

"I am a member of ISKCON." Srila Prabhupada

Dear followers of Srila Prabhupada,

Please accept my humble obeisances! All Glories to Srila Prabhupada!

ISKCON is at a crucial juncture in its history. 'Who is the head or captain of ISKCON?' Shall we choose the ISKCON Governing Body (GBC) or shall we choose our ISKCON Founder-Acarya His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (Srila Prabhupada) as the captain of the ISKCON ship? The answer may seem to be obvious to some, but unfortunately not to others.

At the upcoming Mayapur GBC meetings in February, the GBC has to accept or reject a proposal to amend ISKCON's legal and official documents which give conflicting answers to this vital question. The proposal is an attempt to help the GBC Body accommodate itself to the personal membership of Srila Prabhupada. The proposal is attached as a PDF file and this letter is just to bring awareness to it.

I risk appearing outspoken, but in my understanding without first recognising and establishing Srila Prabhupada's constitutional rights in ISKCON, our well-intentioned strategic planning attempts are like building sand castles on a sea beach. That will not fulfill Srila Prabhupada's desire to fulfill Lord Caitanya's prediction:

pr̥thivīte ache yata nagarādi grāma sarvatra pracāra haibe mora nāma "In all the villages and towns all over the world, everywhere, this sankirtana movement will be preached." [CB Antya-khanda 4.126] That is His prediction. So by the grace of Lord Caitanya, this movement is already introduced in the Western countries, beginning from New York. Our sankirtana movement was first introduced in New York in 1966. At that time I came and began to chant this Hare Krsna mantra in Tompkins Square. I was chanting there for three hours with a small mrdanga (drum), and these American boys assembled and gradually joined, and so it is increasing.

ref/ SSR 5d: Krsna Consciousness -- the Yoga for the Modern Age

In this regard there is an anecdote from “Srla Prabhupada Nectar” by Satsvarupa Das Goswami who relates how in Hawaii Srila Prabhupada was challenged “Well, are you ISKCON?”, Srila Prabhupada replied, “***I am a member of ISKCON***” and indicated that other devotees were also.

Was Srila Prabhupada being humble or was he stating a constitutional fact that is even true today after his samadhi? The latter is true because we accept the authority of scripture that our *senapati-bhakta* or commander-in-chief, Srila Prabhupada, is transcendently situated like Narada Muni.

Our daily temple songs by Visvanath Cakravarti Thakura and Narottama Das Thakura, “*Guruvastakam*” and “*Guru Vandana*” are sung in the present tense and confirm the continued existence of Srila Prabhupada in both his vani and vapu forms.

In his well-known poem on the passing away of Thakura Haridasa, Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura writes

*“He reasons ill who says that Vaishnavas die / When thou art living still in Sound!
The Vaishnavas die to live and in living try / To spread the holy name around!”*

Similarly in his lecture in Atlanta on the Appearance Day of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta - March 2, 1975, Srila Prabhupada says:

“But I had full faith that My Guru Maharaja is with me. I never lost this faith. And that is fact. There are two words, vani and vapuh. Vani means words, and vapuh means this physical body. So vani is more important than the vapuh. Vapuh will be finished. This is material body. It will be finished. That is the nature. But if we keep to the vani, to the words of spiritual master, then we remain very fixed up. It doesn't matter.”

The question then arises what are Srila Prabhupada’s constitutional rights as a member of ISKCON? Isn’t it very simple? Srila Prabhupada still has the same constitutional rights as he had before his samadhi. As our eternal spiritual father, he naturally expects to be consulted and obeyed by all members of ISKCON and in exchange he gives us his mercy to go Back to Godhead. As such, we have the right to consult Srila Prabhupada and the duty to quote his words to justify our actions and administrative decisions. But do we have enough faith to stand up and defend Srila Prabhupada’s constitutional rights as a member of ISKCON?

The present wordings of ISKCON's documents betray our wavering faith that Srila Prabhupada is a transcendental person with his rights as a member of ISKCON. Our documents contradict one another. For instance, in the ISKCON Law Book, Oath of Allegiance and Declaration of Will Srila Prabhupada is firmly established as the 'supreme authority' of ISKCON and the GBC is designated as the "ultimate managing authority" of ISKCON. But the "Memorandum of Association" of the ISKCON Governing Body Society dated 1992 states that its object is to act as Srila Prabhupada's "natural legal and spiritual successor". In the recent GBC Press Publication "Foundational Document Srila Prabhupada the Founder-Acarya of ISKCON" (FA) p82 the GBC twice claims itself as Srila Prabhupada's "chosen successor at the head of ISKCON". This claim is beyond its management powers to make or in legal terms is *ultra vires*.

The proposal to be submitted to the GBC aims to amend these and other confusing statements in favour of recognizing Srila Prabhupada's supreme authority as an active member of ISKCON.

How did these discrepancies come about? Did they arise from our feelings of separation from Srila Prabhupada's vapuh, or out of our incompetence, or out of legal expedience or perhaps out of a conspiracy? Whatever the answers are, the fact still remains that in all ISKCON documents, the subject matter of HOW the GBC Body is to approach, consult and follow Srila Prabhupada is not fully explained. Practically speaking the ISKCON managers (the arms department of ISKCON) are not accustomed to trying to consulting Srila Prabhupada (the head).

Do our democratic procedures in the GBC meetings amount to consulting Srila Prabhupada? Can we insure that Srila Prabhupada will be pleased to guide us and approve our resolutions simply because we follow the rules and sadhana practices and have small kirtans and readings before our GBC meetings? Several times before his samadhi, Srila Prabhupada overruled the GBC decisions and even disbanded the GBC. Have Srila Prabhupada's rights been rescinded since his samadhi? No. If we really accept Srila Prabhupada as ISKCON's supreme member, we cannot minimize or supercede his rights, otherwise ISKCON can go on the rocks without Srila Prabhupada being allowed to act as the captain of the good ship ISKCON.

Some devotees may claim that "putting Srila Prabhupada in the centre of ISKCON" has already been dealt with in the GBC's own FA book. Certainly the author of FA

Ravindra-Svarupa, with his amazing historical research and literary genius has taken us all a long way to appreciating Srila Prabhupada as the Founder-Acarya of ISKCON. We must be very grateful to the GBC for this.

Nevertheless, with a straw in my mouth, whilst following in the author's footsteps to glorify Srila Prabhupada, I feel duty bound to say that FA is tinged with mayavada or impersonalism. Why? Because it glorifies Srila Prabhupada with faint praise. It does not go so far as to declare that Srila Prabhupada is a living transcendental person in his vani and vapuh forms who is entitled to his full rights in ISKCON as its head and Founder-Acarya. As such Srila Prabhupada's position in FA is being relegated to being, a "presence", an "inescapable predominance", "the soul of ISKCON" or a symbol of unity. What is more on page 82, FA actually claims twice that the GBC supercedes Srila Prabhupada, as his "chosen successor at the head of ISKCON". I request my readers to read FA for themselves to see how the the suggested amendments will correct this.

Some members of the GBC may see me as a disobedient, over-critical, eccentric simpleton clown with my impractical ideas in the clouds of my Changing Bodies diorama hat. But is Srila Prabhupada being simple when he teaches us that the managers, or arms department of human society must humbly approach and consult the head department the brahmanas?

"Just as all parts of the body cooperate to keep the body fit, in the ideal state all sections of society cooperate under the leadership of the brahmanas. Comparatively, the head is the most important part of the body, for it gives directions to the other parts of the body. Similarly, the ideal state functions under the directions of the brahmanas, who are not personally interested in political affairs or administration because they have a higher duty."

ref/ Journey of Self Discovery 7.1: Plato: Goodness and Government

What is the difficulty? Why can't we be simple and apply this in ISKCON where the head member is Srila Prabhupada in his vani and vapu forms? In the presence of our father, Srila Prabhupada, isn't it childish to pretend to be independent authorities? Even though we may be ISKCON gurus on the GBC, how can we get puffed up, if, as students or monitor gurus in Srila Prabhupada's class, we always remain ready to bow down at his lotus feet? Otherwise if we don't, I humbly submit to ISKCON leaders, our parampara will be broken.

So what to do practically? The managers of ISKCON have to find ways to seek out and consult the brahminically qualified devotees in the ISKCON diaspora who are well versed and loyal to Srila Prabhupada's vani form. For instance, Vanipedia and its team could be consulted as a kind of informal brahminical advisory Council which nevertheless remains independent from ISKCON management. Vanipedia can compile many books on all the topics covered by Srila Prabhupada's words. These compilations can contain objective summaries which ISKCON managers and can be the basis for their decision making. This is one suggestion, but where there is a will there is a way. They can also use internet to conveniently form groups and consult devotees.

So in conclusion, if the GBC accepts the proposal to amend ISKCON's official documents at the upcoming February GBC meetings it will greatly clarify and establish Srila Prabhupada's position in ISKCON. It will be taking a landmark strategic step to establish the "the unity and integrity of ISKCON". Accepting the proposal will be a sign that at last we ISKCON leaders are beginning to question our bad habit of using Srila Prabhupada's name as a convenient brand name to justify our independent decisions. Then the future of ISKCON will be very bright as *"one of the branches of the Caitanya tree"*. (CC Adi 9.19).

Otherwise If the GBC does not accept the amendment proposal it will be disappointing to many members of ISKCON and its diaspora. They will ask how the GBC can continue wielding the authority given to it by Srila Prabhupada without first trying hard to consult Srila Prabhupada and get his approval of their decisions? In my opinion if this is the case then ISKCON will inevitably become another one of the *"useless, dried-up branches of the Vedic religion"*. CC Adi 12.73

The detailed GBC proposal containing sastric evidences is attached as a PDF file. I humbly request all the assembled devotees to please read it, understand what is at stake and advertise it widely to your colleagues and friends, so that our respected ISKCON leaders will be influenced to make the right decision at this critical juncture in ISKCON's history.

Of course, if I am mistaken here, I stand ready to be corrected by evidence from our supreme ISKCON member and Founder-Acarya of ISKCON Srila Prabhupada. I humbly beg forgiveness if in his service I have committed any offences to any of the readers.

Thank you all for taking time to read this,
Hoping that this finds you all hale and hearty,
Your humble servant,
Mahavishnu Swami