

Srila Prabhupada's Transcendental Sweetness and Beauty

Dear Maharaja's and Prabhus,

Hare Krishna! My repeated pranam dandavats to all of you. What a week of Vaishnava sadhu satsanga this has been. I leave the richer having exchanged with my family members—old and new godbrothers, godsisters, nephews and nieces. While I feel most unqualified to speak to you today, I am honored and privileged to join my godsisters in voicing my concerns as a woman in ISKCON.

As the GBC body, all of you are responsible for establishing Srila Prabhupada's legacy, which, in these difficult and turbulent times, is at stake. Perhaps one realm of that legacy--the rapport Srila Prabhupada established with his Vaisnavi disciples—is the topic of our discussion today because over the years since his disappearance it has been largely forgotten. And perhaps my personal service and association with him, along with his later guidance and instructions, offer some insights in this area.

I met Srila Prabhupada in 1966 as a strong and independent young woman and took initiation in 1967. Had Srila Prabhupada demanded conformity to orthodox roles for women as a condition of surrender, I, along with many of my godsisters, would probably not have joined ISKCON. That he did not is testament to his spiritual vision. He lovingly encouraged and engaged us in the service of the sankirtan movement, and he consistently revealed himself to be paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ, equal to all.

In both men and women, Srila Prabhupada observed our propensities and expertly dovetailed them in his preaching mission. For many years, in different countries and circumstances, I had the good fortune to render personal service to him. He trained me, urged me to accept more and more responsibility, and regularly asked me to lead kirtans, give classes, arrange programs, manage departments, provide comforts for visiting devotees, meet with leaders, and actively promulgate Krishna consciousness. In India, where previously no women were allowed, he sent me to various temples to learn Deity worship and cooking and he repeatedly asked me to train others in the same.

It would take much longer than the limited time I have today to give you a glimpse into the numerous exchanges that illustrate Srila Prabhupada's demeanor and mood. One such exchange is what I call the the Chanakya Pandita Pastimes.

I was present on four occasions when Srila Prabhupada repeated the adage, "Never trust a woman or a politician." On each occasion Srila Prabhupada looked me in the eye to see my response. On the last occasion, in Bombay in 1973, he quoted the saying, heartily laughing in front of a small group of men. Then he said: "What do you think, Yamuna?" Immediately I retorted: "Of course it is true, Srila Prabhupada," whereupon he became grave, looked at me with great feeling, and said, "But you are not a woman, you are a Vaishnava."

Another series of exchanges centered on leading kirtan. Srila Prabhupada often had me lead the first kirtan before he spoke at a program, whether in front of twenty or ten thousand people. There were occasions when I felt uncomfortable with this. At the Jaipur pandal at Radha Govinda temple, I refused to lead kirtan. Srila Prabhupada called me over and said, "Lead kirtan." I said, "I can't. My throat hurts." He said, "No. Lead kirtan." So, croaking like a frog, I led kirtan.

In late 1974, having left my householder ashram, Srila Prabhupada pronounced it "good that you have left your husband," and encouraged me to become "sannyasini." Although I was not in the traditional role of being protected by my father, husband or son, in both his personal darshans and written instructions, Srila Prabhupada offered me unfettered encouragement and astonished me with unexpected answers to my questions.

After settling in Oregon with my godsister Dinatarine, Srila Prabhupada, while pronouncing us "independent" to a concerned godbrother, at the same time twice rebuked us when we approached him to leave. "You westerners are so restless," he admonished. "Why can't you remain in the same place? Stay where you are." We questioned, "But Srila Prabhupada, they are saying that if we aren't in ISKCON, we lose your blessings and cannot make advancement." Prabhupada replied, "ISKCON is where you are chanting the holy name-- that is ISKCON." We rejoined: "They are saying we don't have any association here and are therefore in maya." He replied: "Association can be two or two hundred. If you are two and compatible you can become perfect in Krishna consciousness. If you are 200 and are not, then no one will make advancement." (June 1976)

To conclude, Srila Prabhupada trained me to be concerned about his movement and at this time I am deeply concerned. Now more than ever, it is time to revive and imbibe Srila Prabhupada's mood with his disciples. If we neglect this, an aspect of his greatness will remain unknown to future generations.

I appeal to you that, along with the laudable projects you are managing and those you are contemplating—especially the magnificent temple that will arise here in Sridham Mayapur-- consider that the behavior of the ISKCON devotees who participate in these projects must also be magnificent. Any other behavior will make the projects less than worthy of Srila Prabhupada's name. This grave responsibility falls on you. In other words, let us instill in every person who comes into contact with Srila Prabhupada's movement the healthy spiritual relationships that he had with his followers--his mood of encouragement, protection and kindness.

The closer we come to individually appreciating and honoring Srila Prabhupada's personal dealings with his disciples, the closer we will come to his sense of completeness in Krishna consciousness, to his joyfulness, to his transcendently attractive nature.

With great care, our service is to create a devotional environment where men, women and children can thrive in Krishna consciousness, rendering service according to their desire and inclination. Our service is to empower rather than inhibit the service propensity in others.

Finally, let us search our intelligence and hearts for ways to help the women who are sincerely looking for spiritual life. Without properly nurturing them, we as a society have no future. Women in Krishna consciousness are an intricate, essential part of Srila Prabhupada's legacy. In our effort to move forward, let us not put Srila Prabhupada's example behind us, but in front of us—our divine beacon--to guide us together toward the lotus feet of Sri Sri Gour Nitai and Sri Sri Radha Krishna.

Thank you very much.