

HG Shesha Das

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 moving into the future?

ISKCON means Srila Prabhupada is the Founder-Acharya and that's something that... in the college they teach that in general in the society... There are different courses where they teach you about Prabhupada's role. So, if you are looking to leadership principles that Srila Prabhupada established, his mood, I think that's what needs to be preserved for the legacy of ISKCON.

For instance, we see the willingness to do anything for the mission, to sacrifice. Srila Prabhupada was the first to sacrifice and he set that example for the leaders. What did he do in 26 Second Avenue when he was first starting? He would clean up after everybody left! He didn't complain, he continued to do these kind of menial tasks and finally the people, the devotees saw, 'Oh! Swamiji is doing like this. Maybe we should help'. So he induced them to follow his lead and then they took up responsibility. ***I think that sacrifice that Srila Prabhupada made for ISKCON, is an essential part of leadership that can't be lost if we are to still remain the same organization that Srila Prabhupada founded.***

I think it is a theme that will run through all my answers, is the same... Prabhupada had a great deal of humility and respect for others. Prabhupada was so masterful; he used to meet big people, professors, and government people and by his humble presentation he could ask very forceful... Prabhupada would meet government leaders, leaders of other sections of society and they were all impressed with him, by his humility. Actually by taking that position, humble position, Prabhupada was able to give instructions to people, in ways in which they were quite surprised.

Humility leads to cooperation. So you have given this in your notes about... Prabhupada said, "Your love will be shown by how much you cooperate". ***Cooperation is basically a function of humility. Willingness to sacrifice,*** by his

example and his **instructions on cooperation and humility** that's required for that. I think they are **the most important elements**.

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 fulfil the same?

I think that, underdeveloped is the sense of servant-leadership which is grounded in humility. I think, too often, coming from the material world, we bring with us this idea of 'Ishavaro aham, aham bhogi...' But in Krishna Consciousness movement that's not a principle of leadership or management. So Underdeveloped is I think humility and sacrifice... Who can sacrifice enough really? It seems to me that my own experience of last couple of years, being pushed outside your comfort zone... To do management activities and to take up responsibility for ISKCON's activities means being pushed outside your comfort zone. And that requires some humility, tolerance, these basic qualities of a brahmana. Brahminical leadership is, I think what we are looking at.

Well I think that the system of rules and regulations, even the system of our own internal laws, ISKCON law, that are accepted and followed, are the basis for any kind of management or leadership system that ISKCON may develop. I think that's where we have been a little weak in the past, in terms of expectations. What are the expectations of the leaders, what are the expectations of the followers, managers, workers? When these things are unclear then conflict, misunderstandings, these things develop and they derail our mission.

So I would say that we need to work on a standard body of operating procedures that give step-by-step how certain tasks are accomplished, whom to go to for help and who do you expect to come to you for help in your position? I think this is crucial. Gauranga Prabhu had begun analysis of ISKCON according to that... 9000 ISO standards. I think that the more we understand what our position's function is in the overall organization and we place people in the right spots so that they can succeed rather than putting them in an undefined position, so that they are in a position where they don't succeed can't win. Then our whole organization's effectiveness is thwarted.

So a leader's job is more than a manager. Manager may make sure it happens; but the *leaders have to have the vision* to see the need for this kind of things and put them in place.

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 one of the main criticisms, when I was the temple president, was that whenever anybody came to talk to me, I would tell them, 'let me think about it'. They didn't like that; the devotees didn't like that. They wanted some snap judgements, some immediate response. Of course, there are circumstances that demand that; I don't mean to say that there aren't. But I think *the leader has to have the luxury (it's not a luxury but I call it a luxury) to be able to think about issues and not just react, because often the reaction will produce more trouble than it's worth.*

My personal experience has been that if I get a chance to think about a situation, think through all the different angles of it and then give advice, give some direction, then that always serves me in a better way than just reacting passionately. Again, we talked about brahminical leadership. I think, in a spiritual organization like ISKCON, we have to lean on that side of it with our spiritual practices influencing our leadership and management decisions. That was... give me some time to think about decisions so I can go through them.

I think, once you start on that it may be difficult initially because people want immediate responses. But if we are to cultivate more of mode of goodness in our leadership, especially activities... I make a distinction between leadership and management. Especially, ***leadership has to be more brahminically based.*** So it is going to require some thought. That has been my experience at least.

Q Please recount your best and most successful projects (or initiatives) during your tenure as leader / GBC. What were the key success factors in terms of

leadership and managerial decisions or approaches which contributed to the success of these projects?

I don't know if I have had lot of success doing a lot of projects, quite honestly. *Mine is a more cooperative approach. I am trying to bring devotees together, that have elements of an idea or elements of a project and keep them working cooperatively so that that project can be realized with the many different facets that the devotees bring to it.*

So Successful projects in my regard... we initiated some Ratha yatras first time in a city and it was distant city. It wasn't where the temple was; it was about 100 miles away. We wanted to start a Rath Yatra because that was quite a popular tourist location. We had not only had to have... that's called the legal team who are trying to get the permits necessary. The city made some opposition; we had to have lawyers involved. The cooks had to cook at the temple and transmit that prasadam over a 100 miles to the distribution location. The deity worship... same thing, moving the deities that distance. *All these different groups were working for one goal.*

I think that was satisfying to me because we got a synergy of all these differently orientated parts of the rath yatra festival and I felt particularly happy once we had the plan and then saw it rolling into execution, almost like a military battle plan with this group moving out at such and such time and travelling to the destination and timing the next group leaving the temple and carrying their provisions so that when the first group got there, they would be ready for the second group. We had a couple of successful years like that in Atlantic City, New Jersey from the temple which is about 100 miles.

That was satisfying, I think, to all the devotees that we were able to see different parts and how they fit into the whole operation. It was an experience that may help others see how to work different groups in a synergistic way so that you achieve one goal. That is applicable to all kinds of different things whether it is a book marathon or janmashtami celebrations in the temple or whatever the different groups. But ***to get everyone working together for a common goal, is a skill that we want our managers to have.*** So many diverse types of activities in Krishna

Consciousness that we bring together in a festival or a program or even an educational program or something like that. ***Managers have to, have to be able to work together.*** They can't do it all as one man show.

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

Listening skills. I think a leader has to hear first. I think good listening skills and not thinking that you have it all figured out, but to actually hear the suggestions of others, I think that's a very very important training and it does require training. We shouldn't take it for granted that 'I can hear'. *An active listener tries to understand the motivation of the speaker, to give a response which resonate with the problems or difficulties that are trying to be expressed.* So, there are many workshops, seminars that can be presented about active listening skills. So, I think that's important.

Other values I think, **integrity** is there. We have to walk our talk, 'walk your talk' as they say. Especially a leader needs to be able to display that quality despite pressures that are on him, one way or the other. I recall one incident where I was a temple president. One devotee was coming to the temple. But I knew, he was not living in the temple; I knew some of his activities weren't so legal, I would say. At one point of time and he offered to give a large sum of money to the temple. What he wanted to do was take a cheque for a hundred thousand dollars or something, run it through the temple bank account and give a big donation but take a lot of cash for himself. That was, kind of, in line with that person.

Persons may have so many habits back also when they come to Krishna Consciousness. So long as they are willing to give that up, fine. But when they try to start making a deal with Krishna, then ***the integrity of the leader has to show.*** No, we won't do that kind of thing. We won't compromise Prabhupada's name and the goodwill that ISKCON has got, for my own personal gain or even in the name of gain for the temple. So ***Integrity, i think is an important value that needs to be part of the training.***

When I went to military college, in the military college we had a honor code. The honor code was that we will not tolerate anyone who lies, cheats or tolerates the ones that do so. Not only personal integrity but a leader should teach integrity to his subordinates so that they also form a block against the activities which are harmful to Prabhupada's name or his society. It's not our name; the society is Prabhupada's and he has entrusted it to us, but we need to take it with integrity.

Q Which do you see as the core Strengths of ISKCON which you feel should be preserved for the future generations?

Q Which do you see as underlying Weaknesses in the way ISKCON is growing and operating today?

Q Which do you see as the biggest Opportunities which ISKCON should capitalize on in the near future?

Q Which do you see as the biggest Threats to the movement in the near future?

As I said, ***sacrifice, humility, tolerance, determination are the strengths that come from spiritual practice.*** Obviously, if our spiritual practices are strong then we will have these qualities that are strengths that hold a society together. We are the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. So, what's holding us together? The society has to be held together by this kind of things. What do you think, we can do to preserve and transmit them? *Practice. We have to practice.* Study them, do the theoretical study but also practice.

That means when there is a difficult situation, to continue with faith in Prabhupada and Krishna that things will work out, and continue instead of giving up. *When you give up once, you will always be someone who is ready to give up. So we can't afford to give up even once. How can we do that? By association and encouragement of others. So that's our strength.*

Weaknesses are ideas which make us feel that I can do it myself, I am not dependant on my Godbrothers; I am not dependant upon my Guru; I am not dependant on Krishna. I can do it myself. To the degree that creeps in our mind,

our consciousness, that's a weakness that can spoil all of ISKCON. If you look at ISKCON's history and if you look at case studies of what happened when various leaders thought or did XYZ and what that did to overall society of Krishna Consciousness, I think you will find that these weaknesses of Independence, non-cooperation and an arrogance really that I don't need others, they are at the heart of what caused problems for ISKCON. So those weaknesses should be studied, learnt and we should try to overcome them.

Opportunities: Biggest opportunity for ISKCON? Well the whole world is an opportunity in different ways for ISKCON. I think that's how we have to see. When my children were little, I used to read them a book about Jataka tales, I think it was the mouse merchant. It is a story about a young man who came into a town, looking to find wealth. The only thing he could get from anybody to help him was a dead mouse. But he took that dead mouse and he thought, 'hmnn, how can I take advantage of this opportunity?' And he made some opportunity with the dead mouse. And then, with the profit he got from the dead mouse deal, he made another deal. He was enterprising and soon he was the wealthiest merchant in the town. But he started with a dead mouse as his capital or his opportunity.

So, opportunities are abound. Our leaders have to have the vision to see that opportunity. And quite honestly, when I am here and I am seeing all these devotees here, I see different devotees who, I think, act like that. They are always looking for some opportunity and always taking a leading step in spreading Krishna Consciousness. That's the kind of leader that we need. So Such a leader will see opportunities everywhere.

Threats: *Non-cooperation, arrogance, pride, disregarding our spiritual practices, these things are threats.* They are threats because ultimately we are dependent upon Krishna. Man proposes, God disposes. We act but we act with dependence on Krishna. So, if by spiritual weaknesses we forget that, then if we (so called) accomplish something materially, what use is it? So, biggest threat is, not being Krishna Conscious.

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

- *What all do you see in that vision?*
- *What do you think we need to do to be able to get there?*
- *What are some of the obstacles / impediments we might face in reaching there?*

Well, I will go back to what I said initially in terms of a system of rules and regulations, fair processes. And that requires good communication in a sense of justice in the society. There are always going to be challenges in any kind of leadership situation. But there should be a consistency in how to deal with these things and this comes from standard rules and regulations or the rule of law. No special treatments, no favouritism, but a standard against which all activities can be measured. A society based like that, I think, has a chance to go forward for an indeterminate time in future.

When Americans.... To the US constitution which embodies those kind of things. And based on that constitution, the government and a society has been existing for a couple of hundred years or more than that, two hundred and fifty years. That's what I would envision for a long term existence of ISKCON. Enshrining and following through a personal example, Prabhupada's example of humility and sacrifice, combined with a society in which everyone knows and can expect how to be treated. If you are asking for sacrifice, you have to understand, you have to have some faith in how you are going to be treated. Otherwise no one is going to execute that sacrifice.

So these are the expectations that have to be there. If you have that based down, then whatever problem comes, you have a way of dealing with it. But more than that, there is the type of synergy I was talking about. (25:55)... We get different people from different parts of the world, meeting different challenges and helping each other. That's what Prabhupada did. He took from this part of his society to help that part of his society; whether it be men or money. The parts were interchangeable. I think that's what ISKCON has to be, to remain a true international society. It is not that we lose the flavour of individual cultures and

devotees that come to our society, but we do have a common platform of expectations that we can throw ourselves into, wholeheartedly.

Well, what are you doing right here? Preparing something for the college. I think that the training that the college does, works along a line of creating... what you said here, what you just summarized. So ***education and training are extremely important for accomplishing that vision***. Recognition of the socio-cultural ecosystems, how everything works together.

I was just talking with someone this morning about how different cultures can work together. It was about Mayapur. In Mayapur, we find... Mayapur is an international capital city, right. So it should exist here if it's going to exist anywhere. Here you find devotees from all different backgrounds around the world. How can they work together? What has happened? What experiments have they done here in the management, to bring about this vision where everyone can work together?

One of the devotees was telling me that they had divided the community, basically for management purposes in one way which, sort of, isolated different groups. So they decided to break that down and organize the community of devotees in another way where you get crossover, you get interaction. I think that's an example of looking at a socio-cultural ecosystem that you are in and not letting it go to a default setting where people just keep to themselves, but, as I said before, push a little bit beyond the comfort zone for greater good, where you interact in a broader way and the society becomes stronger in that way.

You know that story Radhanath Swami tells about Redwood trees. The roots of Redwood trees... these redwood trees are... they grow like... they are the largest trees on earth, tremendously high and tremendously round and big. So how can a big tree like that stand up? How does it remain standing for centuries together at large? Apparently, according to Maharaj, their roots don't go down independently but they go lateral and latch on to other roots of other redwood trees. And in this way, together they get strength to remain standing in storms and so many things for the centuries that they live.

So this kind of an approach of integrating as much as possible, the various cultural and socio-economic groups, integrating them, finding ways where they can live together and work together as society, makes everyone stronger. And I think this makes ISKCON stronger.

What do the Obstacles and impediments mean? Well, I have a sign in my office which says, 'Obstacles are those horrible things one sees, when one takes his eyes off his goal'. So obstacles and impediments basically mean Maya. If we succumb to Maya in one form or another, then we will never be able to achieve our goals.

Someone may have difficulties. Maya means maya. *Maya adhyeksane prakritih suyate sa caracarah...* But working together cooperatively, helps us overcome obstacles and impediments and keep our eyes fixed on the goal. So we have to do like that. That we can visualise, we can make a real... It is Prabhupada's dream, it's not our dream. Prabhupada has given, he said, '***I have given you the blueprint, you just have to fill in the details***'. So he has a vision. We are running after him to fulfil his vision. That makes us safe first of all, that we are following his vision. It gives us a purpose in life to try to fulfil his vision.