feedback on where the paper works and what needs to be adjusted and improved.

History of the Topic

Several years ago the GBC embarked upon developing a systematic plan for the future of ISKCON. They selected several issues of primary importance to the movement and formed committees to discuss those issues. One of the committees was requested to study the divergent lines of authority within ISKCON and suggest a method for settling disagreements between them. The members of this committee were Bhanu Swami, Guruprasada Swami, Prahladananda Swami, Ramai Swami, Sivarama Swami, Badrinarayan Dasa, and, later, Niranjana Swami.

After a thorough discussion, the members of this committee concluded that the most pressing issue to address was the tension created when spiritual masters sometimes act as an independent line of authority within ISKCON.

Focus of the Essay

Hence, this essay will focus exclusively on defining principles that should be followed by initiating or instructing spiritual masters, disciples of initiating or instructing spiritual masters, Zonal GBCs, Regional Secretaries, Temple Presidents, and other ISKCON-authorized managers. The aim is to prevent misunderstandings between spiritual masters and managers, as well as to minimize the influence these potential misunderstandings may have upon devotees under their combined care.

"Spiritual Master" Means Diksa, Siksa, or Both

It should be noted that, from here on, unless specified, whenever we refer to "the spiritual master" we mean both initiating spiritual masters and instructing spiritual masters (including managers who act as such). Additionally, whenever we refer to "spiritual authorities" we mean anyone (spiritual master or manager) whose instructions (siksa) and example have formed the foundation of a devotee's faith in devotional service and who continues to build on that foundation of the devotee's faith.

Authority Within ISKCON

This essay is not a detailed or definitive analysis of ISKCON's management system, nor is it a detailed analysis of guru-tattva—the requisite qualities and duties of a spiritual master and the process of choosing a spiritual master.

The basic premise of this essay is as follows: Whether a devotee is an initiating spiritual master, an instructing spiritual master, a sannyasi, a Governing Body Commissioner, a Zonal Secretary, a Regional Secretary, a Temple President, a congregational leader, or anyone else in a position of authority within ISKCON, the authority bestowed upon that devotee is complete only if he or she follows Srila Prabhupada's instruction to serve in ISKCON under the authority of the GBC Body.

To establish this premise, we feel we need do no more than emphasize that His Divine Grace consistently and clearly established this principle in his teachings, as well as within official documents he himself signed. Srila Prabhupada thus clearly established the GBC as the ultimate managing authority and also indicated that the GBC's jurisdiction includes the responsibility to offer spiritual guidance (siksa) to the whole of ISKCON, including all devotees serving as spiritual masters:

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

Srila Prabhupada: "I am training some, I mean to say, advanced students so that they may very easily take up the charge. I have made them GBC."[1]

In other words, although the GBC is the ultimate managing authority in ISKCON, the GBC's duty is not only to manage but to teach.

Two Lines of Authority

Since every devotee accepts his or her spiritual inspiration from higher authorities, two lines of authority, with their representatives, exist within ISKCON—one is seen as primarily spiritual, while the other is seen as primarily managerial. Both lines of

[1] Room Conversation with Reporter, Los Angeles, June 4, 1976

authority serve their own unique yet interdependent purposes in submission to the orders of our Founder-Acarya. Both are authorized by the GBC to give shelter to devotees under their care. This shelter is given through both instruction and example.

By distinguishing the two lines of spiritual authority in these terms—as primarily spiritual or primarily managerial—we are not suggesting that managerial authority is contrary to spiritual authority. Nor are we suggesting that the spiritual line of authority is somehow more privileged or intrinsically more pure.

"Management is also spiritual activity. . . . It is Krishna's establishment."[2]

"In our preaching work . . . we deal with so much property and money and so many books bought and sold, but because these dealings all pertain to the Krsna consciousness movement, they should never be considered material. That one is absorbed in thoughts of such management does not mean that he is outside of Krsna consciousness. If one rigidly observes the regulative principle of chanting sixteen rounds of the maha-mantra every day, his dealings with the material world for the sake of spreading the Krsna consciousness movement are not different from the spiritual cultivation of Krsna consciousness."[3]

In a spiritual society a manager cannot fulfill his or her duty to manage simply by declaring and enforcing rules. The rules themselves must have a spiritual foundation, and their implementation and enforcement must be applied in accordance with Vaisnava principles. Managers who serve with this understanding will generally carry the full weight of spiritual authority for those under their charge.

We should therefore see the oneness between "spiritual" and "managerial." But there is also some difference, and understanding this simultaneous oneness and difference requires the use of these two distinct terms with their explanations.

The Spiritual Line of Authority

The spiritual line of authority begins with Lord Krishna and continues to Brahma, Narada, Vyasa, and the entire disciplic succession through Srila Prabhupada, our Founder-Acarya. Those who are submissive to our sampradaya and who serve under the authority of the GBC are authorized to give siksa and shelter in this spiritual line, under the auspices of ISKCON. This spiritual line can include Governing Body Commissioners, GBC Zonal Secretaries, spiritual masters, sannyasis, Regional Secretaries, Temple Presidents, congregational leaders, and both traveling and community preachers. In fact, anyone who strictly follows a bona fide spiritual

[2] Room Conversation, January 16, 1977, Calcutta
[3] Srimad Bhagavatam, 5.16.3, purport

master, both by example and precept, can be authorized to represent the spiritual line of authority.

Generally speaking, the most prominent spiritual authority is one's initiating or instructing spiritual master. The scriptures clearly say that devotees should obey and be loyal to their spiritual masters. The spiritual masters thus exert authority over their disciples, and in so doing the spiritual masters are able to train and educate their disciples in the development of bhakti. The spiritual masters, therefore, assume a significant role in giving their disciples the spiritual education and inspiration necessary to advance in Krishna consciousness.

The Managerial Line of Authority

In the managerial line of authority, and in accordance with Srila Prabhupada's instructions, the supervision of the Society and the enforcement of its rules proceed from the GBC. When we use the word "authority" in the context of the managerial structure, we do not mean an absolute, infallible authority—such as the authority of scripture—but the mandate to organize the preaching movement so that it is aligned with the instructions of Srila Prabhupada. To carry out that mandate, his followers have adapted ISKCON's managerial system, given by Srila Prabhupada, to take into account the proliferation of temples, congregational devotees (who are not temple residents), and projects like farms and gurukulas, as well as other favorable organizations and entities. Thus, to better serve this expanding field and its members, this structure presently includes various regional, national, and continental governing bodies consisting of, but not limited to, Governing Body Commissioners, GBC Zonal Secretaries, spiritual masters, sannyasis, Regional Secretaries, Temple Presidents, congregational leaders, and both traveling and community preachers.

Defining the Point of Divergence

Although in an ideal world everything would work according to Srila Prabhupada's vision for ISKCON, we have seen tendencies from those in one line of authority to interfere with those in the other line of authority.

For instance, 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[4] 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.

This scenario creates not only confusion but a spirit of separatism as well. Situations such as these can also become points of contention for managers, although the more junior managers often refrain from directly voicing their grievances because they feel intimidated out of fear of committing offenses, especially to spiritual masters.

On the other hand, there are also managerial authorities who sometimes provide inadequate spiritual care. This can fuel the spiritual master's inclination to intervene by suggesting an alternative for his disciple's association or service.

For instance, managers may sometimes place greater importance on management goals than on sadhana, preaching purely, or the development of purity in the devotional service of those under their care. Managers may even neglect the spiritual development of those within their jurisdiction who do not offer resources to help their managerial vision, even though said managers may have done little to inspire help from them or to empower other authorities to do the same.

Deference to the Managerial Line of Authority

The above-mentioned scenarios cause tension between the spiritual and the managerial lines of authority.

Of course, it is understood that circumstances do arise where there are financially independent devotees who have no managerial connection with locally organized sanghas. Still, it should not be assumed that no effort is being made by local management structures to include every devotee, or aspiring devotee, within their locally managed system of care for congregational devotees.

Therefore, with respect to the service performed by ISKCON managers, a spiritual master should always seek approval from the managers overseeing the area of jurisdiction in which his disciples are living before suggesting a new sangha or service for them, or intervening in other managerial decisions.

Best, of course, is to train the disciples to offer respect to their local managers right from the start of the spiritual–master/disciple relationship. Many ISKCON managers are carrying out the responsibility of maintaining the temples, Deities, book distribution, and other standards given to us by Srila Prabhupada.

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[4] "Dependents" are not only those who are spiritually dependent. There are instances where devotees are also financially dependent upon their spiritual authorities and are financially maintained by the structures the spiritual authorities have themselves created.

"Deity installation means regular worship without fail and for good."[5]

Therefore spiritual masters should teach their disciples to serve Srila Prabhupada's mission by cooperating with their local leaders and managers.

But this does not mean that a manager should assume that he or she has complete freedom to ignore legitimate needs of those under his or her care or that he or she has the freedom to ignore concerns expressed by spiritual masters who ask them to see that their disciples are properly cared for. They should be sensitive to the concerns of the spiritual masters as well as their disciples.

If the spiritual master still strongly feels that the level of care for his disciples within the local management structure is inadequate, taking into account the level of commitment and responsibilities being asked of them (his disciples), then he may appeal on their behalf to the higher levels of management, the local GBC, or other ISKCON avenues of appeal, as listed later in this paper.

More on this point will be addressed later. But before we do that, we will first briefly discuss the topic of faith. Those in both lines of authority would be well served to consider the relevance of faith to the broader issues being discussed here.

Authority Is Built on the Continuous Development of Faith

ISKCON's greatest asset is the faith of its members. Even if there are no temples, no projects, no income, and only a few followers, if there is faith, there will be prosperity, in the true sense of the term. Consider what Srila Prabhupada has written in the following letter:

"There is a proverb in Sanskrit literature that enthusiastic persons achieve the favor of the Goddess of Fortune. In the Western part of the world there is tangible example of this slogan. People in this part of the world are very much enthusiastic in material advancement and they have got it. Similarly, according to the instructions of Srila Rupa Goswami, if we become enthusiastic in spiritual matters, then we also get success in that way. Take for example, I came to your country in ripe old age, but I had one asset: enthusiasm and faith in my Spiritual Master. I think these assets only are giving me some lights of hope, whatever I have achieved so far with your cooperation."[6]

And in his purport to "Bhagavad-gita As It Is" 9.3, Srila Prabhupada writes: "Faith is the most important factor for progress in Krishna consciousness. . . . It is only by faith that one can advance in Krishna consciousness."

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[5] Letter to Sivananda, 2 September 1971

[6] Letter to Jaya Govinda, Tittenhurst, 15 October 1969.

Those in the spiritual line of authority should preach and behave in such a way that they nourish and protect their dependents' faith in pure devotional service, in our sampradaya, in Srila Prabhupada, and in ISKCON, including its management. Spiritual masters also have the added responsibility of nourishing and protecting ISKCON's managers' faith that they (the spiritual masters) are fit representatives of the spiritual line of authority. If the spiritual masters act in a contrary way, they will erode the faith of others.

Conversely, those in the managerial line of authority should manage, preach, and behave in such a way that they build and sustain the trust of those in the spiritual line of authority and their disciples. By the managers showing genuine concern for the devotees under their care, the spiritual masters will then naturally encourage their disciples to assist the manager in his service. But if managers act in a way contrary to spiritual principles, in conflict with the spiritual interests of those devotees for whom they are responsible, that will also erode others' faith.

Therefore, to safeguard the faith of all of ISKCON's members, it is necessary that we delineate clear principles for both lines of authority to follow.

Spiritual Masters Are Not Independent

To further clarify the need to introduce well-defined principles, we will examine the position of spiritual masters within the managerial structure of ISKCON.

When Srila Prabhupada was physically present, he was ISKCON's sole initiating spiritual master, its preeminent siksa guru, and the supreme managerial authority, superior to the GBC:

"[…]we are managing our Krishna Consciousness Movement by the Governing Body Commission, GBC. We have got about 20 GBC's looking after the whole world affair, and above the GBC I am there. Below the GBC there are the temple president, secretary, treasurer in every centre. So the temple president is responsible to the GBC and the GBC is responsible to me. In this way we are managing.."[7]

In Srila Prabhupada's physical absence the structure is now somewhat different. His Divine Grace instructed that the GBC should be the ultimate managing authority for ISKCON. At the same time he indicated that the Society should have multiple spiritual masters:

"Anyone following the order of Lord Caitanya under the guidance of His bona fide representative can become a spiritual master, and I wish that in my absence all my disciples become the bona fide spiritual master to spread Krishna Consciousness throughout the whole world."[8]

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[7]Letter to: Vasudeva, New Vrindaban, 30 June, 1976
[8]Letter to Madhusudana, Navadvipa, 2 November 1967.

This gives rise to a challenging situation. Many spiritual organizations have one spiritual master operating as the sole head of the institution, whereas ISKCON has many spiritual masters within one organization, in addition to a "governing body" that operates as the "ultimate managing authority" for the institution as a whole. Those serving as spiritual masters in ISKCON are meant to follow the instructions of Srila Prabhupada and work under the GBC Body.

The spiritual masters are thus obligated to follow the Society's policies and codes of conduct, including those outlined in this GBC-approved paper, and to abide by the decisions of its management. Included within that obligation is the responsibility to inspire their disciples to associate with and serve within ISKCON's already-existing managerial and devotee-care sangas, located within their disciple's area of residence rather than only inspiring them to associate with themselves (the spiritual masters) or with their sangas and projects that have no connection with the ISKCON zonal management structure.

Disciples Should Avoid Creating Conflict Between Their Authorities

Disciples should also understand the greater picture within ISKCON. Certainly a spiritual master may be more spiritually advanced than any given GBC member or any other ISKCON manager (while there may also be cases where the local GBC or ISKCON manager may be more spiritually advanced than a particular spiritual master).

Nevertheless, concerning the spiritual management of the Society, as we have already clearly shown, Srila Prabhupada invested authority in the GBC and its individual members and in other ISKCON managers.

If a disciple has the mistaken conviction that his or her spiritual master is above the GBC and ISKCON’s laws and policies, that should be corrected by the spiritual master and other authorities. Otherwise, that misconception may lead to actions which create conflict between his or her spiritual and managerial authorities

Indeed, all disciples should follow their ISKCON authorities in the same way that all initiating and instructing spiritual masters should follow their own authorities within ISKCON.

By both example and precept, therefore, all spiritual masters should not only educate and train their disciples in the development of bhakti but should also educate and train them about their relation to the managerial structure of ISKCON, as well as about the spiritual masters' own relation to that structure.

Principles Being Introduced

Education of guru's disciples

It is the responsibility of the spiritual masters within ISKCON to help every one of their disciples clearly understand the following:

1) The spiritual master draws his authority from his fidelity to Srila Prabhupada. This includes fidelity to Srila Prabhupada's order to work within his mission, ISKCON.

2) The spiritual master is a member of ISKCON and, as such, is accountable to the collective will of its leadership, the GBC Body.

3) The spiritual master does not derive any specific right or prerogative over ISKCON resources simply by dint of his being a spiritual master. Moreover, the spiritual master should not misuse his rights and prerogatives over his disciples.

4) The disciples should follow their ISKCON authorities in the same way that all initiating and instructing spiritual masters set an example by following their own ISKCON authorities.

5) Disciples have the essential task of surrendering to Krishna through the spiritual master, and included within this task is recognizing and respecting other superiors within ISKCON's management who are helping them in their process of spiritual progress.

6) Spiritually mature managers may be the main siksa gurus for devotees who are not their initiated disciples, and such relationships are to be fully encouraged by the initiating spiritual masters.

Conduct of gurus

Moreover, to show respect toward the managerial line of authority and to help nurture and protect managers' faith in the spiritual line of authority, every spiritual master should:

1) When first visiting or preferably before arriving at a recognized ISKCON temple or preaching center, ask the local manager how he (the spiritual master) may serve that yatra during his visit (rather than the spiritual master only pursuing his own agenda).

2) Before planning a visit to a zone or region where there is no local temple or preaching center, first ask the Zonal GBC if there is a vision local leaders have for that place or region which he (the spiritual master) could serve.

3) If there is a disagreement in terms of managerial decisions, do his best to cooperate with the relevant authority. If no agreement can be reached, then the spiritual master should defer to the decision of the relevant authority, with the option of appealing to higher authorities if necessary.

Duties of Managers

To build cooperation within ISKCON, show respect for the spiritual line of authority, and help nurture and protect the faith of spiritual masters and their disciples in the managerial line of authority, all managers should:

1) Be receptive to advice given by initiating spiritual masters and other itinerant preachers visiting their area of jurisdiction, especially on matters concerning devotee care.

2) Protect the faith that their dependents have in pure devotional service and in the principle of accepting and serving an initiating spiritual master and instructing spiritual masters.

3) Encourage and support a system of devotee care (i.e., counselor system, brahminical advisory board, etc.) within their sphere of management.

4) Assure that the managers in their line of authority are themselves trained in the principles of devotee care.

5) Inform visiting spiritual masters about the spiritual health and overall well-being of their disciples.

6) Encourage and help visiting spiritual masters and other itinerant preachers to reach out to those disciples who are in need and who would be most responsive to their help.

7) Insure that there is an equitable system for initiation recommendations which does not condone unwarranted pressure or manipulation from the local management for managerial gains.

Summary

To promote the full flourishing of devotees' spiritual lives, Srila Prabhupada created for ISKCON a managerial structure with clear lines of authority. Every member of ISKCON should respect this structure and learn to work within it. The goal of the managerial structure is spiritual: to facilitate the spiritual advancement of ISKCON's members through association with devotees, opportunities for service, and effective preaching strategies. Simultaneously, ISKCON affirms the fundamental importance of accepting initiation from a bona fide spiritual master.

Of paramount importance, of course, is our Founder-Acarya, Srila Prabhupada, who is the initiating spiritual master of many devotees in ISKCON and the foremost instructing spiritual master of every devotee, now and in the future. Also important are the many initiating and instructing spiritual masters now serving in ISKCON.

All spiritual masters and their disciples should likewise appreciate the importance of the many managers in our society, who help guide and train disciples and oversee the facilities ISKCON provides for their spiritual advancement. All spiritual masters and their disciples should work cooperatively within ISKCON's managerial system, both to benefit themselves spiritually and to help the Society flourish.

This cooperative, mutually respectful spirit is the best way to preserve the Society's unity, please Srila Prabhupada, and expand the sankirtana mission.

In the mood of Lord Caitanya, Srila Prabhupada desired that the sankirtana movement be spread all over the world, "to every town and village." He demonstrated that desire by his constant traveling, writing, and speaking. He requested his disciples to open centers far and wide, distribute his books, arrange for attractive festivals, distribute prasada, etc. It was Srila Prabhupada's desire that ISKCON continue to expand, to rise as the benediction moon of Lord Caitanya's mercy.

It is for this purpose that Srila Prabhupada established ISKCON as a spiritual institution with a managerial structure. The purpose of this structure is to maintain the standards he established, to offer shelter and spiritual nourishment to the devotees, and to support and increase the sankirtana mission. To please Srila Prabhupada by delivering the mercy of Sri Sri Gaura-Nitai to the conditioned souls, everyone within ISKCON—spiritual masters, disciples, and managers alike—should work cooperatively within this structure.

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