

ISKCON Studies Conference

## The Guru: Person, Position, Possibilities

Villa Vrindavana, Italy

Friday 3 – Monday 6 July, 2009



**ISKCON Studies Institute**

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## Aims

**The ISKCON Studies Institute is an academic institute.**

It aims to:

- develop the field of ISKCON studies and related areas of interest;
- develop forums for academic exchange;
- promote relevant research and facilitate publishing about ISKCON in various disciplines.

## Members

**Its members are,**

- Gopinathacarya Dasa
- Krsna-ksetra Dasa
- Kumari-priya Dasi
- Lal Krishna Dasa
- Merudevi Dasi
- Pranava Dasa
- Radhika Raman Dasa
- Shaunaka Rishi Dasa

## Day One

1.1 10-11.20am

### Introductions and opening address

**Shaunaka Rishi Das**

1.2 11.40am-1pm

### Guruh Sastropadesta: On the definition and authority of the Guru

**Dvija-mani Dasa (David Buchta)**

From the lexicons of Amara and others to the writings of the Gaudiya acaryas, the word guru is very often defined as one who teaches sastra. Given this definition, the question of the relative authority of the guru's words and those of the sastra he or she teaches becomes crucial. This is especially so in the context of the spiritual inquiry that forms the basis of Vedantic discourse (brahma-jijnasa), the subject matter of which is beyond the scope of pramanas other than sabda. This paper will consider the authority of the guru's words in the context of the relationship between sruti and smrti as discussed by Baladeva Vidyabhusana and others in their commentaries on Vedanta-sutra 2.1.1.

Lunch 1-3pm

1.3 3-4.20pm

### Gurus, charisma, and ISKCON's religious system

**Kimmo Ketola**

Like most of Hindu culture, ISKCON attaches great importance to the principle of guru in spiritual life. Hinduism has been especially successful during the past century in producing many charismatic gurus that have gained world-wide following. However, there are vast differences between traditions regarding the significance of the guru. This paper examines ISKCON's concept of guru in terms of the type of religiosity it exemplifies in terms and categories developed in the science of religion. The analysis also sheds light on the founder-guru A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's contribution to ISKCON's success as a religious movement.

## **Sitting at the guru's feet: Teachers, students, and didactic roles in the Upanisads**

**Rembert Lutjeharms (Gopinathacarya Dasa)**

The Upanisads occupy a significant place in the religious history of South Asia. These often cryptic texts form the foundation of Vedantic discourse, and still influence the religious imagination of countless spiritual seekers, both traditional and modern. Its 'secret' teachings (upanisad) are often presented through the voices of Vedic teachers, and the roles these teachers play is central to these teaching, as indicated by the traditional etymology of the word upanisad ('to sit in the proximity [of the guru]'). Focussing on the narrative of these religious texts, this paper will explore the character of the Upanisadic gurus, the roles they played, their didactic attitudes, and their relationship with their disciples, contextualising, comparing and contrasting these with Vedic roles of the guru and the guru in (Caitanya) Vaisnavism.

## Day Two

2.1 10-11.20am

### **Culturing the wisdom of devotion: Developing ISKCON's vision for spiritual guidance**

**Krsna Ksetra Dasa**

As ISKCON establishes itself, cautiously or confidently, in different settings around the world, its members step through uncharted territory of tradition-making, even as they offer, or claim to offer, ancient, time-tested, universally applicable wisdom of Krsna-bhakti. In this situation, the guru seems ever caught between the opposing demands for conservation and innovation. In this talk we will undertake some 'thought experiments' to see where various possibilities, real or imagined, might take us with respect to the ways of guruship in ISKCON. The aim will be to consider such scenarios in the context of a parallel concern, namely, to understand what aspects of institutionality and individual charisma can and should be fostered to develop a culture receptive of and eager for spiritual wisdom, such that those who have it are attracted to participate in ISKCON and to make their wisdom available to those who want it, so that Krsna-bhakti can survive and thrive in a changing world.

2.2 11.40am-1pm

### **The guru in ISKCON after Prabhupada: A study of the Zonal-Acharya System and the Guru Reform Movement 1977-87**

**Arya Dasi**

This paper will present work to date on a Ph.D. thesis which is part of the ISKCON Oral History Project, a project of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. In this study an oral history method is being used to examine spiritual leadership in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), following the passing of its founder, Srila Prabhupada, in 1977 until the mid-to-late 1980s when a period of leadership reform took place.

The overarching research question is: 'What form did spiritual leadership take in ISKCON after the passing of the founder and what was the nature and effect of that leadership?' Data collection involves conducting interviews with leaders and other members of the movement and documentary evidence is being gathered to supplement the interviews. Content analysis and narrative analysis are being used to interpret the data. The main conclusion to date is that the time period under investigation has been dominated by a singular narrative. The oral history method is being used to unearth other narratives, and therefore treat a complex subject matter with a nuanced understanding. Not only has no in-depth study been conducted on leadership in ISKCON, but in addition, the literature on religious leadership in general is sparse, as noted by several scholars. This study is intended as a contribution to the research on religious leadership.

**Lunch 1-3pm**

**2.3 3-4.20pm**

**By your mercy:  
A Vedantic exposition on teacher's grace**

**Krsnasarana Dasa**

The place of Guru and his grace (prasada) plays a vital role in the Vaisnava schools in general and in Gaudiya Vaisnavism. It was Madhva who first located the discussion of Guru's mercy in the section of worship (Upasana-pada) in the chapter of practice (Sadhanadhyaya) of the Brahma-sutras. Madhva deals with the topic of Guru's mercy under the sutras 3.3.44-5, where previous commentators discuss something else. This section is also one of the places in the Govinda-bhasya where Baladeva Vidyabhusana almost exactly copies Madhva. In this paper, we examine the commentaries on the Brahma-sutra 3.3.44-45 by Madhva and Baladeva and argue that the concept of Guru's grace plays the central role in the system of teacher-student succession (guru-sisya-parampara). I will also make some observational remarks regarding Madhva's influence on Baladeva.

## **Complementary and conflicting elements in the life of an ISKCON Guru**

### **Kadamba Kanana Swami**

We will review the position of the Guru in relation to the support and confines of an institution. Topics discussed include: How the success of the Guru's mission rests on uncompromised personal integrity; the challenges he faces in relationships with disciples and Vaisnavas in general; the task of being a Guru in a post-charismatic phase of an institution; the ambivalence of representing a tradition in modern times; and finally the real import, 'Love of God'.

## **Day Three**

### **Day trip to Florence**

## Day Four

### 4.1 10-11.20am **Guru Seminar: Lessons Learned**

#### **Anuttama Dasa**

ISKCON, as an extension of the Gaudiya-Vaishnava tradition, participates in the disciplic succession from Sri Caitanya. In most Indic guru traditions, secular and spiritual authority rests in one person, or acarya, who sits at the head of the Math, or in some cases, the entire sampradaya. ISKCON, as the first global Vaisnava movement, was fashioned by its founder in a different mold. ISKCON is a multi-guru organisation that places, per its founder's Will, the 'ultimate managerial authority' (secular and spiritual) in a Governing Body Commission (GBC) that debates and votes its decisions – and ISKCON's official course. More than thirty years after the passing of Srila Prabhupada, the GBC has found it wise to develop a seminar 'Spiritual Leadership: Being a Guru in ISKCON' and made it mandatory for all future gurus to attend.

How does ISKCON hope this will help balance the strain of multiple authorities? What does the society consider essential pre-requisites for its future gurus? What issues arose when a dozen of ISKCON's GBC leaders and gurus crafted the 'Guru Seminar'?

### 4.2 11.40am-1pm **Acceptance, guidance, transcendence: The 'guru' in classical South Asian legal texts**

#### **Federico Squarcini**

In order to better understand the role of the guru in contemporary societies it may help to look at classical South Asian sources, especially to those brahmanical texts devoted to the organisation of society's rules. From these sources it is possible to learn about a variety of functions assigned to a variety of instructors or performers – a variety that needs to be put in context if we are to comprehend the many reasons and motives

of its existence. In this presentation the role of the guru will be explored from the point of view of three main indicators (social acceptance; 'professional guidance'; and the dimension of symbolic transcendence), which are all strongly related to the dialectical syntax of the social context.

**Break 1-3pm**

**4.3 3-4pm Discussion**

**Chair: Shaunaka Rishi Das**

**4.4 4-5pm Wrapping up**

Acknowledgements

Reflections from speakers

Summary on behalf of ISKCON Studies Institute – Krishna Ksetra Dasa

**6pm Closing dinner**

ISKCON Studies Institute  
63 Divinity Rd, Oxford  
OX4 1LH, UK  
[www.iskconstudies.org](http://www.iskconstudies.org)