

Devotional Etiquette

Association of devotees is our main support in the development of Krishna Consciousness. There are different levels of devotees according to their spiritual qualities and advancement. We will discuss those, but the overall picture is that we need to associate with those who inspire and enliven us with their enthusiasm and determination to make spiritual progress. When Śrīla Prabhupāda was asked how his disciples would be recognized, he said that they would be perfect gentlemen. From that, we can also infer that the women would also be perfect ladies.

Devotees are not ordinary persons. They have accepted Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, as their life and soul, and have applied themselves to the development of Krishna Consciousness according to bonafide practices. Therefore, association with devotees is not an ordinary thing, and proper etiquette has to be applied.

One wonderful devotee of the Lord named Sanātana Gosvāmī was present during the pastimes of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu in West Bengal just over 500 years ago. Sanātana Gosvāmī had gone to see the Lord, and even though he was a most exalted devotee, he considered himself lowly and unclean. In order to avoid accidentally touching the priests of the Jagannātha Purī temple in Orissa and contaminating them, he took a back path along the hot sand beach that left him with blisters on his feet.

Upon observing the situation, and questioning Sanātana Gosvāmī why he did not take the cool path by the temple gate, the Lord said-

“My dear Sanātana, although you are the deliverer of the entire universe and although even the demigods and great saints are purified by touching you, it is the characteristic of a devotee to observe and protect the Vaiṣṇava etiquette. Maintenance of the Vaiṣṇava etiquette is the ornament of a devotee. If one transgresses the laws of etiquette, people make fun of him, and thus he is vanquished

in both this world and the next. By observing the etiquette, you have satisfied My mind. Who else but you could have shown this example?”

This is quoted from Caitanya-Caritāmṛta, Antya-līlā, chapter 4, verses 129-132.

“Even the Supreme Lord, Sri Krishna Himself, stressed the importance of proper etiquette by His own example. As a child, he used to offer respectful obeisances to his father and mother, Nanda Mahārāja and Mother Yaśodā, At the Battle of Kurukṣetra, Krishna touched the feet of King Yudhiṣṭhira because the king was His elder.”

In Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Antya-līlā, chapter 8, there is a description of the personality of Rāmacandra Purī and his dealings with Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu and His followers.

“Rāmacandra Purī was a disciple of Śrī Mādhavendra Purī, and was thus a godbrother of the spiritual master of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Rāmacandra Purī had become influenced by his association with Māyāvādīs who disavow the person Godhead, and by that contamination, he offended his own spiritual master, was rejected by him, and fell deeply into fault-finding the devotees. He even criticized Lord Caitanya for His eating. However, in spite of the offenses of Rāmacandra Purī, Lord Caitanya maintained proper etiquette towards this personality who was senior in age and spiritual initiation, even though the patience of the other devotees had worn very thin.”

Association with the devotees of Krishna gives great opportunity for spiritual advancement if there is proper respect and submission, and can also award severe suffering if there is offense committed.

In the 4th canto of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, we learn how Prajāpati Dakṣa and his followers suffered severely after Dakṣa, proud of his position in the

heavenly realms, did not offer proper respect to Lord Śiva, the topmost devotee of the Lord, and who holds a unique position in this world, being the same Supreme Personality of Godhead and yet not, as milk and yogurt are of the same substance, but also different.

In fact, the 1st offense against chanting the holy name, as noted in *The Nectar of Devotion*, is blasphemy of devotees who have dedicated their lives to propagating the holy name of the Lord. Śrīla Prabhupāda compared the shortcomings of a devotee to pockmarks on the moon. The moon, in spite of having some apparent blemishes, still shines brightly. In time, with the developing practice of Krishna Consciousness, these apparent blemishes will vanish to virtually nothing. We don't criticize someone who is in the shower for being dirty. The person is becoming cleansed by the honest practice of devotional service, so there is no fault, and there should be no criticism.

An offense to a devotee is described by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu as *hātī mātā*, the mad elephant offense. A mad elephant creates disaster, especially in a nice garden. We may culture a lovely garden of devotional qualities, but an offense to a devotee will wreak havoc. We have to be very careful not to make offenses to the devotees. In the same light, if we hear someone blaspheming the devotees, we must immediately leave that place so as not to become contaminated.

Making an offense to a devotee, or blaspheming a devotee, is not to be compared to making a proper assessment of someone in considering with whom we would like to associate or even from whom one would like to take spiritual initiation. There have been instances when so-called spiritual authorities were making offenses to devotees, but the ones who pointed it out were called the *aparādhis*, or offenders, for questioning the motives and qualifications of the leadership. So, we also have to become sober and mature in our own assessment of a person or situation, and know where we want to put our hearts and faith. Not everyone who dresses or identifies himself as a devotee is worthy

of being respected as a devotee, and in fact may be an imposter.

We have to always be aware that we are not here to try to make material adjustments to this world, to try to fix or correct things no matter how righteous the endeavor may appear, or to point out deviations from what is the real path of devotion unless that is our service and we have attained the proper stage of maturity to support that intention. We are here to develop the qualifications whereby we may exit this mundane world in due time, in proper consciousness, and return to the eternal abode of Śrī Krishna, bringing as many along with us as we can. However, while we are here, we must work to uphold the principles, integrity, and teachings of the predecessor ācāryas in spite of sometimes being ourselves criticized.

Nectar of Instruction, text 6 and purport, instruct us to not see a devotee from the material perspective. There may apparently be some defect on the body of a devotee, but these should be overlooked. Krishna's devotee is not subjected to material condition, even though his bodily features may appear materially conditioned. Unless one is a devotee, he cannot see another devotee perfectly. To consider the bodily defects of a devotee is an offense.

Every devotee should be ready to take instruction from one who is more spiritually advanced, and those who are more spiritually advanced must be ready to help a person who is newer to the practice of Krishna Consciousness to make progress on that path.

Nectar of Instruction, verse 5, tells us, "One should mentally honor the devotee who chants the holy name of Lord Krishna, one should offer humble obeisances to the devotee who has undergone spiritual initiation (*dikṣā*) and is engaged in worshiping the Deity, and one should associate with and faithfully serve that pure devotee who is advanced in undeviated devotional service and whose heart is completely devoid of the propensity to criticize others."

It is described in Nectar of Instruction that there are three types of devotees. The kaniṣṭha-adhikārī does not have the ability to distinguish between a devotee and a non-devotee. He is concerned with worshiping the deity in the temple but does not know how to behave towards the devotees or even people in general. He has received harināma initiation from the spiritual master and is endeavoring to hear and chant the holy name of Krishna. This person should be respected within the mind. The kaniṣṭha-adhikārī must aspire for more progress and not remain on the kaniṣṭha platform.

The madhyama-adhikārī can distinguish between the devotee and the non-devotee, as well as between the devotee and the Lord. So, he treats each of them in different ways. He is considered midway in devotional service. This is the platform of the preacher. He is engaged in devotional service under the direction of the spiritual master. He worships the Supreme Personality of Godhead as the highest object of love, makes friends with the devotees, shows mercy to the innocent and ignorant people and avoids those who are envious.

The uttama-adhikārī is highly advanced, and in his true humility, considers that all other souls are serving Krishna better than he is. His heart is clean, and he is self-realized. According to Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī, the association of such a perfect Vaiṣṇava is most desirable. In order to preach, the uttama-adhikārī has to assume the madhyama-adhikārī position. According to Śrīla Bhaktivinode Ṭhākura, an uttama-adhikārī can be recognized by his ability to convert many fallen souls to Vaiṣṇavism. It is stated in Nectar of Instruction, in the purport to text 5, that one should not become a spiritual master unless he has attained the platform of uttama-adhikārī, and a disciple should be careful to accept an uttama-adhikārī as a spiritual master. It is said that a neophyte or intermediate devotee can also accept disciples, and it should be understood that those disciples cannot advance very well in spiritual life under his insufficient guidance. This is an extremely important topic, and there has

been much discussion on this subject matter since the departure of our beloved Śrīla Prabhupāda. I would suggest reading our essay, “Keeping the Disciplic Succession Alive”, which is available at PurelyPrabhupada.org, for more insights.

It is an offense to criticize the pure devotee of Krishna. One who does so becomes bereft of spiritual progress. It is an offense to consider that a pure Vaiṣṇava should be an object of disciplinary action, or to try to offer them some advice or correction. The advanced devotee will be in the position of spiritual master, and the neophyte will be situated as the disciple. The spiritual master should not be advised by the disciple, and the spiritual master is also not obliged to take outside advice.

The real humility of the uttama-adhikārī has nothing to do with mundane humility, which often is tied to a lack of self-esteem and is therefore self-centered. The uttama-adhikārī has full self-esteem, being totally in alignment with the Lord. This cannot be understood by the mundane mind. The consciousness of a devotee can only be understood by a devotee, so it is better to accept what the scriptures state and know that by the grace of the bonafide teacher of Krishna consciousness, and by following the process of Krishna consciousness, these understandings can be achieved in time.

We have to be honest in our self-evaluation, not pretending to be what we are not or imitating a more advanced devotee, and respectful of others on the path of devotion. Then, we can make real progress towards the ultimate goal of life, the reawakening of our dormant love for the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Sri Krishna.

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