

Accepting a Spiritual Master

By Urmila Devi Dasi

THIS MONTH (September) we celebrate Srila Prabhupada's one-hundredth birthday anniversary. To honor Srila Prabhupada, our children can sing his praises, decorate his seat, write homages to him, and help cook a feast in his honor. Honoring Prabhupada in these ways is important, but our children really honor him when they become his students.

The Vedic idea of a student differs from that of the Western idea. The Western student hears a subject or learns a skill, pays his fee, and then goes his way. The Vedic student finds a self-realized teacher and becomes inspired to take a great vow of lifetime dedication as his disciple. (The child should be at least twelve years old at initiation, so that he or she can take vows with personal conviction. Generally, our children are older than twelve at initiation, but twelve is the minimum age.)

Discipleship implies that a student voluntarily, with love, dedicates body, mind, and words to the guru's pleasure. True discipleship is the secret of success in spiritual life, because what pleases the guru pleases God, Lord Krsna.

Because the complete dedication of a disciple gives a guru great influence over the disciple, our children need to learn the qualities of a saintly person before determining at whose feet they will lay their life. They should then spend at least a year observing and serving under a person whose behavior and instructions reflect the qualities they have studied.

And our children must become qualified to be disciples. As reputable universities examine prospective students through complex entrance procedures and examinations, a guru examines a prospective disciple for a year to see that the knowledge will be given to one who is worthy. Adults in the child's family, school, and community should help the child become fit for initiation and able to recognize a bona fide guru. Our teaching children to become qualified disciples is similar to a guidance counselor's helping a student pick a good college and meet the college's entrance criteria.

The mutual examination of guru and disciple implies that our children must find a spiritual master present before them. So although our children become convinced that Prabhupada showed all saintly qualities during his life, it is one of Prabhupada's disciples who must examine them and accept them and whom they must accept as representing Prabhupada, as Prabhupada represented his spiritual master.

After the prospective guru and disciple are satisfied with their examination of each other, the disciple takes a formal vow at initiation. Childhood should be a preparation for the moment when one vows to abstain for life from illicit sex, meat-eating, intoxication, and gambling. Clearly a child whose family and friends are free from these vices is at an advantage. A disciple in ISKCON also vows to daily chant sixteen rounds of the Hare Krsna mantra on a strand of 108 beads.* Such a vow requires a background of maturity and self-discipline in the child's life.

The initiation ceremony isn't simply some cultural ritual or rite of passage; it is completely on the spiritual platform. The years of sacrifice by the child's parents and teachers succeed when the child formally commits to the school of Krsna consciousness, where Krsna Himself is the headmaster and the gurus are the teachers. There is no better way for our children to glorify Prabhupada.

Urmila Devi Dasi, initiated in 1973, has worked in ISKCON education since 1983.