

Nitai-zine One
Some reflections on Initiation
(re-edited)

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[This is a corrected and edited version of the very first issue of Nitai-zine. My memory was imperfect when I first wrote this. After all many years had passed since the events described herein. As I thought more about those events I found they began to reappear with more detail. Hopefully, most of the misconceptions and misremembrings have been corrected in this version. I have also tried to pin down the events of Sarasvatī's great admission before Pandit Rāmakṛṣṇa Dās Bābā that he had not actually received initiation from Gaurakiśora Dās Bābā to a more specific time and location. Those details have been added to this version of the account. — Nitai Das]

Recently, among the many other projects I have started and not finished, I was working on Viśvanātha Cakravartin's *Kṛṣṇa-bhāvanāmṛta*, a delightful poem embodying the *rāgānuṅga-bhakti* practice of *smaraṇa* or visualization. The very first verse of the text contains the word *paramparā*, which, among other things, may be translated disciplic succession. The verse reads like this in my translation:

I surrender to the rain-cloud Kṛṣṇa Caitanya, who instantly destroys the darkness of the world and refreshes the whole world through *uninterrupted succession* of showers of his beauty like the beauty of millions of gods of love.¹

It is a nice image. Caitanya is like a rain cloud pouring down his beauty like rain on a dusty, thirsty world. Imposed on this rather poetic, natural view is the word succession (*paramparā*). It seems from one angle to spoil everything. Rain clouds rain indiscriminately, but in Viśvanātha's verse he has left the natural order behind and imposed the idea of succession on the image. Since it doesn't fit the image very easily, he must have had a very good reason for it. Or perhaps the image should be one of lines or bands of rain moving across the landscape the way one sometimes sees them in the summer, an intense, dark-blue downpour soaking a particular area, but leaving the surrounding areas dry. However one imagines it, the meaning seems clear: Caitanya's shower of beauty or personal lustre (*kānti*) is mediated through successions and for us in the Caitanya community this means "disciplic" successions. This verse reminded me of a foolish little book that was sent to me recently. Written by someone named Tripurāri Maharaj (what kind of a Vaiṣṇava name is this, anyway?), it was called *Śrī Guru Paramparā: Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, heir to the esoteric life of Kedarnatha Bhaktivinoda*. The book is full of goofy errors, sophistry, and misunderstandings, but criticizing that silly little book is not the

¹कृष्णभावनामृत, १.१:

श्रीकृष्णचैतन्यघनं प्रपद्ये
सपद्मपद्मस्ततमःप्रपद्यम् ।
पद्मेषुकोट्यर्बुदकान्तिधारा-
परम्पराप्यायितसर्वविश्वम् ॥

point of this essay. The author, however, claims that Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī had received dikṣā (initiation) in the Gaudiya *sampradāya* and this reminded me of my own parting of ways with ISKCON (International Society of Krishna Consciousness).

The main reason for my departure from ISKCON was that I came to believe (and I still believe) that Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī *never* received proper initiation into the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* (community). This revelation absolutely shook my world to pieces. I remember sitting on the roof of ISKCON's Vrindaban guest house the following day sadly watching the sun come up. It seemed like a different sun and the world I saw was not the one I had been familiar with. It was now a strange and frightening one. For weeks I had no idea what I was going to do. The man who broke the news to me was Dr. OBL Kapoor, elder savant of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition and member of the Gaudiya Math (his initiation name in the GM was Ādikeśava Dās). He himself, he confided in me, had fortunately found genuine initiation outside the organization of Bhaktisiddhānta, with the great *bhakta* of the Nitai-Gaura Rādhē Śyām tradition,² Śrī Gaurāṅga Dās Bābā.³

Even though I greatly respected Dr. Kapoor, I refused to accept what seemed to me to be extremely bad news on his word alone. I interviewed others and did my own research, but everywhere I turned I found the course led to the same unbelievable conclusion. Bhaktisiddhanta had been refused initiation by Gaurakīśora Dās Bābāji and since he had insulted his father's guru, Śrī Bipin Bihari Goswami,⁴ his enormous ego and rather sharp tongue closed the doors of Kṛṣṇa's realm to him and to those who have depended on him for guidance. When he was called on his lack of initiation by one of the Caitanya tradition's greatest scholar-practitioners of the last century, Pandit Rāmakṛṣṇa Dās Bābā, who was universally respected and honored by Vaiṣṇavas of all the *sampradāyas* (communities) in Vrindaban at that time, he turned his venom on the *bābā* who were following the only recognized form of renunciation in the Caitanya tradition and on the caste Goswami community who were the preservers of the Caitanya tradition for centuries. This has had a profound effect on the functioning of Gaudiya Math (GM) and all its children, one of which is ISKCON. More will be said about this side of the problem in future installments of this *e-zine*.

Why did I come to believe that Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī was never initiated? This was almost universally the reason ex-members of the Gaudiya Math gave for their own departures from that organization. I had always been told that after the death of Bhaktisiddhānta in 1937, the Gaudiya Math gradually

²This is the Vaiṣṇava community founded by Rādhāramaṇa Caraṇa Dās Bābā in the middle of the 19th century.

³Dr. Kapoor described for me on one occasion the first time he and his wife met Śrī Gaurāṅga Dās Bābā. They both broke down into tears and each knew individually in their hearts that they had finally found their guru.

⁴I was told that Bhaktisiddhānta then Bimal Prasad, offended Bipin Bihari Goswami by referring to the Goswami in his presence as a "fart sniffer."

disintegrated as a result of the struggle for power and greed. The actual impetus I learned was more principled than that. It was the result of the discovery of the inauthenticity of Bhaktisiddhānta's initiation. The man who began the fracture of the GM was Bhaktiprasāda Purī Dās Goswami, known before his renunciation as Anantavāsudeva Dās, the leader of the GM who was hand-picked by Bhaktisiddhānta himself. His reason was precisely his own discovery of the fundamental flaw in the *paramparā* of the GM. After a four-month long series of lectures on the *Bhakti-sandarbhā* of Śrī Jīva Gosvāmin, begun in Bengal and completed in Vrindaban, he called all the members of the Math together, especially the *sannyāsīs*, and announced his own departure from the institution. He also informed them that their own efforts were in vain. Without the proper initiation of their teacher, Bhaktisiddhānta, the *mantras* he gave them in initiation were useless. The institution of *sannyāsa*, too, the renounced order of life according to the system of *āśramas* or stages in an exemplary Hindu life, which was instituted by Bhaktisiddhānta in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, was also groundless (since Bhaktisiddhānta had given it to himself). He advised all the *sannyāsīs* to go home and get married. Their pursuit of *sannyāsa* was a sham and a waist of time. Most importantly of all he advised them that for their own spiritual good they get properly initiated from an authentic lineage within the Caitanya tradition. This I heard from several aged Vaiṣṇavas in Vrindaban and Nabadwip who knew Purī Dās personally and who left along with him or some time shortly afterwards.

In addition, I did a little research on my own. During one of my visits to Nabadwip I visited the bhajana kutir/mandira of Gaurakiśora Dās Bābāji and spoke with the pūjārī there. I asked him if he knew whether Gaurakiśora Dās Bābāji had any initiated disciples. His answer, after consulting with some of the other elders of the compound, was that, as far as he knew, there were only four, a married couple of modest means and two others, agriculturalists from neighboring villages, none of whom were Bhaktisiddhānta. How he knew this and how reliable his testimony was, I don't know, but taken in conjunction with the other evidence it lends support to the thesis that all that Bhaktisiddhānta got from Gaurakiśora Dās Bābāji were his blessings in the form of a little dust of Nabadwip sprinkled on his head.

The third bit of evidence comes from an eyewitness account. Tripurāri Maharaj claims that there were witnesses to Bhaktisiddhānta's initiation (p. 37). He doesn't mention who they were or even how he knows there were witnesses. We are expected, I suppose, to accept it solely on his authority. His authority is useless, however, and unless he has some evidence, we can treat the witness claim with the doubt it deserves. The eyewitnesses I know of and from whom I heard were eyewitness to Bhaktisiddhānta's admission before Pandita Rāmakṛṣṇa Dās Bābā that he had not received initiation from Gaurakiśora Dās Bābāji. Bhaktisiddhānta was in the habit of visiting Pandit Bābāji during his visits to Vraja since he was without a doubt the most respected of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas of the early 20th century. On one occasion, certainly before 1914 when Gaurakiśora Dās Bābā passed away, Bhaktisiddhānta highly

praised Gaurakiśora Dās in Pandit Bābā's presence. Pandit Bābā asked him if he had received initiation from him. Bhaktisiddhānta said he had received it in dream. Pandit Bābāji said that that was fine, but he should receive it in the flesh as well since that is the only type of initiation accepted as authentic in the Caitanya tradition. Bhaktisiddhānta said he would and ended the visit.

A few years later, in 1917-18, Bhaktisiddhānta returned to Vrindaban, now the *ācārya* of the Gaudiya Math, a famous man with many disciples. He visited Pandit Bābāji again. Bābāji was living at that time at the Bhāgavata-nivāsa *āśrama* on Ramaṇa Reti Road. He had been ill and was there to recuperate. When Bhaktisiddhānta visited him, Pandit Bābā asked him again if he had gotten initiation from Gaurakiśora Dās Bābā. He answered that he had not, at which point Pandit Bābā got extremely angry with him for taking disciples without proper initiation. Pandit Bābāji threw him out of the *āśrama* and Bhaktisiddhānta, fearing damage to his reputation, began his campaign of calumny against the bābās of Vraja and forbade his disciples from meeting with them. This account was given to me by Advaita Das Bābā who was the nephew of Purī Dās and who claimed he had heard it directly from Viṣṇudās Bābā who as a young lad had been there helping Pandit Bābā during his stay at Bhāgavata-nivāsa. Viṣṇudāsa had been in the room during the meeting between Pandit Bābā and Bhaktisiddhānta and heard this exchange personally. Advaita Das Baba was then quite old. He was a *śikṣā* (instruction) disciple of the great *smaraṇa* teacher Manohar Das Baba of Govardhan. When I met him he was the *mahānta* (abbot) of Govinda-kunda, the *āśrama* of Siddha Manohar Dās Bābā. I expressed my anxiety about leaving ISKCON to Advaita Dās Bābā. I knew I would incur Bhaktivedānta Swami's anger if I left ISKCON and sought shelter at the feet of Kiśorīkiśorānanda Dās Bābā as I was thinking of doing. He laughed and assured me that I had nothing to fear from Bhaktivedānta's anger. His exact words were "his anger is powerless." I took that leap shortly thereafter and have never looked back with any regret.

Does all this prove that Bhaktisiddhānta did not receive authentic initiation? It depends on what one means by proof. Some people set the bar so high for proof that by that standard nothing can be proved beyond a doubt. There are still some twisted f**ks who who claim that the Holocaust did not happen because it has not been definitively proven to have happened. I think the preponderance of evidence falls against Bhaktisiddhānta's having received authentic initiation. It is not just a matter of hearsay, as some rather thick and loud demagogues want to claim. The people who actually lived through those events were alive when I was faced my difficult choice and they shared with me their experiences and insights. Moreover, it is absurd to think that Bhaktiprasāda Purī Goswami would have made such a momentous choice based on mere hearsay. He gave up the highest and most honored post in the GM to live a life of seclusion and service in Vrindaban. His life was put in danger because of it and had he not been hidden by some of the Goswamis of the Radharamana Temple in Vrindaban, some of the members of the GM would have killed him. Finally, there is the fact that the mainstream Vaiṣṇava community does not re-

gard ISKCON and GM (IGM) as authentic members of the Caitanya tradition. This is most dramatically demonstrated by the fact that main-streamers do not eat with members of IGM and as far as possible do not associate with them. Is this widespread feeling of the mainstream community towards IGM based simply on hearsay? I think not. It is based on the conviction that IGM is not part of the community of Vaiṣṇavas who trace their tradition back to Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. They are an *apasampradāya*, renegade community.

My advice to ISKCON-men and women and to ex-ISKCON-men and women and to non-ISKCON-men and women is the same as that given to me many years ago by Dr. Kapoor: get yourselves properly initiated. There are several members of authentic Vaiṣṇava *paramparā* around whose lineages are undisputed.

Next month: The second part of the argument: phenomenological evidence that ISKCON has no authentic initiation. Has it really been successful? Has anyone become advanced? What role does the holy name play in the society today? Is all of this consistent with the idea that the inner door to Kṛṣṇa's realm is bolted closed to the members of IGM?