

Reflections on Initiation
Part 3

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[This essay was originally published on July 17, 1999 as Nitai-zine (Issue Three). It has been re-edited and polished a bit. My line of argument has changed slightly, largely because of what I have learned since it was written. This essay is substantially the same as the original, however. My views have not changed much since then. — Nitai Das]

Last month I argued that if one examines the empirical evidence, there is no support for the contention that ISKCON and its mother organizations, the Gaudiya Math and its splinters, are empowered as one would expect them to be if they possessed a genuine line of initiation. I used three criteria: material wealth and followers, production of advanced followers, and influence on the consciousness of the time. One needs only to look at the beginnings of the Caitanya movement to see what empowerment looks like. Vast numbers of people became followers, temples were built to house the movement's many deities, numerous followers showed signs of advancement on the path of *bhakti*, and consciousness was profoundly transformed. Within a century a vast literature was created and the influence of that movement was exerted on Bengali literature for several centuries. As an example of the last criterion, one need only recall the huge numbers of songs and poems written in Sanskrit, Bengali, and Braj-bhasha about the love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. So profound and lasting was this transformation of consciousness that centuries later it influenced perhaps Bengal's greatest poet Rabindranath Tagore who, using (maybe the words adopting, adapting, or downright pilfering would be better words to use here) the figures and moods of *bhakti* poetry in his *Gītānjālī*, won recognition from the world as India's first and only Nobel prize winner. Perhaps that prize really belongs to Mahāprabhu and his many poet followers.

Since the "big bang" of those beginnings, however, not much of that magnitude has happened. The universe has continued to expand at a steady rate, but the only major milestone in the last five centuries seems to have been the expansion of the movement beyond the boundaries of India to the rest of the world. Credit for that only partially rests at the feet of Prabhupada (Bhaktivedānta Swami). Other representatives of the Caitanya tradition came West before him, learned and charismatic devotees like Premānanda Bhārati and Mahānābrata Brahmācārī preceded him by over a half a century. Though from our perspective at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, their efforts seem to have failed, in actuality, during their times they met with a good deal of success in spreading the faith. They wrote books and dissertations, produced journals, established temples and āśramas, and gave lectures to hundreds. Premānanda even made numerous disciples whom he took to India with him and who carried on in their own ways after his untimely death. The Gaudiya Math, too, sent representatives like Swami Bon to try to establish the movement in Europe and boasted a few intelligent and high-profile disciples like Sadānanda and Walter Eidlitz, author of several important studies of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. Prabhupada's success may well turn out to be no greater than theirs and more long-lasting.

Still, it is enticing to think that perhaps over the centuries the Caitanya movement became too complacent, too self-satisfied with the rich inner world

it had been given access to. Having been given, by the grace of their living successions, the keys to the inner door in initiation, it became very hard to resist using those keys to enter into the eternal inner world of *līlā*. Why indeed would one want to resist such a thing? Therefore, perhaps Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, Bhaktivedānta Swami, and others like them are to be seen as unwitting instruments in the hands of Mahāprabhu, instruments capable of doing things for the spread of the movement that duly initiated members find very difficult to do. If the inner door is closed and locked, one is forced to live and work among the externals, amidst the money, the followers, the public relations, the publications, the land deals, the lawsuits and the temples. One is funnelled into a life of busy-ness (or business) if the inner eye remains shut. Thus, ISKCON and its parent organizations might be seen as something like loud noise makers, attracting the attention of the people of the world with a carnival-like atmosphere and drawing them to an awareness of the world of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. Once those people have been put in orbit around Mahāprabhu it would be easy for some small percentage of them to make the transition into association with Mahāprabhu's authentic followers. If this thesis is correct, then making this transition, though important for some, is not for everybody. Some must remain locked out in the external realm as part of the carnivals, at least for a few more lifetimes, in order that the process may go on and the sirens may continue their song. This seems to be what has happened and is continuing to happen with IGM (ISKCON/Gaudiya Math).

Maybe something like the scenario outlined above was in Dr. Kapoor's mind when he shattered my safe little ISKCON world by informing me of the absence of initiation in ISKCON and the Gaudiya Math. He himself, as I mentioned before, had been re-initiated already by Gaurāṅga Dās Bābā and I recall quite clearly his emotional description of the day on which he met his initiating guru (Baba). Dr. Kapoor's suggestion for me was that I too take initiation secretly and remain within ISKCON. This was apparently what he had done, since he had kept up his relationships with his old Gaudiya Math god-brothers, kept his GM initiation name, and at least on the surface appeared to be no different from them. When I asked him for initiation, he wisely declined. Instead he recommended Tinkudi Baba as the most advanced of the *bhaktas* in Braj at the time and as the best candidate for my initiating guru. He mentioned other possibilities as well, speaking highly of Kṛṣṇacaraṇa Dās Bābā and others. That was when I began to visit Tinkudi Baba, meeting him for the first time at Cakleshwar on the banks of the Mānasasarovar near Govardhan. But that story is for another installment.

Somehow Dr. Kapoor's advice didn't sit very well with me, however. I had just had my head chewed off a month earlier by Prabhupada in Mayapur over a plan I had devised to create an accredited *guru-kūla* and that in front of many of the GBC. I can still see the smirks on their greasy, self-indulgent faces. His words still ring in my ears, too: "Do you think the world needs more scholars?! No! It needs more devotees!" I never could accept the idea that one could not be both a scholar and a devotee and, quite frankly, I still don't. I felt, therefore, out of place in ISKCON and I considered it somewhat

hypocritical to take initiation secretly from someone else and then pretend to be Prabhupada's disciple still. I began from that time to plan my departure, looking for an opportunity to slip away quietly and unnoticed into the morning mists of Braj. But that too is a story for another time.

Looking back at that time from the present I am convinced I did the right thing. Sure, I could have secretly helped correct ISKCON's impotence by bringing in an authentic initiation line. Perhaps others have done this and many of the mantra now transmitted in ISKCON have been brought to life. There were many rumors of various other disciples of Prabhupada receiving initiation from other Vaiṣṇava like Lalita Prasāda Ṭhākura. My own disciples, if ever I had any, would have been benefitted no doubt and perhaps the worship of that heart-guru (*caittya-guru*) accomplished in the first of the initiation mantras and *gāyatrīs* given in genuine initiation would have helped me guide ISKCON on more wholesome paths. Still, there is a horrible flaw and obstacle at work in ISKCON and its parents that nothing short of complete separation can correct. This flaw is also the strongest evidence against the idea that the Gaudiya Math and ISKCON are instruments in Mahāprabhu's plan. It is to that flaw that we must now turn.

Apart from ISKCON's impotence due to lack of initiation, it suffers from the serious commission of offense to the holy names. Repeating the holy name requires no initiation and has no limits in terms of proper place, time, or practitioner. Anyone can utter or repeat the holy names and reap the benefit of being in the presence of the holy named, Kṛṣṇa, through his holy names. The only obstacle that can interrupt this positive influence is committing an offense to the holy names. That is precisely what has infected the Gaudiya Math and its offshoots (ISKCON). This offense began with Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī himself and is inherited by everyone who counts him or herself a follower of his. First of all in IGM there is the most obvious offense to the holy name, the first listed on the traditional list of ten offenses, blasphemy of the saintly (*sādhunindā*). This began in the Gaudiya Math after Bhaktisiddhānta was severely criticized by Pandit Rāmakṛṣṇa Dās Bābā for not being authentically initiated by Gaurakīśora Dās Bābā (see the my first essay). Sarasvatī's egotistic response was to blast the Bābās one and all and why he was at it why not throw in the caste Goswamis, too. This offensive practice became part of the very institution of the Gaudiya Math and its offshoots. We heard it often enough from Prabhupada in person and in his writings. It became the basis of the instruction to avoid anyone claiming to be a Vaiṣṇava outside of ISKCON. That extended even Prabhupada's own god-brothers from the GM. I understand that Prabhupada eventually realized the seriousness of this offense and for I hear that on his death bed, he called leading members of the Vrindaban Vaisnava community together, his god-brothers and caste Goswamis alike, and asked for their forgiveness. Too little, too late? Who knows. Real Vaiṣṇava are a humble and forgiving bunch.

The really serious offense to the holy name, however, is one that few think recognize. It arises from neglect or disrespect of the guru (*guro-avajñā*), the third offense. Not to take proper initiation is to commit the offense of neglect-

ing the guru and that, too, is a powerful obstacle to the holy name. The great commentator Viśvanātha Cakravartin gave an interesting characterization of the way this offense works in his commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 6.2.9-10. He says:

Some people are always engaging their senses in the sense objects like cows and asses and don't know, even in their dreams, "who is God, what is devotion, who is the guru." Such inoffensive persons are saved even without a guru by repeating the holy name in the manner of a "semblance of holy name" (*nāmābhāsa*) like Ajāmila and others. Others, however, have discriminating knowledge: "Hari is to be worshipped, worship is the way to attain him, the guru is the instructor of that, many people of the past have attained Hari by means of the devotion taught by the guru," and yet, on the basis of claims: "initiation, good practice, and expiation are not needed; the mere touch of this mantra, composed of the name of Kṛṣṇa, on the tongue brings the result," and on the basis of those very examples of Ajāmila and others, they think: "why should I go to the trouble of finding a guru? By *kīrtana* of the holy names alone I will get the Lord." Because of this great offense of neglecting the guru, they will not attain the Lord. However, when that offense becomes eliminated, in that lifetime itself or in another lifetime, they, too, will find shelter at the feet of a guru and reach the Lord."

From this it appears that in some ways it is better not to know about the importance of the guru than it is to know about importance of the guru and not to take shelter of one. I conjecture that this is exactly what Bhaktisiddhānta did. Perhaps he really wanted to take initiation from Gaurkiśora Dās Bābā, but for some reason was unable to and could not find another who met his high standards. That is understandable and even admirable. But to start accepting disciples without have made that initial offering of oneself to Kṛṣṇa in the moment of surrender to a guru, that is inexcusable. Moreover, those who now believe he was not properly initiated or who at least honestly doubt that he was properly initiated and yet are reluctant to get themselves properly initiated suffer from that same offense. The result is the same: the effectiveness of repeating the holy names is impeded. Not until after the offense is destroyed and one has found shelter with an authentic guru does one get Kṛṣṇa.

In conclusion, where do we now find ourselves? Two results have been arrived at concerning the Gaudiya Math and ISKCON: first, they are cut off from the powerhouse by the absence of proper initiation and second neglect of that absence is offensive to the holy name stopping even the holy name from acting to purify and perfect their followers. I noticed this second phenomenon quite dramatically toward the end of my stay in ISKCON. During my last days in ISKCON I was given the position of head pūjārī of the Kṛṣṇa Balarāma Temple in Vrindaban. I decided it would be a good opportunity to do more rounds of japa (chanting on beads). I specifically wanted to try to chant one lakh (100,000 names or 64 rounds on the beads) a day as the scriptures (*Caitanya-bhāgavata*)

recommend. With practice I did reach the level of doing one lakh a day. The result was surprisingly unimpressive, however. I still had high hopes, but I didn't feel that power and that presence that I hoped I would. Later, after I took shelter with Tinkudi Baba, far away from anything ISKCON, and he made it my sole responsibility to chant three lakhs a day and extraordinary things began to happen. The holy name became effective again. At that time I had not received initiation from Bābā yet, but the holy name was having an overwhelming effect on me. That effect or change of heart was indeed what Bābā was waiting for before giving me initiation. The only explanation is that previously, when I chanted a lakh in ISKCON I was guilty of offense by association with offenders and the holy name acted only weakly for me. Only after I left that atmosphere did I begin to feel the great power of the holy name. I will describe this in more detail in the one of the next installments of Nitai-zine.

Before signing off this month, I have to raise the question once more of whether ISKCON and the Gaudiya Math are instruments of Mahāprabhu. There are a number of reasons for answering this question in the affirmative. On the other hand, there are many good reasons to think that if they are instruments they are somehow profoundly flawed, flawed almost to the degree of being useless to Mahāprabhu. It appears that if anything good is to come from the experiences of those of us who have left those organizations and found genuine initiation elsewhere we must be ready to offer our support to those still in those organizations or to those influenced by those organizations in their search for the dimly etched way to the inner bower. Somehow out of all the more highly qualified, more gifted, more intelligent, more highly motivated devotees, only a few have found the way successfully out of that thicket. We owe it to those who showed us great compassion when we needed it and in no way deserved it and to those who sincerely wish to know and follow the path to mark it clearly with the lamps of our own realizations and experiences. In addition, we are bound to offer whatever assistance we can to those who are sincere as we move at our own paces down that path.