

HG Kaunteya Prabhu

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?

The foundation of any civilization or any system or culture is its education. So, ***Gurukul education is the basis of health of the movement*** throughout the generations. Otherwise what is the alternative? Alternative is that our children be put in the hands of very unenlightened teachers or institutions. Srila Prabhupada repeatedly described these institutions as slaughter houses. If Varnashrama or civilized life is compared to a tree, gurukul is its root. If the root is not there or if the root is cut, the whole tree collapses; or if the root is very weak, then also the tree can collapse at any moment. So *this is certainly a key instruction which has been, in general, very much neglected in the movement.*

Although Srila Prabhupada gave so much attention to it, *he said that this our most important project*, as a movement we have failed to do it properly and *we have failed to give attention to it*. When things go well, you kind of drop the bow. But that remains a fundamental question, fundamental issue, fundamental pillar of the Krishna Consciousness Society, fundamental pillar of Srila Prabhupada's mission and vision for the future of ISKCON. I could talk much more but it is certainly a prominent area, which as a movement, we have neglected and we are largely still neglecting.

We see one thing in Srila Prabhupada's manifested pastimes ie. ***his agility, the capacity of being supple and adapt the eternal principles of devotional service to the environment in which he was operating*** and his ability to change course; to try something and if that didn't work, change it. For instance, when he established GBC in July 1970, the strict rule was that Sannyasis could not be GBC. He had the vision that GBCs would be Grihastas or brahmacharis, maybe Vanaprasthas, but Sannyasis would be exclusively dedicated to travelling and preaching. Then he saw that among his disciples, the most dynamic were the Sannyasis. So in a couple of years, he changed the rules. He introduced the Sannyasis as members of the GBC.

So it is very important in Srila Prabhupada's manifested pastimes to see what are the principles and what are the details. And this is in general in the realm of bhakti yoga, in the realm of spiritual life. What are principles? unchangeable norms that need to be defended and preserved. And what are details? Those which do not need to be taken as sacred and eternal. For instance, when Srila Prabhupada came to America with the Bhagavatam, he produced a flyer saying, “Srimad Bhagavatam – India’s message of peace and goodwill”. Now, that type of language very much resonates with the Christian language – peace and good will; and also because of a relativistic type of understanding of Srimad Bhagavatam, because Srimad Bhagavatam is spiritual world’s message and not just India's message.

But again, to connect with these audiences, Srila Prabhupada thought ... this we will have, because this is going to a Christian country and he had this Christian training in the Scottish church College. So he was aware and familiar with the lexicon of Christian language; and so he presented the Bhagavatam as India's message of peace and goodwill.

Now, when he actually arrived in America and he started the movement and the hippies were his first customers, we see that immediately he changed his style of language with the language of the counter culture, like in pamphlets such as ‘Stay high forever’ or ‘Who’s crazy’, which is a style which he would have probably not adopted in India. This is just one example. But this agility, this flexibility, this capacity of understanding the principles and adapting to particular circumstance to make it easy for people to connect to Krishna Consciousness is something we really need to imbibe very deeply. *Otherwise we take **the risk of becoming** irrelevant, becoming attached to insignificant or even detrimental details and becoming **irrelevant to people we are trying to influence*** and the society we are trying to thrive in.

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?

First of all, I did not directly experience in the sixties and the seventies; I joined in May 1980. So I have seen some things in the eighties and the nineties and so on. What I understand, from devotees who have studied, who have experienced and then studied the Sociological atmosphere and dynamics of the movement, is that some describe this as the golden age of ISKCON in which from the very beginning to 1969 in which Srila Prabhupada was aware of practically of every devotee of ISKCON. All devotees of ISKCON knew Srila Prabhupada and basically Srila Prabhupada knew personally all the devotees of ISKCON.

What I hear from those who were present, *the atmosphere was much more collegial, in the sense that there was a very high level of friendship among the devotees*. The women were respected. In fact, sometimes they were colloquially addressed as gopis and there was a much better relation even with the environment, with the people outside of the movement.

And then at the beginning of the seventies, what I hear from those who were present and analysed, *there was some sort of militarisation of ISKCON and depreciation for the residents of the Grihastha Ashram and women*. From gopis they became even witches because a form of renunciation, which has been demonstrated as immature and artificial, took place. Many people took Sannyasa and for them in their immature stage, the youthful years, rich in testosterone, women were the enemies. They had to be exorcised; not a godsister to be cherished or worked together with.

Before the seventies, getting married was a positive experience; it was actually according to Varnashrama culture. It was a step up; from a Brahmachari life one takes the responsibility of Grihastha Ashram. Just like in the universal form, it is described that a brahmachari represents the legs, Grihasthas represent the abdomen, Vanprastha represent the arms and the Sannyasi represents the head. *So some people jumped from the legs to the head and that went to their head*.

So the movement was covered with enmity against women and it also became almost a militarised force; like the outsiders were seen almost like demons or people who knew just nothing about anything, who had no good qualities. It was a sort of very artificial and non-devotional perspective which doesn't come from our Acharyas. Our Acharyas showed a great respect for whatever element of Sattva guna the people outside manifested. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur gave

the famous speech and sent the devotees to Europe that the people you are going to preach are your superiors in many ways. So you have to be very humble.

So that mood was destroyed and the karmis became a sort of philosophical categories; fallen souls to be saved, fallen souls to be sold books to, by hook or by crook. So much pain was created in the individual lives of the devotees. Some felt really inadequate; maybe they took Sannyasa and they couldn't maintain it. They stepped down; there was a lot of traumatic experience of a sense of failure, lot of pain in the relation between the ashramas. ***There was lot of incapacity of seeing in a mature way at the role and potential of women in our movement; and again, an incapacity of relating to our environment in a constructive, mature and intelligent way.*** That created a number of problems that we are still experiencing.

Just to give an example, among the first devotees who introduced the movement in Singapore, there was some very enthusiastic young man who started preaching against demigod worshippers, while being hosted by the devatas temples. They created such a negative impression, such a heartburn in people, such a pain in the audience, that still after thirty forty years, our movement in Singapore is still experiencing the bad consequences of that type of approach. In other words the movement has had a share of the tamasic and Rajasic activities.

As we know from the Bhagavad Gita, Rajas brings immediate results; it even brings immediate pleasure but it turns into pain later. I am not saying that it was just passion; it was also pure dedication of satisfying Srila Prabhupada and saving the conditioned souls but often mixed with elements of Rajas and tamas. As a consequence, *many of the devotees who were made in those years in the seventies and the eighties, they are not around anymore.* Not only that they are not around anymore, but they don't want to have a constructive or positive relation with ISKCON. Those were the devotees who acted as messengers of ISKCON for many years.

Now, in 2017, we have learnt some of these lessons. We are looking at ISKCON more as a society, which includes children, old aged and everyone. We are still working into clarifying our priorities, the functions of each role, each ashrama in our movement. ***There is also an awakening of some imaginary conception of what's vedic or what's not vedic.*** It's interesting or maybe even, sadly, amusing that sometimes devotees don't think. Some devotees, some pockets in ISKCON

culture don't realise that the Bhagavad Gita itself, what to speak of lord Caitanya's movement, was a challenge to the vedic order. It is the essence of Vedic philosophy and knowledge. At the same time, it was very challenging, it was a message of challenge to what was the vedic custom, social norms, understanding of spiritual advancement.

Like Krishna says in BG 9.32 that even those who are considered lower in the vedic paradigm, like Sudras, Vaishyas and women, can reach the highest perfection in this very life. And Krishna Himself says that He appears when dharma is waning. So sometimes it is not clear if Krishna appeared to establish dharma, *it almost seems that some pockets of devotees want to reconnect to the age which, Krishna is specifically saying He came to change.* He came to establish Dharma.

And again, what to speak of movement of Lord Caitanya, ***sometimes I hear expressions against egalitarianism.*** Sometimes these expressions are just dropped there without an explanation, almost as if it was an established fact that egalitarianism was a negative concept. And *some devotees apparently don't understand that the movement of Lord Caitanya is extremely egalitarian.* We could say that there has never been a movement as egalitarian as that of Lord Caitanya, in giving an equal opportunity to everyone for spiritual advancement.

There are devotees all over the world who grew up in the lowest vedic categories: mlecchas, yavanas, who were eating all sorts of things that mlecchas and yavanas were eating. And this includes myself. Then after two-three years, they have the opportunity to serve as pujari, touching the body of the God, serving them, cooking for God in the temple. So, if this is not egalitarianism then what is egalitarianism? I see that ***there are certain misconceptions, misinterpretations, mental models that need to be revised, reviewed*** for the health of the devotees and for the health of the movement.

In other words, sometimes I see devotees accepting, as true, certain ideas that may be actually not true at all. That influences the capacity of the movement to grow, because, obviously, if we are basing the growth of your movement on principles which are not true, then you are basing the movement on untruths. It is more than apathy; apathy means indifference. It is more like a confrontation. Militarisation means like 'we against them'. Devotees in some parts of the world are learning that we are supposed to be a part of the society. Obviously we are not

supposed to be contaminated by certain negative aspects of society, certain ideas such as evolutionism or other imaginations. But we are supposed to play a role in the society as the brahmanas, ideally as the head of society. Srila Prabhupada wanted to create a head of society; and obviously the head cannot fight with its own body. ***By militarisation I mean a confrontational attitude 'we against them'.***

The first one is a mental attitude. We need to understand that we are a very young movement. As a movement ***we need to have the humility of understanding that we have not understood everything and not everything we do is perfect.*** Often our lack of success is not just due to the people outside. See, in our movement, sometimes we like to have this idea of giving ourselves excuses, rationalizations that 'oh, we are so small in some places because what we are promoting is so high. How many people can buy diamonds? Because we are very small and insignificant, irrelevant, the TV, the media doesn't ask for our opinions on what's happening in the world, this is the proof our purity'. Frankly speaking, that's a delusion.

Srila Prabhupada wanted a movement that grew in size and when he was present, the movement was influential, becoming more and more influential. Journalists would come and ask the devotees, 'What do you think about this? What do you think about this current event? What's your opinion?' *In many places, nobody cares anymore what the Hare Krishna thinks. In many places, they don't even know that Hare Krishna exists.* So we should be humble and intelligent enough to recognize our failure. Since, we create a mental dream that 'no, no this is the proof that we are right', we are not expanding or we are not expanding within certain environments.

Pride is the first thing, *Amanitvam. Knowledge starts from absence of pride.* In many parts of the world where we are not growing, where we are not significant in the world, *we need to take a very good look at how we are doing things, what kind of people are we attracting.* Are we attracting anybody? In an entire country, unfortunately I can give many examples of countries. In an entire country, three people take initiation in one year; that's not growth! Next year we will have four; that's not growth! Srila Prabhupada envisions, the Bhagavatam envisions a movement that creates a revolution, '*Janatagha viplavo*'; not just a microscopic, ethnic Church that caters to local hindus, a small portion of the local hindus.

So, I think we should take a very good and hard look at the mental attitude, at what's not working. Yes, during the fiftieth anniversary we celebrated our existence, our survival and yes, we have done certain extraordinary activities. After all, we have distributed spiritual knowledge, spiritual food and we have established hundreds of functioning centres for the cultivation of spiritual knowledge, a few farms here and there. So ***there are results; but this is nothing in comparison to what can happen.***

So *we need to*, kind of, step down from his celebratory mood and ***take a very hard and realistic look of what's happening and also take a look at other movements outside.*** Another form of complacency is to say, 'no, our rules are so high, our rules are so strict that people don't want to take them up'. But there are other movements with very similar strictures or there are movements which are much stricter than us in areas such as divorce. They ban people from divorce. So, there are a number which have similar or even more stricter regulations that are actually growing and expanding in areas where we are practically completely stagnant.

Now, this is not, obviously, a criticism of those who hold the fort in those places, those who keep open their small centres, with three people or even with ten or fifteen people. Obviously, it is not a criticism of that. You have asked me 'What kind of attitude we should have?' We should take a very realistic assessment of the situation; keep aside the celebratory mood which had its place in 2016. But *now we need to move on and take a real look at the state of our movement.* How many intelligent people are we attracting? How deeply are we influencing the culture? How deeply are we influencing their logical thought? How deeply are we influencing the media?

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?

Okay, see I cannot really take credit for these projects. But the first thing that comes to mind is ***the introduction of the Bhakti Vriksha system*** of congregational

development which has shown itself as very valuable in building both the quality and the quantity of devotees in the various parts of the world. The quality, because it directly teaches the devotees in building friendship, strong relations strong bonding. When it is done properly it also helps devotees to think about the philosophy in a very active way and also to think of the philosophy in terms of application in their lives, what the philosophy means to them in their life, not only as a academic exercise or as an exercise of memory. And again, I have not developed any congregation in any part of the world.

*My role was more educational, introducing the ideas, the concepts, the principles, participating in **the publication of books such as the Bhakti Vriksha manual**.* And we have seen that those who have taken these ideas seriously and incorporated them, invested their time and energy, they have been successful in developing many groups, many self perpetuating groups. Each group is based on creating new leadership and inspiring people to take responsibility. We have seen in places like Kolkata; we are talking about under Fifty groups or in Bangalore under fifty groups, in Delhi there might be even more and many other cities in India and also in the west, especially west means outside India such as Russia where we have atleast five hundred groups.

So the congregation development ministry has been instrumental in introducing these techniques, this approach, this structure which has really helped. In one sense, we are only in the beginning because of the dynamic nature of the project, the program can actually expand to millions in the future.

*Another project which we have been involved with is the **GBC organisational development and the GBC strategic planning team and GBC strategic planning network**.* These initiatives were the source of the GBC college for leadership development and a number of key legislations for the structure of the movement such as *the creation of the zonal supervisor role and zonal configuration*, the process of looking at the world through the lenses of rationality and sustainability and a number of other important legislations like *a twenty-page paper which became officially ratified as the global duties of the GBC*. These steps, which are in the infant stage, can be very instrumental in shaping the leadership of the movement, the structure of the movement, the culture of the movement. For instance, the introduction of the idea that leadership should come with some

training, with some certification, some demonstrated experience of learning, before taking up a position.

There were other projects I have been involved with; I have been connected with such as ***the creation of the global duty officers*** which substituted the previous system of becoming a GBC through a GBC candidate, a GBC assistant and acting GBC steps. So this new approach has certain advantages; it prevents a sense of entitlement because not all GDOs will have to become GBCs and also it impresses and engages people who will become GBCs in global thinking, global responsibility, and global services from the beginning.

*The Bhakti Vriksha is based on certain fundamental principles of the practice of Bhakti; especially the practice of Bhakti in Lord Caitanya's movement and especially the practice of Bhakti as delineated by the Founder Acharya His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. As you know, **Lord Caitanya stressed that there are five most powerful forms of devotional service.***

Sadhu Sanga- we all need devotee association for advancing, for support and for survival in this world. When the Bhakti Vriksha is done properly, it provides the support, provides the regular association and it's a formula in association; it is very intimate in which friendship at very deep level can actually flourish. There are different types of association, like in large festivals, Ratha Yatra, Janmashtami. Those are very good for providing a certain type of experience, like the enthusiasm is seen. Hundreds and thousands of people are involved; or the experience in a Sunday program, where people see upto a few hundred people; maybe there is a very inspiring lecture.

So some association is provided in those formats, which are very important. At the same time, devotees need also the small group experience. So the Bhakti Vriksha works on that principle, applies that principle and therefore the devotees build a relation. It is a forum, it's a platform on which people can really develop their relation on a devotional basis. It's also based on cultivating the Holy Name, Sadhu Sanga and **Nama kirtan** because these groups chant Hare Krishna; often chant Japa, often they discuss the quality of Japa. So it's very important to support their Nama practice.

Bhagavat Shravan- They listen the philosophy of the Bhagavatam, of course, Bhagavad Gita and other Srila Prabhupada works. But especially it is done in an

interactive way; it is not just passive listening of somebody speaking; it's not just some ceremony. But it's an analysis done with the devotees of the texts, the purports; how it applies to one's own situation. So didactically it is very powerful for people to actually assimilate the information, making it relevant to their personal existence.

Bhakti Vriksha is also based on the principle of taking responsibility. So devotees are encouraged to go through these cycles and then take responsibility and that really helps. For instance, Srila Prabhupada explains through his temple presidents that *they are almost forced to advance when they take responsibility*. Because they are really encouraged, they have to take the duty of seeing that the group develops, the group is cohesive and the atmosphere is pleasant, congenial. So this is another of the dynamics of Bhakti Vriksha that makes it so powerful because people are encouraged to take responsibility; sometimes even if they are not initiated. So *they begin their spiritual life, continue their spiritual life with a sense of taking a duty in the mission*.

Another important principle that the Bhakti Vriksha incorporates is the focus on outreach. For instance, Srila Prabhupada says in the first Canto that the most merciful project is engaging people in preaching Krishna Consciousness; *not only in Krishna Consciousness but also in preaching Krishna Consciousness*. In this way, their faith becomes deeper; they attract the mercy of Krishna. Like, Srila Prabhupada says in the seventh Canto of Srimad Bhagavatam that every member of the Krishna Consciousness movement is interested in going from door to door to spread the teachings of Lord Caitanya, the teachings of Bhagavad Gita. So, these are some of the elements that make Bhakti Vriksha so powerful, so effective when done properly; when the ingredients and the attention and the coordination are there. And people are experiencing these results.

Another aspect of the work of the strategic planning team of the GBC is ***the creation of a bi-annual meeting, the ISKCON leadership Sanga or ILS***. As we are talking, we are already three and the next February, in about five months, will be the fourth edition. This is something that aims at bringing people together with leaders, with their GBC, bringing the people together, especially those who are in a leadership role and nourish them; nourish them in the association of others, other

colleagues, nourish them in the Dham, nourish them by equipping them with new ideas or new techniques, new skills.

And of course, another initiative that came from the strategic work of the GBC is ***the SGGS, the Sanga of Gurus, GBCs and Sannyasis***. This is an extremely important element in our movement, as Srila Prabhupada recommended that the GBC and the senior devotees should come together every year to discuss unity in diversity. So this is a tool through which eventually, we wish to have more unity, more sense of common purpose among the leaders. Especially the leaders of the movement, the GBCs, the Gurus, the Sannyasis so that more harmony, more understanding would be there among the leaders and it would cascade down to all the levels of the movement.

Atleast some of these examples are actually instances of realignment. In other words, they are innovative but at the same time, they reconnect to our tradition or to Srila Prabhupada's direct instructions. For instance, we have the SGGS, the Sanga of Gurus, GBCs and Sannyasis. There is a direct instruction that Srila Prabhupada recommended all the GBCs to come together every year in Mayapur and discuss unity in diversity. Now, that is something that wasn't done. So connecting to that root of tradition, in a sense within the body of instructions of the Founder Acharya, the SGGS is, in one sense, a natural development. So it's innovative but at the same time, it is realignment.

Unity comes when there is unity of views. Say, if the Governing Body Commission passes some legislation, then any Guru may say, 'Oh, I don't agree on this'. It could be in matters of philosophy, such as the origin of the soul or methods of sociology such as the role of women in the movement or the role of women in the spiritual leadership. One guru may express his disapproval and all those who follow that guru, may be hundreds or thousands of people, are naturally and almost immediately disenfranchised from that notion, disenfranchised from that legislation and disenfranchised or alienated from the Governing Body Commission. So, the idea of the SGGS and especially what has been right now drafted as a representative body of not only the leadership but also of different areas of the world, is supposed to act as sounding board, is supposed to work in tandem with the GBC. Not only so that the decisions and direction would be of better quality, but there would be also more acceptance. So instead of having a decision that could

be rejected by thousands of devotees who take inspiration from a particular spiritual leader, ***by working together in creating those directions and those decisions it will ensure a high level of acceptance, a high level of agreement.*** In other words, there will be some fundamental unity and diversity, of course. Devotees will have local chapters in doing many of the day to day activities or local initiatives. Atleast as a movement, especially for social and theological issues, these mechanisms will provide and ensure a better harmony, a better sense of agreement.

In the Bhakti Vriksha we also started, for instance, Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakur groups in his namahatta movement and we saw that those groups were quite militant; they were quite mobilised. One of the rules to be a part of those groups, was to preach to atleast five people every day. They would go on Harinam with flags and that was the healthiest manifestation of Lord Caitanya's movement at that time between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, before Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur founded the Gaudiya Math.

If we also look at the dynamics at the very beginning of ISKCON, when Srila Prabhupada started storefronts in New York or San Francisco, ***the movement would grow and after reaching a certain size, fifteen twenty devotees in a temple, naturally some of them would go to another location and open another temple.*** Like it happened from New York to San Francisco or from New York to Boston or from San Francisco to Los Angeles, that was the dynamics which was very much a part of our history, our experience in ISKCON. The onl difference is that, it's replicated on a congregational level and on a city-wise dimension. In other words, the groups come together, they grow, they solidify and then from those groups, leaders manifest and open other groups in which new people can actually take shelter.

So it is the same dynamics; there is nothing new, nothing unseen in ISKCON. So, ***many of these projects are actually a form of realignment with some of the original intentions, mood and vision of the Founder Acharya and the previous acharyas.*** Well, each of the initiatives will have its own elements. In Bhakti Vriksha, just two days ago here at the GBC college, we presented a three hour session on

fifteen different challenges that we have observed in developing Bhakti Vriksha, in establishing Bhakti Vriksha in the first twenty years of this experience.

There are elements such as devotees don't really know how to run a meeting; it's not within their experience to lead a discussion, instead of giving a lecture. So there is a lack of training. In some places, there is a lack of coordination; devotees may not be able to put in place a structure that supports the sustained growth, a structure that allows for communication, collaboration, cooperation, coordination. We just analyzed fifteen of them. Just to mention one more, sometimes people call any congregational effort as a Bhakti Vriksha, but often it is not so; the ingredients are not there, the elements are not there, the foundation is not there, the fundamentals are not there and the program doesn't give the same results.

In other areas, for instance, zonal configuration, ***there are certain habits that are being developed over the years on how the GBC and the GBC zonal secretaries would work on a zone***. Some of these may be still relevant; some of these became a bit obsolete because of the growth of the movement. For instance, Srila Prabhupada said that one GBC should always see upto six temples. If you consider that, in the seventies our temples were generally a much smaller operation with not much congregation, not many children and not many temples with three alters. So, Srila Prabhupada envisioned one GBC to supervise six temples. Now, there are certain GBCs who supervise thousands and thousands of temples in different countries, different continents.

In one sense, ***the role of the GBC and the demarcation of the geographical boundaries of the zones should be adapted***. That's why GBC established the role of zonal supervisors to be a support, otherwise a single GBC may not cover the totality of a zone. There are, we could say, natural growing pains or learning curve. Some of them are in the realm of culture, habit. We have been doing things in a certain way which may not be the most effective in the new ISKCON or in a ISKCON which is much larger quantitatively.

Some are in terms of attitudes. For instance, some of the first leaders who are coming from a hippie background, really rejected solid and healthy organisational principles; naturally the movement was in a pioneer stage. Therefore, the things were done in a spontaneous way with no clear job description, not always collegial decision making. So, *what was working to some*

extent in the beginning, obviously won't work in a more administrative, mature stage and more rational stage of the movement. Naturally there must be some adaptations, psychological adaptations to the new roles, to the new realities.

Survival There is an ISKCON. It is almost a miracle that there is still a movement worldwide which, to some extent, still accepts the concept of a Governing Body Commission. We have seen phases in which, through the zonal acarya days, the notion of collective leadership on a global level was very much practically challenged and was very much jeopardised. Sociologically speaking, organisationally speaking, it's almost a miracle that ISKCON did not drastically break into many, many pieces in different continents and countries.

At the same time, a realization of the first fifty years is that, ***for ISKCON to survive as a unified movement in the future, we will have to be working on it's connections***; because ISKCON is actually a collection of various national ISKCONs which often don't have integration legally. By legally, I mean an integration which can be recognised in a court of law. So, in one sense, last year I said in a joking way, but it was not, unfortunately, a joke. It was that on the fiftieth anniversary of ISKCON we realized that we don't have an ISKCON. There is no one International Society for Krishna Consciousness. *There are many ISKCONs incorporated in a number of ways and sometimes the connection is very weak.*

And why is that important? That is because unless we have a global connection, a global integration, it would be very hard to maintain the standards that Srila Prabhupada wanted, the spiritual standards. So, that's certainly a work which has to be done. But, again, one achievement is that ISKCON as a movement, at least in the spiritual sense, in the cultural sense, survived the first fifty years, despite many many challenges and leadership failures and so on; besides of course, the classic achievement such as the millions of books, thousands of tons of prasadam and the devotees having influenced the culture in many ways. I mean, those are directly visible; the establishment of different temples, deity worship etc. in many parts of the world.

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

Specifically, in the upcoming GBCs, I would like to see **a heightened function of global awareness** because the Governing Body Commission is for the world. So I would like to see that besides their zonal and continental duties, responsibilities and functions, they give enough time in thinking of the whole world and how everything fits together. Now, everything should grow together. So they should have global awareness, global focus. And again, global awareness and focus need to be manifested in practical structures, in practical, legal, administrative and educational dynamics that will connect and influence their work.

There are certain tools that obviously need to be developed or imbibed for running a world class organization. Certainly, *how to run meetings*, as you mentioned, *is an extremely important skill*. How to run meeting means understanding the frequency of meetings, how often we should meet, how often we should work together, what kind of agendas, what kind of priority we need to focus on and also the practical running of the meetings. Where do we spend time? Are we tapping into the capacity, the potential? Certainly, ***running meetings is a crucial aspect of a world class organization and it is something that we can certainly improve.***

Another aspect is ***the focus on education***, the culture of having a very solid concentration on having devotees, especially, the leaders in ***imbibing Srila Prabhupada's books, his mood***, understanding Srila Prabhupada; an understanding which is not confined to what we have seen through the sixties and seventies but the real Srila Prabhupada. In other words, what moved Srila Prabhupada in terms of purity of intentions and principles. Not only what he did, but why he did that, why he did that in particular circumstances, understanding the values that motivated Srila Prabhupada and the organisational principles that led his actions.

Certainly, he stressed that ***all devotees should read the books, should have a very strong philosophical understanding*** and there should be a system through which devotees feel themselves as lifelong learners. Not only the philosophy but whatever tools are required for service, are important. As technology advances and changes, the movement obviously has to integrate and assimilate whatever tools can be useful.

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?

Strengths: Obviously, we have all these strengths that come from being a movement, a branch of Lord Caitanya's tree. Obviously those cannot be negated or minimised. So this a branch of Lord Caitanya's tree and of course, everything which is in Lord Caitanya's and Krishna's appearance and mission, is our strength. I mean, the dhams and of course the books, of course the purity of many devotees, the bhakti, the devotion, the dedication and the hard work of many devotees. There are positive aspects.

For instance, here we are now guests at the Govardhan Eco Village and we see here the Bhagavata Vidyapeeth which gives two years of training on Srila Prabhupada's books. Culturally, *this is a very big step forward from the standard in our movement*, where generally the brahmacharis and other temple residents are seen more as workforce to collect funds or to cover different services. Thanks to Radhanath Maharaj's vision, ethics and also the collaboration of his leaders, we see a different mentality which is actually the normality; brahmachari as celibate students, brahmacharis as putting years in studying. Not just studying academically but studying Vaishnava lifestyle, serving the cows, living in a protective environment, strong sadhana to prepare. This is human life. There is a big chunk of life which goes into preparation.

When we stress that, not only *we prepare people to do something solid in their life but we also attract people who understand the principle*; who don't want just to join a workforce but they want to learn and they want to grow intellectually, emotionally as persons.

Sometime back, we met a pastor of the seven day Adventists, Christian denomination. He told us, "Look, I came to your temple long ago. I liked your temple, I liked your philosophy but I didn't see for myself any future. I didn't see

any real avenues for progress besides just going and selling books on the streets". Then he joined this seven day Adventists and he became a pastor and now he runs the most important church of that organisation in Italy. And he told us, "Probably if you had a better setup for new people, in which the people can grow and see themselves growing as persons, growing as leaders in a systematic way, I probably would have stayed with you". In the same way, *who knows how many thousands of people we lost because of not being ready to offer something of substance that they can relate to.*

Srila Prabhupada's contribution to humanity is obviously our strength. We have the books, we have the standards, we have deity worship. Obviously, every aspect of Krishna Consciousness is a strength.

Weakness: By positions, I don't only mean a hierarchical position but I mean a path of growth as an individual. Just to give an example, we are still in the beginning of even having premarital training. Our people often get married and sometimes they get victimized by unqualified astrologers. These astrologers make the match while they don't know really about astrological compatibility; they miss some fundamental elements. Then these people get married and then after a few months they either divorce, separate or they live miserable lives together for some time. A solid society takes care of its people.

We are an educational society but we don't really have much education. Our children go to outside schools today. We know what Srila Prabhupada spoke about those schools. When our people get married, there is no requirement in most of the places in the world for these young people to sit together, ask key questions like 'how many children you want?' or 'what kind of standard of life you want?' or 'are you okay with leading a frugal and austere life or you need some more opulence, some more comforts?'. Again, *we are a very young movement; we need to understand that we are a very young movement.* If we are thinking that we are already an established movement, then we lack the energy to look at what we are missing.

If you look at the basic phases of life then we have children, children education, brahmachari education. In some rare place, there is some solid thing and at some other place it is not so much. Then there is grihastha education, grihastha support,

grihasta ethics. For instance, ***Srila Prabhupada stressed so much on charity as one of the pillars of grihasta life.*** But somehow as a movement, *we have not even figured out what fifty percent means, what giving fifty percent means.*

And it seems to me that most people think that fifty percent means from the gross income, half of salary and I believe that's not what Srila Prabhupada meant. What Srila Prabhupada meant by fifty percent was, what's technically called the discretionary income. Fifty percent of what's left after the basic living expenses after taxes. So what's left after that, fifty percent of that; which is largely obtainable for most people in the world. So take charity, take the many many instructions by Srila Prabhupada about fifty percent charity. As a movement, ***we have still not clarified and as a result people are not encouraged to give or they give somewhat haphazardly.***

Charity from the grihastas is like food for a religious movement. So, in some cases and some places we are starving because we have not educated our people or even our leaders about what fifty percent means, how to give fifty percent regularly. We have not trained our people in regular proportional giving. As a result, we are often, financially poor. You could go through all the phases in life and see weaknesses. The potential is there. *I have full faith that this movement can become the biggest, most powerful religious, philosophical and cultural influence on this planet.* I have full faith on that. But if you take a picture of the movement after years of its inception, there are many weaknesses.

One major weakness is the analysis in many parts of the world, how many intelligent people are we attracting, how many intelligent people are we making into devotees. Srila Prabhupada said that we need intelligent people to take the leadership ahead. A simple piece of data is given.

We asked the GBC for candidates to become zonal supervisors; we meaning the GBC college for leadership development. We are now running the third year of the zonal supervisor course. So we informed that we are looking for students and in some entire countries there were no candidates! Entire countries, where the movement is more than forty years! So, *we have a movement which is forty years old in a country and a poor GBC can't point out even one person!* Even person in forty years! We don't have even one person in an entire country and there are

many such countries that could not pick up zonal supervisors because of the quality, the calibre. This is something which should make us think.

Opportunities: Of course, people are suffering and intelligent people are asking themselves why we are suffering? There are many people who are asking themselves. They see some very big psychological problems. I was reading an article few days ago in which researches have demonstrated that now youth spend so much time on the screen, on their mobile phones and this has demonstrably increased their level of depression.

So, the world is in a bad shape. There is so much technology and at the same time there is so much pain. Material science has not delivered a world free of war or a world free of hunger. So, intelligent people still have faith in some metaphysical principles and we do have the answers, we do have the fundamental answers for the suffering of people. *We do have the fundamental answers through which people can gain awareness of their reality of their identity.* We have so much to give. We have the solutions. ***That's virtually an unlimited field of opportunities.*** Every single person is practically an opportunity.

Threats: There are different types of threats. Some are specific to particular countries like the legislation, the political atmosphere of certain countries. So, each country, each continent will have to be analyzed individually. What is a threat? It's also an opportunity to understand that people may not be attracted to read thick books of theology and philosophy with a lot of Sanskrit. People nowadays tweet, they do whatsapp.

The humanity has, to some extent, lost the capacity for focus and concentration. A teenager in America checks his phone two thousand times in one day. *So we are dealing with, in one sense, a modified human being.* Therefore, *that's a threat.* At the same time, it's also an opportunity. ***In other words, we need to adapt our message to our audience.*** It is not that the principle or the message has to be watered down but ***we need to find tools and instruments to make it relevant.*** The fact that people are suffering and there are people who are looking for solution, it is certainly an opportunity. But we need to become relevant.

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?*
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I would like to be instrumental in facilitating the creation and establishment of the next generation of the GBCs, Governing Body Commissioners that could really meet the challenges of the twenty first century, that will incorporate an adequate organisational mentality in terms of the need for solid administrative and legal forms of the movement, a GBC which would optimize the usage of technology, a GBC which would give enough attention to global initiatives which will serve the whole movement. *This is my dream that I could be somewhat instrumental in helping in creating that vision.*

I would also like to see the GBC college for leadership development will come to a point of certifying all aspects of responsibilities so as to ensure a better performance, a better care for the devotees under the care of these leaders and better overall quality, which will also attract persons who are intelligent, persons who value quality, persons who value intelligence. Well, it is not necessarily like that; it is not a linear thing. Just like Srila Prabhupada was discussing certain things in the realm of justice. Now people are civilized; they don't torture any more. It is not necessary that kali yuga has a linear progress towards going down, down, down. Humanity has gained foothold of a sense of justice, fairness, equanimity or equality. So, *we should not have too much of a pessimistic idea.*

I have mentioned that ***if you look at each stage of life, there are certain specific needs.*** Children needs are satisfied by gurukul and how to do the gurukul, should it be totally ashram based or the children go home at a certain time; that is negotiable. But a system of gurukul means the ashram of the guru, the ashram of the spiritual teacher. Then in case of brahmacharis: what kind of training, what kind of engagement should be there. They are not simply a workforce. Grihasta: what kind of training, what kind of training before becoming a grihastas, what kind of training we give them as parents, what kind of values they bring to the education of their children.

I see sometimes devotees who simply imitate the moods and the priorities of their home's culture. Say, in a place, materialistic parents want their children to become engineers or doctors. *The devotees also plan for their children to become engineers and doctors. It is like a failure of our internal education system.* Srila Prabhupada stressed that engineering is technology; technology is sudra work. But somehow you have thousands of our parents who find no problem in sending their children to... or actually their ambition is for their children to become engineers because they have not been trained. Why they have not been trained? Maybe their spiritual guides are not so clear about the priorities or they don't stress, they don't put enough training.

When we talk about charity we have, for instance, grihastas who have been trained. For instance, in the region of pune, many many hundreds or thousands of devotees have been cultivated when they were students or when they started working; and it was inculcated in them, the importance of charity. So, when they get married they give substantial amount to the temple on a regular basis because that's their training. Now ***the vast majority of grihastas don't have the training; there is no understanding***, there is no stress. So there is no much regular charity or there is not as much regular charity as there could be.

Once somebody is hopefully called to serve as the spiritual master, are these devotees prepared? Srila Prabhupada spoke about being equipped with the Bhaktivedanta title. And I am not bringing this up just as a title, a certificate, a piece of paper. Bhaktivedanta means somebody who is intimately familiar with the Bhagavatam. Are they equipped on how to work with other spiritual masters so that the message is not too contradictory? Are they training the disciples to work cooperatively with the other disciples of other gurus? Or are they, kind of, creating their own turf or their own kingdom? So ***these are all questions that need an answer*** and of course, analyzing the different individuals and analyzing the different areas of the world, we may come up with slightly different answers.

Srila Prabhupada was very clear about what he wanted from our children and he was very clear, in general, that ***the higher classes don't serve anyone***. Of course, they serve Krishna, they serve the spiritual master. Very clearly, he said that many times that Vaishyas, Kshatriyas and brahmanas don't accept a position of dependant workers. They will not. Now, certain types of education only produce

people who will go and work under someone. In other words, they are the ones who will go and work under someone; they are designed to produce sudras. And ***Srila Prabhupada did not want our children to become sudras because he becomes both psychologically and economically dependent on the system, the system of the material world.*** They need to work for people who are often sinful and have unethical type of economic development.

So there is no contradiction with the analysis or the analogy of the body. Yes, our children will find place in the social body; but why do need to prepare them to become the feet of that. So technological training (I won't even call it education), technological skill building prepares our children to become sudras, which is the feet or leg of the social body. That, certainly, was not Srila Prabhupada's intention. *I can prove it beyond any shade of doubt that that was not Srila Prabhupada's intention.*

So the devotees in our movement, what to speak of initiated devotees, should imbibe the vision. *We should be followers of Srila Prabhupada in every aspect*, not just during guru puja or the general theological or sadhana aspects. ***We need to imbibe Srila Prabhupada's vision.*** And sometimes there is a lack of information; sometimes there is a lack of education and sometimes there is a lack of faith. There is a lack of faith. There is this heavy conditioning, thinking that unless my child becomes a servant in someone's company, we will not be able to survive.

Now, few children get some jobs in corporations and that's not a disaster but *as a movement that should not be our official and prominent policy and direction.* We should aim something higher; if not all brahmanas, if not all kshatriyas, some Vaishyas. We need to create a culture of acceptance of Srila Prabhupada's mission because *in those areas of parenting, schooling, career orientation we are often very far from Srila Prabhupada's and his ideas.* We take the ideas from the material world. I don't see any new emerging needs; these are the needs of different phases of life. These are eternal needs because life is a cycle; so these are eternal needs. So I don't see emerging needs.

Of course there are emerging challenges; but those are nothing new. Each generation will have to negotiate their own situation. Outreach is generally born out of a very solid spiritual standard. ***If somebody is spiritually weak, we can't expect much outreach.*** Outreach remains like a theoretical idea, like a dream. I

have been to houses of devotees as guest and without mentioning any place, without mentioning any time, *some of them were very very weak in spiritual practice*. I saw the devotees never picking up the japa or never finishing their rounds or chanting their rounds at odd times, in fragments of time here and there.

So, ***unless devotees have a strong spiritual life and they have the happiness that comes from a strong spiritual life, you can't expect much outreach from them***. What outreach will they do, when they have not even completed their rounds? Or they may struggle with their principles or their form of entertainment may be identical to that of the materialists; watching sports, watching movies. So what are you going to preach? *If you are not experiencing the joy of Krishna Consciousness, what are you going to tell people?* If I myself am struggling, how am I going to inspire other people? 'come struggle with me?'

So, ***outreach comes, in one sense, as a natural consequence of being strong and healthy spiritually***; happy about one's own spiritual master, happy about one's own experience in ISKCON, happy with one's own practice, being nourished by the Holy name, nourished by the philosophy, nourished by the association of devotees. Just like, if you are nourished, if you eat well, then you can work. If you are starving and you are undernourished, how can you work? So, that would be the first element.

Then, of course, once those elements are taken care of, then you see, ***how to become relevant to our audience?*** What are we offering? Not only as a general theological message, but what are we offering as the next step? What is our proposal to them? We are saying, please do A, B and C. What's the A, B and C? That depends on the audience whom we deal with and also on how much time we can invest.

Like college preaching, one thing is to go and give one class. How much can you influence? How much can you offer? How much of Krishna Consciousness can you share? Say, like you do here, especially in western Maharashtra and many other places in India. If you establish a centre where students can come, live there, become Krishna Conscious while they study or become Krishna Conscious while they have their first working experience or establishing, like in America, a Krishna House. ***We need to adapt models which are relevant***. We can't have utopian ideas because we, maybe, joined forty years ago, thirty years ago, twenty years ago in a

temple, people will be similarly interested. *We have to find new avenues, new models and we see that those who are investing in those new models, they have success.* They become relevant to their audience; they inspire people to dedicate their lives.

So we should learn from successful programs like Pune, Chowpatty, Krishna house and we should replicate success. *A lot of systematic education is needed for all the important phases of life for children, for youth who are preparing for life, for couples who are preparing for grihasta life, education of our leadership.* We also need to develop a better sense of harmony, a better capacity of dialogue and not simply fighting (saying 'Prabhupada said this or Prabhupada said that'), a capacity for synthesis, a capacity of talking in a respectful way, a capacity of spending time analyzing the issues and creating plans, creating strategies, creating dreams of the future. ***If we are running around putting off fires, we can't really dream big.***

We need to attract more and more intelligent people which will create a better future through different ways such as college preaching, Krishna houses (which we could say is a form of college preaching), attracting people who are already educated, who are already stable in their life. These are cultural elements. Culture means the assumption, the belief, the importance of education, the importance of training. Yes, those come with intelligent people; intelligent people understand the value of art, aesthetics, importance of designing our building in a certain way, calling it green, making it attractive, making it environmentally sustainable.

Intelligent people understand the importance of beauty of presenting Krishna Consciousness, of having our temples nicely ornamented. For instance, we have the hugarian farm, new braja dham. The leadership understands that these are important elements in human society, important element of presenting an alternative to people, showing the beauty of God, showing the beauty of Krishna Consciousness, showing the beauty of the spiritual world. *Certainly, that's very much a part of what a better future will look like.*

We are working on it. I am not at liberty right now to discuss the type of direction and the type of possibilities that we are contemplating; but certainly ***Srila Prabhupada wanted a GBC which does not micro manage, which does not the day to day administration of temples or maybe even countries,*** but that they are able to maintain the spiritual standards and establish not only the basic spiritual

standards but standards of leadership, standards of performance through training, education. We need a structure which maintains the economy and the freedom of the different branches, different countries, allows for a safety net. When something goes wrong, there must be an agency of the GBC that would be able to intervene administratively, structurally and legally.