

# H.G. Vishakha Devi

***Q What important instructions and leadership examples of Srila Prabhupada do you feel should be preserved and shared for the longevity and solidarity of ISKCON into the future?***

This is a very important question I think- one thing that I remember in regard to SP is just how aware he was- *his awareness and it was a very empathetic awareness* for example in joining the temple devotees would have different struggles- Brahmacharis might have their struggles with celibacy, grihasthas may have their struggles with maintaining their sadhana, sannyasis have their own struggles taking such a serious vow. So he was aware of these different obstacles and also he was aware of the voiceless people- the women and how they would be struggling to fulfill their duties and perhaps they would be overlooked in the course of the temple activities and the children who had no maturity to express themselves or even to know what to say but SP because of his what I call empathetic awareness, was quite concerned with all these different groups of people and would respond to them in a way to encourage them at the same time, guide them. So encouragement and guidance were there together hand in hand. To have one without the other is incomplete. And also in preaching, he was very aware about the conditioning of the people he was preaching to and so he could preach to them and encourage them and sometimes with great force and strength as we saw right here in Juhu, this famous Dr. Patel and at other times with great gentleness as we saw for instance, with George Harrison. So he introduced KC to the entire gamut of human society from thief to the Phd, all different nationalities, all different religions and because of his incredible awareness and with that, empathy, he could touch people's hearts and I think without being aware of SP's awareness, we miss out on a very important aspect of his legacy. And I also have to include that this awareness that would be apparently contradictory statements from SP or from the scriptures but he had the brilliance in his awareness to reconcile this contradiction and that was sometimes extraordinarily enlivening and fascinating to see him do that and

extremely helpful for us to broaden our minds and it's not just this way and it's not just that way. But somehow in a way in which we hadn't thought of- it was both ways. So that also I think is very necessary at this time when we tend to become polarised- to be able to reconcile apparently contradictory statements.

***Q Do you find any areas of Srila Prabhupada's teachings that have still not been appropriately implemented or aspects of his vision for the mission that are yet to be fulfilled? If so what could be done to fulfill the same.***

Well, I'll have to relate this to the first question that to realize first of all that perhaps we are lacking in these areas that I mentioned i.e. empathetic hearing to the devotees, for the non-devotees and in terms of reconciling the differences that if we don't acknowledge that, in my view, then we're going to be blind to these things and it'll get worse. Previously in America I was living outside the temple, now I've been in India for some months living inside the temple so I have a little more contact with the devotees and some devotees feel excluded and the management is not aware of that- those devotees because of their feeling of exclusion, they gradually separate themselves from the temple and it's a loss for them and it is a loss for the temple, it's a loss for preaching, it's a loss for ISKCON. *So the leadership has a great responsibility in service to SP to be in touch with these people even if not in an official way but a heartfelt way.* What are you feeling, how can we help you in your service, how could we include you more? What can we do it to encourage you and support you and facilitate you in and help you in your service? These kind of questions, just asking them is very enlivening to devotees and then actually fulfilling those obligations, those different requests will make the devotees blossom.

***Q Please share some of the personal principles and practices which you have held on to in your journey through ups and downs in various leadership roles in ISKCON.***

For me personally and for every SP disciple, we went through very dark times in the 1980s when there was tremendous confusion and fall-down amongst the

leadership. So during those times my recourse as it is now is to have very meditative time for japa, that to have the japa a very grave time one could say or its you and the holy name of the Lord and other things are put aside. Things come to the mind, you write them down, you somehow get rid of them so it's simply you and the Lord and I think to me that's very important and the second thing I would say you tend to be- we have this amazing philosophy that's so inclusive and absorbing and sometimes we forget the basics, the roots. The basics and the roots SP repeated them over and over again just that we wouldn't forget them. Our tendency in this age is to be forgetful. So just that we're small servants, very small parts and parcels of Krishna. Our eternal identity is to serve him, to serve his devotees. These are very simple things that give solace to the heart and strength also to the heart.

***Q Please recount your best and most successful projects (or initiatives) during your tenure as leader/ GBC***

Well as I mentioned to you at lunch, I'm not a leader by any stretch of imagination but I can speak to our recent work on the Hare Krishna film- the feature film that my husband and I recently released. So we had a small crew of 5 people- my husband and I and 3 young people and we worked together for about 4 years to try to make this film and it was very interesting that how that evolved, that small group because what I perceived was that certain ones of us had strengths in areas that other ones had weaknesses and if we could put aside our false ego long enough to let that person who had the strength in that area go for it, just take the ball and go for it, then we had very wonderful results. And as long as our false ego came forward, the results receded the quality of the results receded. So my feeling was that the more we can put our false ego aside, the more SP can be present. For example, amongst the 5 of us, 4 of us were very weak in story-telling which was very critical for a successful film on a story but one person that strength so we gave it to her and said please fill in the gaps- so this is the story, a satisfying story and she did and the results I feel are very wonderful and similarly other people had strengths in different areas. So this working together and giving people facility to explore their strengths and develop them and contribute them

comes out with a beautiful product. Whereas if we are into the hierarchy, into the titles then we spoil the pudding.

***Q Which leadership values should be included in the training for future ISKCON leaders? (Please mention at least three)***

Well that's just to make a continuity of thought. I would say *empathy* is a critical value which should be cultivated and also *broad-mindedness* you know, not to be fixed in our way but to be open a little bit. We want to stay true to the path, we never want to adulterate or compromise the path but our path is very encompassing- we shouldn't make it narrow and if we do, we do it at the sacrifice of our own heart. Our own heart becomes harder and smaller and we sacrifice people also who may have a different idea little bit but can actually be included that we don't have the broad-mindedness to see how it could be included. So for that we need some prayer and some open-heartedness so that we never ever compromise and we include as much as possible. Include and correct and inspire and improve- all these things are so important and if we read SP's letters for example, you'll find they're full with encouragement. There's always guidance and teachings and philosophy with so much encouragement, so much love is there and that's what makes the devotees jump so high and be so inspired to serve- makes all the difference in the world. Just a few drops of encouragement, just like I was in England when SP was there for his last trip when I heard so much about it and SP just by the movement of his finger, devotees would jump and practically hit the ceiling. That's how much it meant to them- this encouragement. So we can take that from SP. We need encouragement, all of us, not to deny that but to give it with guidance and with love, open-heartedness, great hope and prayer that they'll carry on in KC.

***Q Which leadership skills should be included in the training for future ISKCON leaders? (Please mention at least three)***

Well I think the first of the 9 processes of devotional service is **Hearing** and we tend to take it for granted. But hearing is an art and it means that through that

time we have to put aside our own answers to the questions and just try to understand where the other person is coming from and what is their conditional nature, what are their needs, how can I actually help this person rather than imposing our answers before they've even spoken their message. The tendency is always to think 'What am I gonna say?' *But rather let's hear what they're going to say and put ourselves in their position and see it from their point of view- that's actual hearing with empathy and if we can do that then perhaps we'll have the words to say that'll uplift them. That's our whole motive, to uplift others, not to keep them down, keep them in a position, but to bring them to the next step whatever that maybe. Like Bhagavad Gita the 12th chapter if can't do this, do this, if you can't do that, then you do that, Krishna is there you know, whatever you can do, do that. If you can't do this, there's something else you can do, just give away your money for charity finally- anybody can do that. So that's our Lord, that's SP and that's how we should be also- always looking for a way to bring whoever it is that we are interacting with to the next step, to the next level, uplift them through empathetic hearing. Ohh one another point that I could make is that, for us to be successful in that- empathetic hearing, my feeling is that we have to sincerely absorb ourselves in SP's teachings otherwise it'll be artificial. I think there'll be courses that we can take outside how to hear but to actually hear the way I'm speaking up, we have to become personally absorbed in SP's practices that he gave us and his philosophy and his example all these things and then we can actually have that quality how to uplift this person, how to uplift myself.*

***Q Organizational SWOT for today's ISKCON***

***1. Which do you see as the core strengths of ISKCON which you feel should be preserved for the future generations? What do you think can be done to preserve and transmit them?***

***2. Which do you see as underlying weaknesses/ shortcomings in the way ISKCON is growing and operating today? What do you think can be done to reduce them?***

***3. Which do you see as the biggest opportunities which ISKCON should capitalize on in the near future? What do you think should be done to capitalize on them?***

***4. Which do you see as the biggest threats to the movement in the near future? What do you think should be done to deal with them?***

Well certainly it's the Sadhana that SP that has prescribed for us but also I think that every leader should encourage each and everyone of his followers to set aside sometime everyday to read SP's books systematically. I find that more and more SP's books are not being read. People are so busy- they are having their families, they have their businesses, they have so many responsibilities, they have their Sadhana so there's no time or there is time and they're tired. So yes, I think that every follower of SP should be requested, humbly appealed to just read a little bit everyday. If you can't read for half hour, read for 15 minutes, if you can't read for 15 minutes, read for 10 minutes just something everyday without fail just like everyday we honour prasadam, everyday we sleep. So in the same way everyday, please read SP's books otherwise we can be misled very easily and this is very serious thing and as we start to be misled then gradually we can go more and more away from our core foundation. Well certainly the seva to the Lord is very beautiful in ISKCON- devotees are taking very much to this brahminical aspect and keeping the Lord very beautifully, maintaining the temples especially in India. This temple in Juhu is just beautifully maintained- the grounds, the buildings, the deity worship it's incredible really how well it's maintained. So that's very glorious, very important. *To create something is fun, to destroy it that's really fun but to maintain it- that takes the mode of goodness.* So that's difficult,

very difficult day after day after day. Now we had this 40th celebration, talking about the early days that was the adventure, that was the excitement but now 40 years later everyday to keep it clean, to keep people encouraged to come- that's difficult, that's a challenge. Well there's huge areas that perhaps ISKCON could approach amongst the non-devotees. There's certainly the Yoga community is there, people interested in ecology, people interested in healthy living and one that is extremely neglected is how active women are becoming now in society. I don't know if you are aware, there's a whole movement that has started in the last few months in America called 'Me Too'. Have you heard of that? 'Me too' means women are now standing together and objecting to the exploitation of women. They refuse to be exploited and because they've done this in unison, they have dragged down politicians, big politicians, senators, they have dragged down huge entertainers, people well-known in the music industry because they say that these people have abused us- sexually abused us and so because those people are dishonored, they are no longer public figures. So I think this movement is rising of the women and expressing their voice. They refuse to be exploited and this is going to go around the world. It's a national, international problem and ISKCON if they're not aware of this and they're not open to the implications, they're going to become- ISKCON is going to become more and more irrelevant. Women are having a collective voice- they want to be heard, they should be heard and if we don't hear them, they're not going to be interested in us. I see a few big threats to ISKCON in the near future. One of them is what my God-sister Jamunadevi called entitlement. Entitlement means that people come to ISKCON and gradually rise through the ranks of ISKCON and become managers and all of a sudden they think, I deserve this- I deserve this, i deserve respect, I deserve facility, this is my temple and this mood of entitlement or privilege I think will drag ISKCON down very much and being in India for the first few months that I've been here, I've perceived that especially and it's a very serious thing to me. People come in with this mood instead of this mood of service- I'm here as a humble servant. They come with this mood that I'm in charge, I control what goes on here. I deserve respect and this mood is the anti-thesis of KC and the anti-thesis of SP's mood and very very destructive to ISKCON. I think that's a huge, huge problem and if the leaders have that mood, then, things are really grave. But

if they don't have that mood and they see it in those who are coming up through the ranks, they really need to address that or it'll be devastation, devastation.

***Q Please visualize your dream vision for a very successful worldwide ISKCON movement 25 years from now.***

Well I have an analogy that recently occurred to me, that touches on these topics. If you picture a river flowing down, so from 1966 when SP founded ISKCON to 1970 when the first group of devotees came to India with SP, for those 4 years, the only source of understanding of the philosophy, the only source of practice of KC, the culture, the etiquette of KC, all that came from SP to the devotees- that's all they had. We came as blank slates, we knew nothing. Everything that was there was drawn by SP but then in 1970, this group of devotees came to India with SP and this river of SP's teachings and so forth practice, met the river of Indian culture and those 2 waters mingled together and as the time went on, we couldn't tell one water from the other in this confluence of the 2 rivers and what I'm saying now is that very often, too often, the river of the Indian culture supersedes this river that came from SP because the Indian culture for the people that grew up in it is very strong and a lot of the things that you learn growing up in the Indian culture compliment what SP taught and confirm it. But other things, you know this Indian river, it has Muslim influence, it has Christian influence, it has influence of Demi-god worship, of impersonalism, a lot of things mixed up in this river of Indian culture and some of them are meant to be subordinate to SP's teachings but if we don't have that discrimination, what we find is that the Indian culture is drowning what SP gave us and that is especially true in regard to women. Everything SP taught in regards to women has to the detriment when it came to this confluence of river, has been to the detriment of women because there's one aspect of the Indian culture especially in regards to women. SP fully engaged women. He had women who were head pujaris, women were speaking, he would encourage Jamuna to sing, in India Kaushalya to sing, in India there was proper facility that whatever they could do, he would encourage that. Jadurani was Head of the Art Department at some point of time. When we come to India, we find that women have another position and now the current mood of ISKCON



is not to give such facility and opportunity to women and that hurts the women and that hurts the men too and that hurts ISKCON especially preaching. Now in the world women are taking more of a role as I mentioned this movement and they want to be heard, they have something to say that's important and if ISKCON is not there to encourage and to facilitate them and to give them what SP gave, that they could do according to their ability, according to their qualities, according to their activities, give them facility. Let them go for it but instead if they're compressed and repressed and suppressed by this Indian culture, then everyone suffers, everyone. The only thing that doesn't suffer is the male ego. I had the incident here that one of the leaders here was objecting to women offering full dandavats in the temple. He was very upset about that so we showed him that it was mentioned in the Srimad Bhagavatam that both Diti and Aditi offered full dandavats, that the Nagapatnis, the wives of Kaliya offered full dandavats, that in the Chaitanya Charitamrita when Haridas Thakura preached to the prostitute and she was converted and she offered full dandavats. We showed him pictures of women offering full dandavats in front of SP and we showed him stone carvings of a man and a woman side by side offering full dandavats and we had this discussion for sometime and he said he has a cultural barrier. This should not be done because the way he grew up in his part of India, women don't do this. So I pointed out that if you go to Vrindavan, you'll find out that not only do women there offer full dandavats but they roll, this way and that and he said ohh that's from South India. So you're taking one part of Indian culture and saying this is what has to be done here but there you have another part of Indian culture its not done but you know, we don't do it. And then we have SP's example and the example is the scriptures but still no, it's not acceptable, it cannot be done. That's why I said we came as blank slates. Whatever we knew came from SP but when you grow up in the Indian culture, there's a lot on your slate- it's covered with things and if you're not very careful, those things don't allow SP's writing to come there. You have this cultural barrier. He also said that life members would come and they would object- this is a time you teach them. They maybe worshipping demi-gods at home but you should teach them Krishna is supreme. So they come and they see this and you teach them this is there in the Bhagavatam, this is there in the Chaitanya Charitamrita, SP allowed this. This is an opportunity for them to

learn something not that we subordinate ourselves to them but we give them what SP gave not in an aggressive way, not in an offensive way but just to learn- this is what he did so this is what we do. Otherwise, we're letting this Indian culture override SP's example and teaching and the teachings of the shastra. This is our cultural barrier- do we want to keep that barrier up or do we want to let it drop so this Vaishnava culture can come. Well I've seen that in the West and there's tremendous population of Indian people keeping our temples open in America, in Canada. So we are so much grateful to these Indian people because they are keeping the doors of SP's temple open. Not only are they keeping the doors open financially but also they are managers in the temple, they are pujaris, practically we're dependent on them for ISKCON's continuation West and East. Just to bring you back to the other point, that you come from this wonderful culture but as you say, it's a mixed culture. So many influences in it. So now sitting in this temple I hear classes every morning and what I'm hearing is that Indian lore is mixed in with the Bhagavatam. I hear this regularly in the classes- something very very serious, that people if you don't read SP's books and study them thoroughly, something that you grew up with, that is not in his books, you just kinda put in the class but it doesn't belong in the class. Its Indian lore, it's not Vaishnava lore. So yeah, sometimes I'm there reading and I'm looking up Where did this come from, this is just not in his books. It's from their background and these 2 rivers are mixing together and they're not distinguishing the water from one and the other and it's very very serious. Things are getting confused. That's why we have to read SP's books and distinguish our own background from the Vaishnava culture that he's giving us, the Vaishnava teachings. Otherwise things become very confused very quickly.