

# One Allegiance in Three Features

Allegiance to Guru, to ISKCON, and to Prabhupada

*by Ravindra Svarupa dasa*

*This article is a commentary on the following resolution concerning allegiance in ISKCON which was submitted by Ravindra Svarupa dasa and passed by the GBC on 26 February, 1998:*

**WHEREAS: Allegiance in principle should be one and undivided, yet devotees in ISKCON sometimes feel their allegiance to their spiritual master and their allegiance to ISKCON are not intrinsically related and could become separated;**

**WHEREAS: there is sometimes evidence of irresolution among devotees in ISKCON as to the priorities of their allegiance to their spiritual master on the one hand and their allegiance to ISKCON on the other;**

**WHEREAS: For the strengthening of the devotee's commitment, there is the need for a clear and unequivocal understanding of how our allegiance is one and indivisible;**

**THEREFORE BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED THAT:**

**The GBC hereby issues this statement on allegiance: For all devotees in ISKCON, allegiance to the spiritual master and allegiance to ISKCON must be understood as two manifest features of one and the same indivisible allegiance. The reason for this is that all devotees in ISKCON, whether they act as spiritual masters or not, are equally bound by the order of the founder-acarya Srila Prabhupada, and Srila Prabhupada has enjoined us repeatedly to serve him cooperatively within the framework of ISKCON. ISKCON is the instrument which Srila Prabhupada crafted by his own hands for our service to him, and which, in virtue of his position as founder-acarya, continues to be his manifest body for receiving personal service from us. Consequently, for a devotee to serve the spiritual master in the line of Srila Prabhupada and to serve ISKCON are simply two different aspects of a single service to Srila Prabhupada. Consequently, devotees in ISKCON have only one allegiance, which is manifest in three features: allegiance to the guru, to ISKCON, and to Srila Prabhupada.**

ISKCON devotees find themselves committed to a double allegiance; that is, their allegiance is directed toward two distinct manifest objects. One allegiance is to the spiritual master. The other is to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. These two allegiances are different in kind: The first is personal; the second, institutional.

Historically, the differentiation within social organizations between personal and institutional allegiance appeared only in modern times. In the traditional monarchy of a pre-modern society, for example, allegiance to king and allegiance to country were the same thing. This is because the kingdom was perceived by the subjects as an extension of the king's own person. The king was the kingdom personified.

Similarly, when an organization would develop around a particular spiritual leader, it would be viewed as the natural extension or embodiment of his personal charisma or spiritual power; the continuation of the institution beyond the lifetime of the founder would depend upon the perceived successful transference of that charisma to a successor.

Modern forms of rational organization, however, have created institutions that in a certain manner subordinate the personal. In the political realm, this is attested to by the slogan,

“A government of laws, not men.” In the modern world, organizations—whether political, commercial, or religious—become stable, dependable, and enduring when they can elicit a loyalty and commitment beyond the allegiance to any particular leader, however highly placed.

It is the determination of our last two acaryas that, for effectiveness in preaching in these times, such a modern form of organization be adopted by the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. This revolutionary change was ordered by Srīla Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvatī Thākura when he instructed the Gaudīya Matha to continue after his departure under the rule of a governing board, rather than under that of a single acarya. In the event, the Gaudīya Matha leaders disregarded this order, and instead they reverted to the traditional single-acarya rule to which they were, after all, culturally habituated. According to Srīla Prabhupada, this disobedience to their guru’s order caused the dissolution of the organization.

In his time, Prabhupada formed a governing board for ISKCON, and he personally supervised its operations, so that it was already “up and running” at the time of his departure. Nevertheless, it remained difficult even for some ISKCON members to accept this form of organization. Two deviations from Prabhupada’s order—the “zonal acarya” system and the “posthumous ritvik” system—rest on an adherence to the traditional idea of leadership. Each in its own way presumes that genuine, authoritative leadership for the movement is found only when an autocratic figure becomes recognized by his compelling, charismatic presence or “self-effulgence,” and who can then personify the institution.

Other ISKCON members have sought the shelter of this style of leader in the Gaudīya tradition outside ISKCON.

For all such persons, the governing body at the head of the institution fails to satisfy. The rational, bureaucratic procedures necessary to the operations of such a board; the laborious process of decision-making through debate and deliberation; the constant representation of various perspectives and points-of-view, the clashes among them, and the accommodations to them—all this they view with contempt and disdain, taking it as evidence of a “non-liberated” character, and they long for the security of that absolute autocrat whose inspired decrees—even when issued off-the-cuff and on the spur of the moment—they know for certain to be as good as God’s. Such people tend to find fault continually with the particular members, procedures, and decisions of the governing body, but underlying that is an implicit dissatisfaction with the corporate form of governance as such.

Nevertheless, our allegiance to the founder-acarya of ISKCON demands our wholehearted acceptance of this form of governance and, in consequence, our allegiance to the governing body—which corporately represents ISKCON.

It is true of course that this modern form of governance has well-known shortcomings. A major one is this: allegiance to an abstract corporate entity does not come close to moving the deep affective and volitional elements in our makeup in the way that allegiance to a single charismatic individual does.

It is the specific genius of Srīla Prabhupada to have incorporated the intense personal form of allegiance within the framework of institutional allegiance. Modern organizations tend to minimize this personal form of allegiance (for it also has notorious shortcomings), but ISKCON does not minimize it. ISKCON wants the best of both worlds.

The personal form of allegiance is wholly retained in the relation between the disciple and the spiritual master. Spiritual progress cannot effectively take place unless the candidate is immersed in the effectively rich environment provided by the direct face-to-face reciprocal relationship with a teacher who manifestly represents God for him.

The personal relationship, by its very nature, is more ardent than the institutional. Moreover, śāstra emphasizes that our deliverance depends on the relation with the spiritual

master. We are saved by the mercy of Sri Gurudeva; there is no mention of types of entities like ISKCON or the GBC. For these reasons, devotees' allegiance to their particular spiritual master may be stronger than their allegiance to his institution. They may come to see their guru as essential but the institution as optional.

This is a mistake. In fact, the two allegiances cannot be separated or even potentially in conflict. They must be one. Allegiance to the guru entails allegiance to the institution. The guru implies the institution, and the institution implies the guru.

The ground for this mutual implication is found in the implicit third term in the relation: the founder-acarya of ISKCON. A bona-fide guru is one who strictly follows the order of his own guru. It is the order of Srila Prabhupada to his followers to work together cooperatively in his service. Our love for him, he went so far as to say, will be measured by our ability to execute this order.

The instrument crafted by Prabhupada's own hands for our cooperative service to him is ISKCON. Consequently, a bona-fide guru in the line of Prabhupada must serve under the aegis of ISKCON. Thus the allegiance of a devotee's spiritual master to Prabhupada enjoins the devotee's own allegiance to ISKCON. The allegiance of an ISKCON devotee to ISKCON must be part and parcel of his allegiance to his spiritual master.

The devotee cannot accept the spiritual master and reject ISKCON. And should the spiritual master for some reason become inimical or indifferent to ISKCON and attempt to operate in an independent fashion, then the disciple should consider that his spiritual master has left Srila Prabhupada's shelter by disobeying his instruction. The disciple should maintain his connection with Srila Prabhupada by remaining within ISKCON.

The connection between each devotee and Prabhupada is also effected through the other way in which Prabhupada, in fashioning ISKCON, has united personal allegiance with institutional allegiance. By establishing himself as the founder-acarya of ISKCON, Prabhupada put himself perpetually and irreplaceably at the head of the institution. Although Srila Prabhupada has entered into his unmanifest pastimes, he remains present as long as the devotees strictly follow his instructions. All ISKCON devotees daily worship him, glorify him, pray to him, learn from him, and carry out his orders in cooperation. Consequently, ISKCON remains Prabhupada's manifest body, and allegiance to ISKCON is identical with allegiance to Prabhupada.

Therefore, by virtue of Prabhupada's position as founder-acarya, the double allegiance to guru and ISKCON turns out to be two aspects of a single allegiance. That single allegiance is ultimately manifest in three features: to guru, to ISKCON, and to Srila Prabhupada.