

“Plain Vanilla” Made Plain

by Jayadvaita Swami

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THERE IS NO “REGULAR VANILLA” [capitals
in original]

. . . [T]he ‘regular vanilla parampara system’ . . . is
itself another fiction created from your own
imagination, with no basis in reality.

—letter to Jayadvaita Swami
from Krishnakant Desai,
author of “The Final Order,”
etc., 1/4/96

In my paper “Where the Rtvik People Are Wrong,” I began with what I thought
was clear and basic enough for all of us to agree on. I wrote:

This is what Srila Prabhupada taught to all of us, from
1966 through 1977. It’s what all of us learned and
accepted and repeated to others. It’s “plain vanilla.”

For non-Americans, I explained that “plain vanilla” is an idiomatic term for
anything that is simple, basic, unadorned, and standard.

I wrote this introduction:

Forget for a moment that Srila Prabhupada has physically disappeared. Put aside questions of what should happen in modern-day ISKCON. For the moment, let's just look at the standard teaching Srila Prabhupada gave us about the disciplic succession.

I apologize for presenting a piece of my own writing from BACK TO GODHEAD, but I think it gives a reasonably concise summary that any ISKCON devotee would agree with.

But for some people, it seems, “plain vanilla” needs to be made plainer. So I here offer that BTG essay again, this time with footnotes indicating the authenticity of these basic teachings.

Hare Krsna.

From Master to Disciple

The *parampara* is the chain of spiritual masters and disciples through which Krsna consciousness is taught and received.¹ In *Bhagavad-gita* Lord Krsna says, “I taught this ancient science of yoga to the sun-god, Vivasvan. Vivasvan taught it to his son Manu. And Manu taught it to his son Ikshvaku. In this way, through the system of *parampara*, disciplic succession, the science was understood by the saintly kings.”²

In the *parampara* system, then, the original teacher, the original spiritual master, is Lord Krsna, God Himself.³ The Lord gives perfect knowledge, and that knowledge is handed down from master to disciple.⁴ It's like a ripe fruit handed down from person to person, from the top of the tree to the ground.⁵

In the chain of *parampara*, each spiritual master has the duty to transmit the knowledge of Krsna consciousness as it is.⁶ He is not to add anything, subtract anything, or change anything.⁷ He simply has to deliver the message, just as a postman delivers a letter, contents fully intact.⁸

According to the Vedic scriptures, one who is serious about attaining self-realization or God realization or the ultimate goal in life must approach such a bona fide spiritual master.⁹ It is not optional; accepting a bona fide spiritual master

is essential.¹⁰

The method of accepting the spiritual master is explained in *Bhagavad-gita*: one must surrender to him, inquire from him, and serve him.¹¹ Inquiry alone is not enough.¹² One must humbly submit oneself before the spiritual master,¹³ accepting him as a representative of God.¹⁴

The spiritual master is not God, and any so-called master who claims to be God should at once be rejected as bogus.¹⁵ But the spiritual master is honored as much as God because he intimately serves God through the disciplic chain.¹⁶ Because each spiritual master serves his own spiritual master, all the members of the chain are ultimately servants of God and therefore very dear to God.¹⁷ More precisely, the bona fide spiritual master is the servant of the servant of the servant of God, or Krsna.¹⁸

This is one of the secrets of the *parampara* system: to be a genuine master, one must be a genuine servant.¹⁹ The student, therefore, surrenders to the spiritual master as a disciple and serves him, and the master responds by answering the disciple's questions, enlightening him with transcendental knowledge.²⁰ For the sincere disciple who has full faith in Krsna and equal faith in the bona fide spiritual master, all the truths of spiritual realization are factually revealed.²¹

The genuine disciple feels everlastingly indebted to the spiritual master and continues to serve him forever.²² In this way, even when the spiritual master leaves this world, the master and disciple are connected.²³ The disciple continues to serve the spiritual master by following what the master has taught him,²⁴ and by teaching it to others.²⁵ Thus the bona fide disciple becomes a bona fide spiritual master,²⁶ and the chain of succession continues.²⁷

¹ “We have to accept perfect knowledge which comes down, as is stated in *Bhagavad-gita*, by the *parampara* (disciplic succession). We have to receive knowledge from the proper source in disciplic succession beginning with the supreme spiritual master, the Lord Himself, and handed down to a succession of spiritual masters.” *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, introduction.

² *Bhagavad-gita* 4.1-2

³ “We have to receive knowledge from the proper source in disciplic succession beginning with the supreme spiritual master, the Lord Himself, . . .” *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, introduction

⁴ “. . . and handed down to a succession of spiritual masters.” *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, introduction

“The Lord is the original spiritual master, and a person in the disciplic succession can convey the message of the Lord as it is to his disciple.” *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, 4.34, purport

⁵ “The ripened fruit is not dropped all of a sudden from the highest planet of Krsnaloka. Rather, it has come down carefully through the chain of disciplic succession without change or disturbance.” *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.1.3 (*nigama-kalpa-taror galitam phalam*, etc.), purport

⁶ “From a bona fide spiritual master you receive knowledge, because he will present as he has received from his spiritual master. He’ll not adulterate or manufacture something. That is the bona fide spiritual master.” —Srla Prabhupada, Vyasa Puja lecture, London, 22 August 1973

⁷ “Guru is the representative of Vyasadeva because he does not change anything. What Vyasadeva said, your guru will also say the same thing. Not that “So many hundreds of thousands of years have passed away. Therefore I will give you a new formula.” No. There is no new formula. The same Vyasa-puja, the same philosophy. Simply we have to accept it.” —Srla Prabhupada, lecture on the disappearance day of Srla Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, Hyderabad, 10 December 1976

⁸ “A post peon, when he delivers you some large amount of money, it is not his own money. The money is sent by somebody else. But he honestly delivers you: ‘Sir, here is your money. Take it.’ . . . Similarly, . . . The spiritual master brings the message from the Supreme Lord and delivers you. And if you kindly accept, then you’ll be satisfied. This is the business of the spiritual master.” —Srla Prabhupada, lecture on *Gurvastakam*, Stockholm, 9 September 1973. Obviously, as throughout this essay, multiple citations could be provided.

⁹ *Tasmad gurum prapadyete jijnasuh sreya uttamam. Srimad-Bhagavatam* 11.3.21. (Cited in the Folio database more than 130 times.)

Tad vijnanartham sa gurum evabhiyacchet. Mundaka Upanisad 11.2.12. (Cited in the Folio database more than 300 times.)

¹⁰ “*Gurum evabhiyacchet*—one must; it is not optional. It is imperative that one approach the

spiritual master, . . .” *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.21.35, purport.

¹¹ *Tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasnena sevaya, etc. Bhagavad-gita* 4.34

¹² “Inquiries and submission constitute the proper combination for spiritual understanding. Unless there is submission and service, inquiries from the learned spiritual master will not be effective.” *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, 4.34, purport.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Saksad-dharitvena samasta-sastraih. (Sri Gurvastakam, 7)*

“Sage Prabuddha continued to speak to the King as follows: ‘My dear King, a disciple has to accept the spiritual master not only as spiritual master, but also as the representative of the Supreme Personality of Godhead and the Supersoul. In other words, the disciple should accept the spiritual master as God, because he is the external manifestation of Krsna. This is confirmed in every scripture, and a disciple should accept the spiritual master as such. . . .’” *The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter Seven, “Evidence Regarding Devotional Principles—Accepting Initiation from the Spiritual Master and Receiving Instructions from Him) Cf. *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 11.3.21-22.

¹⁵ “The disciple’s duty is to offer respect to guru as he offers respect to God. But guru will never say that “I am—because my disciples are offering me respect as God, therefore I have become God.” As soon as he thinks so, he becomes dog.”

—Srla Prabhupada, Vyasa-puja lecture, London, 22 August 1973.

¹⁶ *saksad dharitvena samasta-sastrair
uktas tatha bhavyata eva sadbhih
kintu prabhor yah priya eva tasya
vande guroh sri-caranaravindam*

“ ‘The spiritual master is to be honored as much as the Supreme Lord because he is the most confidential servitor of the Lord. This is acknowledged in all revealed scriptures and followed by all authorities. Therefore I offer my respectful obeisances unto the lotus feet of such a spiritual master, who is a bona fide representative of Sri Hari [Krsna].’ (*Gurvastaka* 7) This is the verdict of all sastras. The guru never says, ‘I am Krsna, I am God, I am Bhagavan.’ Rather, the guru says, ‘I am the most humble servant of the servant of the servant of God.’ He does not even say that he is the direct servant. Rather, he is the servant one hundred times removed. *Gopi-bhartuh pada-kamalayor dasa-dasanudasa*. We should not try to become direct servants, for that is not possible. First of all we must become the servant of the servant. The guru is the servant of Krsna, and if we become his servant, we become an actual bona fide servant. That is our real position.” —*Teachings of Lord Kapila*, Chapter Seventeen

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

“Regardless of which stage one is in, when I see that one is engaged seriously and sincerely in discharging the duties ordered by the spiritual master and is thus dedicating his life to the service of the spiritual master, that person becomes most dear to Me.” —Lord Sri Krsna, in *Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead*, Chapter Seventy-nine, “Meeting of Lord Krsna with Sudama Brahmana.”

¹⁸ “[O]ne must accept a spiritual master who comes in the disciplic succession and is a servant of the servant of the Lord.” —*Srimad-Bhagavatam*, 6.11.24, purport

¹⁹ “And one cannot be a bona fide and authorized spiritual master unless one has been strictly obedient to his spiritual master.” —*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 2.9.43, purport

²⁰ *Bhagavad-gita* 4.34.

“*Tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasnena*. If you have surrendered, then you can ask some question. And *sevaya*. That *pariprasna* should not be challenge. By *seva*, by service. This is our process. We must find out guru, we must satisfy him by service and surrender unto him. Then guru will explain. *Upadeksyanti te jnanam jnaninas tattva-darsinah*. He knows everything. He’ll explain. This is our program.” —Srla Prabhupada, morning walk, Los Angeles, 10 December 1973

²¹ *yasya deve para bhaktir
yatha deve tatha gurau
tasyaite kathita hy arthah
prakasante mahatmanah*

“Unto those great souls who have implicit faith in both the Lord and the spiritual master, all the imports of Vedic knowledge are automatically revealed.” *Svetasvatara Upanisad* 6.23

²² *evam janam nipatitam prabhavahi-kupe
kamabhikamam anu yah prapatan prasangat
krtvatmasat surarsina bhagavan grhitah
so ‘ham katham nu visrje tava bhrtya-sevam*

“My dear Lord, O Supreme Personality of Godhead, because of my association with material desires, one after another, I was gradually falling into a blind well full of snakes, following the general populace. But Your servant Narada Muni kindly accepted me as his disciple and instructed me how to achieve this transcendental position. Therefore, my first duty is to serve him. How could I leave his service?” *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.9.28

“[I]t is not possible for the disciple to repay the debt to the spiritual master. Therefore the disciple remains eternally indebted to the spiritual master and continually works in such a way that the spiritual master may become pleased upon him for such sincere services rendered.” —

Srila Prabhupada, letter to Mantrini Devi Dasi, 29 July 1976

²³ “[T]he disciple and spiritual master are never separated because the spiritual master always keeps company with the disciple as long as the disciple follows strictly the instructions of the spiritual master.” —*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.28.47, purport

“Please always try to remember me by my teachings and we shall always be together. Just like I have written in the first publications of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, ‘The spiritual Master lives forever by His divine instruction and the disciple lives with him.’, because I have always served my Guru Maharaja and followed His teachings I am now even never separated from Him. Sometimes Maya may come and try to interfere but we must not falter, we must always follow the chalked out path layed down by the great acharya’s and in the end you will see.” —Srila Prabhupada, letter to Cidananda, 25 November 1973

²⁴ “As long as the spiritual master is physically present, the disciple should serve the physical body of the spiritual master, and when the spiritual master is no longer physically existing, the disciple should serve the instructions of the spiritual master.” —*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.28.47, purport

²⁵ After receiving the spiritual master’s mercy, one must repeat his instructions, and this is called *sravana-kirtana*—hearing and chanting. —*Caitanya-caritamrta, Madhya* 19.152, purport

²⁶ “Lord Caitanya gave a plain order that anywhere we go, simply talk of Krishna Consciousness, and you will become a spiritual master.” —Srila Prabhupada, letter to Rupanuga, 7 March 1968

²⁷ “One who is now the disciple is the next spiritual master.” —*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 2.9.43, purport