

Women_diksa_gurus_ISKCON_vignettes

Urmila devi dasi

When discussing whether or not women should give diksa in ISKCON, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that we are really dealing with individual devotees in real lives. Here are three short vignettes of possible scenarios of women giving diksa in ISKCON. These vignettes are composites of the lives of real women devotees in ISKCON. Names and details are fictional.

Vignette #1:

Lalita dasi and her husband, Rama dasa, had been active in ISKCON for 25 years, and second initiated for 20 years. They had a very close relationship to their diksa guru, as well as close relationships with two siksa gurus. From the beginning of their relationship with ISKCON, they have regularly attended their local temple. For the last ten years, they each give Bhagavatam class, dress the Deities, and do other services. Rama likes to help in the office, and Lalita likes to cook. They distribute books on one weekend a month, sometimes along with their married sons and daughters-in-law. Their children are serious devotees and are raising the grandchildren in ISKCON.

Rama wanted to help develop the community, so he and Lalita became active in a system of devotee care where they have other devotees whom they mentor. Rama and Lalita have regular programs in their homes for both committed devotees and to attract new members. Each takes turns giving classes, although over time Lalita has spent more time studying sastra and developing her preaching. Gradually, about ten devotees have come to rely on her wisdom, sastric knowledge, compassion, and personal dealings so that they often come to her for guidance. These include three couples, two younger single women, one married woman Lalita's age, and one young unmarried man, the son of Rama and Lalita's friends.

One day one of the couples asked Lalita if they could consider her their siksa guru. Lalita and Rama discussed the situation and concluded that Lalita had been acting as siksa guru for many years, so it was only natural to acknowledge the relationship that was already there. Lalita and Rama's diksa and siksa gurus approved the relationship. Soon, the other eight devotees who had long been under Lalita's guidance also officially called her their siksa guru. Because the relationships had been long established, this official recognition changed little externally. Rama felt happy and satisfied with his wife's service and realizations. Rama and Lalita often talked about what they read in sastra, and in the deepening experiences they were having in japa and at holy places. Yet, Rama was not really inclined to guide devotees beyond his general mentoring services as Lalita was.

Rama one day discussed with a couple who were his wife's siksa disciples what they planned to do about diksa. "You have been following for many years," he said. And your relationship with Lalita is very sweet." They asked if it was possible to take diksa from Lalita. Rama was thrilled. "That would be a wonderful step forward in your spiritual life," he replied. By that time, Lalita and Rama's diksa guru had left the planet, and so Lalita consulted with her two siksa gurus who were still physically present. They discussed with her the nature of the responsibility and concluded that since she was already taking that role, there was every reason to formalize it.

Within their community, Lalita was already known as a deep and wise devotee, and everyone accepted that she had siksa disciples. After the yajna to initiate them, all the devotees in the community offered the new members of the spiritual family their congratulations. When it came time for gayatri diksa, Rama placed the thread on the male initiates' body while Lalita chanted the mantras she had received from her guru. After the ceremony, she went to the vyasasana and prayed to Prabhupada, "Please accept this great-grand-disciples of yours as my offering of service and guide me to guide them properly."

Vignette #2:

Damodara and Krsangi were disciples of Srila Prabhupada who had strictly followed their vows and stayed loyal to ISKCON since their initiation. Married for 35 years, their grown daughters and son now had their own lives. They felt happy that one daughter was a serious devotee, and the other children did service for ISKCON. Krsangi had served Prabhupada personally on many occasions, and he had directly told her to study his books and teach others. Taking this instruction seriously, Krsangi had, for many years, organized study groups and classes in her home, although her main service was sewing for the Deities at the local temple.

Damodara always encouraged Krsangi's service of preaching and was happy when some of the devotees who regularly came to her study group asked if they could see her as siksa guru. He was gradually developing his own preaching field in another country that he visited frequently. Along with regular service at his local temple, Damodara had run a printing business, but felt ready to retire. Sometimes he and Krsangi would travel and preach together, and sometimes he would go alone. Sometimes devotees would just invite Krsangi to visit their community to do programs. After some years of living like this, the couple spent less and less time together in their home, and more and more time dedicated to the mission and preaching in their own separate programs whether at home or abroad. Damodara eventually initiated disciples and moved more and more towards renunciation.

When Krsangi, in consultation with Damodara and senior Vaisnavas with whom she had a regular relationship, initiated her three siksa disciples, their long-standing relationship of guru-disciple simply continued. When it was time to give them gayatri diksa, one of the men at the temple put the thread on the male disciple while Krsangi chanted the mantras. Krsangi continued to run her study group and classes, sew for the Deities, visit her grown children, travel sometimes with Damodara, and travel sometimes alone or with one of her sons or grandsons for preaching. Damodara took sannyasa. Soon afterwards, three times she got so many preaching invitations that she traveled for 10 months at a time, giving classes in sastra and spiritual practices, Deity dress making, and having a stable transition from grhastha life to renunciation. As her body grew old and frail, she moved in with her married daughter and son-in-law, to spend her last days absorbed in chanting and in listening to Prabhupada's lectures. One of her disciples took on the service of head pujari and continued the study groups she had maintained for so long.

Vignette #3:

Radhika-priya is a disciple of Srila Prabhupada. Since her initiation she has strictly followed her vows and worked within ISKCON. After several years in the movement, she and Syama had married, and had four sons. Syama had struggled to make a living, and Radhika-priya often took part-time jobs to help with family expenses. She eventually started a publishing business that

printed and distributed the books of many ISKCON devotees. She also was one of the main organizers of festivals at the temples where they lived, and was known for her insightful and relevant preaching. Despite her reluctance, Syama eventually convinced Radhika-priya to give sastra classes at the temple and at their home. He preferred to dress the Deities.

Some visiting devotees, hearing Radhika-priya's classes, invited her to come to their temple to preach. Now that the children were grown and on their own, Syama encouraged Radhika-priya to take up these invitations. Sometimes he came with her, but mostly she traveled without him. Over the years, she became well-known and respected in her area of preaching, and about thirty devotees were taking guidance from her. Several asked if they could see her as siksa guru. With the blessing of Syama and senior Vaisnavas, she accepted.

When Syama turned sixty years old, he told Radhika-priya that it was time for him to renounce family life. Gradually they saw each other less and less. Syama bought a house in Vrindavana where he spent his time chanting and studying, doing some service at the temple. Radhika-priya sold their house and set up a room at the home of one of her sons. But, increasingly, she spent time visiting temples, projects, and devotees teaching Krishna consciousness. In time, with Syama's blessings, she initiated her disciples.