

A Q&A Synopsis of Honoring the Law of Disciplic Succession

This is a synopsis of the paper Honoring the Law of Disciplic Succession: a pañcarātrika perspective on the appointment of dīkṣā-gurus in ISKCON, by Kṛṣṇa-kīrti Dāsa, Dāmodara Dāsa, Dāmodara Caitanya Dāsa and Kamala Caraṇa Dāsa. For further details and full pramāṇas, please refer to this paper. Hyperlinks provided.

Your servants, the authors.

Are there any direct scriptural evidences that could override all other opinions and establish authoritatively that initiating in presence of one's own spiritual master is not allowed within ISKCON's paramparā?

The answer is no. The *pañcarātras* allow gurus to appoint their fully qualified disciples as gurus in their presence. The *Nāradya-saṁhitā*¹ says—

“Then he (guru) should say (to his disciple) ‘Kindly accept this *ācāryatvam* as now is being bestowed upon you by me. As up until now I have been accepting disciples, similarly you also start accepting disciples.’ Thus, accepting *ācārya-pada* (position of *ācārya*) from his guru, this disciple is instated in the position of guru.”

In the *Nārada-pañcarātra*, there are two chapters in the *Jayākhyā-saṁhitā* that deal with identifying the qualities of an *ācārya* within a disciple and appointing him as guru. A similar description is found in the *Sātvata-saṁhitā* and other *saṁhitās* of the *pañcarātras*. An absolute prohibition would contradict them.

Then why did Śrīla Prabhupāda give so much emphasis to the etiquette that one should not accept disciples in the presence of one's spiritual master?

Śrīla Prabhupāda was concerned that his disciples first be complete in their training. As Śrīla Prabhupāda has established this etiquette as “The Law of Disciplic Succession”² (henceforward, TLODS), his successors cannot transgress it without committing an offense. However, Śrīla Prabhupāda also said—“Yes. I shall choose some guru. I shall say, ‘Now you become *ācārya*. You become authorized.’ I am waiting for that. You become all *ācārya*. I retire completely. **But the training must be complete.**”³ Thus, one whose training is complete is an exception to “The Law of Disciplic Succession.”

How do we know when the training is complete for someone in order to become an ācārya?

From the *pañcarātras*, on which ISKCON's initiations are based. One who is an *uttama-adhikārī* in the *pañcarātrika-vidhi*⁴ and at least a *madhyama-adhikārī* according to *bhāgavata-vidhi*, is to be considered complete in his training.⁵ Thus, if at all one is to appoint his disciple as guru in his presence, he must do it in strict accordance with *pañcarātras*, strictly following the process of evaluation of his disciple.

¹ ācāryatvaṁ grhāṇedaṁ mayā-dattaṁ tavādhunā | yathāham-adya-prabhṛti śiṣyānugrahakṛt-tathā || kuruṣva tvamapi hy-evaṁ śiṣyāṇāmapyanugrahaṁ | guroḥ sakāśāl-labdhvāsau tadācārya-padaṁ tataḥ ||10.31-2||

² Letter to Tuṣṭa-kṛṣṇa, Delhi, 2 Dec. 1975.

³ Room conversation, 22 Apr. 1977, Bombay.

⁴ Levels of devotees mentioned for different are not the same. For relative positions of *uttama*-, *madhyama*-, and *kaniṣṭha*-*adhikārīs* of different *vidhis*, refer to Appendix I

⁵ For evidences that ISKCON's initiations are based on *pañcarātrika-vidhi* go to section 6 and Appendix III

Adhikāra or eligibility is very important. The *adhikāra* of most, if not all, of the candidates for becoming guru will be on the platform of *vaidhi-sādhana-bhakti*,⁶ and thus strict adherence to *pāñcarātri*ka rules is required. Qualification according to *bhāgavata-mārga* like preaching needs to also be added but should not be considered a replacement for the *pāñcarātri*ka requirements.

So, according to *pāñcarātri*ka-vidhi, how are *ācāryas* prepared by the guru and appointed?

The initiation process and the process for appointing them as initiating gurus is described in *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*, and these are based on the *Pañcarātras*, especially *Jayākhyā-saṁhitā* of *Nārada Pañcarātra*.

The *Pañcarātras* give detailed instructions on the disciple's levels of advancement, starting from the point of first initiation (technically called *samayī*) passing through the stages of *putraka* and *sādhaka*,⁷ and ultimately reaching the level of *ācārya*. At this point, through the *abhiṣeka* ceremony, his own guru coronates him as a *dīkṣā-guru*. Each level is elaborated with qualities that should be seen in disciples before their guru coronates them to successively higher levels, culminating at the level of *ācārya*.

*Pāñcarātri*ka-vidhi requires that disciples have a high level of mastery over the *śāstras*. This is in line with Śrīla Prabhupāda's desire—whenever he has stated that he wants his disciples to become gurus, he has said that they must pass a series of exams, which requires a high mastery over the books of Śrīla Prabhupāda, whose books authoritatively present the conclusions of all the *śāstras*.

How do the Śrī- and Mādhva-sampradāyas appoint dīkṣā-gurus?

The below examples show that institutions play a significant role in appointing *ācāryas*. As a precedent for ISKCON in providing institutional oversight for its own gurus, the practice is ancient and widespread.

- **Śrī Sampradāya**
 - Successor gurus are selected by the current guru, after seeing their qualities.
 - In case a guru passes away before appointing successors, a formal or informal committee with a relationship to the departed *ācārya* may appoint successors.
 - On their guru's order, successor gurus may start giving initiations during their own guru's lifetime.
- **Mādhva Sampradāya**
 - Every *maṭha* guru from the eight primary *maṭhas* in Udupi must appoint his successor well before he passes away.
 - The system of *dvandva-maṭha* (paired-maṭhas, established by Madhvācārya himself) safeguards against an *ācārya* dying before he appoints his own successor.
 - Example: Pejāvara Maṭha and Kāñīyoor Maṭha are *dvandva-maṭhas*. If somehow the Kāñīyoor maṭha's guru passes away without leaving a successor, then the guru of the Pejāvara Maṭha appoints the successor for the Kāñīyoor Maṭha.
 - *Sannyāsa*-giving ceremony itself confers the *adhikāra* for becoming a guru.

⁶ For details, please see section 1: *Adhikāra* of the Society

⁷ This is a technical nomenclature and not to be misunderstood with the practitioner of *sādhana-bhakti*

Why isn't ISKCON's current process for approving gurus along with the guru's blessings adequate to appoint a disciple as an *ācārya*?

The point is that if we are going to do something our *ācārya* never told us to do, then we have to do it according to the appropriate *vidhi*, rules and regulations from the *śāstras*, that we are eligible to follow. While physically present, Śrīla Prabhupāda never appointed any of his disciples as *dīkṣā-guru*, nor did he instruct his disciples that they could do so after taking their own disciples. With the Law of Disciplic Succession, he said quite the opposite. Therefore, if we are going to do something that Śrīla Prabhupāda never specifically instructed us to do, then it has to be strictly according to some *vidhi*, *bhāgavata*- or *pāñcarātri**ka-vidhi*. Otherwise, if we are neither following our *ācārya* nor any *vidhi*, then whatever we are doing is against the principles of devotional service.

Since initiations in ISKCON are governed by *pāñcarātri**ka-vidhi*, then the qualities of a candidate and procedures needed for appointing the candidate as *ācārya* must follow *pāñcarātri**ka-vidhi* as given in *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* and *Nārada Pañcarātra*. Currently, ISKCON's procedures are not in line with what is required for a guru to appoint his disciple as *ācārya*. Therefore, if ISKCON is to adopt this practice, then it must bring its requirements and procedures in line with the *pāñcarātri**ka-vidhi*. Only then may disciples be legitimately appointed as *ācārya* in the presence of their gurus.

What would ISKCON have to do for gurus to be able to legitimately appoint disciples according to *pāñcarātri**ki* standards?

There are a number of things, the most important of which are:

- *Pāñcarātri**ka-vidhi* requires that to become *ācārya* one must be an *uttama-adhikārī* devotee. (So does Śrīla Prabhupāda.)
- Being an *uttama-adhikārī* requires that a candidate be not only have strong faith but that he is *śāstra-yukti*, expert in the *śāstras*, according to criteria specified in the *Pañcarātras*.
- This requirement can be fulfilled by systematic training in Śrīla Prabhupāda's books and tested (e.g. Bhaktivedānta exam, etc.), but ISKCON has not yet produced that standard of training.
- Future candidates must be trained in *śāstra* to the level stipulated in the *pañcarātras*. The current ISKCON process of vetting gurus is biased toward promoting *madhyama-adhikārī* gurus, devotees with above-average knowledge of the *śāstras* relative to the rest of ISKCON but not objectively proficient to the standard required by *pāñcarātri**ka-vidhi*.
- The general pool of gurus and guru-candidates in ISKCON needs to become *uttama-adhikārī*. Right now, the general pool fits the *madhyama-adhikārī* profile.
- Characteristics examined for guru-candidates and procedures and ceremonies for appointing them must be brought in line with *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* and *Nārada Pañcarātra*.

Until these shortcomings are rectified, even candidates who are factually on the *uttama-adhikārī* level need to follow TLODS and hence must wait until their own guru passes on before being permitted to accept disciples.

Can you give a formal, summary statement that captures these recommendations?

An *ācārya* may appoint a disciple as *ācārya* only if his disciple is an *uttama-adhikārī* according to *pāñcarātri-vidhi* and at least a *madhyama-adhikārī* according to *bhāgavata-vidhi*. The process for preparing and appointing such an *ācārya* must also be according to *pāñcarātri-vidhi*. Otherwise, the appointment would transgress the Law of Disciplic Succession, which states that one may only accept disciples in his guru's absence or departure.

This is presented in section 1, “Should a disciple of a living guru be allowed to initiate his own disciples?” of the paper *Honoring the Law of Disciplic Succession: a pañcarātri perspective on the appointment of dīkṣā-gurus in ISKCON*. Therein a full discussion is given.

Minority Opinion: As a general practice, gurus with GBC oversight should appoint disciples as *ācārya*.

- Does not violate TLODS etiquette because it is on the order of the guru. TLODS violated only when a disciple tries to initiate without the guru's order.
- Gurus on *vaidhi-bhakti* platform are permitted only to accept a limited number of disciples. (See CC Madhya 22.118.)
- Strictly following TLODS creates a situation of having a small number of gurus each with a large number of disciples. But these gurus do not have the *adhikāra* to accept so many.
- Gurus have more intimate knowledge of their disciple than the institution, so the GBC process should give more authority to guru for appointing his disciple as *ācārya*.

Points in the majority opinion requiring qualification (must be *uttama-adhikārī*, expert in *śāstra*, etc.) still apply, but practically there will be no waiting for those conditions to be more generally fulfilled. Those will be implemented gradually.

Other benefits of allowing gurus to appoint disciples as *ācārya* who can accept limited numbers of disciples include:

- Protecting themselves from deviation or falling down by not becoming overwhelmed with his disciples' sinful reactions.
- Improving the quality of their disciples because gurus can be more discriminating about who to accept give more time to train the ones he has.
- Reduces ceremonial pomp in guru worship that competes with worship of Śrīla Prabhupāda.
 - In Śrī Sampradāya, *ācāryas'* *Vyāsa-pūjās* are not celebrated with pomp, but Śrī Rāmānuja's is. And that's consciously done to keep him in the center of their society.
- Safeguards the *paramparā* by limiting unqualified disciples.
 - In a part of his commentary to *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* (which Śrīla Prabhupāda quotes in CC 2.22.118) Śrīla Jīva-gosvāmī says— “this indicates not to accept unqualified disciples in order to increase one's sampradāya because that will pollute the knowledge of the sampradāya and will also destroy the *sampradāya*.”

Shared opinion between majority and minority: *the current pace of expanding the number of gurus should be slowed in favor of putting in place the institutions and training to first ensure candidates are uttama-adhikārīs.*