

When the Master Speaks: Ways of understanding Śrīla Prabhupāda’s challenging teachings and form of discourse

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The nature of this study

This article represents a mere sketch — or at best a somewhat extended annotated outline — of an intensely complex nexus of issues that would otherwise require a book-length treatment were all the supportive materials presented.¹ What is presented here instead is a result of decades of hearing what Prabhupāda’s followers have found challenging — even deeply troubling — in areas of his teaching and within his form of discourse, and further, even within the scriptural texts he presents. What is presented here is also a result of directly witnessing the manner in which Prabhupāda’s form of discourse, and some of his specific teachings, have impacted individuals outside the *bhakti* tradition in provocative, and even abrasive ways, which has led them to criticize and even condemn Prabhupāda, further feeding a negative reputation of ISKCON, the global Vaiṣṇava sect he established.

In this article, I will attempt to demonstrate how certain doctrinal ideas and conceptions can function as heuristic lenses for extracting from Prabhupāda’s “living theology”² the key to deeper

understandings. These theologically derivative heuristics may begin to systematically organize his thought and teachings, so as to reveal to any follower or outsider a deeper theological understanding that resolves challenges. In this essay, I draw from within the tradition to help solve the problems that these materials present in the first place. I will attempt to show here that the tools needed to solve the problems that arise within a religious doctrine can ultimately be drawn, constructed, or discovered from within the tradition's theological discourse.

Why did Prabhupāda make assertions that can too easily appear to outsiders, and even to self-honest followers, to be irrational, prejudicial, racist, misogynist, careless or unsupported, excessively or harshly judgmental, etc.? How are devotees to understand and explain such assertions? I will argue that the extraordinary tools needed to solve the challenges that arise within Prabhupāda's discourse can be found hidden within the essential teachings that he himself offered.

The harsh realities perceived in Prabhupāda's form of discourse will be directly addressed without dilution. There is no attempt to soften the seriousness of aspects of Prabhupāda's teachings to make them more acceptable. Nor is there any attempt to simply dismiss his troubling assertions by resorting to *ex cathedra* explanations or decrees. I will not engage in apologetics for the master's work.

Here, an honest and rigorous theological working and development of the tools found within the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* tradition itself is sought, one that may deliver a deeper understanding of the very heart of Prabhupāda's presentation of them, so that what can seem very troubling at first begins to make sense within such a framework.³ In effect, I attempt to lay some of the groundwork for aspects of a very accessible and practical systematic theology directly derived from Śrīla Prabhupāda's living theology itself.

The master's challenges

When seeking to grasp Prabhupāda's form of discourse, one must consider the extraordinary undertaking he faced as he juggled countless volatile factors. Firstly, he brought to modern persons

around the world teachings that are at least five hundred years old, and he made them accessible despite the fact that they were from a very different culture. Inter-cultural transmission — in this case, taking complex ideas and concepts that originate in Sanskrit and Bengali sources and translating them into English — is a skilled task and a difficult, gargantuan endeavor in and of itself. Secondly, the select teachings through which the tenets of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* were transmitted were themselves voluminous. Thirdly, buried within this plethora of teachings was a deep Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* theology so rich, so complex and sophisticated, that it can be confounding for even seasoned followers to grasp in any full sense, what to speak of outside observers!

Moreover, Prabhupāda was simultaneously tasked with the unimaginable and most improbable assignment of permanently establishing communities of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* practice and culture in the West and the rest of the world. In the course of doing so, Prabhupāda naturally faced a clashing of cultures, to which he responded accordingly. Consequently, such responses involved the assorted conflicts that inevitably arose between the outer world of the general secular society and the inner world of the sacred community. Indeed, it is not an uncommon experience for followers of various religious traditions to experience a cognitive dissonance between these outer and inner worlds. Furthermore, conflicts also appear in apparent philosophical contradictions within the words of the master, or between the master's words and what the sacred texts say, or between what one sacred source says and another.⁴

Prabhupāda, undoubtedly, was the inaugural world teacher of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* teachings from Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. However, it is important to appreciate that what Prabhupāda “wrote” is technically mostly what Prabhupāda actually “spoke.” Thus my essay's title, “When the Master Speaks,” underscores that Prabhupāda's writings are mostly transcriptions of what he spoke. This fact makes Prabhupāda's achievements all the more remarkable. Indeed, Prabhupāda spoke into a dictaphone to translate from the Sanskrit in order to create extensive commentaries, which he called “purports.” These purports focused and expounded upon one-minute spoken portions of the text at a time — mostly only one verse — and thus, an articulation of a general, cohesive vision of the essential tenets of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*

theology is simply not found. Prabhupada's writings, which were exegetically faithful and nuanced, are essentially commentarial. While bringing forward salient thoughts from his teachers and traditional commentators, he also spoke from his own experience.

The approximately seven thousand letters, both personal and official, that Prabhupāda wrote to his disciples were mostly dictated by him as well, before being transcribed and then sent as physical letters. And, of course, the thousands of lectures and interviews that Prabhupāda gave were obviously spoken. So we are really focusing on a kind of discourse that, most remarkably, at first takes the form of sound, *śabda*, that is, the spoken word, rather than the directly written word. What was spoken was transcribed and subsequently committed to published pages.

These different modalities of the spoken word carried and transmitted Prabhupāda's teachings. Hence, Prabhupāda was not offering his followers a systematic presentation of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* theology. Rather, he offered a "living theology," that is, one that he lived and breathed, one that he deliberately spoke as commentary on scriptures and spontaneously spoke in lectures and conversations.

While Prabhupāda certainly transmitted the knowledge and thought of the previous teachers in his lineage, and while this is the dominant tenor of his writing, his teachings carry a rather distinct character and personality beyond just their orally transmitted style. This character, in part, is naturally shaped by the Indian cultural milieu in which he was raised, and the life of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* into which he entered, and, later, by the cultural environs of the West and the rest of the world, with which Prabhupāda interacted while delivering his teachings.

Challenges for followers and outsiders

In the eleven-year period prior to Prabhupāda's departure from this world, he established a worldwide movement and left an extraordinary legacy. With his disciples' assistance, he produced dozens of large volumes of translation and commentary, thousands of letters, numerous lectures, conversations, and musical recordings. And in all these forms, the central focus, the ultimate purpose, I would

argue, is simply and unequivocally the promotion and cultivation of love of God — that is, the love divinity has for humanity and the need for humanity to cultivate love for the divinity, reciprocally.

However, many of Prabhupāda’s writings — and also the scriptural texts that he constantly drew from as foundational for his own thought — will sometimes present worldly subject matters that easily appear to eclipse his ultimate focus of loving God in *bhakti*. For example, topics such as evaluating the differences in intelligence and sexuality between men and women; declaring racial hierarchies (in which he claimed the Indian race as superior); making assertions that undermine science and scientific thinking (such as mocking the moon landing and evolution); seriously questioning the modern astronomical view of planetary systems and origins of the universe; or speaking on worldly issues in ways contrary to educated stances.

Over the decades, determining how these subject matters inform, or nourish, the ultimate focus of love of God — or Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* — seems to have left more persons confounded, than enthused. Forty-five years later, losing sight of how to achieve the focus, the master’s followers continue struggling to ascertain which teachings are essential and which are not.

The important question here is this: How can a teacher, or a teaching, whose ultimate and primary purpose is to propound the absolute principle of divine love, or love of God, appear, at times, to be introducing or promoting ideas or understandings that can detract from it, or even apparently contradict it? This question could be asked of any religious tradition in an attempt to reconcile its highest vision of divine love with a commonsense view of the world — a world that reflects the never-ending impoverishment of the heart so ubiquitously characteristic of the human condition.

This general question calls our attention to the universal underlying tension between the human heart’s stirrings and trappings. On the one hand, the master spoke of the human heart reaching for the liberation of a perfect love; on the other he delivered discourses on the trappings of the heart, or the travails and struggles of the human condition. The tension between these two extremes is certainly engaged in Prabhupāda’s presentation of “Kṛṣṇa consciousness,” or the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* he taught.

The absolute authority of the guru's words

Many followers and disciples give equal and absolute importance to utterly everything that Prabhupāda spoke or put into print. Imputing absolute value to every word the guru speaks is surely an expression of the utter love and dedication that disciples have for the guru and the sacredness of his teachings. And this is understandable. Indeed, for disciples to have absolute trust and faith in their guru's teachings is an ideal within the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition.

However, it is important to point out that the tradition espouses three sources of authority to ensure the veracity and trustworthiness of *bhakti* teachings: (1) *sādhu*, (2) *śāstra*, and (3) *guru*.⁵ Thus, the tradition expects the guru's words to be aligned with these two other principles: the words of other advanced Vaiṣṇavas (*sadhu*), and the words of sacred works (*śāstra*).

Consequently, over the past forty-five years, Prabhupāda's followers have sought out the many dozens of unreliably translated and published works written by previous venerable teachers of the tradition, adding to the cumulative quantity of material to digest. In most cases, these are the school's earliest works from authors at the time of Caitanya himself (the sixteenth century), their students, and later works all the way up through Prabhupāda's teacher, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī. But have these served to further illuminate the works of Prabhupāda? Or have they complicated one's efforts toward understanding Prabhupāda's focus?

Significantly, the third principle of guru is itself spoken of in two ways: the external guru and the guru within, or the *caitya* guru, "the guru who is sitting within your heart."⁶ Dozens of times Prabhupāda spoke of this inner dimension of the guru within the heart because it is an important factor. And as the hearts of the *bhaktas* become more and more purified, as the *bhaktas* become more mature, the more they can exercise their inner sense of things, and sense whether something "feels right" or "feels wrong."

In light of this, let us consider — as *śāstra* itself does — that the guru, Prabhupāda, imputes lower and higher values to the contents and subject matter of his speech. For example, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa offers many teachings on dharma, but in the end, he requests Arjuna to relinquish all forms of dharma. Why? Because the highest

teaching is the human heart's response to the yearning for love on the part of the divine.⁷ Another example is this: Among the twelve books of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the tenth is considered the highest. And among all the chapters in the tenth book, the ones focused on the Vraja *līlās* are the highest. And among those, the five chapters of the Rāsa Līlā are the very highest of them all.

These examples in *śāstra* serve to demonstrate that while all teachings are all absolutely sacred, there are still higher and lower teachings. Such hierarchical valuing of content in *śāstra* can also be a model for hierarchically valuing Prabhupāda's teachings. When Prabhupāda speaks about the highest teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, this must be regarded as most sacred and as subsuming all else. Therefore, consistent with the tradition, not everything that Prabhupāda spoke is absolutely the highest teaching that he offered.

A discourse on *vairāgya* carelessness

If persons outside the tradition were to read through Prabhupāda's works and observe them as a whole, most of them would recognize that their dominant feature is the many complex aspects of the rigorous practices and theological visions of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* theology, or what Prabhupāda termed "Kṛṣṇa consciousness." There is no doubt that Prabhupāda's mission was completely centered on teaching Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* and bringing it out of India to the rest of the world.

However, surrounding the ancient subjects of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* and interspersed throughout Prabhupāda's words is often commentary on modern life, in which he addresses the nature of the phenomenal world in general. While speaking on such themes, Prabhupāda makes statements that could easily appear anachronistic to the contemporary world and could raise issues that run counter to popular or established thinking. Many such remarks can easily appear to be fallacious, taking the form of absolute generalizations when inarguable relative claims would more accurately apply. Sometimes, Prabhupāda's words about this worldly realm of knowledge appear to arise from false premises, unproven and hasty assumptions, or just patently incorrect information, paradoxically delivered with his characteristic and assertive: "It is a fact." Moreover,

in particular instances, he could even appear crude and flippant. Such characteristically hyperbolic statements on subjects about which Prabhupāda speaks elsewhere as only of relative importance has, understandably, left behind a trail of confusion.

But I believe that there is something basic being communicated by Prabhupāda's wild generalizations and flippant attitude when it comes to the modern world, his challenging spirit, and even sometimes very aggressive expressions. It is as if Prabhupāda challenges novices: Why are you so invested in what is occurring in this dark, very troubled, temporary world?

And thus Prabhupāda exhibits what I would call a sort of “*vairāgya* carelessness.” *Vairāgya* means “dispassionate” renunciation, especially the kind more intensively pursued by Vaiṣṇava *sannyāsins*, or renunciates. Prabhupāda was “careless” in two respects: One, Prabhupāda, quite literally, just cared less about the fleeting, temporal world in which souls become too entangled. He wanted all to focus on the greater, internal spiritual world — the beautiful and eternally loving and playful world of Kṛṣṇa. Two, this lack of care regarding the external, everyday world resulted in making “careless” statements and assertions about worldly subject matters that he never bothered to substantiate or cared to closely study. Voicing flippant assertions, whether they were based on solid information or even on ridiculous sources, it really didn't matter to him. What did matter to Prabhupāda was the ultimate and permanently valuable focus on the spiritual.

The fact of the matter is that Prabhupāda's discourse can contribute to a damaged reputation to those on the outside and to devotional struggles and aberrations for followers on the inside. The quantity and complexity of the results of teachings that can send mixed messages or offer apparently conflictual guidance, even unclear theological doctrine, are, indeed, overwhelming. Such teachings may lead to unintended consequences: dangerous misdirecting of practitioners in their lives of *bhakti*, fanaticisms and fundamentalisms, a misuse of ecclesiastical power and a perversion of leadership, the development of an acutely judgmental society, a widespread culture of depersonalization, an increase in ethically transgressive behaviors, and so on. Additionally, various misrepresentations of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition will evolve not only

among outside observers but even within the community and congregation of practitioners, and between themselves.

The Bhagavad Gītā's embedded hermeneutic

How can we understand Prabhupāda's conflictual or confounding discourses? In order to tackle ways to navigate through the troubling statements that Prabhupāda makes in his books, we must first establish what Prabhupāda's highest and most essential teaching is. To do so, we turn to a potent and illuminating declaration that appears in the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself and is spoken by Sañjaya, the narrator of the great conversation between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.

The final few verses in the last chapter of the *Gītā* — while describing Kṛṣṇa's teachings — characterize the whole conversation with the following simple, but significant, words spoken by Sañjaya: *guhyaṁ paraṁ yogam*, or “the supreme secret of yoga.”⁸ Hardly flamboyant or hyperbolic, Sañjaya's words emphatically point the reader to something that is supremely secretive about the nature of Kṛṣṇa's teachings. Naturally, we ask: To what, exactly, do the words *guhyaṁ paraṁ yogam* point? Now, let us examine some of Kṛṣṇa's own words in earlier verses that allow the reader to enter into this supreme secret.

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna a final rhetorical question, which establishes that there is a highest teaching of the *Gītā* — one that should challenge any reader of the work. Indeed, if we are to take Kṛṣṇa's words here seriously, this rhetorical question functions as a clue to an illuminating embedded hermeneutic within the text:

kaccid etac chrutaṁ pārtha, tvayaikāgreṇa cetasā

“Has this [teaching] been
heard by you, O Pārtha,
with thought focused upon
the single highest point?”⁹

Addressing Arjuna as Pārtha in the text, Kṛṣṇa asks him whether he's heard his teachings while focused on “the single highest point” (*eka + agra*). Rhetorical or not, with that simple inquiry, Kṛṣṇa gives Arjuna the formula for understanding the breadth and depth of his teachings. Clearly, it is understood that Arjuna will not have fully grasped, or even completely heard Kṛṣṇa's teachings, unless they are ingested in light of the “single highest point” of which he speaks.

This single highest point, as I go to great lengths to show in previous publications, is a subtle thread of expression woven into, and throughout, Kṛṣṇa's teachings that ultimately reaches its most dramatic and emphatic disclosure as “the greatest secret of all” (*sarvaguhyatamam*), Kṛṣṇa's “supreme message” (*paramam vacah*):

iṣṭo 'si me dṛdham iti
“You are so much loved by me!”¹⁰

The “greatest secret of all” — a culmination of Sañjaya's directive — reveals that the supreme divinity, as Kṛṣṇa, holds in his divine heart much love for Arjuna and, by extension, for all souls. Indeed, by the end of their conversation, Kṛṣṇa has moved Arjuna's heart to love him. This divine affection is further underscored in the following verse, after Kṛṣṇa passionately urges Arjuna to reciprocate his love, when Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna, “You are dearly loved by me” (*priyo 'si me*).¹¹

Finally, in what is known as the *carama-śloka*,¹² Kṛṣṇa emphatically states that all other teachings, all varieties of dharma offered to Arjuna throughout their conversation, can even be relinquished in favor of this essential teaching — a kind of *parodharma* (supreme dharma) — namely, coming to Kṛṣṇa as his exclusive loving shelter. Kṛṣṇa has now conclusively made clear his essential and highest teaching. This is the lens through which to understand all his other teachings and even subsume them as either supportive or even peripheral or supplemental teachings.

Drawing a parallel between Kṛṣṇa's and Prabhupāda's “teaching method,” we observe that both emphasize a core teaching in either consistent, emphatic, or even dramatic ways within their presentations of other themes, which — if they are to be grasped in full — necessitate hinging on that essential, core teaching. More

precisely, just as Kṛṣṇa throughout his conversation with Arjuna put forward the general principles and practices in the various teachings that he presents, ultimately they do not matter compared with the highest teaching of divine love — the love that the divinity has for humans, and the divine yearning for humans to reciprocate that divine love, *bhakti*.

Correspondingly, Prabhupāda laid out the principles of strict *bhakti* for practice and daily living, requesting certain vows and ethical prohibitions, sounding uncompromising and even rigid when it came to these principles and practices. However, in many of his nearly seven thousand personal letters to disciples, he exercised enormous compassion, often customizing the lived practices within *bhakti* for his disciples. From all appearances, one might say that Prabhupāda even “bent the rules” in many cases. But when doing so, Prabhupāda always emphasized direction toward, and connection to, the highest teaching, *which is the love of God*, just as Kṛṣṇa does with Arjuna in his final words in the form of his didactic rhetorical question. In both instances, we are offered a lens through which to clearly focus and view, and thus grasp, the teachings as a whole.

Utilizing tripartite heuristic models

The *Bhagavad Gītā* speaks about another filtration system, as it were, that humans are subjected to, and through which they understand reality: the *trai-guṇya*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* demonstrates how this system of transposable qualities, or *guṇas*, is applicable in a number of spheres for qualitative evaluation. For example, the penultimate chapter shows how the *trai-guṇya* can be applied to levels and qualities of faith (*Gītā* 17.1–3), severe austerities (4–6), food (7–10), sacrifice (11–13), ascetic practices (14–19), and the giving of gifts (20–22). In the final and conclusive chapter, three verses describe three levels of a person’s theological vision, which provide didactic content for our purposes here (*Gītā* 18.20–22).

To illustrate how humans filter information and experiences through their own individual theological visions, Kṛṣṇa first speaks about a *sāttvika* understanding of reality when one can “perceive in all beings one ever-present being . . . understand that knowledge to

be of the nature of *sattva*.”¹³ In other words, a vision of the whole and full clarity of the nature of reality. This broad vision characterizes the manner in which mature interpreters of *śāstra*, or the guru’s teachings, perceive in all parts of the teaching its whole, its highest and most essential portion. This is ideal. It is the most transparent filter. Kṛṣṇa then speaks about a *rājasa* understanding that views the subject “with a view of separateness,” which lacks the one unifying factor of the whole that subsumes the separate parts (*Gītā* 18.21). This understanding is of the nature of *rajas* (partial clarity of the nature of reality). And finally, those understandings that interpret and focus upon a single part of the whole, taking it to be the totality of the whole, equating the two, is of the nature of *tamas* (little clarity of the nature of reality): an obscure filter.

More readers of Prabhupāda’s books than not probably ingest and interpret the knowledge found in them through one of these three “filters,” or, most commonly, mixtures of them. And these mixtures are subject to constant change. Under the influence of these ever-shifting *trai-guṇya* filters of understanding, naturally the pictures painted of the master’s teachings can be dramatically diverse. Not just between followers, but within individuals as well — in the course of just twenty years, for example, followers can experience a dramatic crystalizing of how they understand the teachings, what to speak of in the course of an entire lifetime.

How sound, clear, or complete a picture of his teachings is painted by Prabhupāda’s followers (what to speak of others) depends upon their level of evolution and devotional maturity. One inevitably “sees” the teachings through whichever filter reflects the state of one’s consciousness — or is most pertinent to what one needs to see to evolve. As the *Bhagavad Gītā* explains, if one’s awareness is blurred with visions of lust — corresponding to either the *rājasa* or *tāmasa* filters — then one invariably “sees” the teachings on lust as central. As a heuristic approach, this model is limited to the developmental pace of the person subject to it, albeit often unconsciously. Prabhupāda further explains that the natural capacity to love — or sharpen one’s vision of reality through love — expands as consciousness develops from childhood into adulthood, ultimately finding its perfect state in the love for the “supreme beloved” — the *uttama*, or ultimate, vision.¹⁴

The following chart organizes these tripartite heuristic models, as a tool intended to guide interpretations of the *bhakti* texts and Prabhupāda's teachings:

<i>TRAI-GUṆYA</i> FILTERS OF UNDERSTANDING	OBJECTS OF INTERPRETATION (<i>Gītā</i> 18.20–22)	LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION	LEVELS OF DEVOTIONAL VISION
<i>sattva</i>	Vision of the WHOLE	Broad-mindedness: <i>full understanding</i>	<i>Uttama</i> vision
<i>rajas</i>	Vision of the PARTS	Open-mindedness: <i>partial understanding</i>	<i>Madhyama</i> vision
<i>tamas</i>	Vision of only a SINGULAR PART	Narrow-mindedness: <i>little understanding</i>	<i>Kaniṣṭha</i> vision

Figure 1. This chart is intended to serve as a taxonomy of the interpretation of the *bhakti* teachings. It is based upon key teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā* that can support levels of development and maturity of vision and interpretation of teachings.

In effect, the *Bhagavad Gītā* tells the reader to understand every part of a *bhakti* text in light of the whole and essential teaching—attainable when viewing it through the *sātvika* filter: the most transparent filter. The challenge for every follower of Prabhupāda is to present his teachings in this way, mindful not to allow any *rājasa* or *tāmasa* views to obscure their visions of the presentation. This becomes especially significant when sharing Prabhupāda's teachings with outside viewers, whose appreciation of his teachings (despite their challenging parts) will depend upon these enlightened explanations.

Now, we may ask, What is the “single highest point” of everything that Prabhupāda came to teach, write, practice, and offer the world? What is central to the “vision of the whole” theology of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism? Although it may not be so obvious to the casual reader of Prabhupāda’s books, or even to serious readers who may not have done a more fully informed study of Prabhupāda’s whole teaching, in all of his lectures, writings, and communications, Prabhupāda propounded a very simple teaching: *the love of God*. After conducting much research into the nature of Prabhupāda’s discourse, whether written, published, spoken formally or informally, I have observed something significant: A basic grasp and distillation of the highest and most essential teaching that Prabhupāda offered the world, put in his own simple choice of words, happens to be the phrase, “the love of God.” There are thousands of instances in which Prabhupāda used the phrase. Whether we find it in his published writings or in his conversations with clueless outside inquirers as well as already well-informed followers and disciples, Prabhupāda would resort to engaging the phrase most frequently and spontaneously.

What is especially notable is that the phrase *love of God* was how Prabhupāda expressed what he was all about. Of all the ways that Prabhupāda could have summarized his teachings and his purpose as a teacher, this brief and most concise phrase — *love of God* — spoke volumes about what he considered his life’s mission. Many times, interviewers asked Prabhupāda what it was that he was teaching. And Prabhupāda most often responded by saying something such as: “Kṛṣṇa consciousness is giving people the most sublime religion — love of God. That’s all. We are teaching to love God.”¹⁵ It is no wonder, then, that Prabhupāda spoke and wrote the phrase “love of God” (and slight variations thereof, such as “love for God,” “loving God,” etc.) numerous times.¹⁶

The precise phrase “love of God,” which appears at least 350 times throughout Prabhupāda’s books, and many more times in lectures and dialogues (at least 700 times), contains the two important and significant words *love* and *God*. However, it is important to point out that this phrase functions as the very seed, or *bīja*, of

Prabhupāda's whole teaching. Effectively, Prabhupāda's teaching is essentially a *theology of love*. Or, as Klaus Klostermaier once put it when characterizing the whole of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology: a *hrdayavidyā*, "a knowledge of the heart."¹⁷

If the phrase *love of God* is examined carefully as a seed to Prabhupāda's whole theology, one finds that the word *love* and the word *God* each take on various synonyms in Prabhupāda's discourse. And such synonymic forms or ways of stating *love of God* in just Prabhupāda's published works, number into the tens of thousands, indicating what is most essential, or the "single highest point" to everything he wrote and spoke.

To establish that *love of God* is indeed the most powerful theme and highest point of Prabhupāda's teaching, let us more carefully examine the most basic and frequently found words or phrases, in English and in Sanskrit, that essentially mean *love* and *God*— along with some added nuanced senses of the words. The most common and prominent words and phrases for *love* in Prabhupāda's published works come to a total of well over 26,400 instances, and in recorded lectures and conversations, 32,100 instances. I have identified these important words and phrases for *love* as follows: "devotion," "devotional service," "*bhakti*," "*premā*," "*rasa*," "affection," and "the heart." And, of course, the word "love" itself and phrases in which it appears, such as "love of God" and "love of Kṛṣṇa" are also very prominent. The total count of instances in which *love* and synonymic words appear in published books, letters, lectures, and conversations numbers well over 62,000.

The word *God* and its permutations, such as "the supreme," "Kṛṣṇa," "divinity," and phrases such as "the supreme Lord," "the supreme person," and "the supreme personality of Godhead," appear in at least 48,000 instances in Prabhupāda's books. In transcribed lectures and conversations, I found over 117,000 instances. The total count of instances of "Kṛṣṇa" or "God" and synonyms in published books, lectures and conversations, and letters, numbers well over 175,000. It is easy to conclude that Prabhupāda's mission was, indeed, spreading a teaching that ultimately focuses on the love of God. But let's take it further.

The phrase *love of God* has multivalent meanings, each of which is applicable in understanding Prabhupāda's teachings, while

it is obvious that one particular meaning dominates. And while it is evident that Prabhupāda primarily intends one meaning over the others, the other meanings are just as applicable in illuminating Prabhupāda's presentation of the theology and teachings of Caitanya's *bhakti* school. My analysis shows that the phrase *love of God* applies to Prabhupāda's theological presentation in the following four ways:

- 1 *prema-bhakti*: a bhakta's love for God;
- 2 *premodaya*: the soul's dormant love for God;¹⁸
- 3 *bhagavat-premā*: the love from God for souls;
- 4 *premāveśa*: the all-pervasive love of God's innermost world.

Love of God as *prema-bhakti* focuses on humans as *bhaktas*, or those who have offered their hearts with purest love to God, or the *bhagavat*. Prabhupāda most commonly intended this sense. However, other theologically poignant senses are worth recognizing here.

Consider the second sense, love of God as *premodaya*, or “dormant love of God.” Drawing from many scriptural references, Prabhupāda speaks about this dormant love in the sense that lying deep within the soul is a latent capacity to love, and ultimately, to love God. “Everyone has got natural love for God,” he said.¹⁹ Interestingly, Prabhupāda recognizes that love itself is an intrinsic constituent element of the self: “Love exists inside everyone. Every living entity.”²⁰ Why? Prabhupāda explains:

Therefore, *Bhāgavatam* says that that type of religion which is executed simply to develop the dormant love. Everyone has got dormant love of God. That is natural, because we are all parts and parcels of God.²¹

Prabhupāda warns that while all souls have love embedded deeply within the depths of the heart, it can, nevertheless, be misused: “And our attempt is to awaken the dormant love of Kṛṣṇa. Everyone has got love — the stock of love is there — but it is being misused.”²²

Again, it is a matter of awakening and developing the dormant love from deep within the soul; otherwise, the conditioning powers of the phenomenal world — including the *trai-guṇya* filtration system — cause the soul to forget this opportunity to develop this love of God.

Actually, we are teaching the science of God; we are teaching how to develop our dormant propensity to love God. Being parts and parcels of the Supreme, we have got an eternal affinity to love God. Unfortunately, by our contact with matter we have practically forgotten that we are eternally related with God.²³

Thus, at the very core of Prabhupāda’s vision and all of the practices he taught is the foundational *principle of love* — a dormant love that is awakened, cultivated in *bhakti*, practiced, refined, and eventually realized. It ultimately blossoms into *prema-bhakti*, a love that is perfected in the world of divine relation, *prema-bhakti-rasa*.

Love of God as *bhagavat-premā* focuses on God as the *bhagavat*, or the one who embraces all portions of reality with divine love, *premā*, especially for humans as *bhaktas*. And the love of God, as *premāveśā*, focuses on the *premā* within the intimate divine acts of the godhead, specifically for the intimate divine acts, or *līlās*, of the *bhagavat*.

Put simply, Prabhupāda’s teachings present (1) the love from humans for God, (2) the love for God that lies dormant within the heart of souls, (3) the love from God for souls, especially the humanly embodied ones, and (4) the love and its energy that is eternally activated within the highest and most intimate dimensions of the godhead itself. And Prabhupāda provides his *uttama* vision for the movement he founded, and for the followers who would sustain it — the movement as a place in which our *tāmasa* and *rājasa* perspectives may be purified and elevated to a *sāttvika* vista of reality, where lust becomes love: “The Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is so nice that you can transfer your lust into love for God.”²⁴

A theology of love

Transforming lust into love is a theme of the ancient *bhakti* texts that Prabhupāda engages throughout his own work. Crystallizing his visions for his followers even more emphatically, Prabhupāda states that his mission is all about teaching persons “how to love Kṛṣṇa.”²⁵ He further defines his whole movement with respect to purification of the heart: “Our Kṛṣṇa conscious movement is not a religious movement; it is a movement for purifying the heart.”²⁶ And the heart, he tells us, is “purified” by transforming lust into love, by focusing on “the singular highest point,” or *love of God*.

As such, in the most distilled fashion, it is assuredly love of God, or love of Kṛṣṇa, and the purification of the heart that are the essential thrust of Prabhupāda’s teachings for the world. Indeed, Prabhupāda was delivering the most essential theme of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology:

Pure love for Kṛṣṇa is eternally established in the hearts of the living entities. It is not something to be gained from another source. When the heart is purified by hearing and chanting, this love naturally awakens.²⁷

What, then, would constitute his essential teachings on the love of God, or *bhakti*? If we were to articulate, in the simplest language, the very seed principles of the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* theology as a whole — Prabhupāda’s essential teachings — what would they say? Let it be affirmed — despite the fact that I have witnessed how many followers think that Prabhupada did not speak much about love — that the ultimate focus and essential teachings for his followers, indeed, rest on his teachings on the love of God and the purification of the heart.

Therefore, I propose the following twelve essential theological principles, derivative of those very teachings, as yet another tool to assist followers in grasping the whole, tentatively titled: “Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Vision of Love of God.” These twelve principles of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* theology fall under four primary, sequential, and

developmental themes, which I have derived from the four stages found in the great conversation in the *Bhagavad Gītā* narrative, as well as from the four stages occurring in the greatest *līlā* of all, the Rāsa Līlā of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*). I give each theme or stage four simple wordings:

- I The Human Condition
- II Awakening to the Divine
- III Transformation of the Self
- IV Absorption in the Divine

Because of Arjuna's irresolvable ethical dilemma in the first chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, his shattered heart powerfully conveys the human condition. His awakening, however, begins in the second chapter when he turns to Kṛṣṇa and hears his teachings. A transformation appears to be dramatically conveyed in his doxological outpourings in the tenth chapter. And Arjuna's absorption in the divine appears in Kṛṣṇa's words of loving connection with Arjuna in the eighteenth chapter.

The Vraja Gopikās,²⁸ as they are in their homes before suddenly departing for the forest, also symbolize the human condition. Their awakening occurs when they hear the sounds coming from Kṛṣṇa's flute, which draws them to the forest. It could be said that the Vraja Gopikās undergo various transformations: first, as some depart for the forest, they leave their physical bodies. Then they all go through various stages of being with Kṛṣṇa and searching for Kṛṣṇa. Finally, they become absorbed in the divine in the play of the Rāsa dance. The following twelve essential theological principles or teachings follow the same general structuring.²⁹

Twelve principles of Kṛṣṇa bhakti theology

The Human Condition

- 1 Sentient beings in this phenomenal world suffer because of a blindness to their true spiritual

nature and because of an impoverishment of the heart (*hṛd-rogam*, or “the disease of the heart”³⁰), that is, the center of their deepest thoughts and feelings, especially love and compassion.

- 2 The human condition is facilitated by God’s external inferior or material energy of this phenomenal world (*māyā-śakti*) — sentient beings are therefore caught between their conditioned and spiritual natures.
- 3 Yet all sentient beings are eternal infinitesimal parts of God and the spiritual nature (*cit-śakti*), and thus they are spiritual by nature (*jīva-śakti*) — such beings can ultimately choose between the supra-phenomenal and phenomenal worlds.

An Awakening to the Divine

- 4 God also has an internal superior or spiritual energy (*cit-śakti*), which forms the spiritual world in which eternal divine acts take place — these are revealed in sacred scriptures, such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.
- 5 The ultimate identity of God is Śrī Kṛṣṇa, described with the epithet, “the Supreme Personality of Godhead,” the *bhagavat*, who is at the very center of the spiritual world with his divine feminine counterpart and beloved, the supreme Goddess Rādhā.
- 6 The supreme love shared between Lord Kṛṣṇa with his beloved Goddess Rādhā manifests in the form of Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya, the veritable embodiment of their love and the yearning for

love of sentient beings — thus divinity sends out a love-call to all souls to awaken their dormant love.

A Transformation of Self

- 7 When the dormant nature to love God is awakened, the full cultivation of love of God and the spiritual world is possible through the practices of devotional service, or *sādhana-bhakti*, which begins with the sounding of the divine names in the *mahāmantra*.
- 8 This knowledge and practice of *sādhana-bhakti* is received through the guru who comes in the disciplic succession (*paramparā*), *bhakti* teachings, and sacred *bhakti* scriptures.
- 9 Love of God, Kṛṣṇa, is the highest goal of life, and constitutes the purest and perfect form of love, Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, fully transforming the heart.

Absorption in Divine Love

- 10 In *prema-bhakti*, one experiences the close presence of the divine everywhere, and simultaneously experiences the divine's painful absence, which corresponds to the metaphysical declaration of the divinity's "incomprehensible, simultaneous separateness from everything and yet non-separateness in everything," *acintya-bhedābheda tattva*.
- 11 Within the spiritual energy, souls in the spiritual world are all liberated and fully absorbed in the divine acts (*līlā*) within the love of God.

- 12 One enters the eternal world of the heart,
entering the sacred *maṇḍala* within the eternal
dance of divine love (*prema-bhakti-rasa*) and
can turn to this world to awaken sleeping souls
and nourish shattered hearts.

The above twelve theological principles, which distill Prabhupāda’s essential teachings — as well as the tradition itself — are central to what Prabhupāda taught and what the scriptural teachings on Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* deliver. These highest teachings are designated as superlative by the tradition itself — superexcellent teachings that nothing else can surpass. Indeed, they are the *sine qua non* of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Theoretically, nothing else would need to be taught. The value of all other teachings can be evaluated by how well they serve, illuminate, or reflect these twelve core theological principles. Conversely, teachings that obscure or distract from the highest teachings, drop lower on the hierarchical rung of importance. The former can function as supportive teachings, while the latter can be considered supplemental, or even peripheral to the essential teachings.

These twelve theological principles, presented here as “Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Vision of Love of God” clearly demonstrate that the very core of Prabhupāda’s vision is the foundational premise of *the principle of love* — a dormant love that is awakened, cultivated, practiced, refined, and eventually realized and ultimately perfected in the divine. Inspired by Kṛṣṇa’s question in the *Bhagavad Gītā* to Arjuna, followers of Prabhupāda might ask themselves: Have we understood Prabhupāda’s teachings in light of this focus on the principle of love?

A discourse on the nature of love

What does it mean, then, to interpret Prabhupāda’s teachings through the eye of love, or *prema-netra*? If Prabhupāda’s followers are to understand the whole of his teachings by learning to view them as they relate to this ultimate principle of love — as Arjuna did with Kṛṣṇa’s teachings in the *Gītā* — then the importance of

developing an ability to detect this essential principle becomes paramount.

This endeavor, as I see it, is twofold: first, to resist becoming distracted by the less essential teachings until one is mature enough to grasp them and how they serve the whole; and second, to familiarize oneself with “Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Vision of Love of God” and the manner in which this permeated everything he did. With this aim in mind, perhaps a look at Prabhupāda’s relationship to the *bhakti* culture he established in the West and around the world, in light of his foundational principle of love, would be helpful.

Prabhupāda, as the singular extraordinarily successful spiritual master and inaugurator of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* around the world, offered elaborate teachings on how to cultivate Kṛṣṇa consciousness, or *bhakti*, and instructed his followers to do the cultivation. Again, as was quoted above, “we are teaching how to develop our dormant propensity to *love God*.” Everything that Prabhupāda did revolved around this singular focus, or highest point. He served as an example of this principle of love, giving us a living theology, and he made all arrangements for others to cultivate their practice of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, to develop their own “dormant propensity to love.”

Central to these arrangements was the building and opening of beautiful temples, around which communities of his followers, or *bhaktas*, became established and grew. And, like the ultimate focus of Prabhupāda’s teachings themselves, the very focus of worship in the temples revolved around the principle of divine love: the love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. As we are meant to understand Prabhupāda’s teachings by placing his essential teachings in the center, at the center of each temple he built, Prabhupāda installed deities — three-dimensional sculpted representational images of the supreme feminine and the supreme masculine worshipable figures — Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, respectively. This reflected where the master’s own heart was immersed: in the highest revelation of the most intimate loving connection with the innermost world of divinity.

As central as Prabhupāda’s placement of the deities was, so was his emphasis of the chanting of the *mahāmantra*: the sonic representation of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa’s love for one another, through which *bhaktas* may connect with them. Among all the devotional practices, forms of worship, and ways of *bhakti*, the particular practice

of sounding the *mahāmantra* — a certain circuitous pattern and repetition of the names of the divine feminine and divine masculine — is clearly the most central activity for the devotional aspirant taught by Prabhupāda.

In effect, Prabhupāda established a vision of love that first takes place within the godhead itself, between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Then, from within the setting of temples, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, together, send out a love-call to all souls as they lovingly and mercifully gaze outwardly from temple altars to their worshipers. This love-call is sent out from them through the song coming from the flute Kṛṣṇa holds up to his mouth while Rādhā lovingly accompanies him. Then, finally, worshipers offer all of their hearts in a return response to the divine love-call by singing and dancing, animated by sounding the divine names in the *mahā-mantra* in song, while their collective gazes meet the divine outward gaze of both Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

. . . Kṛṣṇa has the propensity to love someone of the opposite sex, and therefore we have this same propensity. The beginning of love is present in the eternal love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. We are also seeking eternal love, but because we are conditioned by the material laws, our love is interrupted. But if we can transcend this interruption, we can take part in loving affairs similar to those of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhārāṇī.³¹

In the above quotation, Prabhupāda identifies an “interruption” in the love that souls are meant to exchange with the divine. Only through elevating themselves beyond the myopic views of this conditioned world and the “material laws” applicable here — such as those of the *traī-guṇya* — do *bhaktas* begin to move closer to cultivating the eye of love, or the *prema-netra*, through which to understand Prabhupāda’s teachings and their inevitable hierarchical arrangement, as far as where *bhaktas* stand in relation to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s Vision of Love of God.

Yet in the twelve years that Prabhupāda devoted to establishing his teachings in the West, rather than devising a method for his followers to discern between which of his teachings are absolutely

central, internal, and essential to Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, and which are supportive, or supplemental, he focused instead on inundating them with *seva*: uninterrupted service to the divine sources of love, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Through offerings of food, dress, and soothing articles of worship to the divine figures of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and recitations of sacred texts on *bhakti*, *bhaktas* are brought together in loving community and are moved with devotional energy to reciprocate the love emanating from the divine.

Three levels of bhakti teachings

Those who seek to absorb Prabhupāda's understandings of love do so by devoting themselves to living in ways that are most beneficial to all who cross their path, by inspiring the practice of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* wherever they go or wherever they are, just as their master did. The efficacy of this depends, in part, on one's ability to discern between the essential teachings, the supportive teachings, and the supplemental teachings of the tradition, as presented by their master.

Indeed, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the first book Prabhupāda produced and published in the United States, we find elaborations upon these three levels of *bhakti* teachings. This precedent for organizing teachings according to how essential they are, and related to what is essential for the practice of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, is observable throughout the chapters of this foundational scriptural text. Therein, teachings that are more external or supportive, usually appear in the chapters first, followed by a closing verse that reveals something of the text's essential message. For example, Chapter 6 presents teachings on yoga practice and philosophy, and it ends with a vision of the highest yoga practitioner as one who loves Kṛṣṇa (*Gītā* 6.47). In Chapter 9, Kṛṣṇa speaks about worshipers of other divinities but ends on how the offering of love to him is the highest (*Gītā* 9.34). Chapter 11, famously known for Kṛṣṇa's revelation of his *virāṭa-rūpa*, universal form, ends by Kṛṣṇa informing Arjuna that the most intimate form who was standing right in front of him all along was far greater than anything that was revealed to him of cosmic glory, divine might, and majesty (*Gītā* 11.52–55). And, of course, as already mentioned above,

Kṛṣṇa presents his great secret, his greater secret, and finally “the greatest secret of all” (*Gītā* 18.64).

Even the *Gītā*’s narrative arc reflects this hierarchical arrangement of teachings. In the simplest terms, the text begins with an outer world conflict, namely, that of the immanent battle between the Kauravas and the Pāndavas. This initial scene easily symbolizes the human condition, with its endless Kurukṣetras, or battlefields, in the phenomenal world. The initial words of the first verse say it all: *dharma-kṣetre kuru-kṣetre samavetā yuyutsavaḥ*.³² Here, the reader’s attention is immediately brought to the tensions between dharma — the permanent essence of one’s true inner nature — and *kuru*, the dynasty from which all the warriors come. Together, these represent the outer impermanent nature of our roles in the world.

While the *Gītā* opens with a focus on the outer impermanent nature and its turmoil, the start of the second chapter launches the teaching on the permanent and immutable nature of the self. And thereafter, the *Gītā* elucidates many different dharma teachings, such as the teachings on action, sacrifice, detachment from the fruits of action, yogic practices, etc. Consequently, the reader follows Arjuna as Arjuna moves from the outer world of conflict in which he finds himself (viewed through the *traī-guṇya* lenses of *rajas* and *tamas*), into the inner world of dharma and the true nature of the self (viewed through the *traī-guṇya* lens of *sattva*).

As Kṛṣṇa crystalizes his vision, he weaves in the most essential element of his teaching throughout his words to Arjuna: Kṛṣṇa’s love for him — and by extension a love-call to all souls. This is the innermost teaching in the most important layer of the text. Indeed, its expression is found in the climactic three verses of the work, in Chapter 18 (verses 64–66), wherein Kṛṣṇa now dramatically asks Arjuna to relinquish all forms of dharma, so that he may *fully* receive his love and reciprocate it — offering his now purified heart (and vision) to the divine.

As we can see, the various scriptural texts on which Prabhupāda relied for his own teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* possess literary contours that ultimately lead up to and land on the highest teaching of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. And within the voluminous and complex teachings of Prabhupāda we may also find the following three layers.

These are the essential teachings on Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Most easily and simply identified as “love of God,” they are more completely presented in the form of the aforementioned “twelve principles of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.” Any and all elements of thought and practice directly articulating and cultivating “love of God,” or Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, constitute what should be accepted as essential in the teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.

Supportive Teachings

Any nonessential elements of thought and practice that directly serve and support the essential, ultimate vision and cultivation of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. For example, *varṇāśrama* dharma is not essential to Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. But when aspects of *varṇa* and *āśrama* directly support the practice of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, then such supportive teachings are valuable and can powerfully contribute to the vision and practice of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. However, when any aspects of *varṇāśrama* are mistakenly taught to be essential teachings, then Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* is no longer the essential focus. To mistake a supportive teaching as if it were an essential teaching diminishes the absolute value of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* and turns what is supposed to be a teaching on Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* into something else — a lesser vision and practice.

Supplemental Teachings

These are teachings that directly or indirectly enhance or develop the supportive teachings and even the essential teachings on Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Supplemental teachings can engage essential or supportive teachings to external worldly circumstances, which vary from one culture to another, one situation to another, etc. Factors such as the socio-cultural (*deśa*, or place), the historical (*kāla*, or time), and the circumstantial (*pātra*, or recipient; the circumstantial could be psychological/spiritual/familial, etc.) are engaged in this level of the teachings. And the ways in which the teacher of *bhakti* interacts with these factors can be helpful in promoting the essential and supportive teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. These teachings can emerge from the perspectives of individual teachers and students. And while

such supplemental teachings are relatively less important than the supportive and essential teachings, they can powerfully apply essential teachings to the particular world circumstances in which practitioners find themselves. However, if practitioners or teachers of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* find the peripheral supplemental teachings distracting or detracting from the essential focus on Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, then they should be put aside and disengaged. To conclude, supplemental teachings can (1) contribute to an outsider's and practitioner's understanding positively, or (2) they can negatively detract, distract, or erode one's understanding, or (3) they can be neutral, and neither negatively or positively impact one's understanding.

Delivering transcendental diamonds to the world

Although Prabhupāda challenged many of the conventional ways of modern thinking and education, while doing so he confidently and enthusiastically introduced a whole new way of viewing the world: an alternative vista of the universe according to the ancient scriptural texts — primarily the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* — and the commentarial tradition that builds upon it. In addition to what the master spoke, the conviction and utter faith with which he delivered this novel understanding also said volumes, while hinting at the divine grace infusing it.

Despite this sacred, otherworldly quality to Prabhupāda's teachings, to non-practitioners in the modern West — the non-followers — so many of his statements all too easily appear as rather culturally biased, colonialist-influenced, and unfounded historically, politically, psychologically, and scientifically. What to speak of the statements that sound patently misogynistic, homophobic, and racist! Such non-followers often wonder how his Western disciples can even accept, much less appreciate, such statements.

More significantly, even followers can easily fall into a kind of cognitive dissonance. While Prabhupāda, as the first in history to successfully spread Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* outside of India to the rest of the world, appears to easily and effectively teach, he can also appear to present myopic statements coming from very conditioned circumstances. These extremes are incongruent, given that Prabhupāda

teaches his followers that a divinely inspired pure devotee cannot be a conditioned soul. And yet it is hard, maybe even painful, for many followers to hear Prabhupāda's views, for example, on the relationships between men and women, their sexuality, on women as being less intelligent than men, on the inferiority of some races. Consequently, some disciples have claimed that Prabhupāda, like any ordinary person, is capable of mistakes and misjudgments. Others remain faithful to the scriptural view: a "pure devotee" — such as Prabhupāda — is one who cannot be thought of as someone who makes mistakes like ordinary conditioned souls. A cognitive dissonance is created in some followers who accept both positions, as this can create inner conflict and turmoil in a devotional life.

In his own teachings, Prabhupāda gives us various means for understanding how to view the spiritual master's words. He makes it very clear that one should first appreciate the spiritual teacher's primary focus in life and mission, and not focus on imperfect things. For example, here Prabhupāda insists that one should ignore the bodily imperfections of a teacher and focus on the teacher's mission:

No one should criticize the bodily defects of a pure devotee. If there are such defects, they should be overlooked. What should be taken into account, is the spiritual master's main business, which is devotional service, pure service to the Supreme Lord.³³

These words provide a general principle: Even if there are defects in the spiritual master's body (including the mind), they should not be criticized. This doesn't mean that they should not be recognized as defects, but the *bhakta* does not judge, or limit, the potency of the spiritual master on the basis of any bodily defect. And perhaps this could be applied to defective ideas, which, inevitably arise due to the pure master's sacrifice for coming into this world:

But a *guru*, although he is *paramahansa*, because he is teaching, he comes down as *madhyama-adhikārī*. . . . He's *paramahansa*. But when he comes to the preaching platform, he must become a *madhyama*

adhikārī, not to imitate *uttama adhikārī*, because he has to teach. He cannot deviate from the teaching principles.³⁴

Clearly, the perfect devotee, the *paramahansa*, who is an *uttama bhakta*, must descend into the imperfect position of a *madhyama bhakta*. In other words, he or she must descend from a perfect and ideal condition into imperfect conditions to disseminate the teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*: “However, even if a devotee is in the *uttama-bhāgavata* status he must come down to the second status of life, *madhyama-adhikārī*, to be a preacher . . .”³⁵

What is important to note here is that this is one kind of *madhyama bhakta* — a perfected being descending. Yet, interestingly, there is another kind of *madhyama bhakta*, who rises up from the conditioned world, from the *kaniṣṭha* or beginning stage, to become a *madhyama bhakta*:

Such an advanced devotee is called a *madhyama-bhāgavata*, which indicates that he has attained the intermediate stage between the neophyte and the perfect devotee. Generally, a devotee in the intermediate stage becomes a preacher. A neophyte devotee or an ordinary person should worship the *madhyama-bhāgavata*, who is a via medium.”³⁶

The key phrase here is that such a *bhakta* has “attained the intermediate stage,” rather than descended down into it. Thus, there are the descending perfect *bhaktas* and the ascending conditioned *bhaktas*, who both utilize the functions of a *madhyama* teacher in this world. The descending *bhakta*, although perfected and originally coming from the perfect position as an *uttama bhāgavata*, still comes into imperfect circumstances, just as such a perfected being descends into a physical body, which also will be an imperfect circumstance.

It would seem, then, that there is a significant difference between the ascending *madhyama* and the descending *madhyama*. When the former teaches, it is possible that imperfections can creep into his or her presentation. Because such a *bhakta* has risen from

the conditioned state to the exalted but imperfect *madhyama* state, statements arising from one's previous conditioned understandings may be present. Whereas when the latter teaches, he or she is doing so from within external conditioned circumstances and not from within an internal conditioned state.

Imagine, if you will, that there is another world filled only with perfect diamonds. These diamonds brilliantly shine and sparkle without imperfections. And then there are the diamonds that are excavated from igneous rock formations that become diamonds-in-the-rough. Such diamonds need to be cut into multifaceted gems. And these gems may possess inclusions or imperfections. The former is the liberated soul at the *uttama bhāgavata* level who *descends*, and the latter is the conditioned soul at the *kaniṣṭha* level who *ascends*.

When the descending *madhyama* operates in this world, it can be likened to a perfect gem being placed into the setting of a ring. Such a perfect gem invariably must be partially, even if only slightly, covered by the setting, and the setting itself becomes displayed along with the gem. Even the most precious of gems are covered by the setting — as little as possible, but nonetheless must be somewhat covered to be held in place within the setting. In a similar way, the perfect *uttama bhāgavata* will enter this conditioned world and speak the teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* from within a setting, as it were. Thus, the *uttama bhāgavata* will engage the external conditions. And certainly it is easily observable how Prabhupāda himself did so.

However, the diamond-in-the-rough, or the ascending *madhyama bhakta*, will often still struggle with internal conditionings and must exercise great caution, discipline, and self-awareness so as to not allow the conditionings to disrupt the teachings he or she offers on Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Newly excavated diamonds-in-the-rough can be cut and shaped only by another diamond, and similarly, the conditioned *kaniṣṭha bhakta* ascends to the *madhyama* level of advancement only by the grace of the *uttama-bhāgavata*.

Thus, when this descending *uttama bhāgavata* makes remarks that are clearly informed or influenced by the surrounding culture and environs, they can be understood as such. Even while knowing that such statements may very well come from the *uttama bhāgavata*'s setting, the student's focus should be on the pure intention behind statements despite the nonessential content or teachings.

Again, the disciple is to ignore the bodily imperfections and focus on the teacher's essential teachings, mission, and purpose.

The ascending *madhyama* might speak *from* personal conditioned circumstances, while the descending *madhyama* speaks from *within* conditioned circumstances and may engage aspects of those circumstances. Those who proclaim Prabhupāda as a pure devotee, the representative of Kṛṣṇa, the guru, therefore know in their hearts that he is not a conditioned soul but is a liberated soul who himself liberates other conditioned souls.

Indeed, the guru brings the highest part of the teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, the essential teachings, while the factors of “place, time, and circumstance” (*deśa-kāla-pātra*) function only as a package, as it were, in which the teachings are delivered. The external influences, such as socio-cultural (place), historical (time), and psychological, spiritual, familial, etc. (circumstances) always play some part in the most important intention of presenting Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* teachings.

So long as followers strive to discern between the three levels of *bhakti* teachings in their master's words, keeping the essential Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* theology at the center — and using that focus as the lens through which to understand the rest of the teachings — this ancient lineage of sacred knowledge will continue to thrive. In Prabhupāda's case, his central focus cultivated in his followers the *love of God*, or Kṛṣṇa, whom he referred to as “the Supreme Personality of Godhead.”

It is only through Prabhupāda's followers' sincere dedication and devotion to awakening their *love of God* — through the practices he left behind for them — that we will continue to see new *madhyama* teachers in this world, new diamonds emerging from the rough, to illuminate the most beautiful Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* treasures.

Concluding Reflections

As mentioned at the start of this essay, the various subjects presented here have only been touched upon lightly. A thoroughgoing discussion and analysis of the ways one can understand Prabhupāda's mode of discourse, and the nature of his discourse,

could take up volumes. What was attempted here was to present various seeds for such a discussion and to bring out some features of Prabhupāda's teachings that tend to get buried under filtered views of them.

The purpose of this essay was to provide content that would begin to assist followers of Prabhupāda in their understanding of his teachings as a whole, and further, to provide them with some ways of explaining some of the very difficult ideas and themes that run through Prabhupāda's very rich teachings and, at times, complex teachings of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Furthermore, the motivating force in writing this piece was to lay some groundwork, something of a foundation, for building and working toward a systematic theology of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.

Followers of Prabhupāda have reached monumental achievements in erecting temples of worship and putting on extraordinary festivals celebrating the culture of the heart found in the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* teachings coming from the lineage of teachers beginning with Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya himself. Certainly, Caitanya, as well as his early and later followers excavated places of pilgrimage for *bhaktas*, and in modern times, around the world, Prabhupāda's followers have built hundreds of temples. The Temple of the Vedic Planetarium, purported to be one of the world's largest places of Vaiṣṇava worship, is now being completed in Śrīdhāma Mayapura, Bengal. There is no shortage of beautiful temple buildings in the Vaiṣṇava world, and no doubt they will continue to be built.

However, the followers of Caitanya also built one of the most developed and sophisticated theologies of divine love — a temple of knowledge and learning. Indeed, even Western scholars are beginning to recognize that some of the sacred texts on which this theology is based present some of the most exquisite pieces of prose and poetry the world over. Followers of Prabhupāda have produced many books, such as memoirs, biographies of Prabhupāda, a regular periodical that Prabhupāda inaugurated even before arriving in the United States titled *Back to Godhead*, numerous translations of writings of the previous teachers from within Caitanya's lineage, varieties of compilations of Prabhupāda's lectures, and even some scholarly examinations on aspects of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* by academically trained disciples.

What is so starkly missing in the modern repertoire of publications within ISKCON is a continuation of a long tradition within the literary heritage of Prabhupāda’s lineage: commentary, *bhāṣya*, on Prabhupāda’s commentaries, or what he called purports. I believe that the next frontier of building, beyond building temples of bricks and mortar, and beyond all the other kinds of publications that seem to get endlessly produced, is “building” commentaries to Prabhupāda’s works. To successfully produce such commentaries, the kinds of tools and understandings begun to be laid down in this article would need to be further developed. I hope that highly capable and qualified followers of Prabhupāda, who can rise to *uttama* understandings of Prabhupāda’s written and spoken gifts, can serve Prabhupāda’s *vāṇi*, or words and instructions, by offering explanatory and illuminating annotations and more extended commentary that will surely shed further light on his complex teachings.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement that Tattvavit Dāsa and Rūpa Sanātana Dāsa lent to me in the writing of this article. I also would like to acknowledge Kṛṣṇa Kānta Dāsī’s tireless review of my ideas, further developing many of the ideas, and inspiration for writing this piece. Additionally, she did very intensive editing of the article, which undoubtedly makes it more readable.
- 2 The phrase “living theology” originates in the work of Tamal Krishna Goswami’s *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). The phrase is useful in describing the very rich theological content of Prabhupāda’s work that is not presented in a systematic way. Rather, it is a theology that Prabhupāda truly lived and breathed.
- 3 Prabhupāda delivered his teachings to the West and around the globe, infiltrating many cultures, and this framework is designed to be useful internationally and multiculturally.
- 4 It is not really within the scope of my essay to be able to show

this. Again, I am giving at best an extended outline of an intensely complex nexus of issues.

- 5 The word *sādhu* means the principle of “the saintly devotee, or *bhakta*.” There are many influential and important *bhaktas* in the life of any *bhakta*. The word *śāstra* means the principle of “scripture,” and there are numerous scriptural writings, some more important than others. And there is the principle of guru, since there are different manifestations of guru, such as the “instructing guru” (*śikṣā guru*), the “initiating guru” (*dīkṣā guru*), the “guru who introduces the path” (*varṇa pradarśika guru*), etc.
- 6 Lecture by Śrīla Prabhupāda, 6 November 1973, Delhi.
- 7 How the ultimate message of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the divine yearning for the love from human hearts and the human response to this divine yearning is explored in some depth in my *Bhagavad Gītā: The Beloved Lord’s Secret Love Song* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).
- 8 *Gītā* 18.75. My translation.
- 9 *Gītā* 18.72. My translation.
- 10 *Gītā* 18.64. My translation.
- 11 *Gītā* 18.65. My translation.
- 12 *Gītā* 18.66; here *carama* means the ultimate or highest.
- 13 *Gītā* 18.20. My translation.
- 14 *The Nectar of Devotion*, page *xiv*.
- 15 *The Science of Self-Realization*, Chapter Five.
- 16 My searches for quantitative data include 1,705 instances of “love of God” (or phrases similar to this) in transcribed lectures and conversations, 829 instances in his published works, and 174 instances in his letters. These numbers are derived from the publicly available website, Bhaktivedanta Vedabase (www.vedabase.io/en/search). All quantitative data presented in this article is derived from searches on the Vedabase and specifically from authentic, published, transcribed, and recorded sources that come directly from Prabhupāda. Compilations and other works by other authors are excluded. My searches in Prabhupāda’s books are specifically from only the following titles: *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *KṚṢṆA: The Supreme Personality of Godhead*, *The Science of Self-Realization*, *Teachings of Lord*

Caitanya, Nectar of Instruction, Teachings of Lord Kapila, Śrī Isopaniṣad, Teachings of Queen Kuntī, The Perfection of Yoga, The Nectar of Devotion, Rāja-vidyā: The King of Knowledge, and On the Way to Kṛṣṇa.

- 17 Klaus Klostermeier's article, "Hṛdayavidyā: A Sketch of a Hindu-Christian Theology of Love" (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1972), p. 765.
- 18 The idea of the *dormant* love of God is expressed in several ways. The most prominent way is as listed above as *premodaya*, with meanings such as "rising up," "coming forth," "becoming visible," "development," etc. This phrase is found in the following passages: *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (Cc.) 1.8.23; 3.4.58; 2.24.194; 3.18.66; 1.7.86; 2.15.109. The phrase *premopajaya* (*prema-upajaya*) can mean "to originate," "become visible," "come forth," "to originate," etc. And this phrase is found in the following passages: Cc. 3.20.26; 3.20.20; 2.20.141. The phrase *premera udgama*, which carries the senses of "going up," "coming forth," "becoming visible," "origin," etc., appears in Cc. 1.7.142. A phrase with similar meaning is *kṛṣṇa prema janme*, which appears in Cc. 2.22.83, and also *bhāvajanmane* in Cc. 2.22.133 and 2.24.195. The phrase, *premānkura* (*prema anikura*), meaning "the fructification of love of God" (*anikura* means "seed") appears in Cc. 2.2.19, 3.1.151; 3.8.36. The phrase *bhāvānkura*, meaning "the seed of emotion" appears in Cc. 2.23.17. The phrase *prityankura* means "the seed of affection" and appears in Cc. 2.23.12.
- 19 Lecture on *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 1.2.6, 17 September 1971, Mombasa.
- 20 Lecture, 2 November 1975, Bombay.
- 21 Lecture on *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 1.2.6, 6 August 1971, Hampstead Hall, London.
- 22 Lecture on *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 1.14.44, 8 April 1973, New York.
- 23 Letter to Giriraj, 10 July 1969, from Los Angeles.
- 24 Lecture on *Gītā* 3.36–37, 11 February 1973, Melbourne.
- 25 *The Nectar of Devotion*, p. ix.
- 26 Letter to Yadunadana, 13 April 1968, San Francisco.
- 27 *nitya-siddha kṛṣṇa-prema 'sādhyā'kabhu naya, śravanādi-śuddha-citte karaye udaya* (*Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.22.107).
- 28 The Vraja Gopikās, "the cowherd maidens of paradisaal Vraja village," were the most beloved among all Kṛṣṇa's beloveds. The

most famous *līlā* in which they appear are the five chapters devoted to the drama on the Rāsa dance, *rāsa līlā pañcādhyāyī*.
 29 ISKCON's Śāstric Advisory Council (SAC) has formulated what it calls "Ten Tenets of Gauḍīya *siddhānta*," which I list here, along with the way each one may correspond, at least roughly, to what I've included in the twelve principles (indicated by the numbers in square brackets following each tenet).

TEN TENETS OF GAUḌĪYA SIDDHĀNTA

- (1) Lord Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Personality of Godhead [No. 5];
- (2) He has His external, inferior or material energy (*māyā*) [No. 2];
- (3) He also has His internal, superior or spiritual energy [No. 4];
- (4) He has His parts and parcels, the living entities, who are spiritual by nature [No. 3];
- (5) The living entities in the material world are conditioned by the external energy [No. 1];
- (6) The living entities in the spiritual world are liberated [No. 11];
- (7) *Acintya-bhedābheda-tattva*: Simultaneous oneness and difference of the Lord and His energies [No. 10];
- (8) Love of God is the highest goal of life [No. 9];
- (9) To achieve love of God, one should practice devotional service [No. 7];
- (10) This knowledge can only be received by us through the disciplic succession [No. 8].

Note that numbers 6 and 12 in the Twelve Theological Principles do not have correspondences with the SAC's tenets. As a suggestion, I believe that a better sequence of the SAC tenets is possible if tenet number 7 were switched out with tenet number 5.

30 See the last verse of the Rāsa Līlā Pañcādhyāya, in my *Dance of Divine Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): "This is

the divine play of Vishnu with the fair maidens of Vraja. One who is filled with faith, who hears or describes this play, having regained the highest devotion for the Beloved Lord, has lust, the disease of the heart, quickly removed without delay—such a person is peaceful and wise.”—*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.33.40: *vikrīḍitaṁ vraja-vadhūbhir idam ca viṣṇoḥ, śraddhānvito ’nuśṛṅyād atha varṇayad yaḥ / bhaktiṁ parāṁ bhagavati pratīlabhya kāmāṁ, hṛd-rogam āśv apahinoty acireṇa dhīraḥ.*

31 *Teachings of Queen Kuntī*, Chapter 15.

32 “On the field of dharma (*dharma-kṣetre*), on the field of Kuru (*kuru-kṣetre*), assembled together (*samavetā*) desiring to fight (*yuyutsvaḥ*) . . .”

33 *The Nectar of Instruction*, verse 6, purport.

34 Lecture on the *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.8.128, 24 January 1977, Bhubaneswar.

35 *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 1.7.51, purport.

36 *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.16.72.

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