

Kalakantha Dasa

Why We Need Female Diksa Gurus in ISKCON

It's no secret that recruiting devotees in America has been down for some time, but it really hit home recently when a devotee returning from the 2014 Navadvip Mandala Parikrama told me there were 9000 participants, only 5 of whom were Americans-and 3 of them were from ISKCON Gainesville.

Over the past five years, we at ISKCON Gainesville, by Krishna's grace, have enjoyed success in recruiting and training devotees, primarily American-born. About 40% of our 150-plus recruits are women. We strive to re-create the family mood of ISKCON temples in the early 1970s, because most Western men and women are used to such co-educational environments. In this process I have learned conclusively that young American men take up Krishna consciousness much more readily in an environment promoting strictly chaste but egalitarian dealings between the genders.

Although we train these young devotees to have a healthy respect for ISKCON and the GBC, the biggest single obstacle we face in nurturing that faith is perceived discrimination against women in the matter of giving diksa. These young men and women are generally very well educated, and they know that females gave diksa during the time of Lord Caitanya. They know that Srila Prabhupada personally said to Professor O'Connell there would be some, but not too many female diksa gurus in ISKCON. They read over and over again that we are not these bodies. None of this squares in their minds with the GBC's apparent discrimination against women giving diksa.

Although we preach patience and faith, the absence of female diksa gurus leads these young devotees to perceive the GBC as hypocritical and out of touch.

I have no problem selling students on the notion that, due to differing cultures, female diksa gurus might be unwelcome in certain parts of the world. For that reason, the students and I were all quite hopeful about last year's compromise EC proposal that would allow regions to make their own decision on the matter. Its defeat was an enormous drain on the morale of our recruits.

In Gainesville, a team of devotees in their 50s and 60s are doing their best to bring in a new generation of American Vaishnavas in their 20s. Krishna

has shown us that ISKCON's message is more viable than ever among these young people. However, ISKCON itself needs to show them it is a movement they can believe in.

If the GBC values future American participation in ISKCON, shedding real or apparent discrimination against women giving initiation is a must. If the GBC body will courageously stand up for individual yattras' rights to make their own preaching decisions, then the country where Srila Prabhupada chose to start his movement will continue to contribute to it for generations to come.

Respectfully,
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Endorsed by
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PS: On Friday, August 1, a formal public written poll taken at The Sanga Initiative (formerly the US branch of Pandava Sena) retreat in Gita Nagari revealed the 85% of the 75 young American-based devotees in attendance favor female diksa gurus in ISKCON.