

(Early Notes Toward a Rhetoric of Consciousness).

When I was teaching in gurukulas, the students would occasionally find out that another child didn't like one sort of food or another and would tease them: "Eww—you don't like mangoes? That means you don't like Prabhupada and Krishna!" These eight- or nine-year-olds were probably joking, or half joking, to the extent that kids are capable. But when adults insist in the rudest language that other devotees who don't share their opinions on one detail or another regarding devotional practice or association are faithless, or even demons, they are not joking. And it's not funny.

Rather, they are simply demonstrating a narrow-minded attitude and cramped thinking discouraged by Srila Prabhupada himself. Unfortunately, we see a great deal of such narrow-mindedness in discussions among devotees over the course of our association, both face to face and in online discourse. I have found it to be perhaps the most discouraging, most corrosive attitude among devotees. I believe it would immeasurably improve the quality of devotee association, and perhaps even the devotees' preaching efforts, if, rather than seeing other devotees of Krishna in such a pinched, miserly way, we tried instead to imbibe and exhibit the kind of broad, generous vision of others that Srila Prabhupada himself exemplified.

Those devotees who have spent any time on the internet over the last few years have most likely observed a number of controversies among preachers, which often appear to be focused more on approaches to preaching than anything else. Sannyasi A rips into Sannyasi B for having the temerity to write on Bhagavad-gita. Sannyasi C conducts a campaign against Sannyasi D, accusing him of being infected with "New Age" ideas. Then he goes after Sannyasi E for engaging in mundane welfare work in the name of preaching. Others in turn criticize Sannyasi C for being stuck in the Middle Ages with regard to a number of social issues. A good number of ISKCON leaders consistently vilify those who have accepted instruction from preachers outside the GBC's control, calling them guru-tyagis or worse, often pushing them outside ISKCON altogether. Many devotees criticize the BBT and its staff for continuing to edit Srila Prabhupada's books. Defenders of the BBT's managers and staff, on the other hand, sometimes belittle those who see themselves as simply standing up for the purity of Srila Prabhupada's books.

And I don't want to give the impression that this problem is exclusively, or even primarily, a problem among ISKCON's devotees. It's no secret that many preachers from one mission have over the years disparaged pretty much everyone who didn't surrender to their guru, whom they touted as the most advanced devotee on the planet, sometimes as the only pure devotee around. And leading preachers in another mission used their blogs for years to harass preachers from other missions who did not serve under their guru, using downright cruel facsimiles of humor. More recently, these same leaders now find themselves embroiled in succession conflicts, which some of them broadcast all over the Web, publicly accusing their perceived opponents of all sorts of impropriety and a laundry list of offenses. And then we have a number of Web sites whose specialty seems to be publishing any and every complaint against leaders of ISKCON and pretty much every other Gaudiya mission. And so it goes, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

What's more, we engage in all this bickering in public, across the Internet! What does this say to the countless students who type "Hare Krishna" or some such search phrase into their search engine as they work on that term paper? To someone who might have purchased a book about Krishna consciousness, or the father wondering if he should let his child visit a temple or stay at an ashram? It seems we can establish dialog and discuss contentious matters cordially with academics, with Christians, with Jews, perhaps with some Muslims and Buddhists, and even some atheists, but we can't talk with another devotee who disagrees with us by even less than one percent without getting into a fight. And sometimes we do so in the most intemperate language. One can only imagine how Gaudiya Vaisnavism must look to those whose experience of it is limited to what they see on the Internet.

What seems to be missing here is discourse driven by the kind of vision Srila Prabhupada showed throughout his lifetime of spreading Krishna consciousness. Let us see, for example, how he responded to discord among devotees in a letter he wrote to Kirtanananda in 1973:

"Now this displeasing of god brothers has already begun and gives me too much agitation in my mind. Our Gaudiya Math people fought with one another after the demise of Guru Maharaja but my disciples have already begun fighting even in my presence. So I am greatly concerned about it... .

Material nature means dissension and disagreement, especially in this Kali yuga. But, for this

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Krsna consciousness movement its success will depend on agreement, even though there are varieties of engagements. In the material world there are varieties, but there is no agreement. In the spiritual world there are varieties, but there is agreement. That is the difference. The materialist without being able to adjust the varieties and the disagreements makes everything zero. They cannot come into agreement with varieties, but if we keep Krsna in the center, then there will be agreement in varieties. This is called unity in diversity... . But, if we fight on account of diversity, then it is simply the material platform. Please try to maintain the philosophy of unity in diversity. That will make our movement successful. One section of men have already gone out, therefore we must be very careful to maintain unity in diversity..."

What we see here is an exhortation to a broader, more generous vision of how diverse devotees may serve Mahaprabhu's mission than some may be accustomed to. The basis of this generosity, Srila Prabhupada explains, is the generosity of spirit Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu teaches:

"Following in the footprints of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu:

*trnad api su-nicena taror iva sahisnuna amanina manadena kirtaniya sada harih*

"One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly."

We must always remember this verse and be as tolerant as the tree, as we execute the Krsna consciousness movement. Without this mentality we cannot be successful."

(Srila Prabhupada's Letter to Kirtanananda, October 18, 1973)

Srila Prabhupada's letter suggests that tolerating difference is essential to the broad vision he urges his disciple to develop here. This word is well worth examining.

Devotees generally use "tolerance" in the sense of forbearance, putting up with something we see as unfavorable. We often speak of tolerating the urges of the mind and senses, of tolerating abuse from an unappreciative public, of tolerating the devotees who get on our nerves, of tolerating bodily pain or the itching of bug bites. This certainly answers to one of the two meanings the word has in English; moreover, it's a useful understanding for practicing devotees. But it is neither the sole nor the primary meaning.

Most English dictionaries give the primary sense of tolerance as fairness toward practices, opinions and perspectives different from our own; freedom from bigotry; a liberal, undogmatic attitude. This is certainly the sense in which Srila Prabhupada uses it in his letter to Kirtanananda, the most useful sense of tolerance for truly progressive devotees in a diverse, worldwide movement. And, unfortunately, this kind of tolerance among devotees is too uncommonly found.

Instead, we encounter scenes such as this: When visiting an ISKCON temple in a large US city a few years ago, I was subjected to one of ISKCON's more prominent sannyasis asserting that all but one of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura's disciples failed to appreciate their guru's innovation of an organized institution for systematically propagating the teachings of Lord Caitanya. Therefore, he said, they all became either mayavadins or sahajiyas. (And he made such a blanket condemnation of Srila Prabhupada's Godbrothers by way of ostensibly glorifying Srila Sarasvati Thakura on the anniversary of his disappearance.) Or we find ourselves embroiled in endless squabbles with members of another mission, who seem to regard everyone who does not share their degree of faith in a particular sadhu as the lowest of offenders. And recently I was involved in an online discussion with a number of my Godbrothers and sisters in which a couple of participants conducted protracted campaigns of vilifying another Godbrother and everyone who associated with him in the harshest imaginable language because he declines to submit to ISKCON's GBC in all matters, including ISKCON policies contrary to Gaudiya Vaisnava siddhanta.

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Srila Prabhupada sometimes told us that one definition of a brahmana is liberal, broadminded, generous, as opposed to the narrow-minded kripaṇa, who is miserly and grudging—at best—in appreciating others with whom he does not closely identify. And he made it abundantly clear throughout his teaching campaign that the dominant attitude in our movement should be that of the brahmana.

We should note carefully, though, that the generosity expressed should not be a kind of Pollyannaism that pretends away the differences between different groups of devotees. I suggest, rather, that we behave, as Srila Prabhupada often exhorted, as a society based on love and trust. The problem is that leaders too often insist that we love and trust them, but they treat us as if we had little intelligence or sincerity. Love, trust, and cooperation are reciprocal activities, two-way streets. But if love and trust seem too lofty, too inaccessible, perhaps we could begin with simple mutual respect.

We need, of course, to be able to discuss the issues that seem to divide us, but we should discuss them respectfully. We can only do that, however, if we begin to turn away from a Manichean view of the world, including the world of devotees. That is a black-and-white view that my perspective, my approach, my mission, my guru, is good, and all others are inferior, if not bad, perhaps even evil. We see that, in American political discourse, this perspective has led to such toxic rancor and demonization that government has been all but crippled. And the same thing has happened in discourse among devotees. Embracing unity in diversity, on the other hand, means accepting and openly acknowledging that devotees whose approach to service may appear more liberal or conservative, or different in any way we find significant, may also desire to make the perfection of Krishna consciousness available to everyone. It means moving from black and white to shades of gray, but also beyond that to a full-color spectrum of approaches to preaching and practicing, as long as they don't challenge the siddhanta established by our acaryas.

We should note that even discussed in a more civil manner, some ideas and policies will be rejected. As much as I may respect your sincere desire to serve Mahāprabhu's mission, I may still find a particular policy ill advised, or even contrary to siddhanta established by our acaryas. You may also find my reluctance to bow to your institution's leaders' authority narrow or short sighted, even obstinate. And we may very well feel compelled to say so. Moreover, our discussion may be quite vigorous because of the strength of our convictions. But we should be able to discuss these issues vigorously without casting aspersions on each others' faith, denigrating each other's accomplishments, or calling each other names. We should be more interested in generating light than heat. Perhaps we need fewer lessons in logic and

argumentation and more guidance from Miss Manners!

So let us by all means discuss those differences, but let us strive to do so with a more nuanced approach than we too often see these days. After all, discussion aimed at understanding the conclusions of the scriptures strengthens our faith. Moreover, the focus of our disagreements is usually how to serve Guru and Gauranga. I hope we devotees can learn to discuss with real respect, not the sham respect we see among today's politicians. Doing so would be easier, of course, if we learn to respect each other's service and contributions, regardless of institutional affiliation or differences in approaches. We must respect boundaries, as well. Good fences, the proverb says, make good neighbors. How far this is true is another discussion altogether. Where I'm from, on the island of Hawaii, we build rock walls, but they're usually only a foot or two high, not sky-scraping walls topped with broken glass or razor wire. It's easy to step over them to visit, as the mood there is "e komo mai": come on over. My kuleana (responsibility) is taking care of what's on this side of the wall, and yours is what's on that side. And if bananas, avocados, or mangos from trees on my side hang over the wall, they're yours. We devotees of Caitanya Mahaprabhu should be able to behave similarly, accepting responsibility for our own service, sharing generously, respecting, but not worshiping, boundaries. Intruding on other missions' affairs simply to break devotees' faith should be avoided.

In our attempts to create a discourse of love and trust, we may recall Krsna's praise of speech that does not cause distress, is truthful, agreeable, and beneficial as austerity of speech. And, bearing in mind that Krsna repeatedly praises nonviolence in Bhagavad-gita, devotees may want to consider approaches such as nonviolent communication. This helps us both express our own perspective honestly and clearly, while at the same time paying others respectful, empathetic attention. And when we do write, whether a book or an email, we should consider carefully a couple of things all conscientious writers learn: how we want to present ourselves, who our audience is (both our intended audience, and, given the reality of the digital world, who our audience is likely to become), and our purpose, what we hope to accomplish by writing a particular text. If we can do such things, we may find it possible to work together and realize Srila Prabhupada and Mahaprabhu's ambitions for the sankirtana movement. Otherwise, we're likely to find ourselves as divided by recrimination and name calling as the leaders of the two main political parties in the US are today. And our efforts will likely prove no more effective.

I don't intend that this brief essay serve as a manifesto, or that it be read as a comprehensive treatment of the problem I identify here, which is not that we devotees disagree among ourselves, but that the manner in which we publicly express our disagreement poisons our relationships and undermines the culture of bhakti. This is merely an essay, in the more formal

sense of an attempt — here, an attempt mainly to begin a conversation. Read it as an opening gambit, if you like. It will also likely serve as the beginning to a longer, more comprehensive project I have been considering for some time. Meanwhile, I hope devotees will feel free to continue the conversation by offering their own insights and experiences.

Let us imagine together how much more easily the world may be able to appreciate the teachings of Lord Caitanya when his followers no longer publicly bicker like eight-year-old children. I hope we can all become humble enough to accept that devotees with perspectives different from ours may certainly love and honor Srila Prabhupada, our guru varga, and Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu as much as we—and to treat them as such. A broader vision, colored by the love and trust that should come naturally to progressive Vaisnavas, will show diversity of perspectives and approaches to be an asset, not a liability. Addressing each other as if we had such a vision may at least be a step in the right direction. We may then begin to see how Mahaprabhu's sankirtana movement is enriched by that diversity, which may provide a broader range of appeal to the larger society, which is in such dire need of the Vaisnavas' mercy.