

Śuddha-bhakti Cintāmaṇi

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Chapter 8- Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- As shown in previous chapters, Rūpa Gosvāmī and other Vaiṣṇava scholars have proven that pure devotion cannot be awakened by any material means.
- The paths of speculative knowledge, fruitive work, renunciation, austerity, and charity may help a person accumulate piety, and piety may fructify as temporary heavenly enjoyment or a kind of liberation, but piety alone cannot qualify a person for devotion to Kṛṣṇa.
- Only pure faith can qualify a devotee for pure devotion.
- Thus there is no alternative to developing pure faith.
- Amazingly, by the influence of great Vaiṣṇavas invested with extraordinary power, this pure faith may appear even in the hearts of persons still infested with material desires.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- In The Nectar of Devotion Śrīla Prabhupāda writes: “On account of his association with mahātmās, or great souls one hundred-percent in the devotional service of the Lord, one may attain a little bit of attraction for Śrī Kṛṣṇa.
- But at the same time one may remain very much attached to fruitive activities and material sense enjoyment and not be prepared to undergo the different types of renunciation.
- Such a person, if he has unflinching attraction to Kṛṣṇa, becomes an eligible candidate for discharging devotional service.” [The Nectar of Devotion, chapter 3]
- Although unwanted desires (anarthas) may remain in the presence of pure faith, devotees should not neglect to root them out.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- There are as many varieties of unwanted desires as there are persons infested with them, but scripture and the Vaiṣṇavas have classified them according to common characteristics.
- Careful and purposeful practice of Kṛṣṇa consciousness purifies devotees of unwanted desires and steadies their faith.
- The detailed study of these anarthas and how they are purified appears in later chapters.
- Unflinching attraction to Kṛṣṇa, which even in the presence of material desires leaves aside karma and jñāna and all other paths, is called pure faith. [Śrī Amnāya-sūtra 57]
- Devotees who have such faith are called adhikārīs, eligible candidates for pure devotion.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- As pointed out in chapter two, such faith is weaker or stronger depending on each devotee's degree of confidence in and knowledge of revealed scripture.
- Therefore Rūpa Gosvāmī has categorized devotees' eligibility for engaging in the activities of pure devotional service in terms of the strength of their faith and knowledge.
- He divides devotees into three groups: topmost, intermediate, and inferior. [Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.2.16–19]
- The devotee with the topmost qualification (uttamādhikārī) is defined as follows:

śāstre yuktau ca nipuṇaḥ
sarvathā dṛḍha-niścayaḥ
praudha-śraddho 'dhikārī yaḥ
sa bhaktāv uttamo mataḥ

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- “One who is expert in logic and in understanding the revealed scriptures, and who always has firm conviction and deep faith that is not blind, is to be considered a topmost devotee in devotional service.” (Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.2.17)
- In the next two verses, Śrī Rūpa defines the devotee with intermediate qualification (madhyamādhikārī) as one who is not well versed in scriptural argument but who has firm faith, and the devotee with the lowest qualification (kaniṣṭhādhikārī) as one who has little knowledge and weak faith.

yaḥśāstrādiṣv anipuṇaḥ
śraddhāvān sa tu madhyamaḥ

- “He who does not know scriptural argument very well but who has firm faith is called an intermediate or second-class devotee.” (Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.2.18)

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

yo bhavet komala-śraddhaḥ
sa kaniṣṭho nigadyate

- “One whose faith is not very strong, who is just beginning, should be considered a neophyte devotee.” (Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.2.19)
- Consider this example: Suppose three youths apply to a university and test fair, good, and excellent on their entrance exams.
- The university’s dean will consider each applicant differently.
- “The one who scored fair,” he might think, “is hardly qualified for this university.
- At least he will need serious tutoring to get through his first year.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- With a little help, the one who scored good marks has potential to get his bachelors degree.
- But the third one with excellent marks has the makings of a PhD candidate.”
- In short, the students’ prior learning indicates their aptitude for university studies as well as the degree of additional help they may need to complete the graduation requirements.
- The analysis of faith and learning in devotees is similar.
- Those with weak faith and no knowledge, and those with firm faith and little knowledge, are not as qualified to advance in devotional service as are devotees with deep faith and comprehensive knowledge.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Eventually, the devotees with low and intermediate qualification must come to the topmost standard, the one that qualifies them for love of Kṛṣṇa.
- If they do not, they remain at the stages of advancement for which they are eligible.
- Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja says:

śraddhāvān jana haya bhakti-adhikārī
'uttama', 'madhyama', 'kaniṣṭha'——śraddhā-anusārī

- “A faithful devotee is a truly eligible candidate for the loving service of the Lord. According to one’s faith, one is classified as a topmost devotee, an intermediate devotee, or an inferior devotee.” (Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.64)

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Compared to the above three classes of devotees, it is evident that the four pious men described by Kṛṣṇa hardly qualify for pure devotional service. [Bhagavad-gītā 7.16]
- Why?
- Because they do not accept that they should serve Kṛṣṇa simply to please Him.
- Rather, they serve Kṛṣṇa to please themselves.
- Only after they acquire pure faith do they become qualified for pure devotion.
- Readers may determine their own qualification for pure devotion by applying the above definitions to themselves as well as by studying Śrīla Prabhupāda's purports to these verses.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Readers should also know that in order to perfect their Kṛṣṇa consciousness, they must acquire and cultivate the highest qualification for pure devotion.
- Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura correlates the stages of advancement devotees pass through with their progressive eligibility.
- He states that kaniṣṭhādhikāra qualifies devotees to practise unsteady devotion, madhyamādhikāra to practise steady devotion, and uttamādhikāra to practise taste, attachment, ecstasy, and love. [Bhakti-tattva-viveka, chapter 4, page 41.]
- Material attachments cloud the hearts of neophytes.
- These impurities do not disqualify them from taking up pure devotional practices, but they do make advancement difficult.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- To renounce their attachment to sense gratification and liberation, beginners must raise their qualification by deepening their faith in and knowledge of revealed scripture.
- Those who fail to do so will fall into bad association and fall down from Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- The best insurance against such a disaster is for them to hear regularly from more advanced devotees.
- The intermediate devotees are above the neophytes.
- Yet intermediate devotees must also improve themselves by systematically studying scripture and associating with devotees of a higher qualification than themselves.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Otherwise, they risk making little or no spiritual progress.
- Fortunately, the intermediate devotees have more taste for devotional practices than the neophytes, which makes the challenge of advancing easier and more relishable for them.
- Referring to the neophyte and intermediate devotees Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, “Conviction and faith gradually increase to make one an uttamādhikārī, a [highly qualified] first-class devotee.” [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.71, purport]
- The most qualified devotees have the greatest taste for bhakti, and therefore they quickly and fearlessly advance to the ultimate goal of life. Only these uttamādhikārīs have become qualified to reach Kṛṣṇa.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Of such a devotee Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī writes, “He can deliver the whole world” (sei tāraye saṁsāra). [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.65]
- Just as the eligibility of practising devotees is defined by one of three levels of faith and knowledge, so the advancement of devotees in general is defined by three levels of attachment and love: positive, comparative, and superlative.
- Caitanya Mahāprabhu describes this to Sanātana Gosvāmī: “A devotee is considered superlative or superior according to his attachment and love” (rati-prema tāratamye bhakta—tara-tama). (Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.71)
- The neophytes’ love for Kṛṣṇa is compromised by material considerations.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Therefore Śrī Havir calls them materialistic devotees and describes them as follows:

arcāyām eva haraye
pūjām yaḥśraddhayehate
na tad-bhakteṣu cānyeṣu
sa bhaktaḥ prākṛtaḥ smṛtaḥ

- “A prākṛta-bhakta, or materialistic devotee, does not purposefully study the śāstra and try to understand the actual standard of pure devotional service. Consequently he does not show proper respect to advanced devotees. However, he may follow the regulative principles learned from his spiritual master or from his family who worships the deity. He is to be considered on the material platform, although he is trying to advance in devotional service. Such a person is a bhakta-prāya [neophyte devotee], or bhakta-ābhāsa, for he is a little enlightened by Vaiṣṇava philosophy.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.2.47) [This translation of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.2.47 is cited in Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.74]

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- The least advanced devotees (prākṛta-bhaktas) have weak attachment to and slight love for Kṛṣṇa, and they are confused about the process of devotional service.
- They mistakenly think that they can become devotees without associating with senior Vaiṣṇavas.
- Eager to engage their material qualifications in the Lord's service, they mistake these qualifications for symptoms of advanced devotion.
- Jīva Gosvāmī cites the famous verses beginning with yasyātma-buddhiḥ as an example of the neophytes' illusion. [The verse from Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 10.84.13 is quoted in Bhakti-sandarbha, anuccheda 190]
- In this verse, devotees who strongly identify themselves with their bodies are compared to cows and asses (sa eva go-kharaḥ).

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Sometimes neophytes are also attracted to karma, jñāna, or yoga.
- When such an attraction is very strong and impedes their progress, such neophytes are called “a semblance of a devotee” (bhaktābhāsa).
- As stated above, however, if advanced devotees give the neophytes their association, the beginners will in time become transcendental to mixed devotional activity.
- Then they will rise to the intermediate stage.
- Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam describes devotees at the intermediate stage of advancement (madhyama-bhakta) as follows:

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

īsvare tad-adhīneṣu
bālīṣeṣu dviṣatsu ca
prema-maitrī-kṛpopekṣā
yaḥ karoti sa madhyamaḥ

- “An intermediate or second-class devotee offers his love to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, is a sincere friend to all the devotees of the Lord, shows mercy to ignorant people who are innocent, and disregards those who are envious of the Supreme Personality of Godhead.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.2.46)
- Intermediate devotees (madhyama-bhaktas) love the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and because of their advanced knowledge they understand the importance of maintaining friendships with the Lord’s devotees.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- They show mercy to the neophytes by giving them as much guidance in devotional service as the beginners are willing to accept, and they neglect those who are averse to Kṛṣṇa consciousness or envious of Vaiṣṇavas.
- These are the traits of Vaiṣṇava preachers.
- Jīva Gosvāmī cites the following prayer by Prahllāda Mahārāja to depict the mood of an intermediate devotee-preacher: “O best of the great personalities, I am not at all afraid of material existence, for wherever I stay I am fully absorbed in thoughts of Your glories and activities.
- My concern is only for the fools and rascals who are making elaborate plans for material happiness and maintaining their families, societies, and countries.
- I am simply concerned with love for them.” [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 7.9.43, as quoted in Bhakti-sandarbha, anuccheda 189]

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- When devotees with such a mood qualify themselves further and become expert in logic and scripture, in time, by Kṛṣṇa's mercy, they become most advanced in devotion—superlative.
- They then come to feel an intimate relationship with all living entities, whom they see as integral parts of the Lord.
- Finally, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam glorifies these most advanced devotees (uttama-bhaktas):

sarva-bhūteṣu yaḥ paśyed
bhagavad-bhāvam ātmanaḥ
bhūtāni bhagavaty ātmany
eṣa bhāgavatottamaḥ

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- “The most advanced devotee sees within everything the soul of all souls, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Śrī Kṛṣṇa.
- Consequently he sees systematically everything in relation to the Supreme Lord and understands that everything that exists is eternally situated within the Lord.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.2.45)
- The great devotees’ (mahā-bhāgavatas’) vision is not simply theoretical but is a consequence of eyes anointed with the salve of love for Kṛṣṇa (premāñjana-cchurita-bhakti-vilocanena). [Brahma-saṁhitā 5.38]
- When Prahlāda Mahārāja’s father, Hiraṇyakaśipu, asked Prahlāda where Lord Viṣṇu was living, the boy-saint replied that the Lord was everywhere, even in the pillar of the palace.
- In disbelief, the demon struck the pillar.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- To substantiate that His uttama-bhakta saw Him everywhere, Kṛṣṇa in the form of Nṛsiṃhadeva appeared from the pillar and killed Hiraṇyakaśipu.
- Less advanced devotees often misunderstand the vision of mahā-bhāgavatas, thinking that such great souls see Kṛṣṇa's form at every moment.
- Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura explains the special significance of the word paśyet, “one must see,” in the verse quoted above.
- The ācārya says that pure devotees are at the stage at which they are able to see Kṛṣṇa's form at will, but it is not that they literally see Kṛṣṇa's form at every moment.
- Otherwise, if only those who see Kṛṣṇa's form constantly are topmost devotees, then Nārada, Vyāsa, and Śukadeva, who did not always see the Lord's physical form, would be inferior.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- This conclusion would be false.
- We should understand that the qualification of great devotees is their overwhelming desire to see Kṛṣṇa.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda would often explain that when the topmost devotees see a tree, they do not see the tree transform into Kṛṣṇa's form but they see the tree—and everything else for that matter—in relation to Kṛṣṇa.
- When they see the tree, they think immediately of Kṛṣṇa.
- It is in this sense that they see Kṛṣṇa constantly. [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 8.274, as quoted in the purport to Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 4.22.28]
- As explained earlier, Jīva Gosvāmī points out that when topmost devotees preach, they act on the intermediate platform of advancement.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- In this way they can distinguish those who are eligible for devotion from those who are not.
- However, the topmost devotees also retain their vision of Kṛṣṇa as all-pervading, and this sets them apart from intermediate devotees not so advanced.
- Mahā-bhāgavatas may also be recognized by their extraordinary ability to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda is the perfect example of such a topmost devotee-preacher because Kṛṣṇa blessed him with such supernatural power.
- Prabhupāda inspired and gave success to intermediate devotees, empowering them to also elevate neophytes to the intermediate platform.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Out of love for Caitanya Mahāprabhu, for whom “he would go to hell,” Śrīla Prabhupāda engaged all grades of devotees in preaching work.
- He thus successfully purified the polluted mentality of many souls who falsely thought this world to be separate from Kṛṣṇa. [Letter to Jadurānī, New Vrindavan, 4 September, 1972]
- The most advanced devotee is ideal because he or she is fully under the shelter of Kṛṣṇa’s divine potency (daivī prakṛti).
- As many of Kṛṣṇa’s transcendental qualities as a living entity can display, that many develop fully in the superlative Vaiṣṇava.
- Positive and comparative devotees also develop such qualities but to much lesser degrees.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja cites Lord Caitanya's description of the twenty-six transcendental qualities of pure Vaiṣṇavas:

kṛpālu, akṛta-droha, satya-sāra sama
nidoṣa, vadānya, mṛdu, śuci, akiñcana

sarvopakāraka, śānta, kṛṣṇaika-śaraṇa
akāma, anīha, sthira, vijita-ṣaḍ-guṇa

mita-bhuk, apramatta, mānada, amānī
gambhīra, karuṇa, maitra, kavi, dakṣa, maunī

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- “Devotees are always merciful, humble, truthful, equal to all, faultless, magnanimous, mild, and clean. They are without material possessions, and they perform welfare work for everyone. They are peaceful, surrendered to Kṛṣṇa, and desireless. They are indifferent to material acquisitions and are fixed in devotional service. They completely control the six bad qualities—lust, anger, greed, and so forth. They eat only as much as required, and they are not inebriated. They are respectful, grave, compassionate, and without false prestige. They are friendly, poetic, expert, and silent.” (Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.78–80)

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Of these twenty-six qualities one is principal: surrender to Kṛṣṇa (kṛṣṇaika-śaraṇa).
- All the others are secondary.
- Surrender to Kṛṣṇa is both the root and the rain shower that sustains and nourishes all the other qualities.
- In the presence of surrender to Kṛṣṇa, qualities such as humility, truthfulness, and equanimity thrive; in its absence they shrivel.
- Devotees should not be surprised, then, when they see the secondary qualities present in nondevotees.
- And they should especially not be critical of the absence of such qualities in neophyte devotees.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- This mentality is offensive to Vaiṣṇavas.
- Avoiding the company of nondevotees as if it were poison, one who takes shelter of pure Vaiṣṇavas becomes the beneficiary of the moon rays of their transcendental qualities.
- The king of these qualities, surrender to Kṛṣṇa, then illuminates the heart, and one bows at the Lord's lotus feet and says, "I am yours."
- Kṛṣṇa is very kind and affectionate toward His devotees.
- He reciprocates in kind with the surrender of His servants, fulfils their desires for pure devotion, and makes them forget their attraction to material life.
- In this way Kṛṣṇa accepts the fully surrendered servants as confidential associates (ātma-samas) and awakens good fortune on the horizon of their endless wanderings.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- In conclusion as Vaiṣṇavas advance through the stages of devotion, they are either neophyte, intermediate, or advanced.
- Pure devotees who labour under the bodily concept of life and who practise unsteady devotion are known as neophytes.
- Devotees who are fixed in philosophical understanding and who have steady devotion, taste or attachment are known as intermediates.
- And devotees who have spiritual vision are known as advanced, or transcendentalists.
- In the previous two sections mention was first made of the qualification for pure devotion (adhikāra) and then of the levels of advancement among devotees.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Both classifications are divided into three, and these three divisions are named *kanīṣṭha*, *madhyama*, and *uttama* in both cases.
- Although technically these two classifications speak about different things—the qualifications for practising different levels of devotion, and advancement in devotion itself—Śrīla Prabhupāda, with the exception of the following statement, equates the two in his teachings.
- In the purport to the verse beginning *rati-prema tāratamye*, [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.71] Śrīla Prabhupāda describes the two classifications as being distinct from one another in the following way:
- Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura has stated that if one has developed faith in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, he is to be considered an eligible candidate for further advancement in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Those who have faith are divided into three categories—uttama, madhyama, and kaniṣṭha (first-class, second-class, and neophyte).
- A first-class devotee has firm conviction in the revealed scriptures and is expert in arguing according to the śāstras.
- He is firmly convinced of the science of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- The madhyamādhikārī, or second-class devotee, has firm conviction in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but he cannot support his conviction by citing śāstric references.
- The neophyte devotee does not yet have firm faith.
- In this way the devotees are typed.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- The standard of devotion is also categorized in the same way.
- A neophyte believes that only love of Kṛṣṇa or Kṛṣṇa consciousness is very good, but he may not know the basis of pure Kṛṣṇa consciousness or how one can become a perfect devotee.
- Sometimes in the heart of a neophyte there is attraction for karma, jñāna, or yoga.
- When he is free and transcendental to mixed devotional activity, he becomes a second-class devotee.
- When he becomes expert in logic and can refer to the śāstras, he becomes a first-class devotee.
- The devotees are also described as positive, comparative, and superlative in terms of their love and attachment for Kṛṣṇa.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- But in his writings and lectures Śrīla Prabhupāda generally equates qualification by faith and knowledge with advancement by attachment and love.
- Thus he calls the neophyte devotee a kaniṣṭhādhikārī, the intermediate devotee a madhyamādhikārī, and the topmost devotee an uttamādhikārī.
- For instance, Śrīla Prabhupāda translates the Sanskrit term for “materialistic devotee”: “A person who is very faithfully engaged in the worship of the deity in the temple but does not know how to behave toward devotees or people in general is called a prākṛta-bhakta, or kaniṣṭhādhikārī.” [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.2.47, as quoted in Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 7.14.39, purport]
- He also describes the intermediate devotee: “The madhyamādhikārī is a devotee who worships the Supreme Personality of Godhead as the highest object of love, makes friends with the Lord’s devotees, is merciful to the ignorant, and avoids those who are envious by nature.” [The Nectar of Instruction 5, purport]

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Finally, in a purport in which he quotes from the Bhāgavatam the symptoms of the topmost devotee, he first writes, “The neophyte and intermediate devotees can gradually rise to the platform of uttamādhikārī and become first-class devotees.” [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 16.74, purport]
- This leaves no doubt that Śrīla Prabhupāda uses the word adhikārī to denote devotees who have achieved a stage of spiritual advancement.
- His translation of the following verse, already quoted earlier, offers a final and comprehensive example:

śraddhāvān jana haya bhakti-adhikārī
‘uttama’, ‘madhyama’, ‘kaniṣṭha’——śraddhā-anusārī

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- “A faithful devotee is a truly eligible candidate for the loving service of the Lord.
- According to one’s faith, one is classified as a topmost devotee, an intermediate devotee, or an inferior devotee.” (Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.64)
- Ṭhākura Bhaktivinoda makes a similar but more specific correlation between the qualifications for pure devotion and the stages of devotional service in practice.
- He writes: “When pure faith appears, one becomes a kaniṣṭhādhikārī.
- When one executes the limbs of devotional service in practice, such as hearing, chanting, and remembering, and when by the influence of Vaiṣṇava association one becomes free from unwanted habits and his faith becomes dense and transforms into niṣṭhā, one develops the madhyamādhikāra or intermediate qualification for pure devotion.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- By the further pursuance of the activities of devotion, one's niṣṭhā intensifies and assumes the form of ruci, taste.
- The sādhaka in whom such ruci has developed is called an uttamādhikārī.”
[Bhakti-tattva-viveka, chapter 4]
- According to both ācāryas, kaniṣṭhādhikāra qualifies devotees for the beginning stages of devotion—from faith to unsteady devotional service in practice.
- In other words kaniṣṭhādhikārīs are kaniṣṭha-bhaktas. Madhyamādhikāra qualifies devotees for steady devotional service, and devotees so situated are madhyama-bhaktas.
- And only with uttamādhikāra do devotees attain the spiritual platform to become uttama-bhaktas.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- However Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura also specifies uttamādhikāra as the requirement for madhyama-bhaktas to attain the stages of taste and attachment.
- The following table summarizes this correlation.
- One important conclusion can be drawn from this description of the relationship between qualification for and advancement in devotion: To achieve loving devotion one certainly must have the highest qualification by faith and knowledge (uttamādhikāra), but one who has attained this highest qualification has not necessarily attained the highest stage of love and attachment for Kṛṣṇa (mahā-bhāgavata).
- Thus an uttamādhikārī may still be a conditioned soul at the stage of taste or attachment.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- In other words, an uttamādhikārī is not automatically an uttama-bhakta; he or she may simply be an advanced madhyama-bhakta.
- To clarify, a person must have excellent business sense to become a millionaire, but just because a person has excellent business sense doesn't necessarily make him a millionaire.
- The qualification to gather wealth is one thing, the actual possession of wealth another.
- The above conclusion can be applied to help devotees resolve a long-standing controversy: Does one need to be a mahā-bhāgavata to be a spiritual master?
- Many devotees answer yes based on Śrīla Prabhupāda's statement in the purport to verse 5 of The Nectar of Instruction: "One should not become a spiritual master unless he has attained the platform of uttamādhikāra..."

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- However, by now it should be clear that an uttamādhikārī may be either a conditioned soul at the stage of taste or attachment, or a fully liberated soul at the stage of ecstasy in love.
- In either case, uttamādhikārīs are ideally suited to be spiritual masters because they have the highest qualification in terms of faith and knowledge and thus they cannot be deviated by the arguments of nondevotees, nor, barring exceptional circumstances, do they fall down.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda and Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura would say that these uttamādhikārī Vaiṣṇavas can be recognized by their ability to convert many fallen souls to Kṛṣṇa consciousness—the primary duty of a spiritual master.
- Of course, it is preferable for spiritual masters to be perfected devotees.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Because mahā-bhāgavatas have greater spiritual potency, they are able to infuse their followers with strong faith.
- But in a world where perfected devotees are rare and where Lord Caitanya expects all devotees to preach, practitioners with the topmost qualification may also serve as gurus.
- Furthermore, to fulfil Lord Caitanya’s desire Śrīla Prabhupāda envisioned that the world needed “millions of gurus.” [Lecture, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 6.1.21, Honolulu, 21 May, 1976]
- His Divine Grace envisaged that in the spiritual emergency caused by Kali-yuga, even less qualified devotees—madhyamādhikārīs and kaniṣṭhādhikārīs—may also act as spiritual masters.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Still, it is a fact that their weaker faith and inferior learning handicap these gurus' attempts to guide their disciples.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, “A neophyte Vaiṣṇava or a Vaiṣṇava situated on the intermediate platform can also accept disciples, but such disciples must be on the same platform, and it should be understood that they cannot advance very well toward the ultimate goal of life under his insufficient guidance.” [The Nectar of Instruction 5, purport]
- Thus although a blind uncle is better than no uncle, Śrīla Prabhupāda warns discerning devotees to be careful to accept an uttamādhikārī as spiritual master.
- Devotees are often apprehensive about judging a Vaiṣṇava's qualification and advancement.
- “Is such scrutiny not offensive?”

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- they ask.
- Not according to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s comment above, and not according to Rūpa Gosvāmī’s advice in the fifth verse of Śrī Upadeśāmṛta.
- In fact, such refined discrimination is recommended, and both ācāryas advise that devotees cultivate it while always showing appropriate respect to all kinds of Vaiṣṇavas.
- It is a mistake to automatically accept anyone who serves in the capacity of initiating spiritual master as an uttamādhikārī or mahā-bhāgavata.
- Unfortunately it is an error that is both widespread and even encouraged in ISKCON.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- The successive falldown of senior gurus is evidence that devotees exalted by wishful thinking may not be exalted at all.
- Spiritual masters do not become perfect souls by dint of their serving as initiating gurus.
- Neither do they become perfect simply because they are supported by zealous neophyte disciples.
- The only indication of a devotee's degree of advancement is the presence of the discernable qualities that have systematically been described in scripture.
- Therefore one should evaluate Vaiṣṇavas in general and spiritual masters in particular by the presence or absence of these qualities.

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

- Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī advises devotees to use their intelligence to distinguish between the kaniṣṭhādhikārī, madhyamādhikārī, and uttamādhikārī.
- Such discrimination will help them select a suitable spiritual master.
- It will also help them evaluate their own position and avoid imitating devotees on a higher platform.
- The duty of all devotees who aspire for perfection is to seriously practise devotional service and raise their qualification to the topmost level.
- This is what it means to cultivate (anuśīlanam) Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- Kṛṣṇa glorifies devotees' untiring quest for perfection with these encouraging words:

SBC 8 – Qualifications for and Advancement in Pure Devotional Service

kāma-krodha-vimuktānām
yatīnām yata-cetasām
abhito brahma-nirvāṇam
vartate veditātmanām

- “Those who are free from anger and all material desires, who are self-realized, self-disciplined, and constantly endeavouring for perfection, are assured of liberation in the Supreme in the very near future.” (Bhagavad-gītā As It Is 5.26)

śravaṇādi-kriyā—tāra ‘svarūpa’-lakṣaṇa
‘tatastha’-lakṣaṇe upajāya prema-dhana

- "The spiritual activities of hearing, chanting, remembering and so forth are the natural characteristics of devotional service. The marginal characteristic is that it awakens pure love for Kṛṣṇa." Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.106