

*Pillars of Success:*  
*The Principles and Practices of Reform in ISKCON*



RAVĪNDRA-SVARŪPA DĀSA

*“A devotee, therefore, should execute his devotional services with full energy, endurance, and confidence. He should perform his scheduled duties, he should be pure in heart, and he should serve in association with devotees. All six of these items will lead the devotee to the path of success. One should not be discouraged in the discharge of devotional service. Failures may not be detrimental; they may be the pillars of success.”*

*Light of the Bhagavata, 43*

In October of 1984 I became active in what was later to be known within ISKCON as “the guru reform movement.” Over the next two years I wrote a series of widely circulated papers that attempted to understand and rectify some failures in ISKCON. As things turned out, I became a leader of the reform movement. At the annual meeting of the Governing Body Commission in March of 1987, the reform effort reached a denouement of sorts. Four of the most powerful leaders of ISKCON—all simultaneously sannyāsīs, initiating gurus, and GBC members—resigned or were removed from office, each under a noisome cloud of scandal.

These and other depredations had shrunk the GBC to fifteen members. At the same time, the GBC had empowered an outside “Committee of Fifty,” all senior disciples of Srila Prabhupada, to interview and evaluate each of the remaining GBC members and to share its findings with the body. That being accomplished, the GBC then requested that committee to place before the GBC the names of some devotees as prospective new members. (The GBC added new members by a two-thirds vote.)

My name was among those proposed, and I was voted onto the body. I had wanted to return to my services of writing and scholarship with the Bhaktivedanta Institute and the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, but I fell unwittingly under the sway of a fairly well-established law: If you lead a successful revolution, you are condemned to become part of the government. There is no doubt that in the activities of reform I had to criticize many devotees who—deviations and shortcomings notwithstanding—harbored an inviolable seed of devotion to Prabhupāda and Kṛṣṇa. Having to serve on the GBC was only a fitting punishment for my offenses.

Although I prefer the contemplative to the active life, it is true that my active engagements with the guru reform movement and later the GBC have repeatedly produced bumper crops of material to feed contemplation. I should explain that in my case reflecting on the Hare Krishna movement—in that mode of critical self-awareness inculcated in academia—formed, from the beginning, an important component of my involvement with it.

In 1971 I had moved with spouse and children into a fledging temple-community in Philadelphia, thereby committing our joint and several futures to Prabhupāda's movement. It was indeed an act of faith, but it is a fact that faith seeks ceaselessly to understand, and I strove daily to comprehend more fully just what I had done, what adventure I had embarked on. The understanding that gradually took shape was composed of three closely inter-related dimensions; and these three, eventually, were also to provide me with the features of certain broad principles for reform. I shall call them the historical, the personal, and the social.

Prior to my joining ISKCON I had seriously pursued academic study in religion and philosophy. Although the limits of the merely academic impelled me to refuge within a living spiritual tradition, I could not simply shed my prior formation. And so it was with a certain thrill that I realized that, having joined the Hare Krishna movement, I was granted the closest, real-time access to a kind of event that fascinates scholars of religion: a religion transplanting itself from its natal culture. I had once studied the movement of Christianity from its original Jewish milieu into the cosmopolitan Mediterranean world of the *pax Romana*. Now I recognized a parallel: in Prabhupāda's ISKCON, Gaudīya Vaishnavism being lead from its Bengal cradle-land into the modern global civilization of the *pax Americana*. I didn't have just a "ring-side seat" to this event; I was in the ring.

I was committed. I had committed more than this life to the mercies of ISKCON. I had committed my very soul. In spite of my predilections for the long historical perspective, I was anything but a disinterested observer. My own personal stake in the success of Śrīla Prabhupāda's endeavor had an individual as well as social dimension. As an individual, I had committed myself to the enterprise of becoming a pure devotee. Prabhupāda had succeeded in convincing a coterie of idealistic American youth that sainthood was a feasible vocation, a "live option," and I was one among them. Prabhupāda called us to a kind of heroism of risk, of commitment, and of sacrifice in an ultimate "war against *māyā*." Prabhupāda taught that this consummate victory was granted only to those prepared to subordinate all other concerns to the service of this single ultimate concern. When I took initiation from him, I pledged myself to this principle. Yet I could not carry out this pledge by myself; I required favorable grounds. That was ISKCON, painstakingly crafted by Prabhupāda himself, placed by him in late twentieth century America, to nourish and foster my personal pilgrimage toward pure service to God.

ISKCON harbored a further significance: ISKCON was itself my service. Even as ISKCON nurtured me, I was bound in turn to nurture ISKCON. Assisting Śrīla Prabhupāda in his mission was both my obligation and my saving grace. His mission was to deliver throngs of fallen souls through propagation of the *sāṅkīrtana yuga-dharma*, effecting thereby "a respiritualization of the entire human society." In this effort, ISKCON

was both his means and his end. In the bhakti saṅkīrtana movement, as Prabhupāda taught it, saving myself and saving the world entailed each other. ISKCON was the context for both.

Bhakti is at once personalistic and social, for it is a philosophical truth that the personal and the social cannot be separated. What a “person” is can be fully manifest only through interactions with other persons. This principle is exemplified at the highest ontological level in Kṛṣṇa, whose supreme personhood entails that he is also supremely social. The fullness of the Godhead entails that the supreme, transcendental absolute is equally the supremely, transcendently relative. Kṛṣṇa, therefore, is never alone but always in the company of his devotees. He is constituted by relationships, and many of his proper and eternal names include those of his nearest and dearest—as, for example, “Rādhā-kānta,” “Rādhā’s sweetheart;” “Yaśodā-nandana,” “Yaśodā’s darling boy;” “Pārtha-sārathi,” “charioteer to Pṛthā’s son,” and so on. For this reason, bhakti—devotional service—is preeminently a social activity, and that social principle attains its fullest exfoliation in the idea of saṅkīrtana, the congregational glorification of God’s name, fame, activities, and so on. Therefore, Prabhupāda’s founding a society of devotees was not simply a tactical expedience; it was a metaphysical necessity.

The effort of Prabhupāda, then, was to establish the community or communion of devotees, a communion that, out of the natural overflowing of its own joy, would be ever-increasing. That communion is one in which certain kinds of personal transactions would take place among the devotees; by them, the devotional consciousness of the participants would ever increase; and, in a spirit of compassion for those suffering outside this community, the members would always be initiating others into their circle to share in the felicity of their communion.

Prabhupāda, however, was not inaugurating this society de novo, from scratch. Inducted into ISKCON, we became part of a sampradāya (the brahmā-madhva-gauḍīya-sampradāya, to be precise), a venerable historical community whose task, generation after generation, was properly and correctly to receive a spiritual culture, attain full formation and realization through it, and pass it on complete and sound, free from any adulteration, to the next generation. Although Prabhupāda came to us in the West as a solitary figure (an anomaly we shall examine later), he was the repository of a vastly rich tradition of teachers and students, who studied, composed, taught, and practiced volumes of theology, commentary, drama, poetry, and song. When we became Prabhupāda’s students, he was initiating us into the teachings and practices of that tradition, to become its heirs.

Here, then, was quite another way the historical past came to be known by me—as age-old tradition, received and transmitted through authority. It is the outstanding na-

tional trait of Americans to be without tradition. A nation of migrants, the United States could realize more thoroughly than Europe the Enlightenment project of a radical break with the past, of wholesale rejection of traditional political and spiritual authority, of the reinvention of humanity from the ground up. In America, tradition and traditional authorities are reflexively viewed with skepticism, suspicion and even hostility. Rootlessness is the national style, and the ability to perpetually reinvent oneself through a series of discrete identities is practically the national ideal. It is, unfortunately, the world's future, as indigenous communities and traditions are dissolved by the solvent of the ever-spreading pax Americana, to survive only in the travesty of the theme park and the multi-media "experience." At first, American—I should say modern—rootlessness was an important, even necessary, condition for the beginning of ISKCON; very soon, it became one of the greatest impediments to its development and continuance. The contrast between the condition of modern America and the "Vedic" culture of tradition and authority, of continuity and conservation, that Prabhupāda was attempting to transplant could hardly have been greater. With growing amazement, I gradually got sight of the immensity of Prabhupāda's endeavor. It was breathtaking.

I also came to see that Prabhupāda was very well aware of the overwhelming difficulty of his undertaking. Seeing him immersed in that endeavor gave me new appreciation for certain of his oft-repeated sayings, such as "Impossible is a word found in a fool's dictionary," and for his injunction to "shoot the rhinoceros" (meaning that if you are to attempt something, you might as well make something formidable). As Prabhupāda explained in a 1971 letter to Balavanta dāsa: "We should always be enthusiastic to try for shooting the rhinoceros. That way, if we fail, everybody will say, 'Never mind, nobody can shoot a rhinoceros anyway,' and if we succeed, then everyone will say, 'Just see, what a wonderful thing they have done'."

Prabhupāda understood the obstacles, but he remained ever confident, and instilled the same confidence in others. His ability to convey a sense of unshakable confidence in himself and his mission attained its impressive power because it was evidently part and parcel of a simple and deep humility. The confidence of Prabhupāda reposed, of course, on supernatural foundations, on firm dependence on guru and Kṛṣṇa, and therefore it held impervious to all failures and setbacks. "So I don't think there is any cause of discouragement," he wrote in 1969 to Vṛndavaneśvarī, "because we are working on a different platform."

Yet at every minute Śrīla Prabhupāda was wrestling with failure and setbacks. Indeed, as I was gradually to learn, when Prabhupāda single-handedly conducted Caitanya's mission to the West, he did so as the sole undebilitated survivor of a monstrous spiritual failure in India, the foundering of his spiritual master's mission and institution,

the Gaudīya Maṭha. He came to America like a survivor paddling away from a colossal shipwreck. Even from the beginning of his Western mission, Prabhupāda was carrying on in the face of massive failure and discouragement in the generation previous to us. He noted this, for example, in a letter of 1972 responding to a disheartened Guru dāsa: “Do not be depressed. All along my godbrothers gave me only depression, repression, compression—but I continued strong in my duty. So never mind there is some discouragement, continue with your work in full enthusiastic Krishna Consciousness attitude of service.”

Prabhupāda’s own movement also soon provided him with ample reason for discouragement. From the very outset there was trouble: his authority was challenged; his position compromised; his instructions distorted, neglected, or selectively followed; his teaching molded to various fancies; his assets misused, mismanaged, and misappropriated; his standards broken; his dependents neglected, exploited, and abused. And the worst of this was committed by men Prabhupāda entrusted with responsible positions. Prabhupāda traveled continuously around the world, grappling with problems. Each day his mail washed up to him a jumbled deposit of scandals, failures, and disappointments. Internal weaknesses and shortcomings turned the eleven years of Prabhupāda’s personal supervision into a concatenation of crises.

It is a noteworthy feature of ISKCON during that time that there was hardly any frank and open acknowledgment of the problems among the members. Even though almost any of us could provide impressively detailed accounts of a plethora of scandals and failures, a weird sort of schizoid compartmentalization allowed us to maintain the conviction that we as a society were pure and transcendental and that, almost by definition, we could do no wrong. Scandals and failures tended each to be viewed as discrete and anomalous, and they were rarely surveyed as a whole to alarm us with the picture of a chronic condition, a pervasive pattern, a trend. We became so captivated by our own dazzling ideals that we were blinded to our actual behavior. We could have benefited by accepting some of the devastatingly accurate criticisms leveled against us by the anti-cult movement, but unfortunately the anti-cultists called for the destruction of ISKCON. Their condemnations were indiscriminate and sweeping, and they in no way wished us well. As a result, they simply fostered the very bunker mentality they condemned and only fed the self-righteousness of the devotees.

Yet given all that, it was more than possible to flourish spiritually within ISKCON. True, when I moved into a temple of little over a dozen residents, it was a shock to discover the extent of the struggle with spiritual weakness that went on daily. It was a test to undergo the difficulties of human relations within a small tightly-knit, high-demand, high-intensity, religious community, especially one nearly bereft of the human comforts

of social or psychological compatibilities. Nevertheless, one could, if one wanted, negotiate all the individual and group minefields, and not only advance in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but also deliver it effectively to others. In fact, I could do neither of those things at all outside of ISKCON. If, on my worst days, I found myself thinking that the devotees I lived with were fools and rascals, I always reminded myself that without these fools and rascals, I could make no advancement in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. I had better learn to appreciate them. We were, all of us, fools and rascals; nevertheless, Prabhupāda still enabled us to do miraculous things, rendered all the more miraculous in light of the character of the performers.

Thus, it was not until after the demise of its founder-ācārya in 1977 that ISKCON as an institution had to acknowledge and come to terms with its failures and shortcomings. At first—with the lineage apparently handed over securely by Prabhupāda to eleven hand-picked successor-ācāryas—ISKCON set out with great panache, leaping off with the boyish ebullience of Siegfried bounding down to the Rhine, horn blaring. Yet it was not long before ISKCON had to confront, at last, its own shadow, as over the decade intractable failures and shortcomings—abuse of authority, enjoyment of position, attachment to material pleasures, and the like—emerged within the group of initiating gurus. The movement was forced to begin facing, frankly and openly, the gap between its ideals and its actual achievements. We had attained the condition for real progress.

So profound was ISKCON's denial, its concealment of its own problems from itself, that many reacted initially as if these problems among leaders were some shocking brand-new phenomenon. They contrasted the prelapsarian paradise of ISKCON under Prabhupāda with the now hopelessly degenerate society, devoid as it is of the salvific presence of any “mahā-bhāgavata.” Some awaited eagerly the emergence of a new “self-effulgent ācārya” who would restore us to our lost purity. There are those who still await the coming of such a savior, while there are yet others who proclaim to have found him manifest in the person of some particular devotee, usually this or that elderly Indian sannyāsin.

Yet even in Prabhupāda's presence—the all-acknowledged “mahā-bhāgavata”—ISKCON regularly failed to live up to its own ideals. Moreover, it was during Prabhupāda's presence that ISKCON devotees were most successful at maintaining their concealment; only after Prabhupāda was gone did the concealment begin to break down. It has taken longest for those failures enacted during Prabhupāda's own presence to attain admission to consciousness. Seeking the reason for this delayed recognition has led me to face an uncomfortable fact: It was Prabhupāda very presence that had gradually begun to function for many devotees as an instrument of concealment and denial.

It was natural for us to identify ourselves to some extent with Prabhupāda as the living embodiment of our ideals and to see him as the very personification of ISKCON (so that his purity became ours). This helped us maintain our ideals and our enthusiasm to attain them even in the face of setbacks and adversity. However, such a relationship turns unhealthy if I engage in the worship or adoration of an ideal precisely in order to compensate for personal failures become chronic, for weaknesses accommodated to. In such cases, my self-respect no longer resides in the heroism of my struggle, for I have given up on the struggle, without acknowledging that I have done so. Now, as a substitute for dealing honestly with my failures, I identify intensely myself with my savior-figure. My disowned anxieties about my true condition and the psychic tensions of concealment find release as adulation, one that reveals its origin in falsity though its strident, driven character. In such cases, worshiping a guru becomes a substitute for becoming Kṛṣṇa conscious. Thus we have the too familiar phenomenon in ISKCON (then and now) of fanatical followers and so-called “guru groupies.” This pathological submergence of self into an all-powerful, idealized savior-figure is, of course, one of the phenomena that gives rise to the notion of a “cult.” It is a sure sign of arrested spiritual development disguising itself as true religion.

The point is that the difficulties that precipitated the guru reform movement are intimately connected with psychological patterns and styles of relationships that began to establishing themselves from the beginning. These are grounded in the inability of many devotees to acknowledge and deal fruitfully with their own spiritual shortcomings and failures, or, in traditional vocabulary, their inability to execute the process of *anartha-nivṛtti* (the eradication of “unwanted things” from the heart). This general, widespread failure, which pervades the institution and has even shaped some structural features of it, is the root debility, of which the guru crisis—the “crisis of succession”—is simply a highly visible symptom. It is my conviction that any real reform has to address effectively the root debility. Too many of us have tried to fix the symptom while ignoring the local manifestation of the disease, including the manifestation within our own hearts. Too many have tried to purify ISKCON as a substitute for purifying ourselves. This kind of behavior is the disease, not the cure.

In 1979 questions about the gurus’ position had burst out in major eruptions at ISKCON centers at Vrindavan and Juhu Beach, ejecting over the rest of the movement thick fascicles of photocopied papers. In May of 1980 the GBC body was forced to convene an “extraordinary general meeting”—an emergency meeting—in Los Angeles to find immediate responses to controversial behavior on the part of Hamsadutta Swāmī (abuse of power, drugs, sex, crime) Jayatīrtha Swāmī (LSD, as it would turn out), and Tamal Krishna Goswāmī (extreme autocracy). A mere three months after sanctioning



these gurus, the GBC issued a philosophical position paper defending the position that the current gurus were to be understood as mahā-bhāgavatas. In any case, by 1981 the GBC had to remove Hamsadutta from his position, and it did the same with Jayatīrtha in 1982. By this point, most senior devotees believed that guru failures and abuses were going to continue, and the GBC could not control them. This growing anxiety finally found institutional articulation at a routine meeting of the North American temple presidents and sannyāsīs in September of 1984. The thirty-five voting members present polled themselves and discovered that 94% of them believed that “there are fundamental and compelling problems with the guru institution as it presently exists in ISKCON.”

The group called a second meeting in November to pursue this issue further, and, in spite of a good deal of reluctance, I was persuaded to the meeting. Much to my surprise, I found myself becoming greatly enlivened and encouraged by the association and the commitment of the devotees. I realized, with a shock, that quite unconsciously I had fallen into a state of despair about ISKCON—and about myself as well. I was in a spiritual slump, and the meeting was waking me up. At this gathering I was asked to conduct research to determine just exactly what had gone wrong with the way the position of the guru had been institutionalized in ISKCON. I agreed to take the job.

Back in Philadelphia, I concluded that the only way I could responsibly conduct research on such a loaded subject was to attempt to entrust myself to the guidance of Supersoul, the indwelling guide and director of intelligence. I feared more than anything else my own stupidity. I was the Straw Man, and I needed a brain. I decided to entrust myself to Prabhupāda’s instructions for attaining direction from Supersoul. Thus, as a remedial measure, I undertook to rigorously restore my sādhana to a strict level. I defined good sādhana as chanting the Holy Name while trying assiduously to avoid offenses. In this way, I would be in a position to receive intelligence from Kṛṣṇa whenever He chose to give it. Prabhupāda’s instructions were as potent as they are simple:

In all spiritual affairs, one’s first duty is to control his mind and senses. Unless one controls his mind and senses, one cannot make any advancement in spiritual life. Everyone within this material world is engrossed in the modes of passion and ignorance. One must promote himself to the platform of goodness, sattva-guṇa, by following the instructions of Rūpa Gosvāmī [in the first verse of Upadeśāmṛta], and then everything concerning how to make further progress will be revealed.

—Preface, Nectar of Instruction

It seemed that this was as pertinent for guidance of the entire movement as it was for personal guidance.

As my sādhana became strict, my spirits picked up, and my despair over the fate of ISKCON began to evaporate like fog. And everyday I thought hard about what had gone wrong in ISKCON. Then a breakthrough came.

One evening some of us who had attended the meeting in Towaco were discussing strategy. Śeṣa dasa, the temple president, was there, as well as Mahākrama Swāmī, who had been elected vice-chairman in Towaco. He was also the regional secretary for Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswāmī, the initiating guru and GBC for our area. Although Satsvarūpa Mahārāja would later publish an influential book called *Guru Reform*, his initial reaction to the nascent reform movement had been filled with misgivings. He did not interfere with our participation, yet he had publicly expressed strong reservations about the Towaco meetings, questioning the suitability of politics to deal with spiritual issues. After our strategy meeting broke up that night, Śeṣa took me aside and warned me: “You know, you should be really careful about what you say around Mahākrama! He reports everything back to Satsvarūpa Mahārāja. You should know that.”

I was stunned. I thought: “Here we are supposed to be the reform party, and we think we can save ISKCON, but we cannot even trust each other. How will we be any better?” It was during the sleepless night that followed that I came to realize that the “guru problem” was merely a symptom of a disease, with which we were all infected. The polarity of “us-and-them” was wrong. I remembered the famous motto of Pogo, the newspaper-comic opossum: “We have met the enemy—and he is us!” Any effort at reform that did not begin with myself and with our “side” would be superficial and counterproductive. It would indeed be mundane politics.

Ideas flooded into my head, and in the morning I began intensely discussing them with Kuṇḍalī dāsa and others and setting them down on paper. Addressing my god-brothers and –sisters. I began by asserting, “The root of all problems now facing ISKCON is that we, the disciples of Śrīla Prabhupāda, have not yet established proper Vaiṣṇava relationships among ourselves. While Prabhupāda was here with us, we did not enjoy such relationships, and our spiritual master plainly told us that our greatest fault was our tendency to quarrel with each other.” And then I went on to commit to writing—for the first time—my honest perceptions of life in ISKCON:

A society of devotees in which proper Vaiṣṇava relations are not yet the norm is called a kaniṣṭha-adhikārī society. Its distinguishing characteristic is contentiousness arising from envy. Envy is a product of false ego. Because of false ego, the members are unable to establish spiritual friendship among themselves. Instead, they vie with each other for prestige, power, and perquisites. Intensely desiring the honor and respect of others, the contentious neophyte pretends to be more advanced than he actually is. He tries to conceal his shortcomings and fall-

downs, and in so doing he develops a secretive mentality and holds himself back from entering into open and honest relations with his Godbrothers. Because he cannot reveal his mind in confidence, he remains aloof from real fellowship.

He strays from the path of devotional service, but his peers do not help him. For he thinks that if he allows someone to preach to him, he implicitly admits his own subordination. Therefore he cuts himself off from hearing and becomes impervious to instruction or good advice. Because he has many secret misgivings about himself, he becomes eager to find the faults of others; that way he reassures himself of his own superiority in spite of his many unacknowledged weaknesses.

Spiritual immaturity often leads a *kaniṣṭha-adhikārī* to identify spiritual advancement with organizational advancement. He thinks that attaining prestige, power, and the perquisites of office is evidence of spiritual advancement. Lacking the assets for real spiritual achievement, he substitutes organizational elevation, which he can attain through his cunning or political prowess. He therefore competes intensely with others for high office, and he comes to believe implicitly that one achieves a spiritually elevated state only by becoming victorious over others. In this way material competition becomes institutionalized in *kaniṣṭha-adhikārī* societies.

I also could propose a path of reform:

Fortunately, however, the *kaniṣṭha* stage is followed by the *madhyama* stage. A *kaniṣṭha-adhikārī* advances to the *madhyama* platform by means of *sādhana-bhakti*. *Sādhana-bhakti*, pursued diligently and attentively, destroys false ego, and as long as the neophyte devotees attend to their *sādhana* they can be sure of elevation to the higher stages. There is, however, no other assured means of advancement, and habitual negligence in *sādhana* is therefore fatal to progressive spiritual life. Furthermore, when a neophyte devotees has risen to the *madhyama* platform, *sādhana* is absolutely necessary to maintain him in that position. If he becomes slack in *sādhana*, he rapidly reverts to the neophyte condition. Therefore, the essential prerequisite for both creating and sustaining a *madhyama* society is intense common commitment to *sādhana*.

Further on, when I described this grass-roots process of reform, I expanded upon what I felt were the pervading social and individual deficiencies in ISKCON:

One special advantage to this revolutionary project for the regeneration of ISKCON is that it need not wait on the action of the GBC. It can be initiated in

each temple immediately. It can be started by one devotee, and then spread by progression to two, three, and on and on. Thus there can be many centers of reformation, and they will each widen until all of ISKCON is included.

Any devotee who wants to institute reform must begin with himself. The prerequisite for coming to the madhyama stage is to be a strict follower of the regulative principles of devotional service. Spiritual fellowship cannot flourish if anarthas are not being relentlessly uprooted by daily practice. Therefore, every devotee who wants to help in the reformation of ISKCON must first carefully review his own spiritual condition and his personal devotional practice. If he is careless in observing regulative principles and slack in sādhana, he must immediately take up the process of rectification. This entails attending the complete morning program in all alertness, with especial concentration on attentive, offense-avoiding japa. by this effort, a devotee may quickly remove all his accommodations to sense gratification and undertake the deliberate dismantling of his false ego. A devotee of the reforming party should recognize sense gratification and false ego as the two great impediments to Vaiṣṇava fellowship. They are the mortal enemies of ISKCON, and he should resolve to conquer them.

Having undertaken whatever personal reformatory measures are required, the reforming devotee should then undertake the rectification of his relationships. Most devotees will discover that few, if any, of their relationships are satisfactory. The devotee will probably see that he has almost no confidential friends, and that he does not and cannot trust most of his associates. He is conscious that many of his associates have made accommodations—sometimes quite extensive—to sense gratification. Indeed, he has participated in many meetings in which the faults and shortcomings of those not present have been thoroughly examined. Yet the established patterns of relationships are such that while everyone is free to talk about, no one is free to talk to them. In this situation, devotees find themselves standing helplessly by as they watch one of their associates sink deeper and deeper into māyā until he finally blooms; no one is able to come to his aid. As the failing devotee falls further and further away, the criticism of him intensifies, but no one helps.

Nor can the devotees work together effectively, because they have no way of working out the inevitable differences that arise in any collective effort. When one devotee transgresses against another, the offended party will either respond in wrath or else retreat into wounded silence (complaining, however, vociferously to others). He does not know how to approach the other devotee and openly resolve their differences. He is unable to reveal his mind without giving offense.

Under these conditions, a great stockpile of resentment builds up in time, and the atmosphere is filled with sullen undercurrents of hostility and mistrust, relieved only by periodic outbursts of anger. In this uncongenial climate, devotional relations become more and more burdensome, and materialistic people start to seem relatively nice. The devotees find themselves living in deepening isolation from one another, each enthroned in a well-fortified ivory tower of false ego. They learn to get along by avoiding each other. These are some local conditions that arise in the milieu of fratricidal strife.

I called the finished paper a “preliminary proposal,” and gave it the title “The Next Step in the Expansion of ISKCON: Ending the Fratricidal War.” My realizations were quite personal; I had conducted no surveys nor much textual research on the guru question. So, tentatively, I mailed photocopies to three or four devotees to get their responses. (Remember that at this time—November, 1984—facsimile machines were not yet in common use; it was photocopying, then ubiquitous, that carried the reform movement.) What happened next astonished me: within two weeks strong responses—some of them very personal—began flooding in from devotees all over the world. Chain-photocopying had geometrically propagated the paper swiftly throughout ISKCON. Devotees called to complain that I had left them off my mailing-list—I had to explain that the paper had published itself.

Clearly, I had struck a nerve. The response was overwhelmingly favorable. However, Rameśvara Swāmī, the head of the North American BBT, was outraged, and he charge me with the worst of malefactions: because I was discouraging the devotees, I was hurting book distribution. This I worried about until the Christmas mail delivered a store-bought card from Los Angeles displaying on front the words “Good Job!” and “Thank you!” inside. It was signed by Rameśvara Swami’s biggest book distributors—“Mothers Kaumadaki, Jagaddhatri and friends too shy to write their names”—who added the message: “Dandavats for your ‘Preliminary Proposal’ for ISKCON. At last some hope!!”

Bahūdaka dāsa, the chairman of the North American temple presidents and leader of the reform movement in America, was a little disappointed. He wrote me that

We need solid research to understand what should be the role and position of guru. With that paper we can push on strongly for real change. ISKCON as Prabhupada set it up has changed radically and the primary cause is the serious mistakes being made regarding the position of guru. How can we establish the importance of sadhana in our movement when the majority of gurus give the worst example in this regard?

As Bahūdaka wanted, I did go on to write a further paper about the misunderstanding of Prabhupāda’s order concerning the position of guru in ISKCON. “‘Under My Order...’: Reflections on the Guru in ISKCON” (August, 1985) became accepted as the position paper the reform movement, and the paper’s thesis helped lead, two years later, to the formal dismantling of the “zonal ācārya” system.

My investigation of this issue brought home the fact that the difficulties undergone by ISKCON uncannily paralleled those suffered the Gaudīya Maṭha after the demise of its founder. Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura had appointed no successor to occupy the chair at the head of his institution; instead he ordered the institution to be managed by a “Governing Body Commission,” that is, a board of directors of the kind that runs modern corporate enterprises. (“Governing Body Commission” is in fact the name of the governing board of the British-established Indian Railways.)

Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura was attempting to construct a preaching mission effective in the modern, global context. To do this he instituted a collection of reforms that rendered his mission suspect to many formed by and attached to prevailing practices, which they regarded as sanctified by sacred tradition. The idea of a GBC was one such innovation. However, it did not prevail. As Śrīla Prabhupāda recounts it:

Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, at the time of his departure, requested all his disciples to form a governing body and conduct missionary activities cooperatively. He did not instruct a particular man to become the next ācārya. But just after his passing away, his leading secretaries made plans, without authority, to occupy the post of ācārya, and they split into two factions over who the next ācārya would be. Consequently, both factions were asāra, or useless, because they had no authority, having disobeyed the order of the spiritual master. Despite the spiritual master’s order to form a governing body and execute the missionary activities of the Gaudīya Maṭha, the two unauthorized factions began litigation that is still going on after forty years with no decision.

—Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā, 12.8, purport

According to Bhakti Rakṣaka Śrīdhāra Deva Goswāmī (who discussed this matter during a audio-taped conversation with a group of GBC members on October 17, 1980), a GBC of thirteen members was formed ten days after the departure of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, but Śrīdhāra Mahārāja—who would not serve on the body—was dissatisfied with it, and he and some other senior members prevailed upon the Maṭha to elevate Ananta Vāsudeva dāsa, a brahmacārī of brilliant scholastic ability who had served as Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura’s secretary, to the position of ācārya. In effect, the Maṭha reverted to an ancient, tradition model of leadership, in which a single

guru, recognized by all as possessing exceptional spiritual power is elevated above all others to rule autocratically at the seat at the head of the institution. One of Ananta Vāsudeva’s “principle supporters,” B.R. Śrīdhāra Swāmī recollects (referring to himself in the first-person plural):

We made him ācārya, though a brahmacārī, because, next to Prabhupāda [Bhaktisiddhānta Saravatī Ṭhākura], he could satisfy us with the siddhānta, shastric siddhānta, shastric conclusion. He was well versed [in the śāstra]. It was universally accepted: Next to Prabhupāda, he knows the shastric siddhānta. So we felt indebted to him. And from early time, we thought the next ācārya will be he. That was our conviction.

Two years after the elevation of “Vāsudeva Prabhu,” however, someone stumbled across some “love letters”, part of a correspondence between Ananta Vāsudeva and a woman; these letters were brought to B.R. Śrīdhāra Swāmī, who concluded, together with some other senior men, that Ananta Vāsudeva could not “do justice to the seat of our Guru Mahārāja” and should step down. Ananta Vāsudeva, however, did not agree, and he and his loyal followers squared off with the others in protracted, painful hostilities that included systematic discrimination, much persiflage and on occasion physical assault. Finally, as Śrīdhāra Mahārāja put it, “Prabhupāda withdrew from him,” and Ananta Vāsudeva began to preach against Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura —Śrīdhāra Mahārāja says this blasphemy was the result of Ananta Vāsudeva’s having committed so many offenses against devotees—and he left the mission. He gave himself sannyāsa in Allahabad, and later took initiation (as Puri Goswāmī) among the bābājīs of Rādhākuṇḍa—a group highly antagonistic to Bhaktisiddhānta—among whom he continued as leading intellectual light, even though he eventually got married. After his abdication, the Gaudīya Maṭha fragmented into contending parties over the succession, and the case ended up before the Calcutta High Court for resolution.

We see that ISKCON is not going through anything new. It faces the same issues that broke apart the Gaudīya Maṭha. The fact that the Bhaktisiddhānta’s disciples could not continue their founder’s visionary reforms demonstrates first of all the sheer difficulty of the undertaking. It may well take several generations to get it right. The undertaking is to pass on a spiritual tradition in a sound and healthy form, its living force undiminished, into the modern world. This is no small task. Up until now, when the religions of the West have encountered modernity, they have tended either to remain intact by withdraw into the self-protective shell of fundamentalism, or to become swallowed up and assimilated by the world, to live on only as a few nostalgic gestures. Does a similar fate await Lord Caitanya’s movement? The task facing Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavas, it seems to me, is to discover another alternative.

Awareness of the history of the Gauḍīya Maṭha not only shows us the difficulty of challenge, but it may save us from the same mistakes or at least help us rectify those we have made. Any hope we have of healing fragmentation and isolation depends upon the our recognition of past mistakes. At the beginning of the reform movement, I tried to show how within ISKCON concealment of failure leads to isolation. This principle holds as much for relations among communities as among individuals. Progress in spiritual life, individually and institutionally, depends first of all on the frank acknowledgement of shortcoming, errors, and mistakes. Without that, all “progress” is mere bluff.

At a certain time, Germans found it necessary to put themselves through a painful process to which was they gave the name *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—that is, “coming to terms with the past,” “past” here referring to the period 1933-1945. ISKCON requires its own *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Each devotee needs to undergo it as an individual, and the society to undertake it an institution. It is also a necessary for the various present offshoots and spin-offs of the original GauḍīyaMaṭha. ISKCON is not the only place mistakes get buried. In those quarters there seems to be a reluctance to face up to an historical failure to serve the order of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura.

The reform movement in ISKCON aimed at establishing the GBC-principle and subordinating initiating gurus to the GBC authority, based on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s order. To me, however, the most important element of reform is the personal reform as I envisioned it in my “preliminary proposal.” And it is this project which has, as you might suspect, proven to be the most intractable.

For devotees in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, reform must be a fundamental spiritual practice, inseparable from our cultivation of the Holy Name. We must accordingly recognize that reform is a never-ending enterprise, our daily work. It should never be neglected, nor should we ever assume that the job is accomplished. Our confession should be perpetual:

tṛṇād api su-nīcena taror iva sahiṣṇunā  
amāninā māna-dena kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ

‘One who thinks himself lower than the grass, who is more tolerant than a tree, and who does not expect personal honor but is always prepared to give all respect to others can very easily always chant the holy name of the Lord.’

—Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Antya-līlā 20.22

At the same time, if we show some perseverance in the matter, always begging Kṛṣṇa to destroy our desires to enjoy independently in this world, Kṛṣṇa will reciprocate with us and give us guidance from within. In this way, the devotee becomes acquainted with the



infinitely caring and carefully guiding presence of Kṛṣṇa, a presence which becomes the solace of the devotee's heart. And the devotee can progress confidently. The devotee is also empowered to give guidance to others.

When I became involved with the reform movement, it distressed me to see the number of my revolutionary god-brothers who thought that the problems with ISKCON resolved themselves in to the fact that other people were not Kṛṣṇa conscious enough. The other people, in this context, were those who had become the first initiating gurus after Prabhupāda. Each of them had been a responsible leader under Prabhupāda, and Prabhupāda relied much upon them. Prabhupāda deeply appreciated them because they had shouldered the burden of so much responsibility on his behalf. Whatever their shortcomings, they were Prabhupāda's "best men." If, in the event, they turned out to be not good enough, then the question I had to ask myself was: "Why wasn't I any better?" After all, we are told that the spiritual master's mercy is equally available to all disciples, without discrimination. Prabhupāda did not play favorites. So the fault was mine: I had every opportunity to be better, but I did not take it.

I also realized that, despite all their failings, Prabhupāda appreciated the service of these people. I should therefore appreciate it as well. And it seemed to me that success in reform of leadership would only come when Kṛṣṇa became convinced that there were other people who would be as willing to carry the burden of responsibility as those who had failed and who would strive more diligently than they did to become free from impurities. In sum, the personal qualification for reform is: With a firm vow, we in ISKCON have to commit ourselves to 1) purifying ourselves, and 2) accepting responsibility to care for others. I am convinced that any devotee—man or woman, senior devotee or new bhakta, big preacher or humble doorkeeper—can, by taking these two vows, become increasingly empowered by Kṛṣṇa to save ISKCON. You can begin today.