

Reflections on Initiation

Part 2

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Last month (well give or take a few weeks; sorry!) I promised to turn my reflections on initiation in the direction of ISKCON and its success, offering "phenomenological" evidence that it has no authentic initiation. In this installment we will have to grapple with the question of the "success" of ISKCON. ISKCON-men will often cite the success of ISKCON as proof of the power and authenticity of Srila Prabhupada. Viewed objectively, however, a strong argument can be made that ISKCON has not been all that successful and one might extend that argument to its mother organization in India, the Gaudiya Math. A lot, of course, hinges on what is considered success. It is possible to lower the threshold of success so low that anything can be considered success; conversely it is possible to raise it so high that nothing can be considered successful. Obviously, however, some more or less objective standards are needed to evaluate success. I will try to find and apply such standards in three areas that are usually associated with success: size and wealth of the organization, level of advancement of its members, and effect of the organization or its teachings on the awareness or consciousness of the West.

If size and wealth are to be considered evidence of success, then ISKCON will have difficulty demonstrating its success. Compared to many other religious organizations, ISKCON has done no better and in several cases it has done worse. According to several sources, ISKCON had at its peak (mid-1970s?) less than 5,000 full-time members in the United States (Melton, 1982), a number which has dropped to about 3,000 today. The current list of centers provided on ISKCON's own home page has around 75 entries for the United States. According to an independent source, ISKCON currently has about a million followers in the world with about 8,000 full-time followers among them (Chryssides, 1999). Another independent source claims that there are 3,000 core members and about 250,000 "lay" members in the United States (New Religious Movements, University of Virginia, 1998). This might at first seem quite impressive, but how does this stack up with some of the other 20th century religious groups in the United States? Independent sources place the number of followers of the Unification Church, which was founded in 1954 by Rev. Sun Myung Moon, at between one to three million around the world (Chryssides, 1999) with some 10,000 full-time members in the West (Bishop, 1987). Scientology has according to their own account eight million followers, but it turns out that the Scientologists claim as a member anyone who has ever availed themselves of their services (auditing, etc) since the founding of the Church of Scientology in 1954. Dissident former members, however, claim that there are less than 700,000 in the United States. Somewhere between those two extremes lies the actual figure. The most recent estimate places the number of members at 5.6 million worldwide (Chryssides, 1999), but this again is dependent on church publications. Of those, there are around 11,370 full-time members according

to the same estimate. The numbers for Transcendental Meditation vary from around 50,000 in the world (Melton, 1993) to one million in the United States and three million in the world (Occhiogrosso, 1996). Obviously, it is hard to find reliable tallies of any of these groups. Nevertheless, assuming that these figures bear some resemblance to reality, ISKCON when compared with its peers has not turned in a very strong performance. In fact, it seems to have lagged somewhat behind; all of the other religious groups cited here appear to have done better than ISKCON. Or, if one exercises a much warranted skepticism over the figures available, ISKCON has at least done as well but certainly no better. It must be pointed out, however, that the Unification Church and Scientology have been in existence for at least ten years longer than ISKCON and that the former, at least, still has its leader. This hardly amounts to the flooding of the world with *preman* predicted in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Nor is it a stunning display of the superiority of Prabhupada's potency and authenticity. On the basis of the evidence such as it is, one would have to claim at least as much potency and authenticity for the Rev. Moon, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Maharshi. Perhaps this is not the way to recognize ISKCON's success, then. Followers, centers, and wealth could be merely a manifestation of good organizational skills and sound business sense, not empowerment.

Let us consider the advancement of the followers of ISKCON, then. Perhaps this is where the secret of ISKCON's success lies. But we are wandering into the middle of a very slippery quagmire here. How can one tell how advanced a devotee is? The *bhakti* scriptures give examples of symptoms to look for in advanced devotees, but do any of the ISKCONers manifest such symptoms and if so, are they genuine? These are difficult questions to answer. I remember how reassuring it was back when I was a member of ISKCON to think that someone in the society had really made visible advancement. We all believed that Yamuna Devi Dasi, of instance, had reached the level of *bhāva*.¹ This must have been a claim that had originated with Prabhupada. Who would dare to make up such a thing. I at least stood in awe of her when I finally met her years later in Brindaban. What a mind blowing experience then when one day during his daily massage Prabhupada turned to me and asked if I knew Yamuna Devi Dasi. I said that I did and waited expectantly for Prabhupada to praise her for how highly developed and saintly she was. Instead he said: "She has spoiled many *brahmacārīs* and *sannyāsīs*!"² What an earthquake! I felt like the ceiling had fallen down on my head.

So much for past greatness; is there any greatness among the current followers of ISKCON? I am certainly in no position to say since I have purposefully removed myself from all ISKCON association. During the six years I spent as a member of the organization I met no one who I thought had advanced very far and worried a great deal about the rate of my own advancement. I re-

¹*Bhāva* is the stage in the development of *bhakti* in which attraction or feeling for Kṛṣṇa (*Kṛṣṇa-rati*) first appears. It must develop further to reach the stage of *preman*, or fully manifest and experienced love for Kṛṣṇa.

²For those of you too slow to get the meaning here, Prabhupada was saying that she had seduced many *brahmacārīs* (celebrate male students) and *sannyāsīs* (renunciants). Some *bhāva*!

member the ludicrous spectacle of a Brahmānanda Swami stealing money, running off to whore houses in Africa for months, and then crawling back on his hands and knees to Prabhupada's feet begging for forgiveness. Brahmānanda was one of Prabhupada's oldest disciples. Besides that he was bully. I have personal experience of that. I need only mention the names Kīrtanānanda Swami, Bhāvānanda Swami, and Haṃsadūta Swami to provide other stunning examples of ISKCON's failure. Apparently Prabhupada's potency was not strong enough to transform crooks, gay men, and terrorists into well behaved Vaiṣṇavas. I suspect that not much has changed, that there are still no devotees who have advanced beyond the even the lowest rungs of *sādhana-bhakti*. This, if true, is very sad thing and a very strange. One would think that someone in the last forty years would have made some advancement. The only devotees I have ever seen who were on high levels of development were outside of both ISKCON and the Gaudiya Math. One remembers, for instance, Śrī Kṛṣṇacarāṇa Dās Bābā who could no longer attend readings of works on Kṛṣṇa-līlā because tears would start squirting from his eyes uncontrollably, his hair would stand on end and slobber would run down his chin. The other members of the audience would take more notice of him than of the text being read. I never saw this happen to him, but this is how Dr. Kapoor described him to me once. I also recall sleeping outside of Tinkudi Baba's (Kīśorīkisorānanda Bābā) room when I first joined him and waking early in the morning to hear him laughing and talking enthusiastically in his room with someone. When I peeked in I saw that he was alone. Those around him told me that he often did that and that he was talking with Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and the other gopīs. They in addition claimed that Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa were actually there with him. Those around him also claimed that they had at various times seen all of the eight *sāttvika-vikāra*³ appear in his body. Unfortunately, my Bengali was too poor at that time to understand what he said there in his room. Even in my profoundly covered state, however, I could sense that something powerful was going on within and around him.

Can ISKCON boast such advanced devotees? I doubt it. If there are some similarly advanced devotees I would be glad to learn of it. ISKCON doesn't even recognize such things as achievements, though. To ISKCON-men selling more books, building more temples, bringing in more money, making more disciples are the signs of advancement. This is all Prabhupada used to talk about. The wealth of the heart doesn't count for much in ISKCON. ISKCON's full attention is directed outside. My thesis is that this is because the path inside is blocked for ISKCONers and this is because it has no genuine initiation. Initiation opens an inner door and as Tinkudi Baba once said connects one with the powerhouse Kṛṣṇa. If that inner path is blocked by worthless mantras, if that inner door is locked shut, one's attention is forced outside and one is stuck with judging one's success on the basis of external measures. As Baladeva

³These are the eight involuntary physical symptoms of deep emotion: being stunned immobile, perspiring, standing up of body hair, breaking of the voice, shivering, losing color, and fainting. These are generally only found in one who has developed *preman*.

Vidyābhūṣaṇa has said in his *Prameya-ratnāvalī*, quoting the *Padma Purāṇa*:

*yad-uktaṃ padma-purāṇe:
sampradāya-vihīnā ye mantrāste viphalā matāḥ*

As it is said in the *Padma Purāṇa*:
mantras that have no community of transmission (sampradāya) are considered fruitless.

Community of transmission here means disciplic succession. Mantras that are not received through disciplic succession are powerless. ISKCON's mantras have proven useless in transforming the hearts of its initiates. That is anyway how it appears to outside observers like me. Thus, neither from the point of view of material success nor from the point of view of advancement of followers does ISKCON appear to be in any sense empowered.

What about ISKCON's influence in transforming the consciousness of the West? Has not ISKCON had a profound effect in transforming Western culture? Perhaps it is too early to draw any conclusions on this issue, but at present it looks like ISKCON and indeed several of the other religious movements of the latter twentieth century are destined to be mere footnotes to the religious life of the century. I have increasingly noticed how, in the classes I teach, fewer and fewer of the students have ever heard of the Hare Krishna movement. Those who have heard of the movement know next to nothing about its teachings and practices. If a student does know something, it is something negative: that the Hare Krishnas used to harass people in the airports and city streets, forcing books and incense on them and short-changing them whenever possible, or that they were a cult that brain-washed their follows. This is ISKCON's real legacy. Older people associate ISKCON with the kidnapping of kids and scandalous murder cases. Penetrating studies have been done on the psychological profiles of people who join such "fringe" groups as ISKCON, with the objective of getting such people help so that they will not do such things in the future. While much of this hype is based on a misunderstanding of what ISKCON stands for and a corresponding refusal to recognize that similar psychological weaknesses can be found in people who become members of any evangelical or fundamentalist religious group, it nevertheless contributes to the overall cultural perception of ISKCON. Thus, ISKCON and the other groups like it have become manifestations of the feared "other." Very few Americans today would consider it an honor if their sons and daughters became members of ISKCON. In other words ISKCON has given Kṛṣṇa a bad name in the West.

On the positive side, it can be said that groups like ISKCON have served to strengthen and to nourish the pluralism that exists today in American religion and indeed increasingly in religion in other parts of the world. Thus, it can be said that ISKCON has indeed had an effect of the consciousness of the world, but perhaps not the one it hoped to have. The process has not ended yet. The current rise in fundamentalisms is a reaction to the increased strength and visibility of pluralism, to which ISKCON contributed, and may bring about the

ultimate demise of pluralism. Who can guess what repressive order may replace it? (Bush?)

The absence of a genuine initiation may account for the absence of real empowerment in ISKCON, but what about the power of the holy name? Surely that is a factor that would contribute to ISKCON's success. The holy name requires no initiation, knows no rules or limitations. The holy name and the holy named are one and the same and thus the holy name is always empowered. Since ISKCON practices and promotes the chanting of the holy name it must thereby have some connection with that powerhouse you spoke of. If ISKCON has had only moderate success, why hasn't the holy name changed that?

This is indeed an interesting question and that will be the one I tackle next month.

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