



IṢṬA-GOṢṬHĪ

Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami

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“[A devotee] should also make friendship with persons who are on an equal level with himself or who have the same understanding that he does. For a devotee, there is no point in making friendships with ordinary persons; he should make friendships with other devotees so that by discussing among themselves, they may elevate one another on the path of spiritual understanding. This is called *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*.”
—*Bhāg.* 3.29.17, purport

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INTRODUCTION

While talking recently with a senior Godbrother, he reminded me that Prabhupāda gave us the legacy of a missionary spirit. He said that we “old store-front boys of 1966” had directly seen Prabhupāda preaching, so if we did not set the example of Prabhupāda’s missionary spirit, how would others know it? My Godbrother then said, “We each should preach to our full capacity. As far as you’re concerned, you have your writing which is like a ‘hotline’ to so many devotees.” After hearing this and considering that “hotline” writing was actually a form of preaching, I became more determined to respond to the requests of readers. I hope that my writing will encourage them to preach in turn.

After that, it became just a matter of how to supply more serial literature. The result is this potpourri of thirty vignettes in a booklet. Although it is a mixed bag, I took care to make each individual vignette just as a cook prepares many items, blends them all into a balanced, nutritious meal, and offers it to the Lord and the Lord’s devotees.

The title, *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*, requires an explanation. (The Sanskrit term literally means “desirable company or association.”) Śrīla Prabhupāda introduced it to ISKCON in 1966. His Divine Grace encouraged the devotees to meet among themselves on the nights when he was not giving the evening lecture, and he referred to our meetings as *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*. He suggested that our purpose should be, “To repeat what the spiritual master has said.” Over the years, the term *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī* has taken on different meanings. I have not attempted to follow all the various usages of the word, but I chose *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī* because I hope my vignettes will be informal, frank, and at the same time *paramparā*, “repeating what the spiritual master (Śrīla Prabhupāda) has said.”

By the subtitle, "Topics for Vaiṣṇava Discussion," I wanted to convey that my comments are not the "Last Word," but that they may induce devotees to further thought and discussion. I invite readers to correspond with me in the iṣṭa-goṣṭhī mood, so that our Kṛṣṇa conscious exchanges may be printed in future issues.

SDG
January, 1989

1

THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE

I have been skipping my daily reading of Śrīla Prabhupāda's books in order to think of a "hotline" writing project.

Suspension of daily duties may be necessary on a temporary basis, but it is important to regulate *sādhana*, as in the daily reading of Prabhupāda's books. A writer may come up with a new series, but it's more important that he set a good example. Even if readers don't have constant new writing, they can follow a good example. Besides, just to survive in spiritual life I need to behave well. Unless we are exemplary, Māyā-devī will lure us.

INNER LIFE IN KṚṢṆA CONSCIOUSNESS

One time in England, a Catholic priest asked Śrīla Prabhupāda what was his program to cultivate the inner purification of his disciples. Prabhupāda replied with the example of the iron rod in the fire: if the rod is kept steadily and continuously in the flame, then eventually the iron will become so hot that it will turn to flame. And similarly, if a neophyte keeps himself busy in acts of Kṛṣṇa consciousness twenty-four hours a day, he will become steady and pure.

So the program to engage the senses in the service of Lord Kṛṣṇa may seem to preclude the need to be otherwise introspective. But that is not a fact. Vedic knowledge also instructs us that a devotee must be very thoughtful, prayerful, and self-examining in order to successfully engage his senses in the service of the Lord.

Why am I engaging my senses? Why am I chanting? To whom am I calling as I chant? Why do I need to chant? The answers to these and other thoughtful questions are given in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Without self-examination and awareness of the goal we are seeking—either by reading, by associating with other devotees, or by thinking on one's own, or in prayers to Kṛṣṇa—even busy engagements can degrade to *niyamā-graha*, or the mechanical performance of Kṛṣṇa conscious duties.

Inner awareness doesn't require a sophisticated or intricate thought process. Simple devotion will do. Just think, "I've been appointed to discharge this particular duty by Kṛṣṇa." Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, "The very phrase 'Kṛṣṇa consciousness' suggests that those who are in such con-

sciousness are living transcendentalists situated in Him” (Bg. 9.29 purport). A living transcendentalist first *thinks*, then *wills*, and only then he *acts*. He serves and he *prays* to serve: “O energy of the Lord, O Lord, please engage me in Your service.”

3

LAMENTING AND REJOICING

When to lament and when to admit with gratefulness that one has been saved from ignorance? All genuine Vaiṣṇavas declare themselves unqualified. But we must also acknowledge that our spiritual master has rescued us. He has pulled us like a drowning man into the boat of *hari-nāma*, and we are safe.

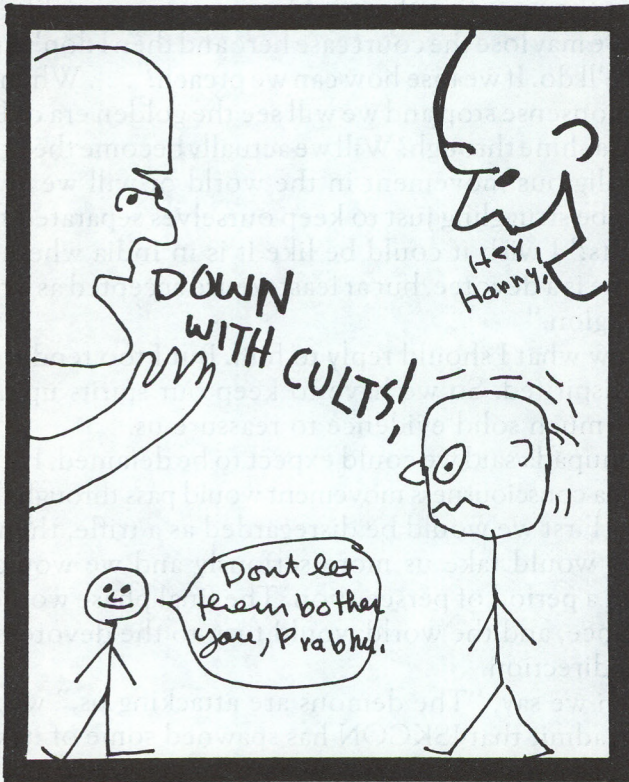
Do we dare to say, “I love the Supreme Lord, and I love His pure devotee?” We have so little love! If we loved, how could we be so absorbed in our temporary affairs? If we loved, why are we so slow to sacrifice on Kṛṣṇa’s behalf? And we are disobedient. We don’t even know, “I am not this body.” Where is there a question of attaining *prema-bhakti* for the likes of me?

But we love. As the philosopher Pascal said, as soon as one sincerely seeks God that means he has found Him. The entire process of *bhakti* has been likened to a mango: in the early stage it is raw, unpleasant, while in the later stages it is fragrant and delicious (never to rot—but throughout, *bhakti* is a mango. Therefore when they ask, “Who here is a devotee of Kṛṣṇa consciousness?” I’ll stand up. When they ask, “Is anyone here a Prabhupāda man?” I’ll promptly reply, “I am.”

Unfortunately, I’m still at the beginning stage after many years of practice. *Fortunately*, my master is expert and kind. The Vaiṣṇava poet sings, “I have wasted my life because I did not worship Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. But please don’t kick me away.”

4

REASSURANCE



A sensational “True Crime” book has been published with documented and yet fictionalized accounts of ISKCON’s criminal and bizarre activities of the last ten years. At the same time, ISKCON faces losses in anti-cult court cases, based on the charges that devotees use psychological brainwashing to entrap people against their will.

With this in mind, one devotee wrote me, “I am honestly feeling a little depressed and dispirited on seeing that this movement is not being accepted by the masses, and not only that but they are directly attacking us in so many different ways. We may lose the court case here and then I don’t know what we’ll do. If we lose how can we preach? . . . When will all the nonsense stop and we will see the golden era of Lord Caitanya shine through? Will we actually become the prominent religious movement in the world or will we always have to be struggling just to keep ourselves separated from the ‘cults?’ I wish it could be like it is in India where not everyone is a devotee, but at least we are accepted as a bona fide religion.”

I know what I should reply to him. But I too tend to become dispirited. So we have to keep our spirits up. And there is much solid evidence to reassure us.

Prabhupāda said we could expect to be defamed. He said the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement would pass through three phases. First we would be disregarded as a trifle, then the demons would take us more seriously and we would go through a period of persecution. The final phase would be acceptance, and the world would turn to the devotees for serious direction.

When we say, “The demons are attacking us,” we also have to admit that ISKCON has spawned some of its own infamy. For those mistakes, we are facing reactions. But charges like “brainwashing” are absurd attacks by anti-religionists and neo-enlightenists who think that all religious experience is in the realm of superstition.

If in our lifetime, Kṛṣṇa consciousness remains a less-than-minority in the U.S.A., we should not lament. Religions have often been mistreated. Consider the birth of Christianity. Christ himself was crucified, and his sincere

followers considered it a mark of their sincerity that they would be rejected and abused by the world. From Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: "Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven."

Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana* movement also went through persecution even in the holy land of Bhārata-varṣa, when the Kazi of Navadvīpa tried to stop the *hari-nāma*. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, "We must remember that such incidents took place in the past, five hundred years ago, and the fact that they are still going on indicates that our *saṅkīrtana* movement is really authorized. For if *saṅkīrtana* were an insignificant material affair, demons would not object to it."

Prabhupāda also told us not to be afraid of bad press. At least they're chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* even when they say, "The Kṛṣṇa sect should be stopped." And neither can the *saṅkīrtana* movement be stopped, provided devotees remain sincere. If we lose temples, we can still gather and chant in the streets and distribute books, and that will do more than anything else to create favorable influence for Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

I can repeat these reassuring words, yet I also worry. But that is just what the enemies of Kṛṣṇa consciousness want, that we should worry and be dispirited. So let us not play into their hands.

5

DON'T TRY TO SEE KṚṢṆA

“A pure devotee never wants to see the Lord unnecessarily. The Lord is engaged in various activities and the pure devotee does not want to see Him whimsically, for his own sense gratification. The pure devotee simply depends on the Lord’s mercy and when the Lord is pleased he can see Him face to face.”

—*Bhāg.* 5.3.15, purport

This statement by Śrīla Prabhupāda occurs in the 5th Canto *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, when the Supreme Personality of Godhead appeared at the *yajña* before the priests of King Nābhi. The priests were very appreciative that Lord Viṣṇu had personally appeared but they were extremely embarrassed and apologetic because they had executed their ritualistic sacrifice in order to obtain a petty materialistic boon—they wanted the Lord to grant King Nābhi and his wife a son. Actually, both King Nābhi and the priests really just wanted to serve and worship the Supreme Lord with devotion, and this was revealed in their apology to Him.

Śrīla Prabhupāda comments that we should not try to draw the attention of the Lord from His various activities. It makes good sense: if Kṛṣṇa appears at my call and I ask Him for something selfish, it is a misuse of His glorious presence. He has specifically created the posts of demigods for those who are after material goals. The form of Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu is for those who intentionally desire to render Him loving service.

And yet we say “I really want to see You, Lord.” But if we really want to sing that line, then we have to act very sin-

cerely and attain the intense desire known as *laulyam*. With faith, we may approach Lord Kṛṣṇa in the *arcā-vigraha* form for temple Deity worship, and bow before His lotus feet. But at that time also we should approach Him for service, not for material relief or benedictions:

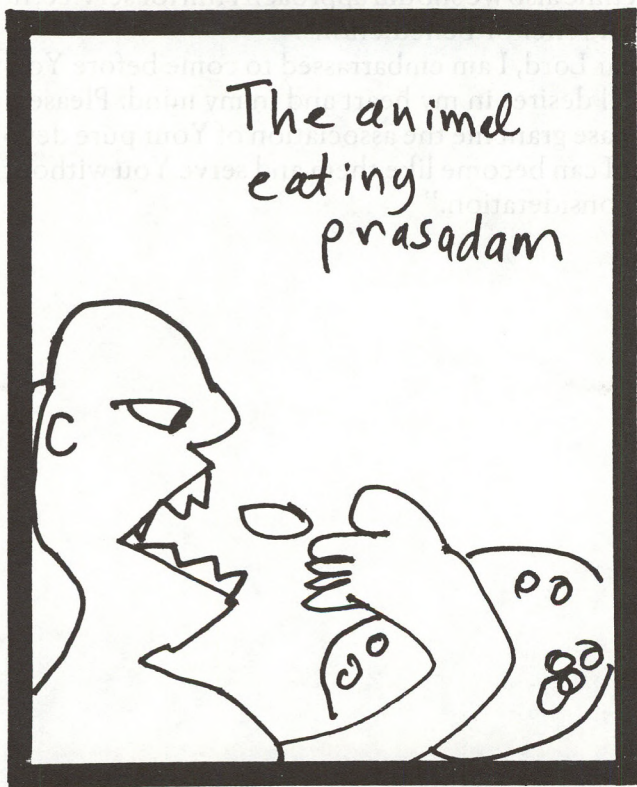
“Dear Lord, I am embarrassed to come before You with material desires in my heart and in my mind. Please purify me. Please grant me the association of Your pure devotees, so that I can become like them and serve You without personal consideration.”



In a few minutes, a devotee will attain a good mood and a small place and put it on the altar. That is not offering to Brahmananda with prayer. "My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, I request You to help me reach my mind in an offering of devotion - just as I have done in the past, when I was with You." The word is offered by prayer to Brahmananda and the offering to Kṛṣṇa.

6

HONORING PRASĀDAM



In a few minutes, a devotee will bring in cooked food on a small plate and put it on the altar. That is for offering to Prabhupāda with prayers: “My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, I request You to help me actually make an offering of devotion—just as You request in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, with love.” The food is offered by prayer to Prabhupāda and he offers it to Kṛṣṇa in

paramparā. And then when I sit to eat, I will recite the prayer for taking and honoring *prasādam*. I offer thanks to Kṛṣṇa for giving such nice food. I turn on a tape of Prabhupāda lecturing, so I may listen to him while I honor the holy repast.

But when I actually eat, an animal takes over, ravishing in sense delight and eating more than required. Communion with the Lord is relegated to “Thanks for the chow, God!” Then after your forgetful meal, when the belly is expanded, you want to return to sublime prayer-thoughts? I have to laugh, or should I cry?

I hope to grow out of this. In the meantime, at least “the animal” is eating *prasādam*, sattvic food offered to Kṛṣṇa with prayers, and the physical strength he derives is used in the service of the Lord. It could be much worse.

IT'S STILL TRUE

Last night I spoke to a devotee who regrets all he has given to ISKCON. "I worked so hard," he said, "and what do I have to show for it?" It used to be easier to answer such doubts. We would just point out that whatever he had done for Kṛṣṇa was to his eternal benefit, so why should he regret it just because his devotional effort didn't bring him personal material profit? We'd preach, "You've got to surrender."

Now it turns out that in many ways ISKCON was mistaken. At least some of its leaders and representatives were mistaken. We didn't manage our money or businesses well for example, and so it seems that many devotees' efforts to maintain and expand a temple went in vain. Some say they were promised that if a householder gave everything to "the Movement" then he would never have to go out and get a job on his own. That promise should never have been made, and now it is broken. Men who were busy for years training mostly in chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and reading *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, now have to compete with their non-devotee peers in the job market; and the practicing devotee has no vocational skills or career-oriented education.

In some cases, devotees admit that their problem is mostly just their *own* change of heart: they can no longer honor vows and promises to live a very simple, austere life in sacrifice to a spiritual cause. As my friend put it last night, "I never really wanted to live in such a completely surrendered way. I just felt pressured." Some convince themselves that they were made to act against their wills. There are personal grudges and resentments.

One hesitates to even write about this for fear of generalizing or leaving out significant grievances. “We made mistakes,” I told my friend, “but we have to go ahead now. You can’t live in the past. Whatever you decide to do for yourself now, you have to attempt it, and try to forgive those who you think have wronged you.” Of course, I wanted to say what we’ve always said: “Whatever you sincerely do as sacrifice for God, Kṛṣṇa, is accepted by Him to your eternal credit. It’s the best act you can ever make. It will never suffer loss or diminution, and even a little bit can save us from the greatest fear. Even if we later wished we never did it.” It’s harder to speak like this, because a preacher who utters words of surrender has to live up to it himself. It’s harder to believe. But it’s still true.

8

ASSOCIATION WITH DEVOTEES

Raghunātha Gosvāmī usually received all his instructions directly from Svarūpa Dāmodara. But once Svarūpa Dāmodara told Lord Caitanya that Raghunātha also wanted to hear something from Him. So Lord Caitanya gave Raghunātha advice in capsule form: Don't mix with non-devotees, those attached to women, or those who are simply non-devotees. Lord Caitanya also said, don't dress luxuriously and don't eat palatable foods. On hearing these instructions, Raghunātha Gosvāmī was very grateful and said, "You have saved me from the blazing forest fire of great material opulence." Śrīla Prabhupāda said similarly, commenting on Lord Rṣabhadeva's teaching: a householder should not over-endeavor for material opulence, but should live in a way that gives him the fullest opportunity for chanting and hearing.

What are we to make of this today? We know we should give some association to non-devotees, by preaching. And we may have to associate with *karmīs* at our work. Still, the Vaiṣṇava *siddhānta* rings like a temple bell throughout the scriptures: "Don't associate with the *asat*, the *avaiṣṇavas*." So we must take it to heart. And that means learning to cherish friendships in the society of devotees.

Who are devotees? Those who have heard and continue to hear from the bona fide spiritual master regarding topics of Kṛṣṇa. Those who like to chant the holy names of God; who accept and believe that the spirit survives the death of the body; who understand that life doesn't come from dull matter, or "by chance," but life comes from the supreme life of the Personality of Godhead. You can talk with devotees

about eternal life and they don't frown or smirk and say, "What are you talking about? Are you crazy?"

Of course, it's most painful when we are disappointed in our friendships with devotees, but that doesn't mean we should switch over to living with the *asat* and the *avaiṣṇava*. Try again. Find friends of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Realize your own shortcomings and enter the association of devotees without a fault-finding attitude. Aspire to follow Raghunātha Bhaṭṭa, of whom it was said, "He would not listen to blasphemy of a Vaiṣṇava, nor would he listen to talk of a Vaiṣṇava's misbehavior. He knew only that everyone was engaged in Kṛṣṇa's service; he did not understand anything else" (Cc. Antya 13.133).

Is the instruction to avoid non-devotees too narrow-minded? That is not what the scriptures say. Consider a tiny sampling on this theme:

"Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu asked, 'Of all kinds of distress, what is the most painful?' Rāmānanda Rāya replied, 'Apart from separation from the devotee of Kṛṣṇa, I know of no unbearable unhappiness' " (Cc. Madhya 8.248).

"...Whether one wants to merge into the Lord's existence or wants to associate with the Personality of Godhead, one should render service to the *mahātmas*. For those who are not interested in such activities, who associate with people fond of women and sex, the path to hell is wide open . . . " (Bhāg. 5.5.2)

asat-saṅga-tyāga, —*ei vaiṣṇava-ācāra*
'*strī-saṅgī*' — *eka asādhū*, '*kṛṣṇābhakta*' *āra*

"A Vaiṣṇava should always avoid the association of ordinary people. Common people are very much materially attached, especially to women. Vaiṣṇavas should also avoid

the association of those who are not devotees of Lord Kṛṣṇa" (Cc. Madhya 22.87).

9

APPRECIATING ŚRĪLA PRABHUPĀDA

We are still trying to fully comprehend and appreciate what Śrīla Prabhupāda did for us. We know he saved us from *māyā* and pointed us in the direction of eternal devotional service to Lord Kṛṣṇa. We love him for the function which he performed in Vaiṣṇava *paramparā*. He emphasized that he was not a special person but that he was carrying the message of Kṛṣṇa. Scholars also sometimes say that Prabhupāda was not an original thinker, because he repeated the tradition rather than giving his own teachings of the Absolute Truth. But everyone is a unique individual, and Śrīla Prabhupāda is also. Therefore we appreciate him not only as a functionary, but as an individual.

It is natural that we want to establish his glories. As stated in the Bhaktivedanta purport, “A spiritual master always represents himself as the humblest servitor of the Personality of Godhead, but the disciple must look upon him as the manifested representation of Godhead” (Cc. *Ādi-līlā* 1.45 purport).

The Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement which has spread around the world in the twentieth century is filled with particular loyalty to Śrīla Prabhupāda and with attachment to his vision. He emphasized that devotees of Lord Caitanya should not keep transcendental knowledge to themselves, but should spread the teachings to others. He emphasized the printing and distributing of books, as he learned from his Guru Mahārāja. He wanted large Ratha-yātrā festivals of Lord Jagannātha in cities throughout the world. These are all strictly *paramparā* activities for Vaiṣṇavas, and yet Śrīla Prabhupāda chose (or we may say he was chosen by Lord

Kṛṣṇa) to introduce particular methods. And ISKCON particularly chooses to carry out the *paramparā* from Śrīla Prabhupāda.

Religion is taught according to time and place and persons and so it can be differently adjusted according to great *ācāryas*. The followers of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement honor, worship and obey those adjustments performed by our founder-*ācārya*. By doing so we feel protected, and we become fixed in our humble position as servants of the *ācārya*. We also continue to study Prabhupāda's books so that we may be fixed in his central teachings.

We should be careful not to unnecessarily interpret Prabhupāda's teachings. In pointing out the fault of the Vedāntic interpretation of Śaṅkara, Lord Caitanya told the Māyāvādīs of Benares that Śaṅkara avoided a direct meaning and invented an indirect meaning. For example, Śaṅkara gave central importance to the aphorism *tat tvam asi*, "You are also that," whereas throughout the *Vedas* *tat tvam asi* is less important than *omkāra*. *Omkāra* indicates the Supreme Absolute Truth, the Personality of Godhead, and it is the real *mahā-vākya*, or central *mantra*. Yet Śaṅkara neglected the importance of *omkāra*. Similarly, we should not avoid the basic teachings of Prabhupāda while claiming to interpret his message for a new age.

If we ask ourselves what did Śrīla Prabhupāda want, it will be clear. He wanted everyone to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and regularly hear *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. He wanted us to give up sinful activities. He wanted us to associate with devotees, and worship the Deities of Gaura-Nitāi or Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. And he wanted us to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness to others, with the conviction that He is the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and His devotional service is the only way of freedom from birth and death.

We want to deepen our appreciation for Śrīla Prabhupāda and we are certain that Lord Kṛṣṇa will encourage us to do so, if we remain pure and active in service to *guru* and Kṛṣṇa. As stated in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, “*yasya deve parā bhaktir . . .*,” to those who have implicit faith in the spiritual master and Kṛṣṇa, all the truths of the Vedic knowledge will be revealed.” No doubt, if we act with full faith in Prabhupāda, others will join us, and at the very least we will be assured of pleasing our spiritual master, who is the pure servant of the Absolute Truth.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS



As ISKCON lurches through revolutionary changes, we sometimes hear a senior disciple of Śrīla Prabhupāda speak longingly of the good old days. The present, however, can be just as good as the past; and in fact, many changes are improvements. Still, we old-timers like to recall, just for nostalgia sake, how we did things in former times with Prabhupāda. Without criticizing in a political spirit, I would like to

fondly remember some of the things we used to do.

I remember when the devotees who gave the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* class would sing “Jaya Rādhā-Mādhava” in the same tune that Prabhupāda used, and he would not go on to sing other *bhajan*s or the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra*. Just a few minutes of “Jaya Rādhā-Mādhava,” *bas*. In the old days, a *Bhāgavatam* speaker would not say “please repeat after me,” and induce the audience to repeat the translation of the verse. And no recitation of “*nārāyaṇam namaskṛtya*,” (as if we had an absolute obligation to repeat that verse before each class).

I remember when no initiated devotee would ever dare to think it was all right to go to the movies (where would he get time and money to do it?)—or to play tennis, golf, football, chess and so on. And no one, unless on a special assignment, would read other books besides the Vedic literatures, because it would be too embarrassing to admit or explain. “Well Prabhupāda, I just thought my spirituality could be enhanced by reading the Christian mystics.”

I remember when we used to take strictly cold showers. And in the evening we would sit around as a community and drink hot milk and listen to the Kṛṣṇa book before taking rest at night. (Do they still do that somewhere?) And we would look forward with enthusiasm and nervousness to the Sunday feast—to the *kīrtana* (not frenetically rapid) and to the eating of delicacies which we never had during the week, and also the sitting down beside guests and preaching to them, maybe too didactically, but in hopes that someone would decide to “join.”

I remember and still perform simple *āratis* before the Deities, without *mūla-mantras*, because that was the way Prabhupāda did it. I usually don’t cover my hand with a cloth while chanting the Gāyatrī *mantra*, because that’s how he did it. But I had better stop talking about the old days.

11

CALLING OUT TO ŚRĪLA PRABHUPĀDA

O Śrīla Prabhupāda, of whom Allen Ginsberg wrote in his poem, “Bhaktivedanta Swami at desk staring sad eye Krishna at my hopeless self-consciousness”;

O Prabhupāda; who so impressed the pious and impious of Bombay, that hundreds still remember him and go to see Rādhā-Rāsabihārī in the Juhu temple because Prabhupāda is their śikṣā-guru;

O Prabhupāda, did that subway conductor, Mr. Reuben really sit with you and did you tell him, “I have many devotees and temples, only time is separating us”? It sure *sounds* like you! And Prabhupāda, is there any doubt that you presided over your little flock at 26 Second Avenue and took us to the park to chant? No, I’m sure of it, as sure as the fact that my parents rejected me—and ever since you’ve kept me busy in your ISKCON;

O Prabhupāda, will we be with you again? Can we become your children again and sit in a room and laugh and listen seriously and feel great hopes for changing the world on your behalf? And after being with you will you dismiss us saying, “You can give me a little milk and finish business.”?

O Prabhupāda, forgive my foolish questions. Let us all follow your *vāṇī* forever, accepting all adventures as further chapters of blissful association with you. For you will lead us as long as we stay true to you;

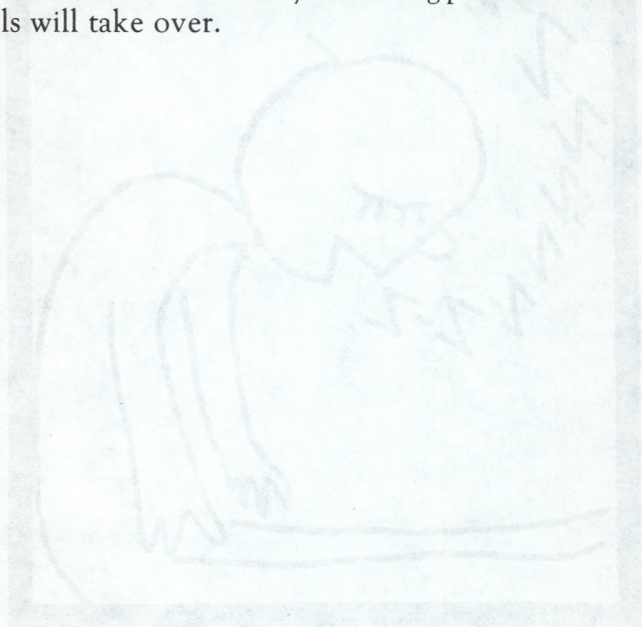
O Prabhupāda, I don’t want to judge who among your disciples is right or wrong, but I do wish you would speak to our hearts. I understand you can do it because you have written that Kṛṣṇa is in our hearts with all His pure devotees;

O Prabhupāda, please speak to us silently in the heart so

that we may have the courage to make the right decision in Kṛṣṇa's service;

O Prabhupāda, please let us chant and read and preach so that we forget our bodies and forget to go home, staying merged in *kīrtana* with you in the center of your devotees;

Please, Śrīla Prabhupāda, come down to the temple again, please sit on the *vyāsāsana*, tell us we are wrong and what we must do. We need your strong presence or else the rascals will take over.



We are fortunate to be able to speak before the devotees in the Śrīmad Bhagvanat-class, but as a devotee, I feel great joy in being able to speak before the devotees. We are very grateful, we all are. That is really the fault of the devotee, and it is certainly not the fault of Śrīmad Bhagvanat.

WAKE UP AND APPRECIATE



We are fortunate to be able to speak before the devotees in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* class. But as with other routines, speaking or hearing a class often becomes a deadening experience. We take it for granted; we fall asleep. That is usually not the fault of the devotee lecturing, and it is certainly not the fault of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*.

Do we need to be shaken by crisis before we wake up to the value of Kṛṣṇa consciousness? When suddenly we find our world changed and we are deprived of our usual comforts and supports, then we pray, “O Kṛṣṇa, now I appreciate the devotees and Your Lordship. If only I could hear *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* again!” But why can’t we remain appreciative in the normal routine? It can be done. We hear that Sudāmā Vipra, even after he became fabulously wealthy, never fell into forgetfulness or sense gratification, but thought at every moment that his wealth was due to “my blackish friend,” and so he thanked Him and engaged in loving service at every moment.

We don’t have to *imagine* it, but simply keep tuned in to the reality—that Kṛṣṇa is protecting and maintaining us at every moment, and that the messages of His pastimes are glorious and pleasing to hear. Let us thank Lord Kṛṣṇa for sustaining us every day. Whatever ease and comfort we enjoy are due to His grace. He is guarding us and providing us with everything that we count on.

Maybe it is not humanly possible to avoid complacency, but we should strive to do so.

When it is my turn to speak in the class, I should pray to Kṛṣṇa, “Please don’t let me cheat them. I want to share Kṛṣṇa consciousness with others. Please manifest appreciation for *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* from my speech and thought. Please let me deliver Your message to Your dear devotees to increase their enthusiasm and to defeat their doubts.”

And when it is my turn to hear the class, then let me stay awake. The mind is the friend, but the mind can be the enemy. A temple room during *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* is not the proper occasion for sleeping. Stand up. Pinch yourself. Slap your face. Use a water bottle. How ridiculous, how sad!

Once we perform a little violence on the sleepy man and outsmart him, then our ears, which are actually eager to hear the nectar, may begin to receive important and pleasing information from Śukadeva Gosvāmī and Śrīla Prabhupāda. We will not think that we are doing “the movement” a favor, but we will appreciate. And when we fail we must apologize, “I’m sorry I fell asleep during your class.” Or better, “I liked your class. That was a good *Srīmad-Bhāgavatam* verse and purport.” Or do we need bombs dropping, imprisonment and deathbeds, before we wake up to appreciate?

13

THE MEANING OF HARE KṚṢṆA

Our spiritual consciousness is presently sleeping, but it can be revived by the transcendental vibration of Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare. “Hare” refers to the energy of the Lord and “Kṛṣṇa” and “Rāma” refer to the Lord Himself. When we chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, we are praying, “O Lord, O Energy of the Lord, please accept me.” We have no other prayer other than “please accept me.”

—*Path of Perfection* p. 144

When Prabhupada gives a “translation” of the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* in his own words, we take it as a gem of devotion. We chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* so often every day, that we may easily fall into familiarity and mechanicalness. These little gems of translation may be interjected by us, within the mind or even said out loud, along with our chanting, just to remind us of what we are doing. A shortened translation is, “Please accept me,” which actually means, “Please accept me as a devotee.” We don’t wish to be merely maintained by Kṛṣṇa, but to be accepted as a devotee and engaged in His loving service.

Here is another translation of the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* by Śrīla Prabhupāda from a 1977 lecture in Mayapur:

“This is the easiest way to please Kṛṣṇa. You don’t need much money, much education, nothing of the sort. Simply require your heart. ‘Kṛṣṇa, You are my Lord, You are my master eternally. I am Your servant eternally. Let me be engaged in Your service.’ That is Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare. This is the meaning of the Hare

Kṛṣṇa mantra: O Kṛṣṇa, O Energy of Kṛṣṇa, I am Your servant, somehow or other I am now fallen in this material condition. Please pick me up and engage me in Your service."

The above translation is actually a paraphrase of the Śikṣāṣṭaka verse, *ayi nanda-tanuja-kiṅkaram*: "O Son of Mahārāja Nanda, I am Your eternal servant, but somehow I have fallen in this ocean of material birth and death. Please therefore pick me up from this ocean of death and fix me as one of the atoms at Your lotus feet."

The entire Śikṣāṣṭaka is actually a commentary or elaboration of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra, as well as attitudes for ideal prayer.

In addition to thinking of the meaning of the words while chanting, one may also interject prayers of appeal to the Lord for better chanting: "My dear Lord, please help me to chant." And we should not forget to thank the Lord and Śrīla Prabhupāda. Although we may not chant nicely, we are still very fortunate to have received the holy name: "My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, my dear Śrīla Prabhupāda, thank you very much for giving me this *mahā-mantra*."

14

DOVETAILING FEAR IN DEVOTIONAL SERVICE



A devotee should be unafraid of material life, knowing that Lord Kṛṣṇa will protect him.

“Living beings who are entangled in the complicated meshes of birth and death can be freed immediately by even unconsciously chanting the holy name of Kṛṣṇa, which is feared by fear personified.” (*Bhag* 1.1.14)

But it is not wrong to be afraid of *māyā*. Neither is it wrong to be afraid of committing offenses to the spiritual master, the Vaiṣṇavas or in my service to the Deity.

I recall one time, while performing a *yajña* in Prabhupāda's presence, I omitted a few important *mantras*, and Prabhupāda was displeased. I am afraid of that; it is painful to the heart. And one time I neglected to put sliced pieces of ginger along with my spiritual master's breakfast. When he pointed it out, I took it lightly, and so he spoke to me again with sarcasm. His displeasure gave me a glimpse of what it would be like to be outside his shelter—a place I never want to see again.

Prahlāda Mahārāja was not afraid of the most powerful demon, yet he was afraid of the *cakra-kalā*, the wheel of time, which throws us into repeated birth and death. If we perform devotional service, then we will be saved from *mahā-baho*, the greatest fear at the time of death. The sea of birth and death is vast and fearful, but for one who takes shelter in Lord Kṛṣṇa the killer of demons, the ocean is shrunk up to a small puddle.

A devotee is sometimes compared to a child who is unafraid because of the presence of his loving parents. But we all know the terror of a lost, small child. I don't want to be in "grown up" illusion, thinking that I can take care of myself because I have the security of a job, bank account, society and nation. Those protectors cannot stand between us and death. Only the Supreme Lord can save us, and He is called Akiñcana-gocara, "one who is approached by those who have no faith in the protection of material possessions."

We should not be so reckless as to indulge in breaking the regulative principles or chanting less than the prescribed number of rounds. Without strictly following Kṛṣṇa consciousness, on what firm ground are we standing that we

should smirk and joke? What about the earthquake? The plane crash! What about the fire of annihilation? You don't think it will happen? Can you stand before the Universal Form, when even Arjuna quaked to see Him? "There is no one in creation who is not afraid of the rage of the Almighty" (*Bhag* 1.1.14). Let the fools laugh at meek behavior. I will bravely take my place, falling down before the beloved Personality of Godhead and His representative, and crying like Uttarā, "O Lord of Lords, Lord of the universe! You are the greatest of mystics. Please protect me, for there is no one else who can save me from the clutches of death in this world of duality" (*Bhāg.* 1.9.9).

15

CALLING OUT TO ŚRĪLA PRABHUPĀDA

O Prabhupāda, the ability to remember you and speak of you is itself a blessing and solace—please inspire us to recall you wherever we are and to seek out the company of those who thirst for Prabhupāda nectar;

O Prabhupāda, when we turn to you again we remember your strict standards and we want to obey; when we turn to you we realize that pure Kṛṣṇa consciousness needs no supplementation from outside disciplines, and we desire again to practice it the way you wanted;

O Prabhupāda, who did not own a car or real estate, or *anything*, because he lived as a renounced mendicant, and therefore when he left this world whatever he had belonged to ISKCON for the benefit of his followers and to be shared with the whole world;

O Prabhupāda, whose personal paraphernalia is kept now in museum cases, showing us that for himself he mostly used humble things like a cheap tongue scraper, a saffron winter coat patterned and sewn by a disciple, cheap canvas shoes, a *sādhū's kaupin*, plain wool sweater, Vṛndavana *svāmī's* hat—all of which he used while directing the spending of millions of dollars for a marble temple in Bombay, and for temples in Māyāpur and Vṛndavana built with as much as he could afford although he wanted to spend much more;

O Prabhupāda, whose essence is beyond time and space in the activities of the Supreme Lord in the spiritual world, and who continues to teach the readers of his Bhakti-vedanta purports exactly how they may transform their thinking so that they can understand the Absolute Truth as

the supreme friend and lover, whose form is inconceivably spiritual and personal;

O Prabhupāda, please stay at home with us, sit in your favorite chair with your slippers on our heads, and listen along with us as we replay your lectures—and travel with us in the van as we drive to the city for *hari-nāma*;

O Prabhupāda, be pleased as we survey the farm; be pleased as you sing *Daśavatāra*; be pleased as you behold the lunch-hour business people crowding into your Govinda's restaurants; be pleased as the pious Indian immigrants become your staunch and learned disciples, giving up their Hindu impersonalism and telling their friends and relatives that Prabhupāda is the way;

O Prabhupāda, be pleased that we have rectified some of our biggest mistakes that were hampering your Movement, and especially Prabhupāda, please accept our sincere regrets, forgive us for our offenses and help us not to commit them again.

16

PRAYING FOR THE LORD'S SERVICE

"You must always ask the Lord's grace to make you in the right position. It is not for your sense gratification, it is for the Lord's service. For the Lord's service we can ask for His grace and mercy a hundred times, but for our sense gratification, we cannot pray or ask anything. That is pure devotion." (Letter to Pradyumna dasa, 29 April, 1970)

As we begin to practice prayer, we notice that we are making many petitions or requests, and we may think that this is a botheration for Kṛṣṇa to hear. We become aware that we are like a lusty child with his list of toys for Santa Claus. There is also the example of King Nābhi and his priests who felt embarrassed when the Lord appeared in answer to their material requests. But Prabhupāda says that you can ask a hundred times for help to serve the Lord: "O Lord, O Energy of the Lord, please engage me in Your service." That kind of asking is all right, but not asking for things for ourselves, either material or spiritual. We have to understand the distinction.

Sometimes we are in the grip of the material nature, and we can't help but call out for material relief from our dearest friend and protector, the Supreme Lord. Thus, Gajendra's call for relief from the jaws of the crocodile is described by Prabhupāda as partly a cry of helplessness. Commenting on the Gajendra episode, Prabhupāda says, "Unalloyed devotees have nothing to ask from the Supreme Personality of Godhead. But Gajendra, the king of the elephants, was circumstantially asking for an immediate benediction because he had no other way to be rescued. Sometimes, when there is no alternative, a pure devotee,

being fully dependent on the mercy of the Supreme Lord, prays for some benediction. But in such a prayer, there is also regret" (*Bhāg.* 8.3.21, purport). A similar regret is expressed by the pure devotee, Sudāmā Brāhmaṇa: "The *brāhmaṇa* saw that there was no need to ask any material benefit from the Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa, but he was induced by the repeated request of his wife." And commenting on Queen Kuntī's request that the Lord sever her tie of affection to her kinsmen, Prabhupāda says, "A pure devotee of the Lord is ashamed to ask anything in self-interest from the Lord. But the householders are sometimes obliged to ask favors from the Lord, being bound by the tie of family affection."

We should not become silent or fail to address the Lord in our hearts. But we should be constantly trying to purify the prayer. Pure prayer is to ask to be engaged in Kṛṣṇa's loving service.

A TIME FOR HEARING

We may forget the necessity of saving time for chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and hearing Vedic knowledge. But the subject matter is so sublime, and our need for it is absolute. Our need is desperate: if we don't chant and hear, we will perish in the ocean of ignorance.

If our minds and bodies are sold out to Māyā as in the mining song, "I owe my soul to the company store," then how can we understand the meaning of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu? It requires association with devotees, time taken in a sacred place (sacred at least within the mind) — for learning and relishing the mysteries of transcendence. And we also have to act in devotional service. By Srila Prabhupāda's grace, anyone can do this even while living in a city and even while working at a nine-to-five job. Thus Prabhupāda has said, "There are many members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness who work very hard in their office or in a factory or some other place, and whatever they earn they give to the Society. Such highly elevated souls are actually *sannyāsīs* and are situated in the renounced order of life" (Bg. 18.11, purport).

But the worker must also save time to hear about Kṛṣṇa. Early morning is preferable because it is unusually quiet—the beast of commerce and sense gratification is not yet up and roaring. In a sanctified mood we can best sit and hear at the feet of the previous *ācāryas*.

Let us consider one short, sublime section from *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Ādi-līlā* Chapter 7. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja is describing the Pañca-tattva. He has already established in previous chapters, by evidence of *śāstra* and by logic, that

the Supreme Truth is Lord Kṛṣṇa, the cause of all causes. And he has also established that Lord Caitanya is the combined form of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Now again he is asking us to appreciate how Lord Caitanya appears with His associates in order to relish the mellow of transcendental conjugal love. We are asked to consider that, “Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, who is the Supreme Controller, the one Personality of Godhead, has ecstatically become a devotee, yet His body is transcendental and not materially tinged” (Cc. Ādi 7.10). In his purport, Śrīla Prabhupāda comments that although Lord Caitanya is Kṛṣṇa Himself, because He accepted the ecstasy of a devotee, one should not misunderstand His pastimes and place Him in exactly the same position as Kṛṣṇa: “While Caitanya Mahāprabhu was trying to enjoy as a devotee, one should not disturb Him by addressing Him as the Supreme Personality of Godhead.”

Now, how is it possible to think over this subject matter and to feel it as relevant and to act on it, if one is in the grips of ignorance and passion? It's not possible. We have to hear in the mode of goodness and be elevated to *śuddha-sattva*, pure goodness, wherein Lord Kṛṣṇa appears. We may have duties as a father or mother of children, as a wage-earner or temple administrator or whatever, but that is not the all-in-all. Activities of economic development and burdens of management are not everything. Man lives not by bread alone. If we work hard but save no time and space for hearing about Kṛṣṇa, then at death, all our work will be deemed a failure, and we will be unable to remember the Lord.

It's up to each person to realize the practical implications of what this means. For one, it might be relatively easy and just mean setting his alarm clock to rise an hour earlier, or deciding not to stay up late watching television. But for some, it *might* mean moving away from undesirable associ-

ation, or changing jobs, accepting a lower standard of physical comforts, becoming an object of scorn . . . We have to pray to Kṛṣṇa to give us the strength to pay the price (*laulyam*) so that we may buy back our own life-time for the purpose of hearing and chanting. We should think with great concern, "How has this happened, that I have lost my own self-interest? Who and what has cheated me in this way? I must get it back!"

18

PURITY IS THE FORCE

My secretary Madhu-maṅgala dāsa and I were discussing the use of radical innovations in the attempt to popularize a new religion. Madhu said that he was attracted to Prabhupāda, *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, and the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra, and to those who set a pure example in following Prabhupāda. He said he would have seen through “popularization” as another gimmick or watering-down—exactly the kind of thing he was trying to avoid in his search for the truth.

One could say that Prabhupāda himself innovated in order to make Kṛṣṇa consciousness more accessible. But he never “sold out” to gain allies and he never admitted materialistic desires into his movement.

Now may not be a time in which very large numbers of persons can accept a way that demands much surrender. But regardless of the time, Kṛṣṇa consciousness will always attract those who are looking for the truth, and who are deliberately avoiding purveyors who offer easy ways and who mix sense gratification with promises of heaven. If in the attempt to popularize, we actually compromise spiritual principles, and thus lose sincere souls, that is the greatest loss. Even the numbers that would be gained at the cost of watering down truth, would only be temporary. Therefore, one would lose all around by making changes which betray the clear orders of the previous spiritual masters. These changes would put one in the position of the exasperated *brāhmaṇa*, who out of hunger ate at an outcaste’s home, but was not able to get enough food to appease his hunger. “Alas,” the fallen *brāhmaṇa* lamented, “I have lost my caste for eating with an outcaste, and still I’m hungry!”

A sign of unnecessary compromise: to concede that Kṛṣṇa consciousness is mostly Indian, and therefore much of it is disposable. Thus one interprets the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* as a Hindu *mantra*, no better than other prayers and *mantras*. In this mood one could also drop the regulation of chanting sixteen rounds which Prabhupāda insisted on, by considering that not enough people can do it.

Those who radically change can easily over-estimate their own powers. The real power comes in the *paramparā*. If we go ahead only on our own strength, we have to face the strength of Māyā, which is insurmountable within this world. If we attempt to popularize, we may easily become more concerned with making money and followers, which are death-traps for the purity of spiritual leaders and movements. And doesn't "popularization" sometimes occur because the innovators find it too difficult to follow their vows, and so rationalize that it would be better for everyone to do less?

We can note Śrīla Prabhupāda's unwillingness to compromise in his talk with Allen Ginsberg in April 1969. As a friend, Ginsberg helpfully suggested that the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* could never fulfill the Americans' need for a unifying spiritual movement. Ginsberg said that he and Gary Snyder had been searching their brains to come up with a simplified spiritual practice for all people, and he wondered if Prabhupāda would help join in this search. But Prabhupāda said, "Kṛṣṇa consciousness is not possible for everyone." He admitted that by keeping pure, the movement might stay small, because after all, it is not an easy thing to understand Kṛṣṇa. "It is not that everyone will come," said Prabhupāda and he gave the example of Calcutta University which offered serious philosophical courses, and had to pay high salaries to the professors, even though few

people enrolled in those courses. "Still the classes were to be maintained," said Prabhupāda, "because the ideal must be there."

Ginsberg countered this by stating that there was a thirst by many people for an alternative to materialism. Prabhupāda replied that if they are actually thirsty, then there is really no problem for them to adopt Kṛṣṇa consciousness. In other words, the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa consciousness as introduced by Prabhupāda, is really not inaccessible, but if many people think it is too difficult, "then I am not going to change my philosophy to suit the Americans." How grateful we are to Srila Prabhupāda for keeping the purity intact!

It is nice to think that the followers of Prabhupāda will continue his "stubbornness" against any popularization which is actually a reduction of the full potency. By the devotees keeping it pure (whether as householders, *brahmacārīs*, or *sannyāsīs*), and by their remaining immersed in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, then people who are thirsting for God consciousness, will be attracted like iron filings to a magnet. And they will not be cheated.

19

PRAYER

O Lord who holds up Govardhana Hill,
O Lord of most attractive pastimes,
who is known as God the Controller
who is worshiped as Śrī Viṣṇu
by the devotees of South India,

O Father of Christ,
Om, Allah-Akbar, the Nirvana—

Please guide me today,
please guide us all,
please be merciful,
give us the nectar of Your pastimes,
let us hear them with attention
and let us appreciate even a moment's association
with Your pure devotees.

Please allow us to use our time
thinking of You—pleasing You
with services in *paramparā*.
We want to offer our will and love this day,
but only if You bless us
can free love flourish
from us to You.

Making this appeal
with a sigh at Your lotus feet,
“Please pick me up very soon
and let me go back to Your place.”

20

PLEASE HAVE MERCY ON THIS SINNER

“I am a shameless cheater. Indeed, I am sin personified. What am I in comparison to the all-auspicious chanting of the holy name of Nārāyaṇa? I am such a sinful person, but since I have now gotten this opportunity, I must completely control my mind, life and senses and always engage in devotional service so that I may not fall again into the deep darkness and ignorance of material life. (*Bhāg.* 6.2.34–35)

In his purport to this verse, Prabhupāda states that we are all in a position similar to Ajāmila: we have been saved from a sinful life of intoxication, meat-eating, gambling and illicit sex. We do not wish to indulge in recalling these episodes from our “past lives,” but it is not wrong to remember that we were very recently immersed in sin. In this way, we will be less likely to think, “I am a pure *brāhmaṇa*, and so I don’t need Kṛṣṇa so desperately as a sinner does. I am now a good person, not like a *karmī*.” Rather, in the mood of Ajāmila, we should remember that we are being saved by Kṛṣṇa constantly, from a fallen condition.

Unless we have a contrite heart, there is every chance that *māyā* will bring us down again in our continuing battle to progress back to Godhead. Feeling regretful and remembering that we were shameless cheaters and that we are simply being saved by the holy name, will help us to feel the need to pray. We will beg the Lord, “Please keep me as a devotee. Actually I am not a real devotee, although eternally I am so. But now I am in a very dangerous position, so please engage me as a particle of dust at Your lotus feet.”

This is not artificial humility, because even Lord Brahmā, who is the supermost *brāhmaṇa*, is afraid of fall-down. He

also prays to the Lord for protection. Prabhupāda writes, "Unless one is sufficiently protected by the Lord, he may fall down from his spiritual position. Therefore, one has to pray constantly to the Lord for protection and the blessings to carry out one's duty."

Recalling our basically fallen nature creates a very desirable need to pray. It brings prayer out of the realm of mere formality or recreation. A sincere devotee will be afraid of *māyā* and seek the Lord's protection and special blessings. Although the Supreme Lord is automatically maintaining us, it is only His special mercy given to the devotees, which enables them to become free of the material energy. In seeking that mercy, and in seeking the association of devotees, a devotee has to personally ask the Lord for special mercy. And not just once, but regularly.

21

SINCE PRABHUPADA'S DISAPPEARANCE:
WHAT HAVE WE LOST?

A Godbrother recommended a book on the theme of total obedience to the bona fide representative of God. It was *The Cost of Discipleship* by Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian who was executed for his faith by the Nazis. The thing that had interested my Godbrother was Bonhoeffer's discussion of the unity of faith and obedience. God and His representative (Jesus Christ, or the bona fide spiritual master) calls us to become His followers, and we must respond by obedience. Reflecting on this, my Godbrother wrote, "We may object and say that we don't have the necessary faith yet to take the step of following the representative of God. Thus our lack of faith justifies our lack of obedience. This is nonsense—we will lack faith as long as we are disobedient. Kṛṣṇa asks us to surrender to *guru* and if we don't, we are disobedient, and thus there can be no question of faith."

After reading a chapter of *The Cost of Discipleship*, I wrote to my Godbrother as follows:

"What I would like to discuss is my own experience of loss in the quality of absolute obedience towards any living authority in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. The question has been in the back of my mind for some time, but it came up more clearly while reading the first chapter of Bonhoeffer.

"Bonhoeffer describes how Jesus Christ called his first disciples to him. He says the important thing is not so much the disciples' contemplation about joining the Master, or

the quality of faith, or the voluntary submission of the disciple—but the main thing is that Jesus has the authority to call and to demand obedience, and so the disciples are simply responding to the call by obedience. He quotes this passage from the Gospel of Mark:

‘And as he passed by he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the place of toll, and he saith unto him, follow me, and he arose and followed him.’

“This reminded me how I and others joined Prabhupāda in the beginning. Certainly the real thing was Prabhupāda himself. Our obedience to him came before we had really developed faith or knowledge. And also, because of Prabhupāda’s being who he was (comparable to Jesus Christ for us) we were prepared to leave whatever we were doing and follow him. So at least during Prabhupāda’s presence, many of us seemed to be genuine disciples—the important thing was not so much our voluntary following, but Prabhupāda’s force or authority which we obeyed.

“It occurs to me that something of that authority left when Prabhupāda left the planet. The zonal *ācāryas* tried to totally assume it, but falsely. I can well remember those recent years and the heady feeling of demanding absolute authority. It wasn’t only we *ācāryas*, but the authority was also supplied by the ISKCON direction in general. If the *ācārya* or “system” demanded that all devotees should collect money by selling paintings, or by selling BTG’s, or whatever, there was a great compulsion to do so under the law of God, and there was also much enthusiasm. In a similar way, we accepted the position of *mahā-bhāgavatas*, and accepted worship on that level.

“Now so much of that has been cleared away and it is a great relief to ISKCON. I am not saying anything here that any careful observer has failed to notice when I say that au-

thority has waned. I am just making a personal expression of it to you. For example, I find myself now more and more not demanding absolute obedience from others. I try to avoid directing my disciples' lives too much; I mostly tell them to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and follow the rules, and I set the example myself.

"Furthermore, I don't see an absolute authority that I can follow. Being a submissive, agreeable person, and wanting to follow Prabhupāda's *vāñī*, I follow the directions of the GBC, but even when I follow, it is not with heart and soul and with the feeling of following the Absolute. Even my following of Prabhupāda lacks the submission that I used to have when in his presence he could tell me to do anything he liked.

"In making this argument for obedience and the necessity for genuine discipleship, Bonhoeffer describes how Christ recruited some of his other disciples, and how he would not allow them to take a relative position. One man said that he would like to follow Jesus, but Jesus warned him that if he did, he would be following "one who has nowhere to lay his head." A second man said that he would like to follow but he would first like to bury his father. And a third man said that he wanted to join but first he wanted to take care of some matters at his house. Bonhoeffer states it as follows:

He wants to follow, but he feels obliged to insist on his own terms. Discipleship to him is a possibility that can be realized only when certain conditions have been fulfilled. This is to reduce discipleship to the level of human understanding. First you must do this and then you must do that. There is a right time for everything. A disciple places himself at the master's disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms. But then discipleship is no longer discipleship, but a program of our own to be arranged to suit

ourselves, and to be judged in accordance with the standards of a rational ethic. The trouble with this would-be disciple is that at the very moment that he expresses his willingness to follow, he ceases to want to follow at all. By making his offer on his own terms, he alters the whole position, for discipleship can tolerate no conditions which might come between Jesus and our obedience to him.

“I can probably supply some answers to this dilemma in terms of ISKCON’s present relative situation, but I wanted to hear from you. I don’t find any all-consoling answers to the problem. Perhaps it is nothing more than a test of maturing to understand that Śrīla Prabhupāda’s *vāñī* is even more important than his *vapuḥ*, and that there is no scarcity of absolute authority as long as we follow him in his form of personal teachings. But although one knows these teachings, still, I often find myself in difficulty trying to decide for myself *how* to obey Prabhupada and it is also difficult to simply submit oneself to Godbrothers and accept their interpretation of how we should obey the absolute authority of Prabhupada.

“I suppose my question might be framed, ‘Is genuine discipleship possible now in ISKCON since the disappearance of Prabhupāda? Is anyone actually qualified in the name of spiritual master to force his disciples as did Jesus and Śrīla Prabhupāda? And if no one is qualified, then what do we have in place of genuine discipleship and what have we actually lost?’

22

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP,
A GODBROTHER'S REPLY

My Godbrother replied to my letter as follows:

“Like you, I have observed that the ‘*atma-nivedanam*’ mood in myself has been replaced by something else, something more influenced by my own reasoning and experience than anything else. But how can it actually not be like that? Yes, it’s true that when Srila Prabhupada was here, we certainly displayed a spirit more like true obedience. But that must have been because he made us that way. It was more his power than our own. He actually held us in the palm of his hand and lifted us up to a level which in a way may not have been our own, but which made it possible for us to actually render the important service that Kṛṣṇa and Prabhupada wanted done. Without that initial ‘artificial’ lift, I don’t think we would be where we are today, and I don’t think the movement could have grown so strong as to survive Srila Prabhupada’s disappearance.

“I don’t mean to say that Srila Prabhupada is not helping us now, but I think we are more back to our own standard. At least for me, I forsee a life-long struggle to become a true disciple—it is a goal, an inspiring goal. But if the process to learn to obey (now more based on actual self-realization) is so much harder, then the reward will be so much sweeter. I remember two incidents in connection with Srila Prabhupada that have colored my spiritual growth a lot, and I think that both are connected with this question of obedience.”

(My Godbrother then told two incidents in which he felt he had failed in being completely obedient to Srila Prabhupada’s presence.)

“ . . . So real obedience I feel is something we have to work on all our lives to achieve. But I have my goal—I want to be ready next time Prabhupada calls; ready to really relate to him, to come up to the standard of mental and physical obedience only achieved after transcending the false ego.

“Thus I don’t know if there was more obedience, ie., less false ego, in the earlier days than now, although externally it may appear that way due to the incredible power of Srila Prabhupada. His disappearance has made the question of obedience take on a new dimension.

“ . . . I guess we were ‘forced’ to advance by the sheer power of Srila Prabhupada—although his demands were never absolute. But he saw what surrender a disciple was able to do *while he was present here*. Now comes the real work, the work to become a disciple based on my own desire. What have we lost? I feel I lost a golden opportunity to relate to Prabhupada as a genuine disciple when he was actually present. Now I have to struggle so hard to attain the goal of absolute obedience I should have displayed while he was here—how much more I could have done. But my life is not over yet, maybe I can still be one of those moons he desired. To hope against hope, to reach the practically unattainable—the genuine discipleship.”

23

CONVERSATIONS WITH ŚRĪLA PRABHUPĀDA

Reading the newly published volumes of *Conversations With Śrīla Prabhupāda* requires patience, but it soon gives a reward of great nectar. As the editors state in their preface:

Śrīla Prabhupāda's conversations reveal the nature of a pure devotee of Kṛṣṇa. They are an amazing record of a personality absorbed in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, who is at the same time completely committed and involved in this world. The key to this dual nature was Śrīla Prabhupāda's dedication to preaching. He was fearless, tireless, and at the same time sympathetic to all.

Śrīla Prabhupāda is certainly the most important preacher of the modern age. He was always willing to discuss the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness with anyone seriously interested.

One can discover the truth of these statements by reading or hearing recordings of the conversations. Moreover, those of us who witnessed Śrīla Prabhupāda on a daily basis can attest that he was always speaking in live encounters, in lectures, walks, and room conversations. (In those days, we didn't refer to informal meetings with Śrīla Prabhupāda as "*darśanas*.")

When I say that hearing Prabhupāda's talks requires patience, I refer to the fact that there is much repetition in the subject matter, and that it is heavily philosophical or theological. These very characteristics, however, are part of the greatness of Śrīla Prabhupāda as a conversationalist and lecturer. He never concocted or wandered into *prajalpa*. And neither did he have to prepare any of his talks. Whoever heard him received direct connection to *kṛṣṇa-kathā*, and

to the Lord's pure devotee. In appreciating the faithful quality of Prabhupāda's conversation, George Harrison remarked:

. . . At first, I hadn't been able to tell what he was saying and I wasn't sure if I was too worldly to even be there. But later I relaxed and felt much more at ease with him, and he was very warm towards me. He wouldn't talk differently to me than to anybody else. He was always just speaking about Kṛṣṇa, and it was coincidental who happened to be there. Whenever you saw him, he would always be the same. It wasn't like one time he would tell you to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* and then the next time say, "Oh, no, I made a mistake." He was always the same.

—SPL, Vol 4 pp. 60–61

Śrīla Prabhupāda's own disciples sometimes grew restless while sitting in on his extended talk of *kṛṣṇa-kathā*. Those who could hear Śrīla Prabhupāda without satiation, were the truly advanced souls. Śrīla Prabhupāda himself was a great hearer of *kṛṣṇa-kathā*, as he comments in relationship to his own spiritual master, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura: ". . . because I was serious for hearing, and therefore now I am serious about *kīrtana*" (Room conversation, May 10, 1969).

Śrīla Prabhupāda was aware that he spoke the same things, "As I have several times said...the same example." But he never considered inventing novel concoctions, "experiments with truth," or "commercial" entertainment for the light-minded. His duty was to repeat the teachings of Kṛṣṇa as he had learned it in *paramparā*. And he *loved* speaking on behalf of Kṛṣṇa. Prabhupāda went on talking about Kṛṣṇa despite all inconveniences, such as speaking to unruly audiences (as in New York City and San Francisco, 1966–1967) and despite the rigors of constant, wide travel. Even

after Śrīla Prabhupāda's Bhaktivedanta Book Trust began to regularly produce his books, Prabhupāda did not say, "My writing is influential enough, so what is the purpose of exerting myself to speak personally to a handful here and there?" No, Prabhupāda always thrived on such talks. Even when he saw that the audiences were uninterested, he did not give up the dutiful practice.

Although he was *ātmārāma*, self-satisfied, Prabhupāda felt something was lacking if days went by without his meeting people. Talking gave him life. That is why Śrīla Prabhupāda did not retire, although his disciples suggested nice places to write, and rest. As Prabhupāda remarked late one night in Mexico, after a full day of conversing without eating, "This is our life, to serve Kṛṣṇa. Work all day for Kṛṣṇa and take a little *prasāda* at night."

All glories to Śrīla Prabhupāda's talk, which is like the talk of Śukadeva Gosvāmī, sweet and capable of liberating its hearers, and bringing them to pure love of God! May we go on hearing and appreciating Prabhupāda's strong discourses, and may we also receive at least a drop of his enthusiasm to speak *kṛṣṇa-kathā* to whomever we meet.

24

PRAYING TO HEAR WHAT GOD WANTS US TO DO

He Leadeth Me, is the story of Walter J. Cizsek, a Catholic priest who was imprisoned in Russia for over twenty years. He often speaks of turning to prayer, for example, when he was trying to make a crucial decision whether to enter Russia. He says that because he was evaluating so many intellectual pros and cons, he “could not hear the voice of God.” This account reminded me that when we pray, we are actually hoping to “hear” from the Lord in the heart and from Śrīla Prabhupāda. *Tesām satata-yuktānām*: He gives the intelligence how to come to Him. Prayer is not your one-sided outpouring, but listening and praying for the reply of His direction. Cizsek says you know this in faith by symptoms such as joy of heart and peace of the soul. But this also has to be a joy in His will, not your own desire alone. So we have to act on Kṛṣṇa’s direction, and not merely by our reason and intellect.

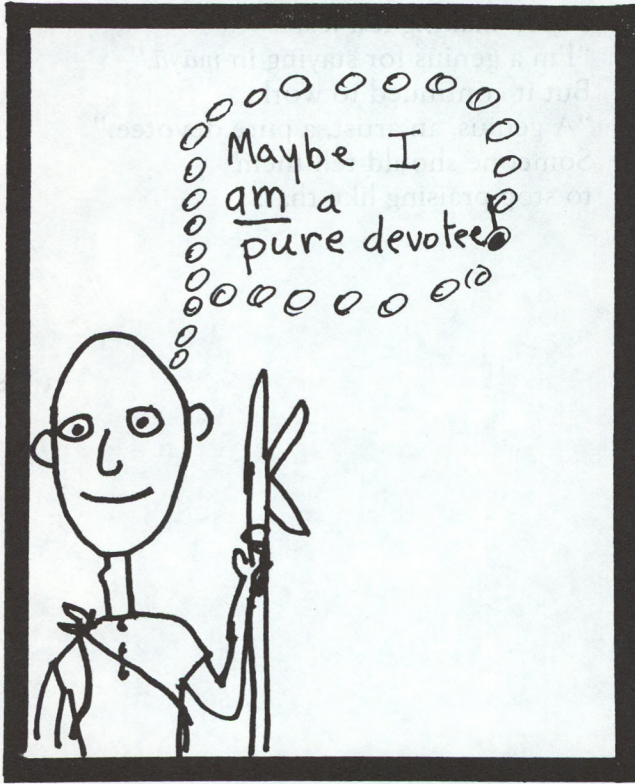
I cannot claim to be guided in that way. But here at least is a direction for my prayers: Ask Śrīla Prabhupāda and Lord Kṛṣṇa to tell you what they want you to do. Ask them to let you know a sign when this is happening. Then, especially at times when you very much need to make a decision, you can be practiced to this prayer.

Please tell me what You want me to do. Let me Hear it; let me know in faith and let me be willing to sacrifice to carry it out.

As Śrīla Prabhupāda says in *Dialectical Spiritualism*: “Through prayer one becomes qualified to understand God, talk with God, and receive His direction.”

25

POISON PRAISE



“You are a genius, an artist
and a pure devotee,”
writes an aspiring disciple.
“You are a hypocrite,”
is closer to the truth.

But I keep thinking, “Genius?
Why did she call me that?”

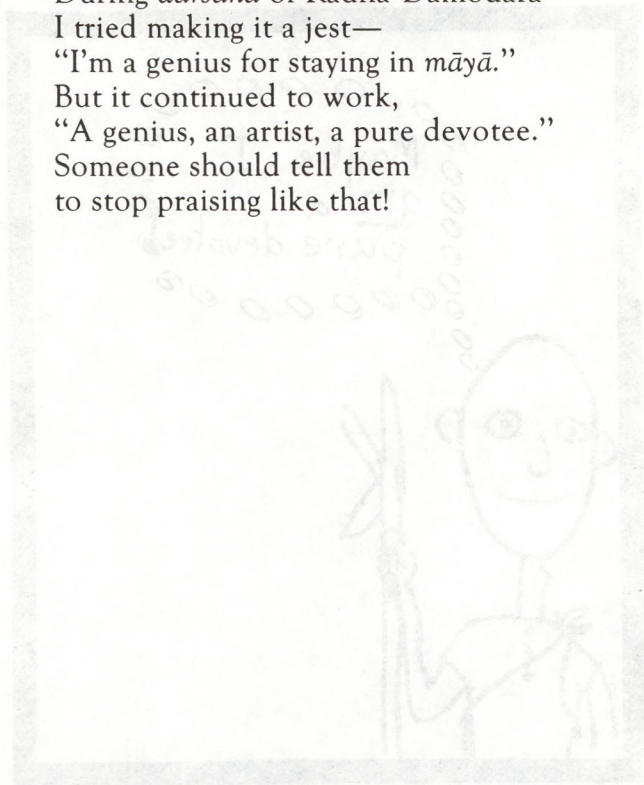
During *darśana* of Rādhā-Dāmodara
I tried making it a jest—

“I’m a genius for staying in *māyā*.”

But it continued to work,

“A genius, an artist, a pure devotee.”

Someone should tell them
to stop praising like that!



“You are a genius, an artist,
and a pure devotee,”
writes an aspiring disciple.
“You are a hypocrite,”
is closer to the truth.

26

JAPA REFORM:
CALLING OUT FOR MERCY

The heart is granite, the mind distracted. There is almost no praying or calling out to the Lord. But I don't give up. Every little chip I make against the stone is noticed by Kṛṣṇa, and is absolute. He will help you. My Godbrothers are advancing by braver acts, but if I can at least persist in vows, prayers, and preaching, Kṛṣṇa will help. Don't give up, even in the face of your granite-like *japa*.

Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura says, "Alone I find I have no strength to chant the holy name of Lord Hari." He means we must receive the mercy of Lord Kṛṣṇa and the spiritual master to chant. This is the art and science of surrender.

Turn to your protectors with mind, intelligence and heart—"Please accept me, please help me to chant." Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura says, "*I beg you therefore please be merciful and with a particle of faith, give me the great treasure of the holy name of Kṛṣṇa.*"

27

GRATITUDE IN ILLNESS

Friends give me well-intentioned advice, to pray to God for relief from illness. One says, "You are always worshiping in the temple and serving Kṛṣṇa. So why not pray to Him for relief?" I am tempted to do so. But devotees don't pray for good health because we know "you're not supposed to." Yet we remain somewhat morose, and we are certainly not *thankful* to Kṛṣṇa that we experience pain and inconvenience in our activities.

But the scriptures advise us to be happy and grateful in whatever Providence wills for us. That is the vision of the pure devotee. In a lecture given in September 1966, Śrīla Prabhupāda said that the man who prays to God for material relief is pious, but he's also foolish:

Because he does not know that God is in my heart. He is sitting along with me. The soul and Supersoul, both of them are sitting together and God knows everything about me. So I do not require to pray from God to get me out of this distress. He knows everything. Why shall I pray? He (the pure devotee) leaves everything to God. He does not pray. He *prays!*—he prays to *glorify* the God!—how great You are. Not for his personal interest, "O God, give me my bread, give me my dress, give me my shelter . . ."

Even if the pure devotee is distressed he thinks, "O Lord it is Your kindness. You have put me in distress just to rectify me. I would have been put into thousands of times more distress but You are giving me only a little. That is Your mercy."

A similar view is expressed in a thoughtful statement by Thomas Merton in his 1964 journal, *A Vow of Conversation*:

Sometimes a call to spiritual solitude and liberty may come to us masked as a humiliating sickness or weakness. One's weakness or incapacity can itself become that liberty in so far as it humiliates completely. But we do not have the courage to see or admit it, thus we deprive ourselves of that joy. How good God has really been to us and yet we are ungrateful.

As I reflect on this, I can begin to understand that actually much spiritual gain can be made from illness. Surely Kṛṣṇa had this in mind, that I should take advantage of debilitating circumstances. Let it humble me and all "my" plans for serving Kṛṣṇa. Let it drive me within to deeper thoughts of surrender. And let me thank Kṛṣṇa for minimizing the reactions to my sins. "How good God has really been to us and yet we are ungrateful."

GOING FORWARD TO MEET KṚṢṆA EVERYWHERE

I tend to take the “poetic verses” in the seventh and tenth chapters of the *Bhagavad-gītā* as aids for beginners. But there is a profound mysticism taught by Kṛṣṇa here, and in the most accessible method.

Guided by the examples in these chapters, we can see Kṛṣṇa at all times in the most ordinary, daily experiences. Prabhupāda especially liked to speak on the verse where Kṛṣṇa says that He is the taste in water, the light in the sun and the sound in ether. Prabhupāda would plead with his audiences, as if expecting every sensible man and woman to agree on the spot and begin to see Kṛṣṇa at once. Who doesn’t see the sun every day? And who doesn’t benefit from the ultra-violet light of the sun which is very good for health?

Everyone drinks water, and Kṛṣṇa is the original taste. (And who can forget Prabhupāda’s most lenient invitation, “I will invite even the drunkard when he drinks his wine, to think of Kṛṣṇa.”) Whatever sound we hear is also Kṛṣṇa. Prabhupāda invited his audience to include even the sounds from Second Avenue in New York City as Kṛṣṇa, “the sound in ether.”

Neither Kṛṣṇa nor Śrīla Prabhupāda intended these verses to be only rhetorical flourishes. They are meant to be put into simple practice. For example, when we see someone exerting strength, we can understand that there are different degrees of that strength. I have a certain amount of strength but there are stronger men. And there are men who are even stronger than that, world champions and so on. At every point, the different degrees of strength including the

ultimate *bala*, or supreme strength of God, can help us to remember God.

The examples given in the tenth chapter are just a sample. With this principle in mind, that Kṛṣṇa is everywhere, we can expand our contact with Him in each and every instance, day and night. Kṛṣṇa is always there, in the elements, in the persons that we meet, and in all situations.

But it is not enough to just acknowledge God; we must go forward and meet His will *favorably*. For example, Lord Kṛṣṇa is *kāma*, or sex desire. But we have to approach *kāma* in a favorable way, according to religious principles. Although technically speaking, illicit sex is also Kṛṣṇa's energy, it is not a favorable participation or union with God. All these *vibhūtimat* manifestations can be found easily, but only when we look for them in a favorable way. In the Tenth Chapter, Kṛṣṇa acts as our *guru* to give us some examples. The application is up to us, guided by Vaiṣṇavas, and out of our own sincerity.

In problematic situations we think, "How can I see Kṛṣṇa *here*? It seems so ungodly." But with faith we should look for God's signs and appreciate, "Yes, here too He is present." And when even these primary lessons in the all-pervading nature of God seem to fail us, we can remember, "Of sacrifices, I am the chanting of the holy names (*jaṇa*) . . ."

29

THE NEED FOR IṢṬA-GOṢṬHĪ

I remember the old-time *iṣṭa-goṣṭhīs* at 26 Second Avenue—we “devotees” talking in the storefront, while Prabhupāda sat up in his room. We used to divide the meetings in half: business and philosophy. As the secretary, I would type up the notes and then bring them to Prabhupāda, who would sometimes make annotations in pen. One night, the devotees had been talking about how Kṛṣṇa consciousness could be spread to different cities. After the meeting, when I went up to Prabhupāda’s room, he asked, “What were you speaking on at the *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*?”

I replied, “We were discussing our plans.”

Prabhupāda replied, “Our plan is to surrender to Kṛṣṇa.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda never tolerated speculation, either in lectures or in *iṣṭa-goṣṭhīs*. Our conclusions must agree completely with the śāstric *siddhānta*. But how easy it is to fall into a role of know-it-all and think that we can be independent of *guru*, *śāstra*, and *sādhū*! Fortunately, Prabhupāda is still “upstairs,” and we may also consult with Godbrothers, so we can be corrected.

One time at an *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī* in Boston, a new boy started making up “pastimes” of Lord Kṛṣṇa. He somehow thought that it was all right to take a creative approach to what Kṛṣṇa had actually done and said. When he spoke that way, all the initiated devotees knew that it wasn’t right, and so we patiently explained it to him. *That* in itself is a significant step in our advancement: if we can learn to detect the ring of Vedic truth in contrast to concocted sounds.

One time at an *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*, a devotee asked about the philosophy of the Māyāvādāi, Rama-Krishna. Pradyumna dāsa

gave a reply and we sent the minutes off to Prabhupāda. He wrote back approvingly, and made a long elaboration on it. This gave us much pleasure, knowing that Prabhupāda was hearing and approving our talks, and giving us more nectar.

But the objection might be raised: if the *śāstra* is the perfect standard, then what need is there for devotees to meet and discuss things? Better to just read from the scriptures outloud, or alone silently, and make no comments. After all, our comments are likely to fall into error.

Silent reading, or reading without any comment, is certainly a valid form of *smaraṇam*, but Srila Prabhupāda also wanted us to learn to *speak*. Therefore, one reason for *iṣṭa-goṣṭhīs* is for the training of the devotees.

We have to be living representatives. This means sometimes sitting together and discussing what the spiritual master has said. We may not always give the precisely right answers. In that case we have to go back to the books and consult again. And we have to admit it when we cannot live up to the standards of Vaiṣṇava behavior; but keep trying. Lord Kṛṣṇa kindly gives us new opportunities to pick up where we left off in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and the devotees will also give us new opportunities, provided we are sincere.

The beauty of hearing and discussing the Absolute Truth is that it can solve all relative problems. *Yasmin vijñāte sarvam evaṁ vijñātaṁ bhavati*. As Lord Balarāma said to Rukmiṇī, when she was distressed about material problems, "Due to false notions only one becomes unhappy, but this unhappiness is immediately removed by discussing the philosophy of actual life. Be happy on that platform only."

If we take part in sincere *iṣṭa-goṣṭhī*, we'll become resolved to arrange our lives for *more* regular hearing of the topics of Kṛṣṇa. And for that we will seek out the association of desirable company.

30

NIMĀI DĀSA AND THE MOUSE

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Like other ISKCON writers, I have deliberated on whether to attempt Kṛṣṇa conscious fiction. The most significant precedent is Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura's novel, *Jaiwa Dharma* which some consider to be also his masterpiece of philosophical dissertation. My Godbrothers Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Goswami and Nṛṣimha dāsa Adhikārī have already written novels. Others are working on fiction or "just about to" make serious efforts. Mathureśa Prabhu has written successful fictional satires which have appeared recently in *Back to Godhead*. So I have decided to join them.

A fable is a particular type of fiction, in which the make-believe content is explicit and obvious to the reader. One variety of fable is the bestiary, in which animals speak like humans. Usually fables tell an instructive moral or inspirational message along with the fantastic tale.

There is a precedent for fables in Vedic culture. The *Hitopadesh* is an ancient Sanskrit collection of stories, usually involving birds and beasts speaking, and filled with wise counsel in politics, religion and morality, similar to the sayings of Cāṇakya Paṇḍita. Apparently, the *Aesop's Fables* is based on the *Hitopadesh*.

There are also a few fables in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* is mostly not fable, and when "animals" like Hanumān, Garuḍa and Gajendra speak, we understand that they are actual devotees in advanced spiritual consciousness. But in the Eighth Canto King Yayāti tell a fable of a he-goat and a she-goat. He says, "The best of the he-goats, attracted by the many she-goats, engaged in erotic activities and naturally forgot his real business of realization." There is a similar story told by a *brāhmaṇa* in the Eleventh Canto, about a family of birds. The male bird returned home to the tree and found that his wife and children had been captured by a hunter. At first he thought to try to save

them, but then he decided not to enter the trap. While telling this story one time, Prabhupāda said, “And so the male bird thought, ‘Let me take *sannyāsa*.’ ” The devotees were charmed to hear Prabhupāda tell it that way, and no one was dull enough to ask, “But Prabhupāda, how could a bird take *sannyāsa*?”

There is even a fable of a mouse who approached a sage and asked for benedictions. (*Punar muṣika bhava*, “Again become a mouse.”)

My story about a devotee and a mouse is not as short as most fables, and it is not so pointed in its didactic moral. It is—

NIMĀI DĀSA AND THE MOUSE

Nimāi dāsa was very surprised when the mouse began to speak to him in perfectly good English. At first he couldn’t believe it. But in this strange material world anything is possible! And there was no doubt about it: the mouse had spoken.

Actually it was Nimāi dāsa who had spoken first to the mouse. He had been feeling dejected when he came up to his attic room. When the mouse appeared, Nimāi blurted, “Hare Kṛṣṇa! What are you looking for? *Prasādam*?”

The mouse, who was small, gray, and nervous in its movements, had replied in a small squeaky voice, “What’s *prasādam*?” Nimāi was startled; he looked around. Usually he had the room to himself. Had someone heard him speaking and answered as a joke? But no, the room was empty as usual.

Nimāi sat down expecting the mouse to flee. The auditory hallucination, or whatever it was, had snapped Nimāi away from his dejection. For the time being he forgot that Bibhu dāsa, the temple president, had just told him that he

would not recommend Nimāi as a husband to any of the *brahmacārīṇīs*. Bibhu said that Nimāi was too irresponsible to become a *gṛhastha*. When he heard that, Nimāi had walked away without a word, and come up to the little attic space above the *brahmacārī āśrama* . . .

The mouse squeaked again, “What’s *prasādam*?” and looked up to Nimāi with an earnest face.

Nimāi felt a stirring desire to preach. Despite the absurdity of the situation, he thought that he should answer what seemed like a bona fide inquiry.

“*Prasādam* is food that’s been offered to Kṛṣṇa,” said Nimāi. And he added, “The Supreme Personality of Godhead.”

“How is it that you can talk?” asked Nimāi. Nimāi was now sitting on his sleeping bag on the floor and the mouse was poised respectfully, a few feet in front of him.

It twitched its whiskers, and sniffed at the floor replying, “I don’t know.”

Nimāi flashed on the idea that maybe this mouse, which was after all a spirit-soul in a mouse body, had some unusual *karma*, and was therefore living in Rādhā-Dāmodara’s temple in the association of devotees. Maybe . . .

Suddenly there were heavy footfalls on the stairs, the door swung open—and the mouse ran for shelter through a crack in the boards.

“Hey Nimāi!” it was Bhīma dāsa. “I heard that Bibhu dāsa just gave you the sauce, huh?” Bhīma dāsa patted Nimāi on the shoulder. “What’s the matter? You look like you saw a ghost or something.”

Nimāi thought of telling Bhīma dāsa about the mouse, but he decided not to. Who would believe it? They would just laugh and call him crazy. In fact, they already did. They called him Nimāi the Gnome, and “eccentric” and, someone had said, “He is a sincere devotee, but a little strange.”

“Just be patient, Prabhu,” said Bhīma dāsa. “Smaller than a blade of grass, more tolerant than a tree, right? If you can’t find a wife, that could be Kṛṣṇa’s blessing.” Bhīma then suggested that it was getting late and they should take rest in order to get up on time for *maṅgala-ārati*.

After Bhīma left, Nimāi kept the light on looking to see if the mouse would come back. But when nothing happened for ten minutes, he turned out the light. *Whatever* had actually happened, he still had to get up at 3:00 A.M. to start his *japa* and morning duties.

When Nimāi dāsa woke the next morning he wondered whether he had actually spoken with a mouse. Nimāi was not an initiated *brāhmaṇa*, but he assisted the *pujārīs* in preparing the plates for Rādhā-Dāmodara, before *maṅgala-ārati*. He then attended the *ārati kīrtana* with the other devotees, although as usual, they could not induce him to dance. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his hooded sweatshirt, and reverently looked upon Their Lordships.

During the *japa* period, his mind was filled with distractions, especially the temple president’s rejection of him as a candidate for marriage. Neither could he forget the squeaky voice, “What’s *prasādam*?” While circumambulating Tulasī, trying to chant *japa*, Nimāi prayed, *My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, my dear spiritual master, in a state like this, how can I pay attention to Your holy names?*

That morning the *Bhāgavatam* class was given by a visiting *sannyāsī*. In the course of his lecture he mentioned that Lord Caitanya could induce even the lions, tigers and elephants to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. When the *sannyāsī* finished and asked for questions, Nimāi dāsa raised his hand.

“Mahārāja,” Nimāi asked, “Is it possible for an animal to become Kṛṣṇa conscious?” Nimāi had a reputation for asking

“mental” or odd questions, although they didn’t seem odd to Nimāi.

“Yes, in extraordinary circumstance,” the *sannyāsī* replied. “Lord Caitanya once blessed a dog that had also been favored by the Lord’s devotee Śivānanda Sena. And that dog soon went back to Godhead. There is also the example of a snake living in the cave of Haridāsa Ṭhākura, to whom the Lord in the heart spoke, and then the snake left the cave so as not to disturb Haridāsa.”

“Can I ask more?” Nimāi asked hesitantly. “Your examples are of a great devotee blessing an animal. But could an animal take birth, say in a temple, and have remembrance of living in that temple before?” Some of the devotees in the audience exchanged looks, indicating that Nimāi was up to his old tricks.

“Yes, that’s possible,” the *sannyasi* answered soberly. “Prabhupāda has said that those people who live in skyscrapers and try to “lick them up” in sense gratification, may be born next life in the same building, not as humans, but as rats! He has also said that people who are very attached to the country, and who want to be Americans next time, may take birth in this land, but as cows to be slaughtered.”

“But is it possible,” asked Nimāi, “that the soul could continue his higher consciousness even in the animal’s life?”

“Only if he was a great soul,” said the *sannyasi*. “The prominent example is Mahārāja Bharata, who had to take birth as a stag, but who kept the higher consciousness and associated only with *sādhus*.” The *sannyāsī* looked around the room for other questions, but Nimāi spoke out again.

“Just one more question, Mahārāja,” he said. A few of the women tittered, and other devotees smiled tolerantly, a bit embarrassed that the visiting *sannyāsī* was getting such a full dose of their Nimāi dāsa. “What if,” Nimāi asked, “a soul was born in a animal’s body because he deserved that lower species? Would it

then be possible for him to have any relationship with a human devotee?" Devotees burst out laughing. Nimāi blushed.

"I don't think I can answer a question like that," the *saṁnyāsī* said. "We should not be so interested in animals, Prabhu. Our duty is to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the human beings. Those human beings who are like hogs, dogs, camels, and asses don't listen to the *Bhāgavatam* message, but we have to preach to *them*. We can give them books. We should try more to distribute Prabhupāda's books, and this would be better than speculating about the position of animals."

This remark brought a responsive "Jaya!" from some of the men, and Nimāi took it as another dig at him. He suddenly realized how foolish he must have sounded.

During the rest of the morning program, Nimāi received a few more jibes for his unusual questions. In reply he nodded silently, although smiling. He was thinking, "There is another reference in the *Bhāgavatam* about this."

After breakfast he went up to his attic room and took down the Second Canto where he seemed to remember something in the *catur-sloka* about animals receiving Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Wasn't there a purport which described Kṛṣṇa consciousness as so liberal, that all creatures in the universe can take to it? He finally found this:

Therefore the devotional service of the Lord with perfect knowledge through the training of a bona fide spiritual master is advised for everyone, even if one happens not to be a human being. This is confirmed in the *Garuḍa Purāṇa* as follows:

*kīta-pakṣi-mṛgāṇām ca
harau saṁnyasta-cetasām
ūrdhvām eva gatiṁ manye
kiṁ punar jñāninām nṛṇām*

“Even the worms, birds and beasts are assured of elevation to the highest perfectional life if they are completely surrendered to the transcendental loving service of the Lord, so what to speak of the philosophers amongst the human beings.”

—*Bhāg.* 2.9.36, purport

As Nimāi closed the book and sat back thoughtfully, the same mouse came forward from the floor boards and crept slowly before him.

It squeaked, “Who is Kṛṣṇa?”

Nimāi was thrilled. He felt a rush of compassion.

“I’ll tell you,” he said. What Nimāi had asked in class, and what the *sannyāsī* had replied, seemed theoretical, compared to this moment. To Nimāi, it no longer seemed urgent to know “who” the mouse was, or why it was able to talk. It had asked a glorious question, and Nimāi dāsa felt obliged to reply.

Nimāi said, “You have asked a very wonderful question. It is stated in the scripture *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, that to answer this question is the perfection of speaking and hearing. I am not very qualified to answer, but I can tell you what I have read in Prabhupāda’s books, which are the perfect source of information about Kṛṣṇa. So try to listen with attention.”

The mouse positioned itself comfortably on its haunches, and tried to compose the movements of its claws and tail. Its ears were perked outward.

Although the mouse directly asked, “Who is Kṛṣṇa?” Nimāi dāsa thought it best to begin with the Lord’s teachings in the Second Chapter of *Bhagavad-gītā*, regarding the identity of the self. This would be particularly relevant for the mouse. Nimāi was eager to use the verses he had memorized, beginning with *dehino ’smin yathā dehe . . .* And so he proceeded logically, describing the transmigration of the soul through the different species. With preacher’s instinct, Nimāi dāsa tried to catch the mouse’s attention and observe whether it was hearing submis-

sively. Nimāi gave the analogy of a person changing garments that wear out, but then he thought the mouse might not be able to relate to that. So he stressed that all living beings are spirit soul, and all are equal. Only due to *karma* do we have different situations where someone is in a body of a human, someone in the body of a dog and someone in the body of a mouse.

After about half an hour, the mouse lost its power of attention, and began twitching its nose, and running back and forth like an ordinary mouse, as if forgetting the purpose of life. Nimāi dāsa was alarmed at these symptoms. He wanted to nurture whatever trust he had already developed, and so he gently advised the mouse that they should end their discussion and take it up another time. The mouse did not speak further, but seemed to nod in agreement. Nimāi then suggested that they could meet for half hour intervals twice a day, morning and night.

And so in the days that followed, they continued to meet as before. The mouse appeared regularly and was always submissive and attentive, as far as was in its power. It continued to ask questions which were short and simple, and yet with a pure and penetrating manner. For example, at the start of the third session, the mouse asked Nimāi, "But how can a soul become free of the body's demands?"

Nimāi was accustomed to being the lesser in his relationships with people, and he took well to the fact that the mouse was subordinate and dependent on him. He tried to treat it kindly. By patiently inquiring, Nimāi dāsa gradually learned some personal details of his new friend. The mouse told him that he was a male, relatively young, and that he came from a large family. He would not say where he lived exactly, except "somewhere in the temple." The mouse had no interest in the subject of his previous lives, and nor did Nimāi care much about it. Nimāi

thought of past-life research as Shirley McLaine stuff and anyway what did it matter? Whatever this soul had been before, it was now in a mouse body, and *now* he was interested in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

The mouse was reluctant to talk about his family and home life. But when Nimāi inquired about his eating habits, he admitted that most of their food came from the temple kitchen. Nimāi then explained the principle of eating *prasādam*, rather than *bhoga*. The mouse was impressed, and squeaked with joy when Nimāi said that he would personally supply *prasādam* for the mouse. Since the mouse's relationship with his family seemed delicate, Nimāi did not pursue the idea that the mouse might bring *prasādam* to his family members.

Within a few days, the mouse was chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. Nimāi even gave him a name, Chota dāsa—"So I can call you," Nimāi said.

Nimāi kept the relationship a secret, but the devotees noticed a great change in him. He was usually morose and irritable. But now he was bright faced and jolly. He even began dancing in the *kīrtanas* and one time, when one of the *brāhmaṇas* was ill, Nimāi volunteered and gave the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* lecture. He became enthusiastic to describe the glories of the holy name and the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. While working at his temple duties, or cleaning the grounds, he would spontaneously say to other devotees, "The glories of the holy name are so great, we can't even imagine! Kṛṣṇa has such power to liberate us! We should all preach His glories!" This behavior was certainly surprising because Nimāi had a reputation for being a wall flower. He never liked to go out on *hari-nāma*, and usually found some excuse to avoid it. He also avoided going to college lectures, or to speaking to guests who came to the temple. If he did speak to a guest, it usually turned out unfavorable, with Nimāi becoming irritable and argumentative.

But now he was a changed man, an asset to the community. Bibhu Prabhu asked Nimāi how he had become so inspired. Nimāi smiled and said, "It's just Kṛṣṇa's mercy."

Bibhu said, "If you keep on progressing like this maybe I can recommend you to get married." Nimāi laughed with shining eyes: "If I keep up like this, maybe I won't have to get married!"

(To be continued.)

