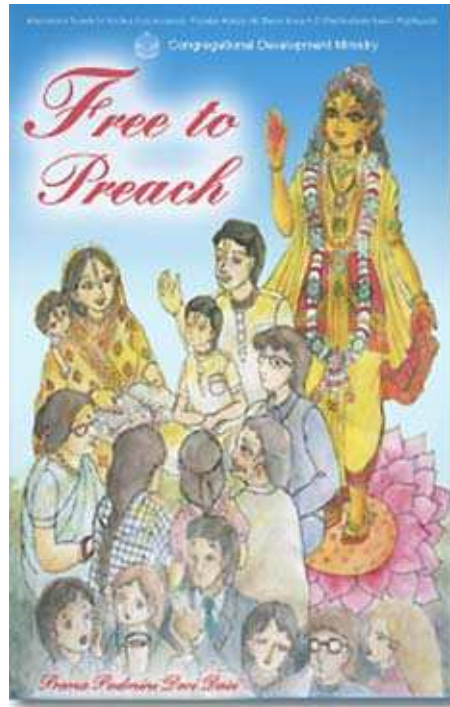


Free to Preach



Prema Padmini Devi Dasi

Congregational Development Ministry
International Society for Krishna Consciousness
Founder-Acarya: His Divine Grace
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada



Dedicated:

To the lotus feet of my beloved spiritual master, His Holiness
Jayapataka Swami Maharaja, whose preaching zeal,
compassion, and loving dealings with everyone helped me
understand a tiny fraction of what Krishna consciousness
really is.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Sriman Kaunteya Das for inspiring and encouraging me to write this book. He has been instrumental in getting me to share our experiences in this form and he has also been the chief editor of the book. I am also indebted to Sriman Ananda Tirtha Das and Srimati Subhadramayi Devi Dasi for also working on the editing. My sincere thanks to Srimati Hemagopi Devi Dasi for preparing the design and the layout, and to Sriman Advaita Candra Das for overseeing the printing of the book. The cover picture is by Srimati Kesavi Devi Dasi, and I would like to express her my sincere thanks for her painstaking effort.



Free to Preach

Publisher: Congregational Development Ministry

Compiled by: Kaunteya Das

Coordination: Advaita Candra Das

Cover Picture: Kesavi Devi Dasi

Design: Hemagopi Devi Dasi

For further information contact:

Office of the Congregational Development Ministry

Room 119, Chakra Bhavan ('Long Building')

Sri Mayapur Chandrodaya Mandir (ISKCON)

Sridham Mayapur

P.O. Sri Mayapur

Dist. Nadia, West Bengal, India

Email:

<mailto:cadministry@namahatta.org>

Web sites:

<http://namahatta.org/> (En)

<http://www.mundonamahatta.org/>
(Es)

Everything in this book:

© ISKCON Congregational Development Ministry

Contents

Acknowledgements:	3
Forword	5
Preface	7
The Lord Answers	9
Mercy to Preach	17
Love and Trust in Action	29
Reaching Out	36
Honeymoon with Bhakti-vriksha	45
Settling Down	54
The Great Push	61
Overcoming Obstacles	67
Bhakti-vriksha, a Shelter for Everyone	73
Testimonials from Preachers	78
Vighnanasana Govinda Prabhu and Gaurangi Gopi Mataji	78
Radha Govinda Hari Prabhu and Saumya Gaurangi Mataji	79
Madan Mohan Caitanya Prabhu and Premandini Mataji	79
Srikantha Kanaiya Prabhu	79
Mukunda Murari Prabhu	80
Rupa Caitanya Prabhu and Baladayini Mataji	80
Nimai Gauracandra Prabhu and Rani Radhika Mataji	81
Divya Kesava Prabhu	81
Caitanya Prakasa Prabhu	81
Mitra Govinda Prabhu	82
Bhakta Sreekanth	82

Forword

by HH Jayapataka Maharaja

It is exciting and enlivening for me to know that Her Grace Prema Padmini Devi Dasi has written a book entitled “Free to Preach.” Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s instructed every human to glorify Lord Krishna; I keenly desire that this instruction be fulfilled. There are so many men and women in the *grihastha asrama*, as students or living at home, who can perform significant preaching to further Lord Caitanya’s *sankirtan* movement, but many of these devotees have not yet fulfilled their potential. It’s a tremendous revolution in Krishna consciousness when devotees are so inspired to feel “free to preach”—besides carrying out their household chores and other occupational duties; it can help to quickly change the world we live in.



Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s *sankirtan* movement spread so quickly because it was a combined effort of various sections of society. Everyone should exercise the freedom to preach!

Srila Prabhupada writes in *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita, Adi-lila, 9.34*:

"Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu indicates that the distribution of the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra* should be performed by combined forces. Although He is the Supreme Personality of Godhead, He laments, 'How can I act alone? How can I alone pick the fruit and distribute it all over the world?' This indicates that all classes of devotees should combine to distribute the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra* without consideration of the time, place or situation."

“Free to Preach” shows that *grihasthas* are also free to become dynamic instruments in the hands of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. In *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita, Madhya-lila, 3.203*, Srila Prabhupada describes how an ideal *grihastha* fulfills his responsibility to preach by following in the footsteps of Advaita Acarya:

Forword

“Advaita Acarya set an ideal example for all householder devotees . . . in His execution of a daily festival at His home. If one has the proper means and wealth, he should occasionally invite the devotees of Lord Caitanya . . . and hold a festival at home simply by distributing *prasadam* and talking about Krishna ... and holding congregational chanting for at least three hours in the evening. This procedure must be adopted in all centers of the Krishna consciousness movement. Thus they will daily perform *sankirtana-yajna*.”

“Free to Preach” demonstrates that housewives and other women are free to become empowered preachers on behalf of Lord Caitanya. This is very inspiring, as at least fifty percent of the planet’s population are women. Often the women’s preaching potential is significantly underutilized. The real way for women to become liberated is to serve the liberated souls by assisting them to liberate the conditioned souls from material bondage. Women can reach audiences that are unapproachable for men. Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura stated that women could preach in the Nama-hatta and it’s endearing to see that “Free to Preach” shows how this is possible and what challenges one may face in achieving this priceless goal. We hope that this book will inspire many devotees to become active in the field of congregational preaching and to share in the nectar of Krishna consciousness.

If all can lend their mite to fulfil Lord Caitanya’s desires, the world will rapidly change and countless souls will get His causeless mercy. That everyone has the potential to become a preacher is such a dynamic idea that it defies my ability to glorify it enough. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura stated, *prana ache yara sei hetu pracara*, “Whoever has spiritual life and enthusiasm preaches.” How actively devotees preach the message of Lord Caitanya constitutes the practical index of their enthusiasm and life. May “Free to Preach” serve as an inspiration and practical guide for existing and potential preachers everywhere.

Your’s in service,
Jayapataka Swami

Preface

by Kaunteya das

“A person who is a householder but is initiated by a *sannyasi*” Srila Prabhupada writes, “has the duty to spread Krishna consciousness at home.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 3.21.31) Srila Prabhupada also writes: “every member of the Krishna consciousness movement is interested in going door to door to try to convince people about the teachings of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, the teachings of Lord Caitanya.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.9.44) In this true story we see both guidelines translated into action.



The setting of this autobiographical book, “Free to Preach” by Prema Padmini Devi Dasi, is a Muslim country in the Middle East. Prema Padmini Devi Dasi’s husband, Vijaya Venugopala Das, is working there. She joins him and together they build a flourishing congregation. There is no official ISKCON temple and everyone works at a full-time job (to stay in the country they must, otherwise they have to leave), yet, in a few years the community swells from two to two thousand devotees, an increase of 100,000 percent.

I found this book fascinating. The way Srimati Prema Padmini Mataji chronicles, with sincere appreciation and motherly affection, individual and collective growth. The way she and her husband deal with the challenges other devotees face due to internal and external obstacles. She sees love and care as essential ingredients of preaching. She describes what makes her happy: “It is a joy to train people, help them grow, and watch them blossom.” She also hankers for perfection in personal standards and in the organization of the community. These and many other features make of this little book a welcome contribution to contemporary ISKCON’s literature.

Prema Padmini’s narration shows that the essence of community development is caring for devotees. Caring includes engaging devotees in missionary work. Srila Prabhupada writes: “The highest perfectional project of philanthropic activities is to engage everyone in the act of preaching bhakti-yoga all over the world.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.13.46) That’s the open secret for attracting Krishna’s appreciation. Srila Prabhupada’s writes:

Preface

“everyone should engage in preaching, following in the footsteps of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. In this way one will be very much appreciated by Lord Krishna and will quickly be recognized by Him.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamrita, Madhya-lila* 7.153)

We are reminded that the role of *grihasthas* is not simply to give money: “Not only should we give the profit of our earning to this cause,” Prabhupada writes, “but we must also arrange to preach this cult of devotion to others because that is also one of the orders of the Lord.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.5.36) We also learn that Bhakti-vriksha is truly an equal-opportunity project, where every man and woman is encouraged to take responsibility and initiative.

Here we see how much a couple can accomplish when they are loyal to their vows and are dedicated to please their spiritual master. But Vijaya Venugopala and Prema Padmini are not the only heroes of this book. Here we witness a community on a mission. Men and women who had never lived in a temple but who imbibe a deep sense of self-discipline in their *sadhana* and develop the strong desire to see Srila Prabhupada’s message accepted and practiced by as many people as possible. This book is a remarkable testimonial of the principle expressed by Srila Prabhupada in a letter of 20 September 1972: “Actually there is no difference between devotees living inside the temple and devotees living outside the temple. You are right that the important thing is to remember Krishna, whatever is your activity.”

I hope you will find this book uplifting, and I pray that the wealth of spiritual insights and practical outlines for congregational development presented here may be soon assimilated and implemented worldwide.

Kaunteya Das

The Lord Answers

My search for the Truth, for God, began early in life. . .

My earliest recollections of this search come from the age of five, when I loved gazing at the moon and was very curious about it.

For my first seven years, I lived with my parents and a younger sister in the picturesque hills of Idukki, a district in Kerala, India, in a colony of an engineering firm that was constructing a big dam on the river by the same name. My father was a mechanical engineer and often posted in such faraway places, close to nature.



Another favorite place was Uttarkasi, set high in the Himalayas, where they were building a dam across the river Bhagirathi, a tributary of the Ganges. From Madras, my sister and me would visit my parents during school vacations. I would look forward to the serenity and the spiritual atmosphere of the Himalayas. Visions of meeting some meditating *sadhu* or great personality would fill my mind, but unfortunately I would have to content with short treks with other colony boys and girls on the awesome, majestic mountains. We would come across tribals who lived there and with the nomadic Gujjars, who looked so fresh, innocent, and carefree.

Nevertheless, the place felt so holy that one could feel it even in the midst of all the people. Ganga flowed just in front of our colony and mercifully poured through our taps. I thanked God for the purification of bathing in her waters and drinking the same every day.

I was a normal child. I loved playing with my friends, and I had my fair share of frailties and idiosyncrasies. But I remember also enjoying moments of solitude. I did not know why I liked being alone. My mind would start reflecting and become serious and serene.

The prayer times of the various schools I attended in the cities were always my favorite moments, and I relished equally the Hindu *bhajans* and the Christian psalms. Even Moral Philosophy class, which few took seriously, was something I looked forward to; I was eager for spiritual guidance.

The Lord Answers

I took very seriously the Christian instruction “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” The few Vedic stories I knew made me picture God residing behind seven sets of doors—and in my mind I was frantically knocking at the seventh.

The spiritual books in my college library spoke only of the impersonal, but even they inspired me to a certain extent. I was impressed and influenced by the teachings of Gandhi and his practical attempts at speaking the truth in all circumstances. As part of my college curriculum in sociology, I sincerely tried to do social service like adult education for slum dwellers, but wondered if I was really benefiting them—and so did they; they tolerated me for trying to do good to them. Actually, they had far more practical wisdom than I did. I really felt frustrated and useless.

I was married at the age of twenty, and God was then mercifully quick in revealing the true path to reach Him. I remember praying to Him to get a husband who was spiritually inclined. I did feel God’s presence and guidance in choosing my husband and in the fixing of our marriage. It was arranged by our elders after thorough scrutiny of our horoscopes to ensure we would be compatible.

Chaperoned by the elders of the family, I briefly met my future husband at our home. I learned that he had a healthy belief in God and in religion, and he spoke of having accompanied his parents on a few temple tours. But, above all, what satisfied me was that he sounded idealistic; he had a strong regard for truth.

His father was Commissioner of Income Tax; giving him a lot of opportunities to take bribes and gifts, since everyone wants to evade paying tax and avoid being caught and penalized for it. But he was well known for his strict adherence to truth and had made absolutely no extra income through his job in the government.

My husband had gone through the pain of losing his brilliant elder brother, tragically killed in a road accident in USA. That experience made him reflect on the temporality of life and stirred within him a philosophical frame of mind.

That was the only quality I was looking for. He was good in communication and yet reserved. He said his hobbies were reading and listening to music. When I asked whether he played any instrument, he joked that he was expert at playing the record player.

As I was to discover later, he had a whole library of books on a variety of topics, including spiritual, and a vast and eclectic collection of musical recordings. He was well qualified academically, and that satisfied my parents, too. We were married with traditional Vedic rites in the sacred hills of Tirupati, South India, where Lord Balaji resides. From day one of our marriage it was very difficult to forget Him.

For the first few months after marriage, though I was regular in my daily rituals of worship, I confess that I got distracted by the new lifestyle, independence, and material

happiness. My husband, later initiated as Vijaya Venugopala Dasa, was a computer software engineer in a multinational firm. We were in Bombay, a modern and liberal city, so I had the chance for some material enjoyment, which contrasted with my sober life before marriage. Somehow, before my marriage I had found it difficult to get excited over material enjoyment, and knowing nothing better I always felt sad and miserable. I really thought I was a misfit and a freak. So now, wanting to become “normal,” I had a last try to “enjoy” in this material world.

But soon I started to feel dissatisfied. Material enjoyment and love have their limitations. I wanted to exchange unlimited love. I remember that one day I cried out to the Lord, wanting to see Him. I hoped and half believed He would somehow answer my prayers, even though I was so fallen, and appear before me.

And He did answer me, though in a different way. That very evening, in the newspaper we saw the advertisement of a violin concert at the ISKCON auditorium in Juhu, Bombay. We were both very fond of music, especially classical, and wasted no time in going there the next day.

We had to pass by Sri Sri Radha-Rasabihariji’s temple room to reach the auditorium, and the serene atmosphere inside impressed me tremendously. Srila Prabhupada’s *murti* was awesome, and the spiritual vibrations contrasted with the passion of the world outside.

But I was just attached to attending the musical program, though I did ask a devotee if I could become a life-member. I thought that membership would guarantee me frequent musical nights. However, the devotee did not take me seriously. He asked me if I wanted it for my grandfather!

Shortly after this we had to vacate our flat and moved close to the temple. We enjoyed the *kirtanas* and beautiful *aratis* to the Deities, Sri Sri Radha-Rasabihariji, as well as the wonderful *prasadam samosas*.

Yet I was skeptical whether ISKCON was authentic. Once I expressed this to a pious aunt who lived in Bombay. I said I preferred the quietness of the South Indian temples and found the wild dancing of the devotees difficult to understand. Her decisive reply changed my whole paradigm and my entire life. She said: “But look at their bhakti!”

From 1982 to 1984 we were only occasional visitors to the temple, until my mother-in-law visited. She loved the festivities at the temple and we started going there more often. Finally, when my husband resigned his job and was waiting for his visa for a Muslim country in the Middle East, we started visiting the temple every evening. Since by then I had a two-year-old son to look after, I could not spend more time at the temple.

I was becoming attached to the Deities, and I prayed to Them, expressing that now for the first time in my life I had found something that could fully interest me but would have to leave very soon.

The very next day a wonderful devotee—Srila Dasa Prabhu, American by birth and Srila Prabhupada’s disciple—I remember feeling very awed by that—approached us and asked us if we would like to become life-members. We agreed immediately and arranged to meet at our home the next morning.

He came at eight o’clock, which was early by our standards. We were impressed by how ‘Indian’ and ‘Vedic’ he was. I felt ashamed as I stood in my jeans, not bathed, asking him questions. But he was so kind and did not seem to mind my disqualifications. I asked him about chanting, and also asked if it was necessary for women to only wear saris. He humbly said that Srila Prabhupada believed that saris were most feminine. That convinced me, though it took me some time to follow it fully. He also spoke to my husband and was concerned that we would not have any devotee association once in the Middle East.

The next morning Srila Dasa Prabhu came walking by to see why we were late for *mangala-arati*. We met him halfway, on the road. He would chant so loudly, oblivious of the surroundings; I admired his devotion.

Once he even wrote us a letter while flying to Europe. I considered him a guru and was eager to reply, but, feeling that my attempts at answering were insufficient, I never got around to post anything.

But I was determined to start to chant, to offer the food, and to read *Bhagavad-gita*. Gradually I motivated myself to do these things regularly, and we began to follow all the regulative principles by begging the Lord for strength. I had to shed a fair amount of tears before each milestone was achieved. Of course, I had good support and partnership from my husband who also accepted the principles.

Once in the Middle East we were really starved for devotee association. I used to look forward to sending small donations to the then Temple President of ISKCON Juhu, Mandapa Prabhu, and felt the perfection of happiness when he replied with some Krishna conscious message.

We didn’t feel the need to chant sixteen rounds. I was doing about eight rounds, and my husband two. This changed when my husband, on an official visit to London, again met Srila Dasa Prabhu. Through his mercy we came to know that two and eight rounds were nothing to be proud of. We had to chant sixteen rounds. As my husband excitedly broke this news to me on his return, we lost no time and started to chant sixteen rounds.

We were dependent solely on Srila Prabhupada’s books for association. As his missionary zeal began to rub off on us, I felt increasingly obliged to share the wealth of knowledge Srila Prabhupada was giving us. I was eager to bring some devotees to preach, but somehow it didn’t materialize. I nevertheless preached to people I met. Many appreciated, but none felt inspired to follow.

In the evenings with my husband and our little sons—three-year old Pradeep and six-month old Ananth—we sang to Srila Prabhupada’s *kirtana* tapes in front of a huge laminated photograph of Sri Sri Radha-Rasabihari.

My husband was again changing his job, and we had to move to a neighboring country. I must apologize for sounding so enigmatic about the identity of the countries and the cities I refer to. This is for security reasons, as in these places these are sensitive topics.

Before moving we visited India and it was there that a Temple President from South India introduced us, in a telephone conversation, to the devotee who would later become our beloved spiritual master, His Holiness Jayapataka Swami Maharaja.

As I waited in Bombay for a visa to again join my husband in the Muslim world, I felt eager to meet Jayapataka Maharaja. But I was skeptical and nervous. I had always been wary of all the different kinds of Indian bogus gurus and was waiting for a real guru. I was convinced about Srila Prabhupada, but had not yet met any of ISKCON’s present initiating spiritual masters.

I was reading about Jayapataka Maharaja from his Vyasa-puja books and praying every day three times for his mercy. Then finally my husband phoned to tell me that Maharaja would soon be passing through Bombay. Over the phone Maharaja had told my husband, who was in the Middle East, “You finish reading *Bhagavad-gita* and the first two cantos of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, and I will come there.” Maharaja had also asked my husband to let me come and visit him in Bombay.

I felt it was Maharaja’s mercy that I could go all the way to the temple to meet him in the late evening, accompanied only by my five-year-old son, Pradeep. Normally my father would have never allowed this. Somehow he happened to be away on tour, and my mother was a little soft on me.

As I sat waiting for Maharaja’s arrival with a few other devotees, I was still nervous and doubtful. Would I really be able to put my trust in him?

As Maharaja got out of the taxi, I paid my obeisances with the others, and found him looking our way. I followed him with the others as he surveyed the new *Gurukula* building. As he reached the guest-house elevators to go up, I felt I had no right to follow further. I didn’t personally know any of the devotees, and I felt too shy to ask them if I could tag along. Just at that moment Maharaja looked my way with a deep, penetrating and compassionate glance. I decided that, come what may, I had to meet him that day.

I chanted anxiously outside his room while he was having a meeting about problems between some devotees. There were other life-members also waiting to have his *darsana*. But I was pressed for time. I had to take a long journey back home late in the night and face my parents. I kept asking the devotees to let me in, and finally, after they consulted with Maharaja, we were allowed to enter.

As I introduced myself, he said, “Oh, I asked you to come, and you came immediately!” He handed me a fragrant champaka-flower. As I sat down on the floor at his feet, I had the opportunity to let my eyes follow his every action. It was unbelievable. I did not dream I would be meeting anyone quite like this. I realized he was really a great soul, way beyond my comprehension, and such a lover of God!

I couldn't stop crying though I felt ashamed and tried to. For so long I had been searching for God and now I actually felt He existed and that the spiritual world was a reality. He gazed deep into my soul through my eyes and I surrendered to his gaze... my first brush with eternity. Time seemed to stand still in that encounter with my spiritual father.

In a very gentle and compassionate tone, he asked me why I was crying, and I muttered, “No, just felt overwhelmed.” I felt so awkward and impure before his radiance and started wondering which species I really belonged to.

He was happy to hear of my chanting and offering of food. I expressed the desire to serve that I had cultivated after reading Tamal Krishna Goswami's book, “Servant of the Servant.” “Can I serve you in the new place I am going to?”

Maharaja was surprised. He raised his eyebrows and looked at the other devotees. He said that maybe I could show people some Krishna conscious videotapes. My heart sank. I had received no more instruction to do devotional service.

While leaving, I paid obeisances. Maharaja said that Lord Krishna Himself had arranged this meeting. But my heart was still dissatisfied that he had given me no service. Amazingly, as if sensing my thoughts, while my forehead was still on the floor, he said, “You continue whatever you are doing and Lord Krishna will help you.” He said he was giving both my husband and me shelter as I had requested him in my letter. Actually I had not even known there was some formal step for taking shelter, and had just written it as a feeling.

As I arose satisfied, I found his loving glance upon me. He handed me some *laddu prasadam* for my family.

Finally I joined my husband in the new country. We performed our daily *sadhana* both mornings and evenings. In the morning we had *mangala-arati* and *Bhagavatam* class, then I would continue with *Tulasi-arati*, *guru-puja*, and more reading. In the evenings the whole family would do *sandhya-arati* and read from *Bhagavad-gita*. In these parts it is tough to find flowers for worship, but I used to take a walk with my two sons every day and clandestinely got some flowers from the roadside.

We had a collection of all of Srila Prabhupada's books and were also getting literature, music-, and videotapes from the catalogue of the Los Angeles Temple; we lost no time in ordering them by mail.

Our expenditures, apart from basic needs, were only on these things. Somehow, by Lord Krishna's mercy, even our children did not demand anything for themselves. We had strived to keep them from watching TV programs by purchasing videotapes of the Ramayana and Mahabharata serials, of which they were so fond, watching them over and over again. They knew the script by heart and would keep enacting the pastimes with one another. They found these serials so enchanting that they had no taste for the cartoons on TV, from which other parents struggled to wean their children.

Vacations in India found us visiting the holy *dhamas* and ISKCON temples, to gain some devotee association.

At first we were staying in a building just above the bank where my husband worked, and all the residents were his colleagues. We were totally new to the place and had no friends. But our immediate neighbor was a socialite and, without our asking, he would take great pains to introduce us to his numerous friends. He was respectful of our lifestyle and thought to patronize us in his social circle. Although pious, he gradually felt that our process wouldn't appeal to his friends, and so gave up on us.

After a year we visited Sridham Mayapur and eagerly met our spiritual master. I asked him to kindly visit our country. His answer took me by surprise: "I will not come to simply eat idlis and chutneys. I know you can cook those well. Only if you preach and make devotees will I come." He encouraged my husband to spread the message of *Bhagavad-gita*.

We had been following all the principles and chanting sixteen rounds for over a year, and he tentatively agreed to give us initiation at the pandal program of the Calcutta Ratha-yatra, if we could first solve the issue of the recommendation letter. He kept us in suspense till the very last moment, even after we had written the initiation tests, saying that he must first find out why we hadn't been sent with a recommendation letter.

We went to Calcutta for the initiation ceremony. As we sat waiting in the bus with our two small children (and our younger son, two-year-old Ananth, was sick with fever and loose motions), I was praying hard to the Mayapur Deities, Sri Sri Radha-Madhava, to help me get initiated. If we missed initiation this time it would be another year before the next chance!

Just as I was giving up hope, a very nice devotee came and took us to the pandal. We found out that the Temple President had simply forgotten to give us the recommendation letter and had approved of our initiation over the phone.

By the end of the initiation *yajna*, which was performed by the Mayapur Gurukula boys, we were still sitting on the dais, waiting. Later our Guru Maharaja looked over at us from the main stage and showed us our beads. He was chanting on them!

At that moment the power went off, the famous Calcutta "load-shedding." As we sat in the darkness which enveloped the whole city, I lost all hope of taking initiation.

The Lord Answers

But at the end of the program Jayapataka Maharaja walked by and called us to again go up to the *yajna* dais. He made a devotee hold up a torch above us. I felt relieved as he gave us our spiritual names: Vijaya Venugopala Dasa for my husband, and Prema Padmini Devi Dasi for me—which were our old names with new prefixes. I now had my spiritual connection! The electricity came back after five minutes. I was born in the darkest of ignorance, and my spiritual master had opened my eyes with the torch of knowledge.



Mercy to Preach

For one year after moving to the new Muslim country I had hankered to start some spiritual program at our house, but nothing had happened. After we returned to the Middle East from our vacation to India, still with the heady feelings of new initiates, things began to take off.

A neighbor approached us: “Your house is like a temple. You must have a program in your house. I’ll call all my pious friends for Janmastami, and you please arrange something.”

About ten people came for our first program. We had a nice *kirtana*, discussed a little about ISKCON and distributed the *prasadam* I had prepared: *samosas*, *kachoris* and sweets. We also gave out some “Back to Godhead” magazines. All the guests were happy, and most agreed to attend our proposed twice-weekly public programs. Our preaching had begun.

The program continued in the same format for four or five months. We gradually introduced a *Bhagavad-gita* class conducted by my husband. On the weekends we had a crowd of about fifteen people, but on weekdays there were only three regulars. The day before the program I phoned and reminded each of them. I didn’t want to take any chances. As it was, they were adept at giving excuses if they forgot to come.

One of the regulars kept a “Back to Godhead” magazine in his room. Once a boy named Venkat, recently arrived from India, visited him and saw the magazine. He became excited, as he was familiar with ISKCON and the chanting, but had become completely lost in the new place. Venkat was our first, solid potential devotee, and he brought his colleague Gopal along.

Both were in their early twenties, medium build, bright faced, fresh and energetic. They appeared dynamic and talented. Both came from the same state of India, Tamil Nadu. They worked in the same firm and also shared the same accommodation, provided by their company. They were eager for spiritual guidance.

Venkat had been introduced to Krishna consciousness in his hometown of Tiruchi. Gopal, though living close to the ISKCON temple in Madras, had somehow avoided visiting it; but he had rendered service in the food distribution program that ISKCON had regularly held at his college.

They had landed here straight after their graduation. They had secured a job in a large, well-established firm, and they had left their parents and siblings back home in India. We were thrilled to see their interest in devotional service. We had a vast library of Srila Prabhupada's books and were trying to freely lend them to anyone. Venkat asked for devotional cassettes and books.

Now the older members were missing my attention. To get them to read books and listen to tapes took so much persuasion and pleading. Meanwhile, our immediate neighbour, wanting to host something religious in his house, had begun recitation of Vedic hymns such as *Rudra Chamakam* and *Purusa-suktam*. He managed to capture Gopal and Venkat for his program. But before going there, they dropped in to meet us. Gopal was eager to learn Sanskrit and was enthusiastic about the other program. Venkat had some experience of chanting the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, but was out of touch and was confused.

My husband was out but I took this as a chance to save the boys from being diverted from the real thing. As I explained to them the importance and superiority of chanting the maha-mantra, Venkat gradually surrendered and felt no need to attend the Veda classes, but Gopal decided to do both things.

Venkat wanted to immerse himself in Krishna consciousness, so we invited him to come and spend all his free time with us. My husband would pick up Venkat and Gopal for *mangala-arati*, which we performed at 4.15 a.m. After *Srimad-Bhagavatam* class and breakfast they would all leave for work. In the evenings, Venkat and Gopal attended our *sandhya-arati* and also the *Bhagavad-gita* class, which went on for a long time, with Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu patiently answering their doubts. They left after having dinner *prasadam* with us. On the weekend they were with us the whole day. They were part of our family, like two older sons. They consulted us on all issues and hid nothing from us.

Gopal was chanting a few rounds and was still attending the Veda classes next door. Lord Gauranga then tricked him into surrendering. He fell sick and had to rest in bed for a week. At that time Venkat persuaded him to listen to Srila Prabhupada's tapes. Gopal then asked us for a large ISKCON painting of Lord Vishnu. Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu told him that the price he had to pay for it was sixteen rounds of *japa*. That very night Gopal began to chant sixteen rounds!

At their place of work both Venkat and Gopal became famous as preachers and managed to bring some of their colleagues and senior office personnel to our programs. Their only mission became to preach Srila Prabhupada's message and make devotees, and so it was immaterial where they were. Every evening they would tell us of the day's preaching experiences, and we would discuss together the challenges met in facing *mayavadis*, atheists, and others.

They would talk and write of nothing else but Krishna consciousness, even to their families back home. Of course this initially created ripples in their relatives' minds, but

during their subsequent visits home they managed to convince them about the joy of Krishna consciousness.

Another serious aspirant was Alka, a girl in her early twenties, fresh from college. Her mother, a regular attendee to our programs, had brought her. Alka, although from Kashmir, had spent several years in South India. She was gentle and soft spoken, intelligent and attractive. She worked as a programmer in a company that sold computers and software.

Alka was so eager for Krishna consciousness that she would visit daily and would spend hours discussing the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* with me. She spontaneously started chanting and became convinced about Krishna consciousness. Initially her family members—three generations of them—were strongly opposed to her devotional activities, especially to her new diet. Nonetheless she persisted in her *sadhana*.

A Mr. Seshadri was also regularly attending our programs and was chanting a few rounds. He informed us that since his wife and children would be joining him shortly from India, he would not be visiting us so frequently. So it was a big surprise when he phoned us the very day his family arrived.

He begged us to come to his house immediately. His wife was in severe depression and had slept throughout the day with their two young boys left unattended. She was talking of committing suicide. Only the thought of her children prevented her from it. She had been on medication for many years, but this problem kept recurring.

It was already night, and our *Bhagavad-gita* discussion had nearly ended. I was busy getting dinner ready, so my husband drove Mr. Seshadri and his wife, Jayashree, over to our place. As she entered our house, she approached me and said, “Can you please promise me to look after my children? I can then die in peace!” I was touched to see her simplicity, and felt sorry for her pain, but I accepted this as a challenge to prove the efficacy of the maha-mantra, as asserted by Srila Prabhupada.

I reassured her that we would discuss about all that the next day, and calmed her down with some soothing words and some *prasadam*, which she reluctantly accepted. I tucked her into our own bed so she would be comfortable for the night. We slept in the guest-room. Her lively sons were happy to be with our two similarly active and mischievous boys. Relieved, Mr. Seshadri took leave.

The next day I dragged Jayashree out of bed and forced her to take a bath. After some breakfast *prasadam* I asked her to help me in the kitchen by cutting vegetables. I explained to her that this was service to Lord Krishna and it would enthuse her.

As she disclosed her pain to me, I explained how and why devotional service to the Lord would cure her. I had a short *sankirtana* session with her and then a japa session. She was amazingly obedient when I asked her to chant. For three or four days I was fully

occupied with her, struggling to explain to her the philosophy and to engage her in some Krishna conscious activity—while all that she wanted was to sleep.

Mr. Seshadri would come during lunch and dinner. He was skeptical about the outcome of all this endeavor. He was just a little relieved that he did not have to face the problem alone. Years of medication and religious vows had not brought about the desired result and that had left him a bit hopeless. So we also had to keep his spirits high, and we glorified the process of surrendering to Krishna.

Jayashree started to feel much happier, and said that now she felt like living, but that she would do so only in our house! It was a difficult situation to handle, but the Lord intervened. Her younger son developed chicken pox, so her husband insisted on her going back home. I taught her how to set up a simple altar, offer *bhoga*, and do simple *aratis*. I told her to constantly listen to *kirtana* or lecture tapes to control her mind. She nodded submissively as she wrenched herself from us.

Within a week of performing these basic forms of worship she started to chant sixteen rounds and was psychologically completely normal. She became a very sincere devotee, but too enthusiastic for her husband to digest. All their friends were amazed at her transformation. There was no sign of her previous depression and she looked very happy and contented. But her husband, who was still quite materially attached, gradually weaned her from so much association with us.

Shortly after this, Jayapataka Maharaja agreed to visit us. We were overjoyed, but since we had no earlier experience in receiving and serving him properly, we were nervous too. Fortunately, just two days prior to Maharaja's visit, the Temple President who had introduced us to Maharaja arrived for fundraising, along with an assistant.

To receive our Guru Maharaja at the airport we arranged a small group of devotees all dressed up in dhoti, with *tilaka* and chanting beads. Only the *kirtana* was missing: we observed restraint considering the place and circumstances. The devotees paid obeisances as soon as Jayapataka Maharaja emerged from immigration. This sort of reception is unthinkable in such places of religious intolerance, but during those first days of unguarded enthusiasm we had thrown caution to the winds.

Back home Venkat, along with a few other devotees, was making elaborate floral decorations. Seeing Maharaja there Venkat just jumped from joy. Some of the new people were struck by our enthusiasm. Around fifty people had gathered. Maharaja remarked how the fire of Krishna consciousness could gradually light up the wood-like hearts.

We had initiations right inside the flat. Jayapataka Maharaja carefully put off the fire himself so that the smoke detectors wouldn't go off and cause unwanted publicity. Venkat became Vighnanasana Govinda Dasa and Gopal became Gopala Gauranga Dasa.

Gopala Gauranga wanted to remain a bachelor, and Govinda was advised not to marry for the time being. They both pledged to give one-tenth of their income for the service of the *Yatra*.

Alka was facing difficulties at home due to her “over-involvement” in Krishna consciousness. Maharaja spent quite some time reassuring her of Krishna’s help to His devotees. Also present were some newcomers who later became committed and stalwart devotees: Bhakta Sridhar, Bhakta Suresh, and Bhakta George.

George, who had come recently from Bangalore, had approached me at the supermarket. He was a salesman in an electrical and furnishing company and was amazed to see an ISKCON devotee in these parts. He had been regularly visiting the Bangalore temple and was very interested in Deities’ dresses and *prasadam*. In relation with following ISKCON standards in these areas, George’s presence was a great boon to us. He was a very friendly and service-minded devotee; he already knew Jayapataka Maharaja and was devoted to him.

Many mornings and evenings Gopala Gauranga, George and I would go out to buy things for the Deities. All three of us enjoyed such shopping. They would sneak out of their offices on some pretext, and George, who was a connoisseur of artistic things, would select beautiful dress materials, altar curtains and jewelry. Both were very generous in spending for Krishna and took great pleasure in discussing how to dress the Deities.

The very first Deity we worshipped was a beautiful, flute-playing, smiling black Krishna. The Deity made of papier-mâché was about two-feet high, and had been gifted to us by my husband’s sister and brother-in-law just prior to our taking initiation.

Soon after starting the worship we had begun our public programs, and our first altar had been a simple table. Yet all the devotees were very attached to the attractive form of Krishna. Then, on Janmastami day, a talented sculptor had spontaneously gifted a beautiful, carved, imitation-marble altar. It was actually made of thermocole, but looked impressive.

In the following year we got Gaura-Nitai Deities from the Bangalore Temple President, as well as Jagannatha, Subhadra and Baladeva, six-inches high. Later we got a small Laddu Gopal from Sri Vrindavana *Dhama*.

Two or three years later a devotee carpenter from Bangladesh, Nitai Dasa, carved one-foot tall Jagannatha, Subhadra and Baladeva. Around the same time a talented and pious painter, with prior experience of painting Deities, started attending our programs. For a full week he would come straight from work to our house and paint Their Lordships till midnight. Finally the beaming and very sweet looking Jagannatha, Subhadra and Baladeva emerged.

We hoped that the painter would stay in our association and also progress in devotional service, but he stopped coming soon after he finished painting the Deities.

Our Guru Maharaja visited us shortly after the new Deities were ready. I was praying that he would appreciate Them and, to our delight, as he entered the Deity room he

greeted Their Lordships with great happiness. That was enough to make us feel as if the Deities had been formally installed.

At that time we would “push” the new initiates to preach and make new devotees, and they took up the task very earnestly. They set up a *brahmacari asrama* in their house and would bring new male guests to our programs for *prasadam* and association.

In this way, after one or two years, we had a team of ten or eleven young, enthusiastic and dynamic male devotees living in the same *asrama*, cooking and performing devotional service together. There was Rajagopal, Gopala Gauranga’s brother: he was lean, serious looking and reserved. He wrote Krishna conscious poems and read them whenever Jayapataka Maharaja visited us. Over the weekend Rajagopal would painstakingly polish all the Deity paraphernalia. Later he moved to the United States where he started looking after some Nama-hatta groups under the supervision of His Holiness Romapada Maharaja.

Sreenivasan, Gopala Gauranga’s cousin, was on the chubby side. Jolly and expert in cooking, he had a way with children. His firm faith in Krishna consciousness was shown, for instance, when his father fell seriously ill with a heart attack. Sreenivasan made him chant many rounds daily, the days before his father left his body. Sreenivasan was also surrendered in regards to his job-related problems and always sought our guidance in overcoming them. He continues to live here with his wife Iccha Bhakti Devi Dasi, who became a devotee after their wedding and who is also seriously and actively preaching.

And there was Chandrasekhar, Gopal Gauranga’s family friend. Tall, handsome and intelligent, he was in his mid-twenties and was working as an accountant. As soon as he entered the country he was brought straight to our house. We were busy getting things in order after Jayapataka Maharaja’s visit and Chandrasekhar started to help at once. After years of valuable service in this *Yatra* and after marrying Rasamayi Devi Dasi, an initiated devotee and active preacher, he moved to Bangalore and he is now helping to establish the Bhakti-vriksha model in South India.

Another sincere devotee was Rajeev Sharma, a Punjabi (but surprisingly adaptive to South Indian cuisine and ways). He still fondly remembers how we all helped him to overcome various attachments such as oversleeping, cricket, and his Shirdi Sai Baba ring. Frank and forthright, he was full of humor and laughter. Always eager for Krishna conscious association, he eventually became an expert preacher and a strict follower of the principles of spiritual life. When he moved to a neighboring country he became the local *Yatra* leader.

Even now those devotees who have grown and matured well in their devotional service have fond memories of their toddler days. Several *grihasthas*, like Rajeev, had since moved to other countries and started *Yatras* on their own. Their moving happened due to a change of job. All expatriates in the Middle East receive a residence permit only if sponsored by their employers. So it is one’s job that determines in which country one

can stay. But the sense of belonging that we had in those early days stays fresh in our hearts, and we still communicate frequently with all of them.

Rajeev brought in his colleague, Venkatesh. Charming, intelligent, always smiling and of humble disposition, Venkatesh had a slight problem with attending *mangala-arati* but was always ready to offer service. He became such a good book distributor that he won the Srila Prabhupada Marathon. He got the maximum number of *Gita Dana* sponsors from our *Yatra*. He married Shireena, a Christian girl, who also became a serious devotee. They started conducting a Bhakti-vriksha group in their home. They were so eager to advance that for a month both husband and wife slept in our house to attend the *mangala-arati*, even though Shireena was in an advanced stage of her pregnancy. At one point they moved to the United States, but they are still in touch with us and are very nostalgic of our early days together.

Bharath, a family friend of Gopala Gauranga's, was another youngster employed in a large business house. He would keep the accounts in their car-sales division. He was always smiling, had a very good hand in cooking and was very service-minded. For a couple of months he slept at our place to be on time for the morning *sadhana*. He had just become very fired-up and efficient in all aspects, when he happened to go home to India. There Bharath took his widowed mother along while visiting the parents of a devotee. They were paranoid and anxious about their son's involvement in Krishna consciousness and put a lot of fear in the mind of Bharath's mother. She became nervous about the possibility that her son would remain unmarried and forbade Bharath from attending our programs. Through his supervisor, who was her relative, she tried to keep tabs on his movements. Bharath kept attending our programs very discreetly, without the knowledge of his relative, as he did not want to put his mother into anxiety. Now, years later, he is initiated, married, and recently also his wife took initiation. His mother eventually attended many of our programs, and also the relative supervisor is now a serious follower of Krishna consciousness.

Sreedhar, a tall devotee, was the peacemaker of the team. He would always try to sort out the differences among the devotees and was always mercifully disposed toward the newcomers. Very serious about spiritual life, he wanted to remain a *brahmacari* all his life, and to this day he is still unmarried. He joined the Bangalore temple and after a short time in fund raising was put in the Deity department and served as Head Pujari for several years.

Parag, an old friend of Rajeev Sharma and a North Indian, was very fond of sweets. He too stayed overnight at our house for two months to attend *mangala-arati*. Parag soon found his working life frustrating and decided to join the temple full-time. He also moved into the Bangalore temple. He later got married, moved overseas and started preaching there.

Bhakta George stayed in his company-owned flat, sharing it with a colleague. He was the main cook of our *Yatra*, specialized in exotic Western dishes. Although he only started

cooking after joining us, he quickly became an expert with the pots. Every weekend for the devotees' breakfast he would make buns, croissants, pizzas, pasta, different kinds of biscuits and so on . The lunch menu would include a special sweet such as the Radha Red Plum Chutney, apricots in cream sauce, or cheesecake. Before the evening program for the guests he would again be in the kitchen preparing mouth-watering dishes to complement the feast. George was also very generous about treating the devotees with *prasadam* at his flat. He was tall and robust and resembled the world-famous ISKCON chef Kurma Das. We therefore unofficially awarded him the nickname "Kurma." George stayed a staunch *brahmacari*, but recently he tragically passed away from a heart attack, at the young age of thirty-two.

All these *brahmacaris* were living together and leading a regulated, regimented life. They would cook for themselves, sleep on the floor, and would come twice a day to our house, for *mangala-arati* at 4:15 a.m. and for *sandhya-arati* in the evening. All of them gave one tenth of their income to the *Yatra* fund for Krishna's service. The only time they were not engaged in direct Krishna conscious activities was at their place of work. Most of them were soon ready for initiation.

Like many bachelors, this group had their fair share of bickering and quarrels, but on the whole they cooperated well. Any squabble or misunderstandings at the *asrama* would soon lead to an *ista-gosthi*, where my husband would try to settle things. We didn't want anything to escalate due to procrastination or negligence. We were like one big family. This sense of belonging kept expanding to include all the newcomers. Some fence-sitters in Krishna consciousness may have been a little uncomfortable with the deluge of attention we gave them, but they were swept up in the mood sooner or later.

There were also other serious devotees living separately, like Bhakta Hector, Ashok Sawant, Garud, Milind Lollekar, Subramaniam and family, and others. Subramaniam also brought his boss Venkat and Venkat's family to Krishna consciousness.

Bhakta Hector, who later became Hrisikesa Krishna das, was a middle-aged Sri Lankan Sinhala. Of short height, he was soft spoken and unassuming. A civil engineer by profession, he was the early bird of the *Yatra*. In the morning he used to go to the *brahmacari asrama* to wake up all the *brahmacaris*. He also moved into a neighboring country and is preaching there.

Ashok Sawant, from the state of Maharashtra, was an ideal devotee. Tall and gentle, he was eager for any service and was an expert preacher. The way he induced his wife to make *prasadam* for him is exemplary for all husbands. He did not go home and suddenly declare his change of diet and insist that his wife also follow him. Since she was totally new to Krishna consciousness, he was afraid that she might not take to it if he started with the diet. So Ashok started quietly to cook for himself. Of course the perturbed wife offered to cook herself whatever he wanted. Gradually she also took to chanting and visiting the temple. He is still with us and he is organizing great preaching programs.

Mercy to Preach

During vacations he preaches in his hometown, Ratnagiri, where he also invites the local ISKCON devotees to his home.

Garud, another Maharashtrian, had been an atheist before, but made rapid advancement after he started associating with the devotees. He was generously using his car to transport the devotees and to run errands. Later on he started driving thousands of kilometers in the desert for preaching in the interior of the country. He did all kinds of services, from cleaning to preaching. His wife started to come along but found his intense devotional pace disturbing; although we tried our best to counsel her, gradually she distanced herself from the devotees. Nonetheless, to her credit, she left Garud full freedom to do whatever he wanted in devotional service.

Milind Lollekar, also from Maharashtra, loved to glorify the holy names. When he came to Krishna consciousness his wife was still in India. When she joined him in the Middle East she unfortunately could not share his enthusiasm for the holy name. He wanted to give himself fully to the service of Krishna and, despite his family limitations, Milind is conducting a couple of Bhakti-vriksha groups. The whole *Yatra* tried to help him woo his wife into devotional service, but she is taking her time to become more involved.

Subramanian, a lively devotee, was born in South India but had lived in Kenya. His good wife Sudha and his precocious five-year-old daughter, Vanita, also loved Krishna consciousness. This little child would phone us up and would report any deviation of her mother from strict standard—infractions such as watching television—and would complain that her mother was in *maya*.

Sudha was an expert singer and dancer who had given public performances but who gradually gave all that up to be serious in Krishna consciousness. She started to use her talents for Krishna by training the children of the devotees and by performing during festivals. At one point Subramanian and Sudha started their own *Yatra* in a neighboring country. Subramanian was very good in attracting people to spiritual life. Anyone who spoke with him was charmed. He would always glorify other devotees and would be friendly with them. He brought practically everyone in his and his wife's family to Krishna consciousness. He was a chartered accountant and when someone approached him for a job he would reply that he would do his best, but it was Krishna who could really give them a job and so he requested them to start chanting. Once, after completing a job-interview and having gotten the post, he started preaching to the superior who had just interviewed him. A few days later that superior and his wife became regular attendees at our programs.

There were also Mr. Venkatachalam, his wife Lakshmi and their pretty daughter Sowmya, also an excellent devotee in the making. Mr. Venkatachalam, though highly placed in his work (he was Finance Controller of a very big firm), was unassuming and humble. He respected highly all the devotees, tried to learn from them, and tried to be of some service to them. His wife was sincere and idealistic. Two of the *brahmacaris* used to regularly visit his home to perform *mangala-arati* and the family took up the worship.

Mercy to Preach

We used to have regular weekly home programs at their place, but they soon had to leave for a neighboring country due to a change of job. Happily, in spite of tighter controls by the government in religious matters, they started a *Yatra* and the preaching is flourishing.

Many of the above devotees came daily to our home for *mangala-arati*, *sandhya-arati* and *Bhagavad-gita* class. On weekends, our house would be full as they spent the whole day with us, cooking and doing other services together. Each Friday, a holiday in these Muslim parts, as part of the evening program we had an elaborate feast (like the ones advertised in “Back to Godhead”).

Gradually we encouraged the devotees to give *Bhagavad-gita* class on weekdays, and almost everyone enthusiastically took up the service. Our annual celebration of Gundica Marjana would have all devotees performing a marathon-cleaning of the entire house, the main center for the *Yatra's* activities. Since this would also clean the heart, the whole team volunteered and enjoyed rendering the service.

Soon a very devoted Bengali family, the Roys, joined our intimate circle. Mr. Roy had arrived first, and had become fully convinced of Krishna consciousness. He was completely free from the attachments typical of Bengalis: fish, meat, and tea. He was constantly preaching to his family by letter, and when the fearful family finally arrived, he forbade them to have any of those things from day one. They were soon won over by his affection and by the association of the other devotees, and became very serious and service-minded devotees themselves. The whole family later moved to ISKCON Mayapur.

At this time we did not have enough services to keep all the devotees fully engaged, so when the desire to fully surrender to serve Krishna arose, the only option was to join a temple. The Bangalore Temple President wanted us to send each and every *brahmacari* to his temple.

I felt bad that he had made no mention of the *grihasthas* and I expressed it to him. In response he offered to develop a farm; but later he purchased a piece of land in Bangalore, two plots away from the temple, and had plans to construct a building there for the *grihasthas*. All the families started paying in installments. Although they were from different Indian states, they decided to be with the devotees and to serve the Lord together for the rest of their lives. For some of them the cost of the housing seemed prohibitive but somehow they managed to get enough money and regularly paid their installments. Many had decided to make just enough money to carry on their household and then retire to a flat in Bangalore, dedicating all their time to Krishna's service.

We were all hooked to Krishna consciousness into our spare time. Any holiday would find all of us at our place, having a twenty-four-hour *kirtana* program, with *prasadam* constantly provided to the visitors. At other times we would go to nearby picnic spots and have a Krishna conscious get-together with *kirtana*, *arati*, *Bhagavatam* class, a

nice swim, and *prasadam*. These picnics elevated the consciousness in a pleasing way. Newcomers were also impressed by the efficient organization.

We had frequent home programs in the newer devotees' houses. This brought opportunities to preach to new people. We also staged many plays during public festivals. Once we staged the play "Jagannatha Darsanam," from the book on the story of Lord Jagannatha by His Holiness Tamal Krishna Maharaja. The script was fully translated into Tamil by one of our congregational members, and was directed by a couple of regular devotees, both chanting sixteen rounds. All the devotees, including my husband, took part in the two-hour play, which played to a packed auditorium and was well received.

For every festival, like Janmastami and Gaura Purnima, we staged plays such as "Rukmini's Svayamvara" or plays on Lord Caitanya's pastimes. For Srila Prabhupada's Centennial celebration we produced a poetic mime on the life of our Founder-Acarya. I normally wrote the scripts and directed the plays.

We did book distribution for two December marathons: one on behalf of the Bombay temple and one for Mayapur. Devotees would approach people door to door and in their offices, asking them to sponsor *Bhagavad-gitas* to be delivered to their friends and relatives back home in India. The devotees were fired-up; even though the whole endeavour happened on short notice, we got 2,500 sponsorships.

All the serious devotees managed with the bare minimum time for personal requirements and were trying to fully attend our different programs. Whoever showed even a faint inclination towards *maya* would be heavily preached to by the others. Making wake-up calls for *mangala-arati* was a regular feature, and any absence would be reported with grave concern. To help him overcome his laziness, the errant devotee would be asked to sleep overnight at either our place or at the *brahmacari asrama*.

In this regard, I clearly remember one event. Once our Guru Maharaja was with us on a two-day visit, and, after a late night program, I got up early the next morning. Gopala Gauranga and Bhakta Pradeep were also up (Pradeep, from Bangladesh, worked as an ordinary helper in a ministry's kitchen, but was always chanting or reading). Both would always volunteer for all the menial tasks (and so kept the other devotees lazy).

The Matajis were to arrive later to help prepare breakfast, but we had to start cooking. I had always been very careful to never omit even a single *mangala-arati* but, rather whimsically, I decided that it wouldn't matter if I skipped *mangala-arati* just for one day. So at around 4:30 a.m. Gopala Gauranga, Pradeep and I were busy in the kitchen when Jayapataka Maharaja suddenly entered and asked, "Where is the *mangala-arati*?" I was surprised to see Maharaja up so early after such a late night program. We hurriedly arranged everything and performed the *arati* at close quarters. But I had learnt my lesson: never ever skip *mangala-arati*.

We had our first marriage ceremony when Bhaktin Alka got married to Rajeev Sharma, another dedicated devotee. From then on we tried to ensure that all new marriages were

Mercy to Preach

between devotees. We were now holding a weekly *kirtana* at a temple. The temple was a beautiful, artistic marble structure constructed by the leading Gujarati families, who, due to a history of friendship and support, enjoyed a good relationship with the Muslim ruler. While the *kirtana* went on, mainly led by me, the devotees kept on the lookout for interested people, to invite them to our programs.

We kept a database of our entire congregation. By 1995 it numbered about two hundred names. Seventy or eighty devotees attended the Friday Program (corresponding to the Sunday Program elsewhere), and around fifty were core-members. At that time some of our trained devotees had already started new *Yatras* in neighboring countries.

We started holding our Friday Programs at a local public hall. We were the only group committed to pay the rent for the hall and for one year we enjoyed a virtual monopoly of it. We would hang up pictures and posters and we would set up a book table selling ISKCON books, tapes, and paraphernalia. While the lecture was going on, many devotees would wait like hawks near the entrance to swoop on potential “customers” and market Krishna consciousness to them.

During the weekday *kirtana* at the temple we would give out pamphlets with messages chosen from *Sri Namamrita*, the collection of quotations from Srila Prabhupada’s books on the glories of the holy name.

Whatever activity regular ISKCON temples were doing, we did not fail to follow. We very much wanted to be as close to the real thing as possible. But little did we know that we had not yet even touched the beginning of a truly ecstatic journey in Krishna consciousness...



Love and Trust in Action

Jayapataka Maharaja visited us in April 1996 and we held a wonderful *smriti Vyasa-puja* celebration. The highlight was a play based on the story of the devoted *grihastha* couple that was ready to sacrifice everything, including the wife's chastity, for the sake of serving their guru, Sri Ramanujacarya. Of course, in the end, the merchant who was after the wife surrenders to their guru and nothing untoward happens. The play ended on a very devotional note, and Maharaja was moved by our tiny attempts to glorify the *guru-tattva*. He folded his palms to Sri Ramanujacarya and wiped his eyes seeing the extent of sacrifice the disciples were ready to undertake for their guru. We were happy to have pleased him.

Later that day Maharaja showed us a book about a Christian Cell Church. Through regular weekly meetings and a systematic plan for growth, they had succeeded in rapidly expanding their membership.

It seemed a little vague to me at first. We were so comfortable with our style of preaching. The mind found excuses to avoid it. "Oh, it may work for the Christians since they don't have many rules and regulations or much philosophy to preach," and so on. But I was interested and kept an open mind to Maharaja's brief summary.

He described that as the cells of a body grow by constant division, the preaching cells grew till they reached fifteen members. Then they split into two and started to increase again. Among the advantages of small groups were closer relationships and better monitoring of the spiritual understanding of the members.

I couldn't imagine our doing that sort of thing since we took large gatherings to be indicators of our success in preaching. We were quite successful at the moment, or so I thought. All these complacent, self-assuring ideas were soon smashed.

While driving to the airport, Jayapataka Maharaja turned to my husband and asked how we could increase our preaching and make more devotees. He was also our GBC, and was always encouraging us to improve our service for the *Yatra*. Door-to-door preaching—selling *Bhagavad-gitas* as we had done during the book distribution marathon—seemed very risky as local people could object to our aggressively preaching a different religion.

"What about cell preaching?" I ventured.

Maharaja looked at my husband, who said, "Yes, Guru Maharaja, we will do it."

Maharaja seemed pleased. It was gratifying to see our Guru Maharaja happy, but we had to go back and figure out how to get it going. The whole thing was barely on a conceptual level for us, yet we had already committed to implement it!

My husband was dead serious in his commitment; he lost no time and discussed the concept with the other devotees. Three enthusiastic devotees volunteered to experiment with cell preaching. One was a bachelor named Bhakta Hemanth, an engineer, now initiated as Hemanga Caitanya Dasa. He was eager to try running a program for some of the workers and technical staff of his company. We chalked out a simple, structured program for him to conduct: *kirtan*, *Bhagavad-gita* discussion, *japa*, and *prasadam*, but also a lot of personal interaction with the members.

Even this rudimentary form of what later became known as Bhakti-vriksha groups seemed to work miracles. All the people involved just blossomed under the new care and attention and became regular members. They committed themselves to chanting and became enthusiastic to perform services like washing the pots and cleaning *arati* trays, chopping vegetables, cleaning and so on. Although not rich, they even started to contribute every month towards the *prasadam*.

It was amazing to see Bhakta Hemanth perform this empowered miracle, as he was one of the most junior devotees among us. While giving us his weekly reports he would admit that he felt that he was not doing anything by himself, but that guru and Gauranga were guiding him.

Soon a very dedicated family consisting of Bhaktajana Priya Prabhu, his wife Manorakshi Mataji, and their teenage daughter Kala Sudha Devi Dasi volunteered to start a weekly *grihastha* cell. We arranged that all the new, not-so-committed members of the congregation would attend it.

The members reveled in the shower of personal attention and warmth they received, something not possible in a large gathering. They also took part in the philosophical discussions. The ones who liked to argue were eventually won over by the family's tireless loving efforts to draw them into Krishna consciousness. Bhaktajana Priya and his family would also visit the cell members at home. They would counsel them on personal problems, pick them up if they needed transport and so on. Their *prasadam* was sumptuous. Kala Sudha inspired the teenagers to become more committed. We were amazed to see the changes in their group members. Those we had previously considered not very serious, who were taking a long time to advance, were showing tremendous progress, enthusiasm and dedication. We began to see how apt the term "Love and Trust Groups" was, the name our Guru Maharaja had given to the cells.

This initial name got converted to the Sanskrit "Bhakti-vriksha," the tree of *bhakti*. The name Bhakti-vriksha was favored over "cell" because the cell analogy simply talks about division, but the analogy of branching includes keeping the connection with the root. Another reason is that the name "cell" is already used by other organizations, whereas

the analogy of the tree of love of Godhead is from our scriptures. We find the Bhakti-vriksha in *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita, Adi-lila*, Chapter Nine, wherein Srila Krishnadasa Kaviraja Gosvami says:

“I take shelter of the Supreme Personality of Godhead Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, who Himself is the tree of transcendental love of Krishna, its gardener and also the bestower and enjoyer of its fruits . . . Thus the Lord brought the desire tree of devotional service to this earth and became its gardener. He sowed the seed and sprinkled upon it the water of His will.”
(*Sri Caitanya-caritamrita, Adi-lila*, 9.6 and 9.9)

Lord Caitanya and His movement are compared to the tree of devotion, the Bhakti-vriksha. Srila Prabhupada writes in the summary of *Adi-lila*, Chapter Nine:

“It is figuratively described that both the tree itself and the trunk of the tree are Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu... The tree surrounds the entire world, and the flowers of the tree are to be distributed to everyone. In this way the tree of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu intoxicates the entire world.”

Srila Prabhupada also says:

“Our International Society for Krishna Consciousness is one of the branches of the Caitanya tree.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamrita, Adi-lila*, 9.18, purport)

Every small group of ISKCON’s congregation is therefore a branch of the branch, stemming from the tree of *bhakti* of Lord Caitanya. The Bhakti-vriksha is a type of Nama-hatta group geared toward branching out. In the tree a branch of a certain thickness branches off into two, and this branching keeps going on until the tree has thousands and thousands of branches, all connected to the tree. Similarly the Bhakti-vriksha group can grow and expand into thousands of groups. Lord Caitanya is the trunk of the tree, and even one single branch from the Caitanya tree can grow and form thousands of sub-branches, small twigs, leaves, and so on. We are part of the Caitanya Tree. This is the ISKCON branch and Srila Prabhupada is our connection.

Soon other devotees were also persuaded to start their own Bhakti-vriksha groups. But first my husband, Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu, conducted a seminar on self-purification. This was to set the proper mood and preaching disposition. Problems would be inevitable without proper understanding of the philosophy. The correct attitude for the group leader was clarified, as taking a position of leadership in the hierarchy of the Yatra could bring pride and dissidence, which would destroy everything.

The seminar dealt with leadership qualities, emphasizing that one should consciously cultivate the service attitude and that leaders should give up the enjoying mood, which is so detrimental to devotional service. They should be proper role models for the

new members of their groups. The service mood is essential; therefore the official term for group leader is Bhakti-vriksha group servant-leader. It was heartening to see the enthusiasm and paradigm shift this presentation generated.

Previously, despite enforcing strict *sadhana*, conducting many programs, giving close association and supervising the devotees, it was difficult to motivate them to take up new initiatives and responsibilities, though they would always oblige when requested to do service. Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu always kept delegating responsibility to train everybody, but the feeling of ownership was largely missing. Those with leadership qualities shone while the rest plodded along. We couldn't stop their lingering material attachment or check their minds from straying into *prajalpa*, idle talk.

Among the six new group leaders were Vighnanasana Govinda, the most senior devotee, who worked in the sales division of a successful automobile marketing company, and Mukunda Murari, a dedicated devotee trained by Vighnanasana Govinda and his colleague at work. The others were Sarvalokesvara Krishna, Bhakta Venkatesh, Sukirti Krishna and Bhaktajana Priya, who ran a Bengali-speaking group.

Every weekend we had the "Group Leaders' Bhakti-vriksha" wherein each leader reported his experiences of the week. We then planned our strategies based on their needs, considering strengths and weaknesses. We wanted to maintain a good quality of preaching in all the groups. Mukunda Murari Das came up with the suggestion of using passages from *The Science of Self Realization* for the beginners. When thirty-six sessions on The Science of Self Realization were completed, I started writing questions for covering the *Bhagavad-gita*.

Questions were framed following the standard format of the three phases of discussion: Discovery, Understanding and Application. These three steps are natural parts in a well-structured discussion. They help to clarify the topic, grasp it better, and make it more relevant.

For Discovery, after the group reads the verse and purport (or an excerpt from a book), the devotee leading the discussion asks basic questions to identify the main theme and highlight the main points: "What are the main ideas?" "What do you find most interesting in what we just read?" "Anyone found new knowledge?" These questions are easy to answer as the answer is found directly in the passage. This phase also establishes boundaries: this is what we discuss today.

The phase called Understanding helps to comprehend more clearly and deeply the subject. The facilitator asks, for instance: "Is there anything not clear about what we've read?" It's also a good time for clarifying definitions, for explaining Sanskrit words, and for bringing up related passages and analogies.

The goal of the part called "Application" is to make the topic relevant to the devotees. The facilitator asks questions such as: "What does this knowledge means to us?" "How

to apply it in everyday life?” “Any personal experience in this area?” These and similar questions help devotees realize how to apply the knowledge of the scriptures to shape their internal and external life accordingly.

This way of discussing the philosophy produces lively exchanges and the scriptures become more meaningful to the participants. Since the Bhakti-vriksha Manual had not been published yet, we had to improvise based on the main principles that our Guru Maharaja presented.

Jayapataka Maharaja had conducted a seminar where he demonstrated the dynamics of facilitating a discussion. This presentation on the skills needed to make everyone participate in the discussion was a real eye-opener. It was a revolutionary change from the normal pattern of delivering a one-way class, in which there was no awareness about the recipients’ views, understandings, or doubts, since not everyone felt confident to ask questions. In a standard class, often due also to the sheer numbers in the audience, the personal touch is missing. We could see how enlivened all the participants felt when their views were considered important and they felt encouraged to speak.

We started to plan to start a ladies’ Bhakti-vriksha as well. Manorakshi Mataji volunteered to start one, but she soon had to give up due to poor health. So it did not take off immediately.

The preaching mood was getting well established in all the devotees, Still we figured we would have to continue with the present structure and number of groups for many months to come.

Our old friend Rasa Krida Parayana Dasa, who was now heading the congregation in a neighboring country, told us of how a couple of relatively junior devotees from his *Yatra* had started nice preaching after moving to yet another country.

This got us thinking. We decided we could also bring a lot of “young blood” into the Bhakti-vriksha Program, give them basic training to ensure a minimum standard, and then let them grow as they learned through experience, guided by senior devotees.

We remembered how Srila Prabhupada mentioned that he made devotees sit in their positions first and then trained them, unlike in the material world where, for example, a high-court judge has to study rigorously and then, after years of experience, is promoted to the high chair.

Therefore we decided to split the Bhakti-vrikshas, and overnight the groups multiplied from eight to twenty-four.

A lot of internal, personal growth had to accompany the external growth of the Bhakti-vriksha groups. The change meant allowing and empowering junior devotees to take responsibilities on a level that previously was thought impossible. We also had to allow

them to learn from their mistakes. Our role was becoming more and more supervisory in nature.

We had to be encouraging without being over-protective. We had to be tolerant and yet remain alert, keeping our eyes and ears open to what was happening, and guide properly. We had to have enormous patience. We had to endure the errant behavior of one or two Bhakti-vriksha leaders who showed signs of separatism and overconfidence. We allowed them time to grow out of their immature follies by preaching to them and guiding them whenever possible.

There was an enthusiastic young couple, and a senior devotee was training them. They were closely in touch with this devotee and were looking up to him. However, after they started leading their own groups, they felt that they were doing much better than most devotees. This heady sense of success made them criticize others, which created unpleasantness and hurt the devotees' feelings. We had to see that they understood the value of humility, but tactfully, without dampening their enthusiasm. We also had to ensure that they would accept corrections to their implementation of Bhakti-vriksha. We arranged that their groups would regularly receive senior devotees who would, in private, suggest how they could improve their performance. We also made sure that the couple would regularly report their progress to their supervisor.

There was a rebellious character, very good in his *sadhana* and intelligent too, who wanted to maintain his independence. He would not attend any leaders' meetings, would not report to his supervisors, and would not ask permission if he wanted to start something new. Once, on a holiday, when we had organized a program for everyone, this devotee had quietly arranged his own program and was inviting the other devotees as well.

Normally all the devotees would first consult us if they wanted to host a big gathering, so that their program would not clash with other existing plans. There was no coercion on our part, and almost all the devotees spontaneously felt that sort of loyalty to authority and commitment to group harmony. Exceptions were always allowed when necessary.

So when devotees told us about the other program and asked which one they should attend, we explained to them the correct etiquette. We requested that devotee to have his program on another day so that more devotees could attend it, and so that we would not be deprived of his association at our program. But he went ahead with his plan anyway.

We did not react to his behavior and continued showing him plenty of tolerance and love. Later on he understood his mistake when we explained it to him, and has mellowed out a lot since then.

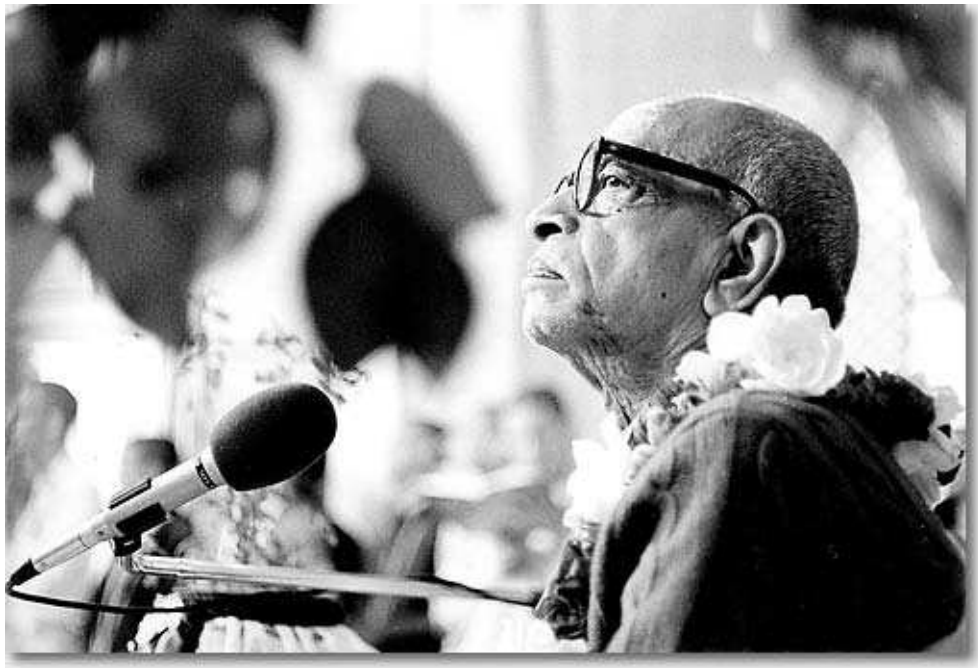
There were one or two devotees who were normally very touchy. They would easily feel hurt, slighted or ignored. We would talk with them, trying to analyze the situation

Love and Trust in Action

together, trying to help them realize when it was just a misunderstanding. We kept ourselves open to accept our mistakes and ready to rectify them. This mood created a bond of trust and love.

After all, all the above devotees were leaders too and so they began to understand the importance of members cooperating with the leader. From the dissension faced in their own groups they realized that being a leader could be a difficult and thankless task.

In any case, the same principles of love and trust that worked wonderfully in the Bhakti-vriksha groups at the micro-level worked wonderfully at the macro-level also.



Reaching Out

Once Jayapataka Maharaja, who serves as the Congregational Development Minister of ISKCON, gave us a videocassette featuring a talk by a Christian pastor in Korea. This pastor was totally sold out to cell preaching. He spoke about the miracles it did to both the quantity and quality of his Christian congregation

The pastor said there were two kinds of churches: the cell church, whose whole focus was on growth and engagement of the congregation (all active in small groups), and the program based church, that might conduct cells, but only among many other activities and projects (centered on church building).

Churches purely promoting cells witnessed an unprecedented boom in their membership and patronage, while other churches found their membership dwindling. The results of cell churches were astounding. Their members were multiplying by the thousands even in a modern city like Seoul. They were spreading so much faith in God in an age of skepticism and hedonism.

But any change brings resistance from those used to the status quo, and, despite all the evidence, some of the Christian old guard were against changing their strategy. They didn't see the need to adapt to the times to remain relevant; they didn't realize they were becoming obsolete.

The enthusiasm and dedication of the speaker was contagious. He was not a fanatic rabble-rouser, but a humane, compassionate missionary with a pleasant sense of humor. He spoke of how regular sermons did not deeply touch people's lives. Normally the real person hides himself behind the Bible, so to speak. But in a cell group, where people interact so closely, one can no longer hide behind the Bible. One cannot just discuss the scripture and let it remain at the theoretical level.

The pastor's faith in God touched our hearts; his preaching spirit and vision inspired us. If only we could expand Krishna consciousness like that!

We had a large group of Bengali devotees who had to be trained in the Bhakti-vriksha Program. Initially we met with some opposition, since they found the structured method of learning Krishna consciousness similar to that of a classroom. They preferred a very long *kirtana* session, a lecture that did not address or probe anyone directly, and, of course, sumptuous *prasadam*. But once the seniors among them were trained in the

Bhakti-vriksha method and started implementing it, they began to really appreciate the enormous good it was doing them. They valued the discipline it was instilling, making them more serious and committed. Their sentimental ideas became replaced by serious Krishna conscious considerations based on sound knowledge.

The Bhakti-vriksha system is designed to help people become sincere devotees and preachers, and to assist them in building strong spiritual friendships. The weekly meeting begins with *sat-sanga*, or the "icebreaker" session, where members are asked to share their views on some light topic relating to them. On the first day self-introduction might be used, otherwise the icebreaker could consist of questions like:

- “What would you do if you’d receive ten million dollars today?”
- “What would you do if you knew that in one minute there would be a terrible earthquake?”

This allows members to share some light moments with one another; it reveals something of their personality, and it makes everyone comfortable to open up and participate in the rest of the meeting. As the members’ outlook becomes more devotional, the icebreaker questions turn more directly spiritual:

- “Share on something that happened during last week that you feel grateful to Krishna for.”
- “Tell us about the devotee who introduced you to Krishna consciousness.”

After a few weeks, when the devotees had settled down a bit, we also encouraged them to read Srila Prabhupada’s books during the week and, as icebreaker, we asked them to share about one point that had made an impact on them. Initially in some cases the group leader would be the only one to speak, but gradually more and more people started talking, as they discovered the joy of sharing with others and of being recognized by the group. For those members who did not feel confident to share their scriptural study, we continued with other types of icebreakers.

After this we would have *kirtana* for ten to fifteen minutes, while devotees were encouraged to offer incense to the Deities of Gaura-Nitai and Jagannatha, Subhadra and Baladeva, or to Deity pictures. This part was a very popular event of the program, especially with children.

A *japa* session would follow, with all members chanting one round of the Hare Krishna maha-mantra. Before chanting we read a paragraph from the book *Sri Namamrita*, a compilation of Srila Prabhupada’s quotes on chanting.

Next the discussion, which we called "spiritual edification session," engaged the devotees in discussing a passage from one of Srila Prabhupada’s books, *The Science of Self*

Reaching Out

Realization or Bhagavad-gita As It Is. The discussion used questions facilitating participation and proper understanding. If the group was larger than eight members we divided it into smaller groups to ensure greater involvement. Indian ladies, for example, may feel shy to talk openly in front of men and therefore we formed a sub-group just for them. In smaller groups everyone gets greater confidence to speak up. The smaller groups would then come back together and share their insights.

The group leader also gives his input so that the rest of the members are enriched by his knowledge. But he is more of a facilitator, his main function being to get everyone to participate. In this way he doesn't necessarily have to be expert at giving lectures, although he certainly has to know sufficient philosophy to answer basic questions. If he does not know something, he can always refer to his seniors or research in the books and provide the answer next week. People appreciate that he is backed up by the support of senior devotees. He doesn't have to project himself as all-knowing.

We have seen that facilitating such discussions generates in group leaders great self-confidence and spiritual advancement, so that they progress to the point of giving formal lectures if needed, which happens especially when they take more responsibility in the hierarchy of the Bhakti-vriksha organization.

After the discussion we would have the preaching session, with the aim to infuse the mood of preaching, to enthuse the devotees to act compassionately toward suffering humanity. After reading a quotation from the book *Preaching Is the Essence*, a compilation of Srila Prabhupada's quotations on preaching, the group leader shares his experiences of preaching from the previous week. Other devotees are encouraged and assigned small tasks, contacting new people, inviting them for the program, visiting some new contacts and befriending them, or making phone calls to prospective members.

Such assignments generate a lot of enthusiasm for preaching and cultivate in everyone, from the very beginning, a preaching mood.

Finally, *prasadam* is served. Normally, after a few meetings, the members themselves would volunteer to serve and to help cleaning up, since they knew the amount of work their host was undertaking.

Somehow all the leaders of the Yatra take great pride in serving good, even if not too elaborate, *prasadam*. As we know by experience, *prasadam* is one of the chief attractions for the participants, at least in the beginning stages. Also, since most of our programs took place in the evening after a hard day's work, people should be spared the task of cooking at home, if we want them to attend the meeting without too much stress. Very soon group members started to volunteer to help cooking and bringing *prasadam*, so the burden on the group leader was reduced.

Even bachelor group leaders were enthusiastic to personally cook for their members; they felt great joy from this. We had Bengali-speaking devotees who did menial jobs

Reaching Out

and were comparatively poor, nonetheless they used to share generously their meager earnings. They felt that this regular contribution to Krishna was part of their devotional service.

After a while—it could take one, two or more months—the group leader was able to identify an intern or assistant, a trainee-leader to be trained to be a group leader himself. The group leader gradually assigns more responsibilities to the trainee, while also explaining to him some of the intricacies of the program and various aspects of interpersonal alchemy.

When the membership reached fifteen, and the trainee-leader was well trained, the Bhakti-vriksha group was divided into two—we called it "multiplication." The trainee started taking charge of the new group and the existing group leader kept leading the remaining members.

To help the members advance step by step, we applied the different levels of the "Siksa Program," gradually increasing stages of commitment toward a Krishna conscious lifestyle, up to becoming qualified for initiation. (I will explain this in the next chapter in more detail.)

In other formats of congregational preaching like Nama-hatta, the focus is often on the main preacher, and others become more spectators than participants, so to speak. This makes them more passive, which doesn't help in making rapid advancement. They don't feel "forced" to think and reflect on what they have learnt, and so forget more easily. Often there is no plan to ensure systematic development of the devotees; everything is left to individual initiative.

Besides, in the absence of a system of close supervision and monitoring, every Nama-hatta group is only as good as its leader; it's hard to ensure a uniform standard for all Nama-hattas. On the other hand, in a well-managed Bhakti-vriksha Program, the structure ensures a minimum standard.

Often in other forms of congregational preaching there is a lack of empowerment of congregational members, a lack of consistent effort to enthuse them to in turn become leaders and preachers. The Bhakti-vriksha system is designed to train every member to become an active preacher.

The Bhakti-vriksha Program—when properly applied—is controlled by love and trust, rather than by an overbearing, high-handed style of leadership. That is why it expands so swiftly, penetrating all the different strata of society.

An important aspect of the Bhakti-vriksha Program is that each cluster of groups should be regularly supervised by a sector-servant, or *Upachakra Pati*, who looks after three to five groups. After Bhaktajana Priya Prabhu, a sector-servant, had to leave the country, his Bhakti-vriksha work was ably continued by Caitanya Avatari Prabhu. Interestingly,

although Caitanya Avatari had been working under Bhaktajana Priya in the accounts division of the same firm, Bhaktajana Priya considered Caitanya Avatari his senior mentor since he was the one who had preached to him and brought him to Krishna consciousness.

The Bengali-speaking leaders learnt the philosophy and techniques of Bhakti-vriksha preaching very well, but perennial misunderstandings and quarrels plagued their camp. Caitanya Avatari had to duplicate all our previous efforts to raise *sadhana* standards and to deal with philosophical misunderstandings. He would conduct *ista-gosthis* to train the devotees to deal better with each other. He also made himself available by phone whenever he was at home. Even after marrying he kept giving his time and attention and looked after his sector very well. He was in constant touch with us, consulting us and reporting the progress made.

Surprising as it may sound, we could inspire these Bengali devotees only because they were preaching as Bhakti-vriksha group leaders, which brought them immense purification. By the end of 1997 there were eighteen Bengali-speaking groups.

The rate of spiritual advancement of the Bengali devotees was tremendous. Previously they might have been sentimentally attached to some rituals which they were accustomed to, and might have given more importance to external demonstrations of devotion like tears, rolling on the floor, etc., and might have preferred to read *Caitanya-caritamrta* before *Bhagavad-gita* or *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. Above all, some felt they had an exclusive right to Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu that gave them an edge over everyone.

Bhakti-vriksha brought about a quantum change in their consciousness. They started to develop humility, willingness to learn, and an enormous desire to preach and expand. No longer were they interested only in long *kirtanas*; they became disciplined and kept to the timings of the Bhakti-vriksha meetings. Discipline in devotional life became very appealing to them, and they strove to finish the late-night programs on time, so they could get up early next morning for *mangala-arati* and *japa*.

To ensure strict *sadhana* standards for all the leaders of the *Yatra* we had weekly *ista-gosthis* where all their *sadhana* problems would be discussed threadbare, with suggestions and encouragement given by my husband and me. Those with good *sadhana* related the benefits they had experienced, and that reinforced everyone's determination.

The first challenge was the *mangala-arati*. The bachelors had to do a full day's job, maintain their house, cook and do their shopping. Besides they would also preach, attend study programs, and visit their group members in the evenings. Therefore they found it difficult to wake up on time, finish *japa*, perform *mangala-arati* at 5 a.m., cook and leave for work by 7:30. Most of them came home for lunch, took rest for one hour in the afternoon as is custom in these torrid parts, and returned to work at 4 p.m., to work until 7:30.

Reaching Out

We had to urge them to go to bed by 10 p.m. It is said that in the hours before midnight the body gets the most restful sleep, and so sleeping early makes the body fresh, even with fewer hours of sleep. Adding a nap in the afternoon would ensure that the body was fully rested. We were following this program of rest and therefore everyday we were able to wake up at 3 a.m., finish our chanting and perform the morning program by 5 a.m.

Before we used to meet together for *mangala-arati*, but in order not to raise suspicion in the minds of the policemen who patrolled the streets at night and throughout dawn, we had different *mangala-arati* centers for devotees living nearby. They would get together, perform *mangala-arati* and have a mini *Bhagavatam* class. This would last only 45 minutes; then they would chant *japa* for one hour and a half, or, if they had to cook, they could chant at least 12 rounds, completing the rest in the afternoon.

Preparing the *arati* paraphernalia at night, ready for worship, made it psychologically easier to get out of bed. Otherwise the extra work could induce one to skip *mangala-arati*.

The *grihasthas* were more fortunate, as they had the assistance of their wives in all these activities. Of course, they also had to make sure to go to bed by 10 p.m., which those with small children found difficult. By taking rest in the afternoon they could counter the lack of sleep at night.

Amidst all this they had to find time for studying *Bhagavad-gita* and *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. People chalked out different plans and set aside time for their reading. Devotees with good *sadhana* shared their realizations on how their consciousness felt excellent, how they were very efficient in their work and in their preaching, and how they were able to keep *maya* at bay. This encouraged all others to become more serious.

After the Bengalis, the next linguistic group we worked on were the Malayalis, people from Kerala, South India. They formed a large part of the Indian expatriate population in this Muslim country. We had already a couple of senior Malayali devotees, Sukirti Krishna Prabhu and Gunabhadra Prabhu, but since they had few non-devotee friends and no regional or linguistic bias, preaching to Malayalis had not yet developed much.

Sukirti Krishna was one of the earliest devotees of the *Yatra* and was quiet and soft-spoken. His wife, Malini Kanti was also humble and dedicated. Though small, their house was full of spiritual activities and one felt very comfortable there because of their Krishna consciousness and their warm hospitality. They had a small altar with Their Lordships Gaura-Nitai and Jagannatha, Subhadra and Baladeva. Although Sukirti Krishna and Malini Kanti were fully occupied in different devotional engagements, they were feeling that they were not doing enough and would keep begging for more service. They were excellent group leaders, very caring and parental in their approach.

Focusing on reaching out into the Malayalam community quickly brought fruits. Harilal Nair for instance, a software professional, had been introduced to Krishna consciousness

before his marriage, and was keen that his wife, Bindu, join him in his spiritual pursuit. Although she was not opposed to the idea, she found excuses to avoid attending programs both back home, in Trivandrum, Kerala, and in another country where they were stationed earlier.

They started attending the Bhakti-vriksha group of Sukirti Krishna and Malini Kanti, and advanced rapidly under the personal care of Caitanya Avatari, the devotee guiding them.

Harilal and Bindu also benefited from our other programs and study groups. They soon became group leaders. Bindu's quick advancement was astounding. Harilal himself was amazed to see her enthusiasm. Although Bindu had always been a little selfish and self-centered, being the only child in her family, she was now ready to share her house, her books, and her cassettes with the group members. She was also tirelessly and selflessly caring for them, by regularly calling, counseling, and preparing tasty *prasadam* for them..

Harilal and Bindu took a vow to make one hundred Malayali devotees. They dedicatedly attended our weekly public *kirtana* programs and would meet all the visitors. They would pass on the names of non-Malayalis to other devotees, and would invite the Malayalis to their house for their Bhakti-vriksha meeting.

Their dedication and determination ensured their success. They soon began their second group. They had one for *grihasthas* and one for bachelors. Bindu quit her good job at a travel agency to care for her son and progress in Krishna consciousness. She was bubbling with enthusiasm and even Jayapataka Maharaja was surprised to see her preaching spirit. More Malayali devotees joined and soon their sector, overseen by Caitanya Avatari, had grown to eleven groups.

Hindi was another linguistic area to be developed. Here we had a very sincere and dedicated devotee in Ashok Krishna Prabhu who single-handedly took over. Starting from the first group, that of Hemanga Caitanya Dasa, Ashoka Krishna expanded, involving also people from the working class. He brought the number of Hindi-speaking groups to twelve, also by multiplying overpopulated groups that had exceeded the recommended limit of fifteen members.

Following the expansion of the groups we appointed more *Upachakra-patis* (sector-servants), overseeing the activities of three or more groups. These supervisors visit their groups during meetings as observers, mingling with the members as just another participant. Later on they share their observations with the group servant-leader and, if needed, offer suggestions for correction, allowing him to implement the changes by himself.

The sector-servants gets monthly reports from their group leaders and look after the interests of the entire sector, being in touch with the devotees and conducting regular meetings, and by receiving feedback.

Reaching Out

Vighnanasana Govinda Prabhu (ten groups), Mukunda Murari Prabhu (eight) and Caitanya Avatari Prabhu (three) looked after the English-speaking sectors. They and Ashok Krishna Das were our four sector-servants at that time, around the end of 1997.

We called the office holders "sevakas" (servants), to emphasize that at every level of the Bhakti-vriksha structure functioning in a leadership role means accepting the responsibility to serve the Vaisnavas. Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura, in his humility and sagacity, described his role in the Nama-hatta organization as the "sweeper of the market place," the person who keeps the market clean from philosophical deviations and impure attitudes.

In the Bhakti-vriksha system the mood of service and selflessness is the qualification to take on more responsibility. There is no question of having a controlling mood in executing one's service. Fear just can't motivate people to become effective messengers of love. The devotees can remain enthused to spread the loving message of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu only due to their loving obligation to the Lord and His devotees.

Besides regular Bhakti-vriksha activities we were also running eight childrens' programs. These weekly programs were structured and serious in content. We trained the children to chant *arati* songs, *kirtanas*, and *Bhagavad-gita slokas*. They would learn *Bhagavatam* stories and Lord Caitanya's pastimes. They studied the philosophy of the *Bhagavad-gita* through questions especially designed for them. We also trained them to perform plays and dances. Many of the children also attended our regular weekend programs.

It must be mentioned that all the preaching efforts of the men were ably supported and assisted by their wives, who played a major role in caring for the members of the groups. The ladies were also conducting the children's programs self-sufficiently. However, Jayapataka Maharaja was keen that matajis should become Bhakti-vriksha leaders in their own right, too.

Two Matajis, Gaurangi Mataji and Jaya Rasesvari Mataji started conducting two *grihastha* Bhakti-vrikshas. Gaurangi Gopi, the young, newly wed wife of Vighnanasana Govinda, had been introduced to Krishna consciousness only after her marriage. She used to work in a prominent watch-making company in India and held a diploma in electronic engineering. But she gave up all desires for a professional career and opted for focusing on maintaining a Krishna conscious household.

Jaya Rasesvari Mataji was working as a secretary in a successful firm. She was married and had a young daughter. Although her husband was not interested in Krishna consciousness, she was very dedicated and spent all her free time at the office doing Krishna conscious work. She would read books, speak to devotees on the phone, transcribe tapes, photocopy anything she was asked to, and preach to her colleagues. Her European boss was very accommodating as long as she completed her office work.

The matajis' preaching was undeveloped mainly due to transportation difficulties. Distances were great, and since taxis had no meter reading, fares were arbitrary. In this

Reaching Out

country women rarely went out by themselves; it was considered unsafe to travel alone by taxi or even public buses.

But this was no excuse to leave the vast potential for preaching untapped. So to motivate and train all our budding lady devotees, I decided to personally go and start programs in different locations of the city. By Krishna's arrangement, we found an old and affable taxi driver who was willing to be engaged any time of the day, and who could be contacted at home by telephone.

I wasted no time and asked him to take me to different places in the city where our lady devotees would gather their neighbors to attend the programs. At that time all this seemed revolutionary indeed. We pioneered the concept of "Outreach Bhakti-vriksha," an intermediate program that we held for a month or two before the members became comfortable with the full Bhakti-vriksha meeting format.

Initially, what motivated us was our observation that other religious groups were popular because of singing *bhajans* and *kirtanas* and reciting some *slokas* glorifying demigods. So we started inviting complete strangers, but Hindus and of Indian origin, to a *bhajan* and *Bhagavad-gita sloka* program.

People did respond well to this invitation. Most of them were pious, were looking for some religious engagement, and *Bhagavad-gita* is a scripture respected by all Hindus. One might think that living in a different cultural milieu induced them to come, due to nostalgia of their home country, but certainly that was not the only reason. We say this because our preachers, during their visits back home in India, received the same kind of response from their neighbors and other casual acquaintances. The same holds true in countries like Canada and USA.

We began with a ten-minute *kirtana* and continued with songs from the *Vaisnava Song Book*. After explaining the meanings of the songs, we would read from the book *Gita Mahatmya*, from *Padma Purana*. There Lord Siva explains to Parvati Devi the glories and benefits of every chapter of *Bhagavad-gita* through various dramatic stories. This was very popular and made our audience receptive to *Bhagavad-gita*. Next we taught *Bhagavad-gita slokas* and translations, followed by a brief explanation. Last, we would chant one round of *japa*, after we enlightened them about the importance of the mahamantra.

This program was well received wherever we held it. The women would enthusiastically look forward to the next week's program and bring new participants. After a month or two, the more senior devotees accompanying me felt confident enough to start conducting these program themselves. New people in these Outreach Bhakti-vrikshas would gradually become regulars and we could then switch to the regular Bhakti-vriksha format.

By February 1998, we had a total of sixty regular Bhakti-vriksha groups, eight children's programs, and eight lady's Outreach Bhakti-vrikshas.

Honeymoon with Bhakti-vriksha

There was a surge of enthusiasm and happiness in all the devotees as we continued our romance with the Bhakti-vriksha system. We did have to plan and do a lot of hard work, but it didn't seem like labor at all, as is natural for one in love. This was especially so when there was so much reciprocation by way of results.

The ladies' success in conducting Outreach Bhakti-vrikshas opened new avenues for expansion. Some leaders had felt the need for a program for beginners, as some new people hesitated to immediately delve deeply into the philosophy. Such people needed a few introductory sessions; they needed to be cultivated and prepared with smaller doses of Krishna consciousness, before launching into the full Bhakti-vriksha format. The Outreach Bhakti-vrikshas fulfilled this need.

These programs also gave us the chance to engage junior devotees in preaching and since preaching is such a potent way to advance rapidly, they would be ready to start a regular Bhakti-vriksha group by the time their members were ready for one. There was great enthusiasm among the preachers when we introduced this approach, as it opened up a lot of potential for expansion.

We targeted to start at least one Outreach Bhakti-vriksha for every full-fledged Bhakti-vriksha group. This meant that we could double ourselves without waiting for the classic way of expanding a group through multiplication into two groups.

The maximum time we gave the preachers to convert the Outreaches into regular Bhakti-vriksha groups was two months. But in reality many of them took four or even six months.

The challenge we faced in this style of increasing the number of groups was that we had to artificially import a few senior devotees into the new group to make it work. A Bhakti-vriksha is ideal when it's heterogeneous and has members from different levels that can inspire and encourage one another. Otherwise the gap between the group leader and the new members takes too long to bridge.

The Bengalis, however, were very successful in introducing this system. One outcome was that they went to all the far off interior regions to preach and start regular Bhakti-vriksha groups.

After six hard days at work, late-night Bhakti-vriksha meetings, as well as other weekly programs like *Bhagavad-gita* study, they would attend the full Friday morning program and then travel several hours by car or taxi to places in the interior for preaching and conducting Bhakti-vriksha programs. Often they would even return to the city in time for the evening program.

I must recount how the Bengali preaching, later followed by the Hindi and Malayalam preaching, began in the interior regions.

We were telling Jayapataka Maharaja about the car ride home from a neighboring country, how the countryside is very green, and so on. Ever interested in preaching, Maharaja asked if there were devotees there. At that time it seemed a far distant dream to penetrate the interior, but soon opportunities arose and the devotees eagerly seized them. Groups of people were already congregating in these areas for their own cultural or religious functions. Our devotees would penetrate such groups and preach to the attendees to take up Krishna consciousness. The devotees would pick out a serious person from the group and make him the one to coordinate the group's activities.

The Bangladeshi devotees were mainly drawn from the labor class: tailors, carpenters, small shop owners, houseboys, newspaper delivery boys, and car mechanics. There were a few jewelers and other businessmen, and one or two educated office-workers.

- Madhava Krishna Prabhu, a jeweler having his own business, was a dynamic and enterprising devotee. He was a gifted speaker and could quote the scriptures well. He was fully dedicated to Krishna consciousness and preaching. Although his family lived with him, his house was open to everyone at all times. All the Bengali programs were conducted at his place. Devotees were welcome to stay with him whenever they liked; he never refused any service requested of him.
- Bhakta Avatari Prabhu worked in an office. He knew English and enjoyed doing all the translations and other paperwork for the Bengalis.
- Rupesvara Krishna Prabhu was a newspaper boy, but very enthusiastic and dynamic. He was managing an entire branch in the interior that was effectively preaching to all the neighboring areas.
- Amar Nitai Prabhu was also a jeweler and, apart from being an enthusiastic preacher, he was an excellent cook. He cooked for all our big programs.
- Vraja Gopinatha Prabhu was our official singer. He was a car mechanic and could drive. He would even drive to places 1,000 kilometers away, in a car lent by another devotee.
- Nirmal Krishna Prabhu owned a carpentry business and helped whenever any woodwork job was needed. He was also a generous sponsor. He and another devotee carpenter, Ramsingh, built the chariot for our Ratha-yatra. He also preached

Honeymoon with Bhakti-vriksha

enthusiastically, conducted Bhakti-vriksha groups, and turned his house into an *asrama* for the devotees.

Their enthusiasm for practicing and preaching Krishna consciousness was remarkable; they did not think twice about spending plenty of money on transportation. They were dedicated to both attending all the programs and to preaching, no matter how far from the city. They managed to rent big places in different parts of the city and country. Their programs would always end with tasty *prasadam*, painstakingly prepared with much devotion, and that was a treat everyone always looked forward to. The minute these Bengali preachers would see us, they would excitedly report about their preaching successes.

Yet we had to closely monitor them and give them a lot of counseling, because their weakness laid in petty misunderstandings and quarrels among themselves. Preaching in the Bhakti-vriksha style was already improving their practical implementation of Krishna consciousness, and they were also open to our counseling and to apply our advice in their dealings.

Our first Bengali devotee, Bhakta Pradeep, later initiated as Prana Govinda Dasa, went back to his hometown of Chittagong, Bangladesh, and single-handedly started some Bhakti-vriksha groups. He trained many devotees who became first-class preachers and who later took initiation. Some of them became full-time ISKCON preachers.

Some young boys had left their families in the villages and had agreed to stay in the city and conduct groups in various parts of the city. They were poor but their heart was set on spreading Krishna consciousness. To this day they continue their service and now there are more than forty groups in Chittagong, with many more outreach programs.

Bhakta Pradeep, who had very little academic education, due to his conviction and enthusiasm could preach with equal effectiveness to university professors, students, businessmen or to simple villagers. From Chittagong, the Bhakti-vrikshas approach has made its way to the district of Comilla, about five hours away by train.

On a holiday my husband Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu and I paid a weeklong visit to Bangladesh, undertaking a hectic preaching tour visiting our devotees and participating in the programs they had organized for us. It was amazing to witness that in the short span of two years of Bhakti-vriksha preaching hundreds of devotees had been recruited. By now they have almost two thousand.

Back in our Middle Eastern country the Malayali devotees had also taken up preaching in the interior villages. Sukirti Krishna Prabhu and Hari Madhava Prabhu, in spite of their jobs and busy preaching schedules, would, along with their wives, Malini Kanti and Bindu Malini Matajis, take the trouble to regularly visit these distant places.

Getting there involved driving between two to four hours. The cars were air-conditioned, and the tarmac was smooth, ensuring a comfortable ride. Nonetheless, and despite the

greenery that dotted the countryside, such journeys were always tedious, especially after a full five-hour weekend morning program. But arriving at our destination, greeted by a large number of smiling, loving devotees eager for association and instruction, made the whole effort worthwhile. And the grand feast they had prepared would remove all the tiresomeness of the journey.

Therefore, in spite of being *grihasthas* with small children to look after, to taste the nectar of preaching Sukirti Krishna, Hari Madhava and their wives undertook the austerity of traveling in the interior.

Caitanya Avatari Prabhu, who was overseeing both the Bengali and Malayalam sectors, was a very busy man indeed. He selflessly and tirelessly gave himself to supervising and guiding his groups. He maintained systematic records and would produce attractive, descriptive pie charts that showed at a glance the statistics of the whole *Yatra*.

Our Guru Maharaja wanted us to acknowledge the gradual improvement of new devotees by awarding them certificates according to the rounds they chanted and other spiritual standards. He had developed the Siksa Program for this purpose, and asked Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu to introduce it in the *Yatra*. The Bangalore temple sent us the various forms and materials.

Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu did express his reservations about the need for publicly acknowledging spiritual growth, which he felt was totally personal and must be unmotivated. He was also doubtful on how well the new members would respond.

Our Guru Maharaja gave the example of how in the materialistic world people like to be honored by medals, awards, and the like. This tendency could be used to nurture their interest in spiritual progression. We trusted Maharaja's experience and scheduled the inaugural Siksa ceremony to coincide with his next visit.

The Siksa Program—officially part of ISKCON Law since 1993—has five levels, gradually leading toward initiation. All over the world, many *Yatras* recognize the standards achieved by their congregational devotees and, on special days, award certificates. One can see evidence of this wide implementation from the scores reported in the "Congregational Preaching Newsletter," a quarterly publication of the Congregational Development Ministry of which I am the editor.

We printed the certificates and had the candidates fill out the forms indicating their commitment to follow the standards of one of the five levels. In different places, taking into consideration different factors and cultural conditionings, there might be slight differences in the requirements for the first two or three levels. In our *Yatra* we bestow the first level, *sraddhavan*, "person of faith," to those who commit to regularly attend the weekly meetings, accept Lord Krishna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and chant at least one round of Hare Krishna maha-mantra every day.

We give the second level, *Krishna Sevaka*, “servant of Krishna,” to those who chant at least four rounds, give up meat eating, start reading Srila Prabhupada’s books, and offer some form of service, at least in the weekly meetings.

Krishna Sadhaka, “one who follows the Krishna conscious *sadhana*,” is for those chanting minimum eight rounds. They offer all their food and give up intoxication, gambling and illicit sex. They also agree to daily perform *Tulasi-arati* and to observe Ekadasi. They must attend the weekly, joint *Bhagavatam* class, or at least the group-study of *Bhagavad-gita* conducted by a senior devotee.

The next level, *Srila Prabhupada Asraya*, “one who has taken shelter of Srila Prabhupada,” is given to those who loyally surrender to Srila Prabhupada’s teachings and standards. They chant sixteen rounds and strictly follow the four regulative principles, also avoiding onion and garlic, tea and coffee, and frivolous sports (professional sportsmen are allowed to continue). They also perform *mangala-arati* every day.

According to ISKCON Law, after at least six months of practicing on the *Srila Prabhupada Asraya* level, devotees can take formal shelter, as aspiring disciples, of an ISKCON initiating spiritual master of their choice. In the Siksa Program, this level is called *Sri Guru Carana Asraya*, “one who has taken shelter at the feet of the guru.”

After at least six months of taking formal shelter, after receiving the recommendation from their local authority, and after fulfilling the specific requirements of each guru (such as written examinations), the devotees are ready to take first initiation.

In our *Yatra* the respective group leaders interview each candidate and sign the application forms. Everything is then rechecked by the *Upachakra-patis*—sector supervisors—to ensure that all criteria are fulfilled. Finally Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu, as the *Yatra* leader, signs the certificates, vouching for the candidate’s qualification to receive such public recognition. The first four levels don’t represent a commitment to a particular ISKCON guru, and therefore Jayapataka Maharaja doesn’t hand out those certificates himself.

We also had some special certificates—based on the number of rounds they chanted—for the children attending the weekly Krishna Clubs.

The Siksa Program revealed itself very effective. It helped people to make steady progress in Krishna consciousness. Some of them previously felt that it was all or nothing. The fear of full surrender had held them back from taking the plunge, but Siksa levels allowed them to come closer to Krishna in a gradual, phased manner. The certificates recognized whatever commitment they were ready for, as a result they gained a sense of achievement at every step. They didn’t need to wait for being initiated to feel accepted as devotees.

We were amazed at the turnout. Almost everyone was eager to receive the certificates. This increased the feeling of unity among all levels of the congregation. Now we could

organize festivals and cultural programs more easily because our pool of contacts had increased. We had a wealth of talent at all levels that we simply had to harness and coordinate.

For festivals the engineers would plan structures for display, the carpenters would engage their devotee employees to finish all the work in record time—and for free—and the cooks would amazingly turn out *kitchri prasadam* for over six thousands visitors.

I began to realize the effectiveness of empowerment. Previously there was only a small group of us to do everything, which would cut out a lot of time from our *sadhana* and other devotional services. But now our output seemed to multiply with less and less effort on our part.

It is a joy to train people, help them grow, and watch them blossom. And we ourselves grow so much in the process. Bhakti-vriksha forced us to apply the principles of Krishna consciousness, otherwise there would have been no growth, and stagnation would have brought all sorts of mental and behavioral problems.

Normally we see tension in different relationships: between seniors and juniors, among peers, between authorities and the other devotees. This is basically due to lack of sufficient engagement.

In a centralized set up the number of available services is limited, so naturally one feels threatened when others wants to perform the same service. Especially those devotees who wish to be leaders may find that unless they jockey for position they cannot express their leadership qualities. Centralized setup naturally breeds envy and politics.

In such a scenario the management wants to control the devotees and feels threatened if there is criticism, rebelliousness, or ambition among the juniors. While this kind of heavy-handed management may enforce obedience among the devotees through fear, it tends to curb initiative. It renders them dull and unenthusiastic spiritually and discourages creativity, to do more and more devotional service.

The Bhakti-vriksha approach can effectively solve these problems. Bhakti-vriksha is for all practical purposes a tree because the root is below and the branches are on top. This means that the leader has to be truly a servant of all. He has to work selflessly for the spiritual upliftment of all devotees; that is his qualification to be a leader.

Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura mentions in *Godruma Kalpatavi* that the qualification to take up any post in the Nama-hatta, the marketplace of the holy name, is to have pure devotion, independently from what *varna* or *asrama* one belongs to. Pure devotion comprises eradication of all material desire, freedom from *karma* and *jnana*, and favorable service to Krishna. According to the devotion in one's heart, one has the qualification.

Therefore, unless one is ready for constant purification of one's consciousness, one cannot take up Bhakti-vriksha preaching for any extended period of time.

The Bhakti-vriksha—or “tree of devotion”—is truly transcendental because it embodies the mood of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu revealed in *Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta*:

“My name is Visvambhara, ‘one who maintains the entire universe.’ Its meaning will be actualized if I can fill the whole universe with love of Godhead.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Adi-lila* 9.7)

“By His inconceivable powers, the Lord became the gardener, the trunk and the branches simultaneously... From the trunk grew many branches, and above them innumerable others. Thus the branches of the Caitanya tree formed a cluster or society, with great branches covering all the universe.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Adi-lila* 9.12, 17-18)

Lord Caitanya says: “I am merely a gardener. I have neither a kingdom nor very great riches. I simply have some fruits and flowers that I wish to utilize to achieve piety in My life. Although I am acting as a gardener, I also want to be the tree, for thus I can bestow benefit upon all.”

Then Lord Caitanya quotes a verse spoken by Lord Krishna in Vrindavana (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 10.23.33):

“Just see how these trees are maintaining every living entity! Their birth is successful. Their behavior is just like that of great personalities, for anyone who asks anything from a tree never goes away disappointed.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Adi-lila* 9.44-46)

Srila Krishnadasa Kaviraja Gosvami explains: “Since the tree of devotional service is transcendental, every one of its parts can perform the action of all the others. Although a tree is supposed to be immovable, this tree nevertheless moves. All the parts of this tree are spiritually cognizant, and thus as they grow they spread all over the world.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Adi-lila* 9.32-33)

Then Lord Caitanya speaks: “I am the only gardener. How many places can I go? How many fruits can I pick and distribute? It would certainly be a very laborious task to pick the fruits and distribute them alone, and still I suspect that some would receive them and others would not. Therefore I order every man within this universe to accept this Krishna consciousness movement and distribute it everywhere.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Adi-lila* 9.34-36)

“The descendants of the tree (the devotees of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu) were very glad to receive this order directly from the Lord. The fruit of love of God is so delicious that wherever a devotee distributes it, those who relish the fruit, anywhere in the world, immediately become intoxicated.” (*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Adi-lila* 9.47-48)

Thus the very purpose of Bhakti-vriksha is to make devotees into preachers who will take up the work of generating more devotee preachers, thus creating a network of devotee preachers and making the prediction of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu come true.

When this mission is foremost in the devotees' mind it becomes easy to preach to them and help them get rid of their *anarthas*. In this age of Kali without this fire to preach, it is very difficult to maintain sincere, enthusiastic, transcendental loving service.

We started getting greater joy from allowing other people to do the services we were once doing ourselves. This does require a lot of purification and detachment from our own bodily and mental demands. It is easier to do all the work oneself than to inspire and train others to do it, especially when they perform it faultily at first. It requires more effort to guide and empower.

In addition, the reward for our labor is nothing material. Preaching Krishna consciousness can be a thankless job, as people sometimes don't realize the amount of love and sacrifice that goes into helping them. At times they tend to take everything for granted, failing to appreciate the value of what they receive. However, when they also apply and pass on this mood of caring and bringing up other souls, one feels satisfied that one's efforts have not gone in vain.

One has to adopt the mood of parenting children and tolerate just about anything, patiently giving all guidance and training. The results of such endeavors are always sweet, because Lord Caitanya Himself is the gardener.

So many times we have witnessed how, by surrendering to the Lord, all so-called insurmountable problems cease to exist. Whether behavioral problems or difficulties with jobs, money, or facilities for preaching. It may seem that one can't oversee and control a large and expanding *Yatra* on such idealistic principles, by Lord Caitanya's mercy it is possible—if one recognizes that the Lord is the actual gardener and enjoyer of the fruits.

We have to be equal in praise and blame, understanding that everything is temporary and fully controlled by the Lord. We have to be always amenable to correction from wherever it may come, for the Lord speaks through so many mouths.

Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-gita*, Chapter Six, Text 30: "For one who sees Me everywhere and sees everything in Me, I am never lost, nor is he ever lost to Me." This, of course, is the perfect stage of Krishna consciousness; yet, if this is our goal and ideal even in our neophyte stage we can perceive how the Lord mercifully gives us guidance and strength to overcome difficulties and tests that disturb the mind.

If we keep trying to develop this attitude we can avoid seeking respect and obedience, or expecting loving reciprocation to all our efforts; these will come automatically.

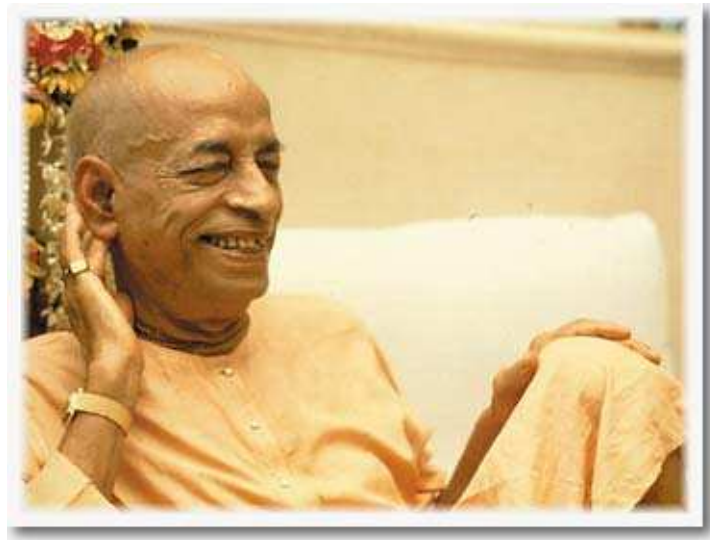
In this way all the branches and sub-branches of this glorious tree can succeed in spreading to more and more places, all over the globe. In our *Yatra*, expansion brought the need to manage and supervise in the real Krishna conscious style: love and trust.

Honeymoon with Bhakti-vriksha

Bhakti-vriksha also generates true equality among all devotees, irrespective of class, caste or place of birth. A General Manager would feel comfortable conversing with a car mechanic or a construction worker. This is actually true, because the only recognition one gets in a preaching mission is for one's devotion and sacrifice.

We have also witnessed a healthy respect for the opposite sex. The majority of devotees in our *Yatra* are youths, since only the productive workforce and their families can stay here. Among them several are yet to be married, and some are forced bachelors having their families at home, in India. Nonetheless, their dealings with the ladies show reverence and filial respect: they call every woman "*mataji*," and apparently they mean it. Men encourage and help the *matajis* by transporting them to different places for preaching and other devotional activities, by making photocopies for their groups, and so on.

Bhakti-vriksha draws out hearts. It makes people experience real love.



Settling Down

With the expansion in numbers, we had to include one more rung in the Bhakti-vriksha structure: the *Chakra-pati* or circle-servant. We appointed two *Chakra-patis* to oversee several *Upachakra-patis* or sector-servants. We had to be careful that these positions would not create any ambition or “lording tendency” in the devotees. Initially it did create some ripples of disturbance. We got some complaints of domineering behavior by the *Chakra-patis*; the circle-servants needed to develop a better service attitude and more tolerance in dealing with the devotees. They in turn had to face some rebellion from a few juniors, which was really uncalled for.

The higher you go the more responsibility you get. In the material world the perks of respect, prestige and power go along with the position. In Krishna consciousness however, one has to become more humble to serve the devotees better. Respect has to be earned through service and love for the devotees. Handing it out as a perk would be contrary to the mood of devotional service.

In Krishna consciousness, the onus is always on the more advanced devotee to reach out and make amends when the situation is tense. Since the only criterion should be the pleasure of Krishna, a senior devotee ought to agree to be humble.

We preached to the *Chakra-patis* to love even in the face of hostility and win everyone through love. There was some resentment in them about this, though not very overt; they felt it would be better for us to just exercise our authority and urge the juniors to follow their instructions. But we weren't interested in doing that since it would run contrary to the principles of love and trust.

Srila Prabhupada again and again stresses the need for humility:

“The symptoms of a devotee are meekness and humility. Although spiritually very advanced, he will always remain meek and humble, as Kaviraja Gosvami and all the other Vaisnavas have taught us by personal example. Caitanya Mahaprabhu taught that one should be more humble than the grass on the street and more tolerant than the tree. One should not be proud or falsely puffed up. In this way one will surely advance in spiritual life.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 3.29.18, purport)

“As servants of the Supreme Lord, all living entities are one, but a Vaisnava, because of his natural humility, addresses every other living entity as *prabhu*.”

Settling Down

A Vaisnava sees other servants to be so advanced that he has much to learn from them. Thus he accepts all other devotees of the Lord as *prabhus*, masters. Although everyone is a servant of the Lord, one Vaisnava servant, because of humility, sees another servant as his master.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.5.11, purport)

“Humility means that one should not be anxious to have the satisfaction of being honored by others. The material conception of life makes us very eager to receive honor from others. From the point of view of a man in perfect knowledge—who knows that he is not this body—anything, honor or dishonor, pertaining to this body is useless. One should not be hankering after this material deception.” (*Bhagavad-gita* 13.8-12, purport)

So we first had a seminar on developing service attitude and Krishna conscious egalitarianism. We explained that taking a position simply means taking on a burden of love by accepting more responsibility in serving and looking after more people.

Then we applied a two-pronged plan of action. First Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu started to personally serve *prasadam* to everyone on Fridays. The idea was that other senior devotees would follow suit and would realize that position means only accepting to serve.

The second strategy was to form committees for organizing different activities so that everyone could share responsibilities and the top people would not be unduly burdened. This change trained the juniors to take more responsibility.

The committee’s membership could be rotated or expanded at the committee’s discretion. Every committee had at least one senior devotee to guide and train the others; the senior member was also expected to consult and notify Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu about the procedures.

We formed committees, for instance, to organize festivals, to cook and distribute *prasadam*, and to look after the levels of the Siksa Program by running the various tests, including those for taking shelter and initiation. *Matajis* were present on all committees.

Establishing committees had wonderful effects. So many devotees were simultaneously getting trained in different areas of management, and the seniors were no more alienated or distanced from everyone else. Position was no longer an issue—only service to the devotees mattered. To exert their authority, the seniors had to behave properly with the juniors.

Most committees met on Friday (the Muslim holiday), after the morning program. It was hectic having all these meetings in every room of our house! After the meetings some devotees would rush off to preach in the interior. It was amazing how people’s taste for devotional service increased; nobody was idly hanging around or gossiping. Even the *grihasthas*, children in tow, were up to their necks in planning and preaching.

Settling Down

We also had a monthly *Matajis'* meeting. This was mainly for coming closer and discussing different issues that affected our spiritual and material life. We discussed our realizations, the relevance of Krishna consciousness in our lives, how to improve our chanting, and various preaching techniques. We talked about the qualities of a pure devotee and about bringing up children in Krishna consciousness, we planned menus for festivals and we shared recipes. We would end with a Krishna conscious quiz, guessing games, or dumb charades. The meetings ended with opulent *prasadam*, prepared by the host. Everyone got the chance to host meetings, which were very well attended.

The meetings were blissful as they were centered on Krishna. It was amazing to see how devoted each one of the ladies was. We found ourselves developing a better understanding of one another. This could not have happened in large gatherings, where there was no time to hear from each other or discuss our innermost issues.

We were extremely grateful to our husbands for patiently ferrying us to our destinations and back. The meetings coincided with office timings, but somehow they would manage to get off. In particular, Radha Govinda Hari Prabhu, husband of Saumya Gaurangi Mataji, must be credited for his extraordinary patience in transporting so many Matajis back and forth.

The ladies' services began to multiply. Many agreed to conduct weekend Krishna Clubs for children, with regular curriculums, and ten such clubs spread all over the city.

During a visit of Jayapataka Maharaja we enacted an all-women play. It was the pastime of Srila Narottama Das Thakura finally receiving initiation, after three years of menial service, from Srila Lokanatha Gosvami, who had initially rejected him since he did not want to accept disciples. Jayapataka Maharaja was amused to see *Matajis* acting in the role of *sannyasis*. He especially appreciated Rasamayi Devi Dasi's playing the heart-rending role of Narottama Das Thakura, and Devaki Priya Devi Dasi's acting as Lokanatha Gosvami.

Another play was written and directed by women, though the cast was all-male. This was the pastime in which Ramanujacarya's disciple Govinda demonstrated extraordinary bhakti to his guru. Matajis also performed a group song, "Ohe Vaisnava Thakura," and trained the children to sing. Such cultural activities became a regular feature of our festivals.

Whenever *prasadam* had to be prepared for visiting *sannyasis*, to foster cooperation among the *matajis* we cooked together in our kitchen. It would have been easier for the initiated *matajis* to just cook at home but we insisted that everyone come together, in spite of the austerities of bringing along small children and sharing the space and the stoves with the others. Initially there were some frayed tempers and ego-clashes between a few of us, but after we started meeting regularly and after discussing the issue in a seminar on Vaisnava etiquette, genuine cooperation and understanding began to manifest among us. Misunderstandings were sorted out with each party begging

Settling Down

forgiveness from the other. The service mood had set in so wonderfully, and it was evident from the nectarean *prasadam*.

Women were being accepted as the other half of the *Yatra*. They participated in all public programs, did *puja* at home, led *kirtanas*, preached, and looked after their *grihastha* group members like loving mothers. I gave classes and conducted seminars whenever my husband was away, and the community accepted it as normal. It is to the credit of the men that they were very encouraging and appreciative of their wives' efforts. Both parties realized how much happier they felt when they complemented each other's endeavors to serve Krishna more and more. Through these services we developed a better understanding of our spouses, probably because we focused on our spiritual qualities rather than our material differences.

Srila Prabhupada wrote to his disciple Himavati Devi Dasi on 20 December 1969: "I am especially proud how my householder disciples are preaching Lord Caitanya's Mission. This is a new thing in the history of the *Sankirtana* Movement. In India all the *acaryas* and their descendants later on acted only from the man's side. Their wives were at home because that is the system from old times that women are not required to go out. But in *Bhagavad-gita* we find that women are also equally competent like the men in the matter of Krishna Consciousness Movement. Please therefore carry on these missionary activities, and prove it by practical example that there is no bar for anyone in the matter of preaching work for Krishna Consciousness."

Jayapataka Maharaja had spoken about the example of Jahnavi Mata, the consort of Lord Sri Nityananda Prabhu, who was a great preacher in Bengal.

Hari Madhava Prabhu made the observation that a *Yatra* can flourish only if its female members are encouraged to play a major role.

We did have a few cases of husbands not interested in Krishna consciousness, but they did not totally forbid their wives' participation. They would set limits to their involvement, but having the Bhakti-vriksha meeting in the home gradually mellowed such indifferent husbands, and they became more and more cooperative, having received Lord Caitanya's mercy.

We also had to overcome the linguistic barrier, which threatened the harmony of our spiritual community. Though not openly, sometimes devotees sharing the same language became a little exclusive in their dealings. Though unintentional, this behavior discouraged devotees from other backgrounds to feel welcome in their circle.

Bhakti-vriksha is all about reaching out to every member and making them communicate with one another, especially during group discussions. This principle easily penetrated everyone's psyche, and soon the devotees naturally overcame any tendency to exclusivity. Thus everyone felt part of the larger group, the family of the entire *Yatra*. This feeling

Settling Down

extended to the whole ISKCON organization. The devotees became broadminded and non-parochial.

Devotees were advancing and more of them felt the need to begin Deity worship at home. To ensure commitment and regularity, we set *Guru Asraya* as the minimum standard for starting to practice Deity worship. Gaura-Nitai Deities were prescribed for beginners.

The devotees starting the worship would organize a big program in their home and would invite the entire Friday morning crowd. We inaugurated the worship by giving Sri Sri Gaura-Nitai an *abhiseka* with five auspicious ingredients, while the other devotees were enthusiastically singing the *Brahma-samhita*. We dressed Their Lordships with new dresses and ornaments, and after a long *kirtana* and *arati*, there would be a lecture on the significance of home worship. We would then have a huge feast, often a combination of what the Matajis' prepared at home and of the men's large-scale cooking. These ceremonies were very popular and created a sublime festive mood.

We would also perform *samskaras*—with fire *yajnas*—on occasions such as the sixth month of pregnancy (*simantonnayana*), the name-giving ceremony for the newborn (*nama-karana*), the feeding of the first cereal when the child is six month old (*anna-prasana*), the hair-cutting ceremony (*cuda-karma*), and the beginning of the child's education (*vidyarambha*). These purificatory ceremonies not only sanctified the family's pleasure in the child's progress, but also offered socio-religious opportunities to come together. New visitors also found such *samskaras* interesting.

We decentralized the celebration of festivals. Rather than creating one huge festival for the whole *Yatra*, three or more groups would jointly celebrate. We began with ten different places throughout the country, and later we went up to twenty or more.

During weekends we would explain how to maintain some uniformity throughout the festivals. All the festival centers, whether individual homes or halls in the labor camps of the industrial belt were to have beautifully decorated altars with Deities of Gaura-Nitai and Jagannatha, Subhadra and Baladeva, as well as the photographs of Sri Sri Radha-Madhava (or other ISKCON Radha-Krishna Deities), of Lord Nrisimhadeva, and of course of the *guru-parampara*.

The rooms had to be decorated with attractive pictures of Their Lordships and with posters we had made that showed different ISKCON activities. In addition we recommended putting up streamers and balloons to create a festive air.

The festival would start with a full *arati* accompanied by *kirtana*. After this there would be the lecture by one of the *Chakra-patis*. Before serving out the grand feast, cooked by initiated devotees, there would also be quizzes, skits, and often extra *bhajans*.

The devotees would give out pamphlets, on chanting or *bhakti-yoga*. They would scrupulously collect names and addresses of new contacts to invite them to the Bhakti-vriksha

Settling Down

groups. The percentage of people who actually connected to the Bhakti-vriksha Program from these programs was about 30 percent, certainly worth the effort.

We found that the quality of contacts we got through such public programs improved every year. This may be due to better preaching by the devotees, or just to the Lord's mercy on us.

These festivals also gave the devotees the opportunity to engage in a variety of services and to interact with members of other groups. Decentralizing helped to cater to more people and offered the devotees a special opportunity to get trained, to gain confidence, and to become more expert.

Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu and I would visit as many festival centers as possible but, as the devotees became expert in managing, soon we were left with very little to do, even for the mass programs and the festivals held jointly. We were happy to note that standards kept improving with every festival. The devotees worked with the proper service mood; they always kept us informed and sought guidance when necessary.

We also had bigger programs celebrated together in the large temple hall, which can house more than one thousand people at a time. Janmastami, Gaura Purnima and Govardhana Puja were events we normally held in the temple with packed audiences, who received *prasadam* and preaching pamphlets. We conveyed the message of Krishna consciousness not only through lectures but also through elaborate plays and dance performances, and we would collect more contacts for follow-up.

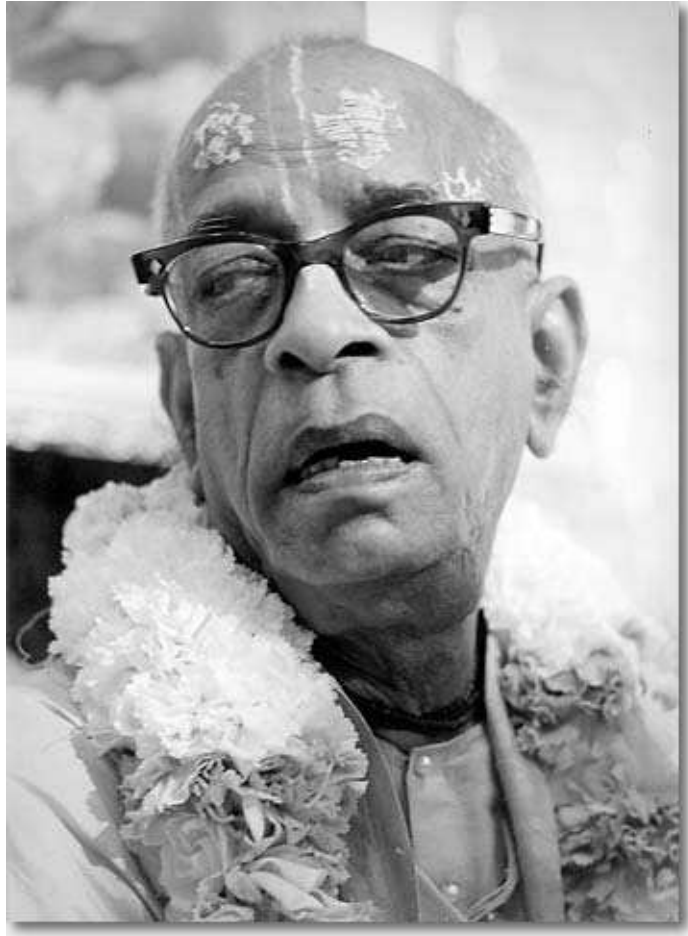
As public processions would not be allowed in this Muslim country, we organized indoor *Ratha-yatras*. The frenzied crowd pulled the 14-foot chariot, feeling the bliss that Their Lordships Jagannatha. Subhadra and Baladeva showered upon them. We would go several rounds inside the hall while people danced, sang, and grabbed the packets of *prasadam* thrown from the chariot. Everyone also received *kitchri prasadam*. At least six thousand people attended the *Ratha-yatra*, and we distributed that many plates of *prasadam*. After two hours of pulling the *ratha* we would have the lecture and the cultural program depicting the significance of *Ratha-yatra*.

In 1992 Vighnanasana Govinda Dasa had worked two months in another city. Someone had given him a local contact, a member of the Sai group. After convincing this person of the authenticity of Krishna consciousness, Govinda got invited to address the whole Sai gathering. It seemed as if they had just been waiting for such guidance, and most of them accepted the principles of Krishna consciousness. Govinda was able to inspire one couple to take it seriously. After he left, they continued the programs with *kirtana*, *japa*, and reading aloud Srila Prabhupada's books.

It is to this couple's credit that they maintained whatever was taught to them, and progressed to the point of *Guru Asraya*. Govinda was constantly in touch with them and supplied them Krishna conscious materials. Devotees who visited the place would take time from their schedule to give this couple some association.

Settling Down

The couple continued in this way until Govinda introduced the Bhakti-vriksha model during another two-month stay. This time he was assisted by his wife, Gaurangi Gopi. The Matajis got a lot of benefit from her association. This little new *Yatra* soon had eight devotees chanting sixteen rounds. Jayapataka Maharaja also visited their city. When they requested him to keep coming, Maharaja remarked that if they kept chanting he couldn't help but keep coming. They were steadily conducting four Bhakti-vriksha groups. Every month they sponsored one devotee to visit them from the capital. Soon there were many candidates for the higher levels of the Siksa Program.



The Great Push

In four years time, we had expanded to 120 Bhakti-vriksha groups and 2,000 members. Every 6 months about 30 devotees would take first initiation, while the more senior devotees would take second.

But we weren't doubling every six months or even every year, as initially planned, and so we felt the need to figure out how to improve the quality of the groups.

On most weekends Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu distributed Siksa certificates to the members of different groups. We would also announce new groups, new outreach programs, or joint programs. We came to dedicate a full hour to improve reporting, to enhance the quality of the programs, and discuss any problem the group leaders faced.

By now the Bhakti-vriksha Manual had been published. We noted the most salient features of conducting a group. My husband and I also visited the groups to see for ourselves where improvement was required. This was actually the job of the *Upachakrapatis* and *Chakra-patis*, but since it needed close scrutiny, we decided to do it ourselves. What we saw was really an eye-opener.

We felt the need to stress the importance of facilitation skills, to lead discussions in such a way that all group members would participate. The icebreaker and preaching sessions also needed to be upgraded.

We made an outline of how to conduct the Bhakti-vriksha meetings. We also gave practical hints on how to solve difficulties that group leaders were facing. We held weekly training sessions for two months, in different parts of the city.

I conducted these interactive sessions. I wanted first-hand knowledge of the group leader's experiences and attitudes and was pleased with what I saw. They had truly imbibed the Bhakti-vriksha mood; they were thoroughly soaked in it; only the techniques had to be polished. The leaders were very cooperative in these sessions, in which we worked on improving our group-facilitation skills in theory and practice.

One main skill that had to be taught over and over again was how to be a patient listener. This certainly is an important skill, since it is much easier to just deliver all the knowledge one has and go away. Initially the group members might be happy to play the passive role, without having to exert their minds to think and without having to make the effort to open up and to overcome their shyness.

The Great Push

A group leader has to be convinced of the need for interactive discussions, for drawing all the members into the dialogue. It is the only way they are going to advance well and quickly. Everybody will have something to say, as the scriptural passage is right there to refer to. While the group leader has to be encouraging, he should correct any statement contradictory to *sastric* conclusions. This however needs to be done in a gentle way, without offending or discouraging participation. Let's remember that the group leader's official title is "Bhakti-vriksha group servant-leader."

When devotees share their thoughts the group leader can deeply understand and appreciate each person, and this makes him more humble in presenting his knowledge to the rest of the group.

A common complaint was that members would always come late to meetings, trickling in one by one, and thus it wasn't possible to start with the icebreaker. The leaders had adjusted by having the *kirtana* first, so the members' indiscipline continued.

We suggested that devotees discuss among themselves and agree on the exact time when they could all arrive, so that they could start punctually and engage everyone from the beginning. It is unfair to make others wait for a few. This idea worked, since such accord among peers had to be respected; coming on time became a prestige issue. Apparently the group leader was seen as a parent figure and therefore previous entreaties to come on time were not always effective.

For the icebreaker session, we introduced that members share what they had read during the week. This helped motivate them to read regularly and share their insights, which was a deeper way of coming closer, now that they already knew each other. With newcomers we continued with the suggested introductory icebreakers, really effective in drawing people out and making them feel at ease with one another.

The *kirtana* session following the icebreaker was so popular that some groups had extended it to more than fifteen minutes. This shortened the time allocated for the other parts of the meeting, also important. The problem had to be fixed. During the *kirtana* the members went one by one to offer incense before the Deities. This was also popular.

After the *kirtana* the group would read a passage from *Sri Namamrita*, a compilation of Srila Prabhupada's quotations on chanting the holy names. The *japa* session, with everyone chanting together, took a little less than fifteen minutes. We discussed how the leaders should be alert to check that everyone was chanting and how they should encourage newcomers with eye contact, smiles, etc.

Coming to the discussion, which we call "edification session," we analyzed in depth the need to conduct it along the lines of a real discussion group, not as a regular class. We provided a common curriculum for all groups with standardized passages to discuss and questions to ask.

The Great Push

Leading the group discussion involves drawing people out of their shells. When they participate they feel enthused and encouraged. Being forced to apply their minds, the members learn and retain the concepts much more effectively than by merely hearing a lecture. Many people are shy to clear their doubts in public, and some may have language problems. The Bhakti-vriksha group is designed to fulfill people's need for education.

The *sastras* have to be conveyed as they are, but it is important to know how to deliver the message in difficult situations, for example with argumentative *mayavadis* or demigod worshipers. The Bhakti-vriksha servant-leader has to convey a service mentality, otherwise such people could easily be turned off, especially at such close quarters. The group leader plays a very important role in the spiritual lives of new members. In the initial stages they are completely dependent on him. He must take a personal interest in all the members and care for their welfare.

These skills can be acquired with training and experience. One may be able to fake them for a short time, but genuinely accepting and applying them sets the stage for rapid spiritual advancement of both leaders and members. So many of the principles of Krishna consciousness play a significant role in Bhakti-vriksha preaching.

The preaching session was conducted by reading aloud a passage from the book *Preaching Is the Essence*, followed by a review of the preaching efforts undertaken during the week by the group leader, by the trainee-leader, and by senior and junior members.

A member is not considered senior only on the basis of how long he has been attending the sessions, but on his actual spiritual status. One can be considered a senior preacher—in the context of the Bhakti-vriksha group—if he is at least on the level of *Krishna Sadhaka*. This means chanting a minimum of eight rounds, reading Srila Prabhupada's books, following the four regulative principles, observing Ekadasi and worshiping Krishna and Tulasi at home. The person should also have good knowledge and a deep grasp of the philosophy and be able to approach and preach to those totally new to Krishna consciousness.

- A junior preacher must be at least on the level of *Krishna Sevaka*: chanting four rounds and refraining from meat-eating. By reading Srila Prabhupada's books he should have gained basic knowledge of the philosophy. The junior preacher can be engaged in cultivating new contacts by telephone or by visitation.
- A new member is one who joined the group recently and has taken the *Sradhhavan* certificate, promising to chant one round of *japa* every day and to regularly attend the Bhakti-vriksha weekly meeting. The new member can be encouraged to bring friends and family members to the group meetings and can accompany senior preachers in visitations.

The Great Push

Most of the leaders admitted that previously, during the preaching session, they were only reading the passage from *Preaching Is the Essence* and were giving a brief exhortation to bring new people to the group. They were not effectively leading this vital aspect of the Bhakti-vriksha meeting. Time was always short, so they rushed through it before heading for *prasadam* and a brief exchange with the members before dispersing.

The whole program was timed and rescheduled to include all the parts in two hours and ten minutes. The official Bhakti-vriksha Manual indicated two and half hours as standard duration, but since the program could only start by 8:30 p.m., our groups could not go the full stretch.

After upgrading our preaching sessions all members would discuss their preaching efforts, such as visiting new contacts or preaching by telephone. The group would then draw up plans for the next week, with every member getting some specific preaching task. Senior preachers were asked to look after the other members' spiritual growth. As a minimum, they had to keep in touch by phone and ensure their attendance of the weekly meetings. Senior and junior preachers would often pair up to do visitations. Sometimes a husband-and-wife team would go and preach together.

After these training sessions the quality of the discussions improved, but other aspects were still not satisfying. During our visits we identified one Bhakti-vriksha that was doing everything perfectly. We videotaped the whole session and asked the other leaders to go in pairs to visit this group, a pair per week.

It was at this time that Kaunteya Prabhu, the secretary of ISKCON's Congregational Development Ministry, visited to train us in teaching skills. This week-long seminar was very interesting and interactive. Thirty leaders attended every night. We learned how to plan systematic and creative lessons, and how to use audio and visual aids to keep the audience attentive and participating.

This helped us writing lesson plans to induce members at different Siksa levels to increase their commitment and to progress to the next stage. Group leaders were responsible for this but, due to lack of time or experience, or maybe because they were considered parent figures, they were not always able to inspire the members to move up the Siksa Program ladder at a quick pace.

In a joint family what uncles, aunts, or grandparents tell the children is often more effective than the words of the parents themselves. Following this principle we decided to have other devotees—not the respective group leaders—present these seminars. Since each lesson was designed to inspire those belonging to a particular level to move to the next, we grouped devotees by their Siksa levels: *Sraddhavans* with *Sraddhavans*, *Krishna Sevakas* with *Krishna Sevakas*, etc.

To facilitate their attendance we organized presentations in different areas of the city. These lessons were effective since senior *Chakra-patis* and *Upachakra-patis* conducting

The Great Push

them included many charts, dramas, brainstorming, group discussions, and other interactive methods. The lessons were aimed at persuading members to increase their commitment.

We also wanted every group to have a designated trainee-leader. We then ran a six-week course on the *Bhagavad-gita* that dealt with commonly asked questions and covered the main topics of the philosophy, such as the science of the soul and the position of the demigods. We are indebted to Sri Sri Radha-Gopinatha Temple in Bombay for creating this course. Mukunda Murari Prabhu conducted it, including a written test.

We had more meetings with the leaders to motivate them to efficiently report, plan, and expand. Reporting, except for a few outstanding exceptions, always needed persuasion and repeated reminders. It's amazing that devotees who spent hours in other devotional activities could not get themselves to fill the report forms, although it took a few minutes only. The reports show the names of the group members, their attendance at weekly meetings, their Siksa Program status, and some comments on their progress: what books they are reading, what services they are rendering, and what additional classes they are attending.

We set aside alternate weeks for all leaders to meet and discuss plans together. One week *Chakra-patis* (circle-servants) met with *Upachakra-patis* (sector-servants); the next week *Upachakra-patis* met with their group leaders. Due to these get-together's, reporting and communication between leaders greatly improved.

We also invited different leaders and potential leaders to have dinner with us to get to know each other better and encourage them further in their service.

We set a target of dividing all groups into two, in the classic Bhakti-vriksha method. Already we had a few successes in multiplying groups. If the members found the group division too heart-breaking, the two groups would be conducted in different rooms of the same house until everyone got used to the new leader and agreed to move on.

If the leaders applied their mind to growth and progress, everything would definitely work. All problems have solutions. We must not lose heart the minute we face obstacles. This realization grows in all leaders as time goes on.

We devised the plan to rotate the weekly meetings in different members' homes. This had the desired effect of enthusing devotees to play host and of bringing the meetings to new neighborhoods. It also reduced the burden on the group leaders who, thus far, had been hosting all meetings in their homes. They had also been preparing *prasadam* for everyone and had been primarily responsible for ensuring everyone's attendance every week.

We also introduced the innovation of "Building Preaching": in buildings that had contacts ready to host a program, we went door to door and spoke with the residents. When

The Great Push

they understood our purpose they usually invited us in and listened respectfully. We just invited them for a *sat-sanga* with *bhajans* and a discussion on *Bhagavad-gita*. This is neutral territory among all pious Hindus, regardless of denomination.

Since the program was to be in their very building, many agreed to come and some became regulars. To approach strangers in this way, the Bhakti-vriksha preachers had to become more outgoing. Initially only the bolder devotees agreed to try it. Surprisingly, the *matajis* were the ones more willing to do it.

Jayasri Janani, Premanandini and Baladayini were three *matajis* who successfully took up this challenge. Jayasri Janani's husband was chanting sixteen rounds and reading Srila Prabhupada's books, but was not actively involved in our programs. She, however, was very enthusiastic in preaching and single-handedly conducted three groups, simultaneously working as a college lecturer and taking care of two small children.

Premanandini was also a mother of two, one being a teenager. Together with her husband, an initiated devotee working as general manager, she was running a group at home and was very active in cultivating all the members. In addition she conducted a group for *matajis* and one Outreach Bhakti-vriksha.

Baladayini was a lamb at home and a tigress in the hunt. Very gentle and soft-spoken, she was tirelessly, persistently, and patiently preaching to many people. Her husband was an engineer and together they conducted three groups and one children's program. She was also independently conducting four *matajis* groups.

There was a feeling among the devotees that with decentralization and empowerment their association with us had greatly reduced. To counteract this we started a *Srimad-Bhagavatam* study-group for all initiated devotees and those on *Guru Asraya* level. Once a week the men met with my husband, while the ladies met with me. I also took care of the Bengali-speaking devotees and lead the study-group in Hindi.

Our Guru Maharaja paid a timely visit and for the first time visited the homes of all initiated devotees, and of those formally aspiring for initiation. This greatly inspired them and we all felt poised to make a fresh breakthrough by Guru and Gauranga's mercy.

Overcoming Obstacles

We were experiencing some success, but before we could make a major breakthrough we still had to cross a few hurdles.

The first complication was the temporary nature of people's jobs, a situation typical to these parts. Over the years around fifty-five initiated devotees, at different levels of training, have left our *Yatra* due to this reason. Other trained preachers have to be constantly on the move due to transitory jobs. At one point the government started a systematic drive to send away all expatriates with irregular residence status. Many devotees from Bangladesh were thus dispatched to their native soil. With all these turnovers we were kept running to find replacements to maintain the same scale of preaching.

The economy was getting duller by the day and devotees were pushed to work harder and harder to sell things for which there was no demand in the static market. This meant that, while before they had the energy and leisure to plan and expand their preaching, now they hardly had sufficient time to maintain their existing services.

Many of the young bachelors had married and their wives were expecting. Delivering a baby is very expensive here and most of the prospective mothers went to India to be with their parents at this time. They also left because domestic assistance is very costly in these parts; it would have been difficult for them to continue covering household chores after delivery. On top of that, the husbands' companies paid for all medical expenses except for dentists and gynecologists. As a result, for several months the *Yatra* was deprived of these matajis' input.

But there were some junior matajis yet to be trained. I enlisted almost all of them in the ladies' *Srimad-Bhagavatam* study-group. This had the wonderful effect of stimulating them to quickly advance. Many of them started new groups.

A number of devotees had found some success, both in their spiritual and material lives and, though they were still serious, a degree of complacency had set in. Their attitude was very different from the intense preaching mood they had earlier.

In his Friday lectures Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu focused on the issue of desiring to advance more and more in devotion.

Overcoming Obstacles

I complemented his efforts by conducting for all the devotees, in small installments, a course on *Madhurya Kadambini*. This book by Srila Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura is excellent for helping devotees grasp the super-excellent results of pure devotional service, for understanding our *anarthas*, and for building the desire to eliminate them to reach the higher, nectarean stages of *bhakti*.

We introduced the next level of the Bhakti-vriksha structure and appointed two *Mahachakra Sevakas*, or "great-circle-servants," responsible for three to four *Chakras*. We arranged one for the Bengalis and one for all the other language groups. The job was awesome though, demanding full involvement.

The *Mahachakra Sevaka* had to have the vision to expand his entire *Yatra* division. He had to motivate the leaders reporting to him, he had to have new ideas for improving the preaching, and had to set an ideal example of commitment and caring by acting as the humble servant of all the devotees.

The quantity and quality of the task required lots of time and dedication, which the *Mahachakra-patis* were not yet able to give. For a long time, stretching to a full year, we were like a big giant unable to move under his own weight.

We definitely had to make it easier for the *Mahachakra-patis* to operate. We discussed and decided to split the entire *Yatra* into ten *Mahachakras*, to be looked after by ten *Mahachakra-patis*—each having two *Chakra-patis* reporting to him. Each *Chakra-pati* would supervise two sectors, made of the usual number of three Bhakti-vriksha groups.

This essentially meant that each *Mahachakra Pati* had a jurisdiction of twelve Bhakti-vriksha groups. This allowed them to breathe comfortably and be able to make plans for development.

Jayapataka Maharaja desired that devotees take the *Bhakti-sastri* course, so we procured the *Bhakti-sastri* CD, developed by the VTE (Vaisnava Training and Education).

We printed the course material and requested the devotees to enroll in the course, an in-depth study of the *Bhagavad-gita*. I started conducting the lessons every Friday afternoon for two and half to three hours, and thirty devotees have attended regularly since the beginning. At the present pace, meeting only once a week, it would take at least two years to complete; but we wish to speed it up and finish it within a year. Our policy is to pay royalties to the VTE for making their remarkable contribution available.

The course is systematically structured and focuses on fulfilling several aims, broadly categorized as developing knowledge, building skills and imbibing lasting values.

The knowledge section—similar to the spiritual edification papers we had developed—has three sections:

- acquiring theoretical knowledge,

Overcoming Obstacles

- getting a deeper understanding, and
- obtaining scriptural realization.

The section on skills deals with how to use the knowledge in our personal lives and in preaching to others.

The part on values fosters the proper vision of Srila Prabhupada's mission, makes us introspect on our academic and moral integrity: remaining true to the purpose of the *Bhagavad-gita* without twisting it to suit our own agenda. The section on values also teaches proper regard for both scriptural and spiritual authorities, helps us in making proper choices in life, promotes responsibility for learning, and enhances our faith and conviction in Krishna consciousness.

It is amazing to witness the devotees' interest and participation. It helps me realize the promise of Sri Krishna in *Bhagavad-gita*, Chapter Ten, Text 10: "To those who are constantly devoted to serving Me with love, I give the understanding by which they can come to Me." In the purport Srila Prabhupada explains that *buddhi*, intelligence, refers to action in Krishna consciousness. In spite of not being very learned or academically brilliant, every sincere devotee can get deep insights into the *Bhagavad-gita* and learn to preach more effectively.

To make the devotees study thoroughly, I gave them periodic tests; they enjoyed the exercise very much. Taking the *Bhakti-sastri* course improved their ability to conduct *Bhagavad-gita* studies for their group members.

We had regular meetings with the *Mahachakra-patis* and their wives to discuss their strategies for improvement. They gave Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu a written commitment about their personal goals in regard to *sadhana* and service. The *sadhana* side included dedicating a specified amount of time to read Srila Prabhupada's books, being regular for *mangala-arati*, and improving the quality of *japa*. In regard to service, they committed to give more time to Krishna through proper planning and to care more for their members.

These exchanges generated a lot of enthusiasm among the Mahachakra-patis, who also passed it on to their *Chakra-patis* and those below them.

Each *Mahachakra Pati* was given charge for the entire arrangement of all the public programs for a whole month. This included the Friday morning programs from 5 AM to 9 AM at a local Hindu temple, all festival celebrations, and all schedules for visiting *sannyasis*.

Earlier all these programs had been at our residence, but our house was no longer sufficient to accommodate the crowd.

We did move into a much larger house in a quiet, serene area, but unfortunately the number of cars parked outside created a stir in the mind of our landlord, who thought

Overcoming Obstacles

that all these devotees were staying overnight: he shuddered at the thought of what we might be doing in his house. He just couldn't believe that all these young people, with small children and babies in their arms, were actually arriving early in the morning.

So we took the cue and saw it as the Lord's arrangement. The advantage of meeting in the temple was that now we could easily contact new people while the program was going on. Some individuals also felt more comfortable visiting a public temple than a private home.

On Fridays at 5:00 AM we had an average of ninety-five devotees, and approximately one-hundred-eighty people attended the *Bhagavatam* class, at 7:30 AM.

The Bengalis, who earlier had been unstoppable in their preaching, had developed some unhealthy rivalry. One-upmanship among their top leaders had led to a lot of factionalism, politicking, and lack of preaching enthusiasm.

No amount of meetings and *ista-gosthis* seemed to work. They just could not overcome their mental blocks about one another.

So we tried to build up their higher taste by having regular *Bhagavatam* study classes. Once a week, especially with the leaders and other senior devotees, we would discuss the practical application of the principles of the *Bhagavatam*. All devotees were welcome to attend these classes at our residence. Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu asked me to conduct these sessions, and I did, in Hindi.

Our study progressed. We would discuss threadbare how to apply the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* verses and Srila Prabhupada's purports. After a few months they seemed to be ready to listen to their higher selves. This made me reflect on the truth of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, First Canto, Chapter Three, Text 43: "This *Bhagavata Purana* is as brilliant as the sun, and it has arisen just after the departure of Lord Krishna to His own abode, accompanied by religion, knowledge, etc. Persons who have lost their vision due to the dense darkness of ignorance in the age of Kali shall get light from this *Purana*."

Soon circumstances forced the leaders to come together. They had to cooperate to build a preaching center in their hometown, jointly with the local ISKCON center. Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu had a series of meetings with them, and explained the proper mood of Bhakti-vriksha: not aggrandizement and control, but love and sacrifice.

We could accuse others and seek revenge, but that was not the mood of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. There is no point in condemning someone for eternity, especially when the accused has promised to reform and is also manifesting several good qualities. And we might not ourselves be free of the faults we accuse others of.

Although they did not admit having any desire incompatible with the proper Bhakti-vriksha mood, Vijaya Venugopala Prabhu thought it prudent to set strict rules and clear demarcation lines of their areas of jurisdiction. This temporary arrangement was meant

to avoid overlapping of services and prevent the attempt to get power and followers. They would also have to rotate in their services, so that no one would get attached to a particular situation of control. Once they were reformed and showed that they were able to function smoothly, they could switch to the loving freedom that normally prevails in the Bhakti-vriksha system.

The rest of the *Yatra* had imbibed the mood of total cooperation. There was no serious jealousy or possessiveness regarding areas of service. Everyone felt they were part of a team, of a preaching family, for the sake of Guru and Gauranga. Nobody minded if he was accidentally "bypassed." One could always clarify one's intentions and immediately correct the situation if the behavior had indeed been a breach of etiquette or if it did create problems.

We were also seriously working with the Hindi-speaking devotees employed in the labor camps. They come from villages in different states across North India and are very pious devotees. They make excellent preachers back home. They have already effortlessly persuaded some of their families in India to chant sixteen rounds, follow the regulative principles, and read Srila Prabhupada's books.

For instance, Ananda Madhava's wife traveled all the way from her native Punjab to Mayapur to take initiation. Janardana, from Bihar, started a group with his family and neighbors while on a holiday. Although Janardana is back here in the Middle East, the group keeps meeting and the group members are now eager to take initiation.

There were also many educated people from North India to be cultivated. They could eventually play a major role in spreading Krishna consciousness. We identified all the Hindi-speaking devotees and made plans for a concerted effort to mobilize them, maintain a database, and keep in touch with every one of them, even after they went back to India, due to loss of job or other reasons.

We have plans to penetrate more preaching areas, and some dynamic and fired up preachers are already at work in new spheres of outreach. Asoka Krishna Prabhu is the senior devotee among them. Then there is the resourceful Caitanya Prakasa, who, assisted by some junior devotees, travels to preach in distant places. Multi-lingual, he looks after the different language groups in his large labor camp and also manages to involve other senior devotees to go and give their association. Caitanya Prakasa is middle-aged and has a big family back home, but he relates everything to Krishna consciousness—family, friends and workplace—and can't think of anything else. He generously opens his house for any program and is always ready to assist anyone who needs transportation.

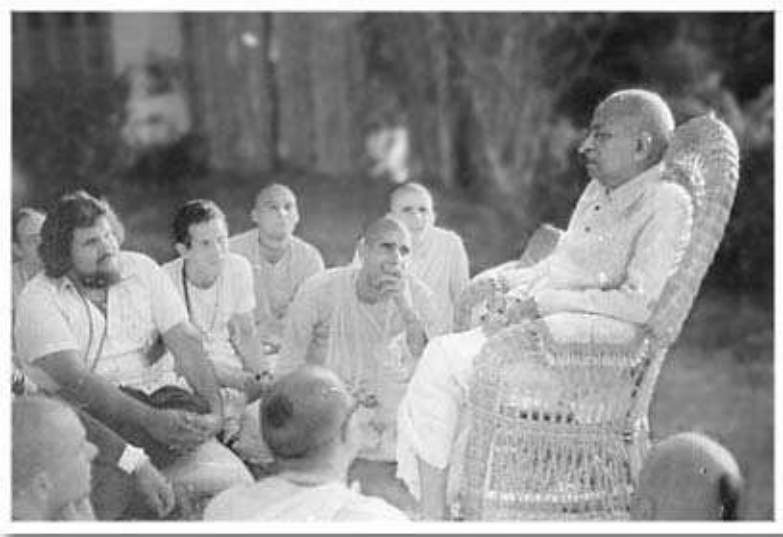
Rupa Caitanya Prabhu and his wife Baladayini Mataji, as well as Mitra Govinda Prabhu, are catering to the educated North Indians. There are also many other committed devotees active in preaching such as Janardana, Bhagavan Caitanya Prabhu and Mr. Singh.

Overcoming Obstacles

Leaders like the *Mahachakra-patis* started to periodically visiting each Bhakti-vriksha group to give *Bhagavad-gita* lectures and to interact with the group members.

We re-emphasized what we called the "*Vyuha* Program," a bi-monthly affair where two or more groups from the same Mahachakra would get together for light programs like quizzes and Krishna conscious games, but also for a lecture by a senior devotee and, as grand finale, a feast. One aim of the program is helping members of different groups to know each other. The *Vyuha* Program provides an interesting break from the regular Bhakti-vriksha meetings, thus renewing enthusiasm. Devotees also get to hear the scriptures from a senior devotee and get the chance to help in organizing the event.

The *Yatra* is again poised to make a breakthrough by regularly doubling itself. That is the target and everyone is hopeful of reaching it in a few months' time.



Bhakti-vriksha, a Shelter for Everyone

As the "tree of devotion" grows, it destroys all obstacles to devotional service. It is a powerful enemy of the personality of Kali. Just as Maharaja Pariksit completely controlled Kali during his reign, we found that being active in the Bhakti-vriksha Program can make Kali powerless even in this age.

Some of our devotees have gone to different places and have been able to achieve similar results by following the Bhakti-vriksha principles. In all the Middle Eastern countries they have moved to, through Bhakti-vriksha our devotees are building a serious, dedicated, enthusiastic and expanding congregation well trained in learning the philosophy and in how to present it.

In Bangladesh it's expanding very rapidly and devotees appreciate the systematic training they are receiving. In India, in West Bengal, Bhaktajana Priya Prabhu and Manorakshi Mataji have a couple of groups and have found the results of love and care astounding on people hitherto materialistic, who are now nicely advancing and developing, surrender to guru and Krishna.

In Bangalore, where Bhakti-vriksha preaching had started earlier, Caitanya Avatari Prabhu is giving a significant contribution to the local *Yatra* and to *Yatras* in neighboring states.

In San Jose, California, Kala Sudha and her husband Advaita Candra—who was trained by Caitanya Avatari Prabhu—have established three groups in a couple of months. The local temple recognized the value of their approach and encouraged them to train more congregational devotees to become group leaders.

Hari Madhava and Bindu Malini moved to Toronto, Canada, and started the Bhakti-vriksha Program there, with the support of the local ISKCON temple.

Sitaram Lakshman Prabhu, Vice-President of ISKCON Perth, Australia, visited us and stayed for a couple of months. He was impressed with Bhakti-vriksha preaching and started implementing the method in his city.

The chief symptoms of Kali are quarrel and misunderstanding. Through the Bhakti-vriksha system we found ourselves uniting more and more for the common mission,

our external differences well on their way to be forgotten. As the "preaching bug" bites the devotees, they automatically become forbearing, tolerant, encouraging, and compassionate to one another. As I write this, reflecting on the wonderful qualities of the devotees, my eyes fill with tears.

Earlier we would sometimes have dissensions and misunderstandings, but now the same devotees who used to quarrel have mellowed and matured so much and so fast that it's amazing. We had devotees who were always critical, proud and unsubmissive, who had a lot of false ego and got offended easily. They were too attached to material life, too attracted to the opposite sex, and so on. With the introduction of Bhakti-vriksha however many of our *anarthas* just flew out of the window in a short time. It is really the mercy of Gauranga Mahaprabhu!

Nobody has time for gossip any more. It holds no interest. Many scandals and issues come and go, but the devotees have no interest in them. Only if they have to defend ISKCON or the process of Krishna consciousness do they talk about them. Even this is rare, as the devotees are so strong in their Krishna consciousness and are such living examples of Srila Prabhupada's teachings that they are able to easily convince others about the legitimacy of the movement.

Husbands and wives' marital complaints have reduced. We are a close community and everyone generally shares their major problems with us: I am observing a growing affection and bond in all relationships, principally the marital relationship. As devotees care for more people they naturally become less self-centered. As husbands and wives serve together, they get closer than ever, experiencing a new, deeper intimacy.

Of course we still have to deal with new devotee couples who initially face problems, but we feel confident that they will awaken their higher natures through a solid program of engagement and the association of exemplary devotees.

Even those spouses who initially showed no interest in Krishna consciousness (but allowed the Bhakti-vriksha meetings to continue in their homes) have mellowed tremendously.

There was a devotee who for years conducted a Bhakti-vriksha and a children's program. He was always looking for opportunities to give the *maha-mantra* to whomever he met. Even though his wife showed no interest, his patience and perseverance finally bore fruit. She has become more cooperative and is gradually accepting the process herself. In a similar case it was the husband that was brought around by his wife's preaching activities.

Many of our male devotees have wives who had no prior exposure to Krishna consciousness. Yet when these ladies mingle with the devotees, they are drawn to the preaching mood and take up Krishna consciousness in no time at all, becoming active preachers themselves.

This is in direct contrast to our early days, when we were functioning in the traditional way of centralized preaching. At that time the preaching mood, the care and the empowerment were not as intense as they are now; it was difficult to give individual attention to every new member or to find an appropriate guide for everyone. New persons found it difficult to identify with the serious devotees, their only role models. So we were particular that devotees married only other devotees. But the Bhakti-vriksha system enables us to provide association and a suitable program for people at varying levels of advancement.

The level of concern for others' needs also has been gradually improving. Devotees find it more natural to visit one another, to help in the search for jobs, or at least to ask about each other's welfare. They are present during sicknesses, they share notes on raising children, and they help each other in cooking, when needed. They also assist one another's preaching by offering transport and company for visitations. Earlier we gave seminars on cultivating Vaisnava relationships, and now the rapport is naturally evolving.

While sharing her realizations about Bhakti-vriksha one *mataji* remarked how she used to be very attached to decorating herself with gold ornaments. After serving in the Bhakti-vriksha Program she became so satisfied that she lost her taste for gold.

Watching television, going on frivolous sightseeing, needless shopping and socializing with materialists are no longer issues we need to address. The devotees already have the higher taste of spreading Krishna consciousness, which they can find in no other pursuit.

The children of our devotees have a very Krishna conscious environment at home. Though they are aware of the outside world through their school friends, their social circle is made up only of devotees.

Peer-pressure from other teenagers is certainly an obstacle to their spiritual development, but as far as possible we try to keep our children fixed in Krishna consciousness through patience and counseling.

It is like having an extended family, all in one city, as it used to be in earlier times. The children themselves start preaching to their friends at school and sometimes bring in guests to their parents' Bhakti-vrikshas and help to conduct the meeting. The philosophy of Krishna consciousness becomes so deeply rooted in their hearts that they are able to avoid modern temptations like partying. Of course they also attend the Sunday School and other programs, but what really makes them accept Krishna consciousness in action is Bhakti-vriksha.

Children enthusiastically attend our weekend *mangala-aratis* and then chant *japa*. They dance jubilantly during *kirtanas* and sit right in the front row during the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* class. They eagerly and loudly read out the ten offences to be avoided in chanting the holy names and even lead *kirtanas*.

They are also very service-minded. When a visiting *sannyasi* lectures, all the children get up one after another to fan him with the peacock-feather fan. On regular programs they are the ones that carry the offered lamps and flowers around and who anoint everyone with the sandalwood paste offered to Srila Prabhupada.

When we first started the Bhakti-vriksha Program some devotees rivaled to pull new members into their own groups, which at times created ill feelings. With guidance on proper etiquette and mood devotees overcame their competitive mood and began to help one another to get members. We also kept a common pool of new contacts from big public programs, which we distributed to the leaders according to location.

Doing Bhakti-vriksha requires one to give selfless service and love to the members, and therefore it gradually removes the fruitive mentality. That's why devotees started losing the desire for one-upmanship and gained a genuine service mood. At the same time devotees have developed not only tremendous self-confidence in dealing with people, but also managerial and organizational skills. Everyone can attain leadership qualities through training and experience, not just the few who have the natural inclination.

There is not much job security in the Middle East. All the labor laws favor the employer; he can terminate anyone's job by giving a one-month notice or, immediately, by paying a month's salary. To get hired by another firm one needs permission from his previous employer—what they call the "release letter." The harassment is not due to racial or religious discrimination. In most cases the Indians themselves act as tyrannical bosses, as they seek the favor of their local sponsors by impressing them with their loyalty.

The suffering seems to be reversed in these parts. In India one hears many women's tales of woe due to harassment by in-laws; but here women, away from immediate family pressures, enjoy more freedom, while the poor men have to bear the brunt of their employers' exploitation.

But by serving the Lord the devotees become so satisfied and surrendered to Krishna's will that they no longer worry about their jobs, unlike non-devotees, who frequently consult astrologers for predictions. The devotees are also able to withstand the mental tribulation of politics in the office. By surrendering to the Lord's will they have found His immense protection and, since their spiritual lives take precedence over their material lives, they know that, wherever they are, they will always preach. So they leave it to the Lord to decide where they should be.

As devotees get habituated to addressing the soul while preaching, to a large extent they overcome class and caste consciousness, linguistic barriers, regional prejudices and sexist bias. One devotee became so confident that he would invite rich businessmen and industrialists to his small, modest house. Nevertheless he would also cultivate very poor and illiterate people.

We have also learnt to be very tolerant of others' faults, especially of those under our care, and we only try to fan their good qualities and engage them in Krishna's service.

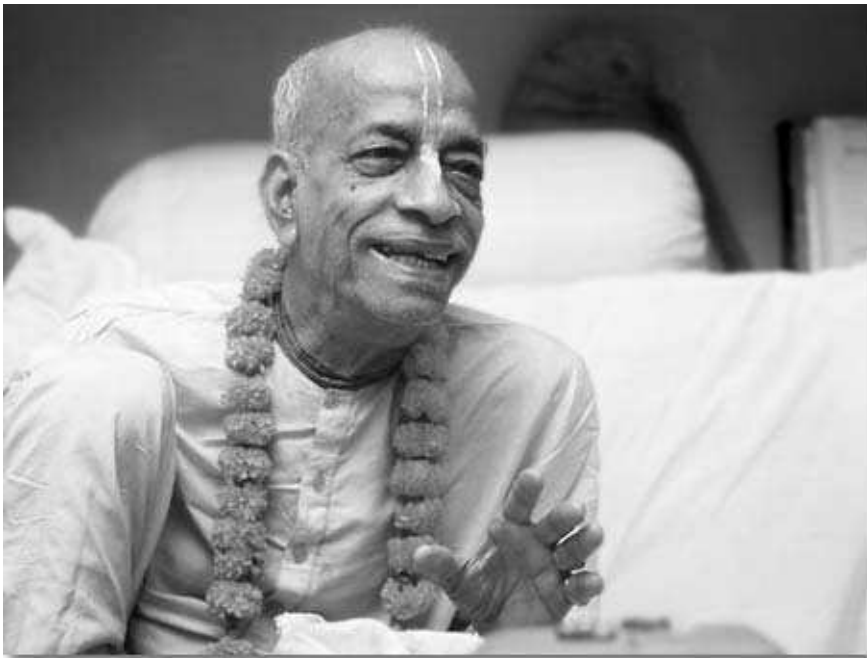
Bhakti-vriksha, a Shelter for Everyone

Lord Caitanya's mercy eventually melts the offenders' hearts and they keep advancing, overcoming their weaknesses. The fault-finding mentality is thus overrun by the genuine desire to help people when they face problems in spiritual life.

Normally Indian expatriates eagerly look forward to their annual leave to visit their home country for an enjoyable holiday. But devotees are generally concerned that their preaching would not be affected while they are in India. If they must travel, they only visit the holy places and preach vigorously wherever they go, including to their family members. They especially visit ISKCON temples to associate with senior Vaisnavas and initiating spiritual masters.

There are still miles to go before we can create the ideal Bhakti-vriksha structure, with each level functioning perfectly. That will take a lot more effort, sincerity, and experience. However, based on our cumulative results, we are hopeful that we will be able to persist and overcome the barriers. This means we must become better organized, provide the same quality of spiritual education to the ever-growing circle of devotees and maintain personal touch and contact with everyone. We have to motivate the leaders to in turn empower other leaders. Above all else, we must be Krishna conscious ourselves.

As I look back on my past quest for fulfillment of love, I have no choice but to go on in this mission. As I look to the future challenges my mind reels at the enormity of the duties ahead and I feel apprehension. Am I qualified to continue? Yet, by the mercy of the spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, and Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, anything is possible! We only have to cling to their lotus feet.



Testimonials from Preachers

What does Bhakti-vriksha preaching means to its practitioners? How has it changed their lives? What are their future plans? In the following spontaneous interviews we get a glimpse of their feelings. I couldn't include all the dedicated preachers as that would be too lengthy, but these are representative samples.

Vighnanasana Govinda Prabhu and Gaurangi Gopi Mataji

Vighnanasana Govinda has been with us for the longest time. He has been committed to practicing and preaching Krishna consciousness for twelve years. He has imbibed the mood of a leader and has become expert in managerial skills and in dealing with people. Gaurangi Gopi Devi Dasi has been involved in preaching for six years. She is well versed in the philosophy, she is herself a leader, and she is very supportive of her husband's activities.

Vighnanasana Govinda says, "I feel Bhakti-vriksha is the most dynamic way to spread the holy name of Krishna, reaching every town and village, every street and house. This is sorely needed by the general public, in such ignorance of genuine knowledge of God realization.

"Bhakti-vriksha has brought life into our lives, otherwise we would be just wasting time without proper direction. I feel greatly satisfied in helping so many innocent people. They are helplessly looking for the proper system to raise their standards of life.

"I would like to keep doing this with more and more intensity and clarity to serve my dear Gurudeva. Such service alone can give us peace and happiness."

Radha Govinda Hari Prabhu and Saumya Gaurangi Mataji

Radha Govinda Hari joined five years ago. He is always cheerful, helpful to all devotees, and eager to share Krishna consciousness with non-devotees.

He says, “To me and my family Bhakti-vriksha means to learn while preaching, to strengthen our *sadhana*, and to try to become dear to the Lord by preaching to interested people. Bhakti-vriksha has brought a rapid change to us. Instead of material association, we have now spiritual association.”

Saumya Gaurangi is shy and soft-spoken, but strong-willed when it comes to preaching. She is a great help to her husband.

She says, “Through Bhakti-vriksha we can bring people to Krishna consciousness and slowly, step by step, people will understand the philosophy and the importance of *sadhana*. Doing Bhakti-vriksha helps both preachers and newcomers to advance in the loving service of Krishna. Earlier we were trying to enjoy material life, which never gives satisfaction to anyone. Currently, by the association of devotees, I am getting unlimited bliss and satisfaction. Our goal is to spread Krishna consciousness wherever we go.”

Madan Mohan Caitanya Prabhu and Premandini Mataji

Madan Mohan Caitanya has enthusiastically engaged many of his colleagues and is always looking for means to preach to everyone, even during his official travels abroad. His wife, Premanandini, is of the same nature and leads several groups.

He says, “Bhakti-vriksha is to me a principal source of internal happiness, strength, and bliss. I am able to engage my mind in organizing, improving, and developing my groups. This helps me to engage all my senses in Krishna’s service.”

Srikantha Kanaiya Prabhu

Srikantha Kanaiya is intelligent, sincere, determined to progress, and humble. He just cannot say “no” to any service.

He says, "I see the Bhakti-vriksha Program as the best way to preach. It's efficient, effective, and organized. Because of the personal care and attention, the spiritual advancement is very fast. The group members get trained in all parts of the meeting and thus they themselves can become effective leaders.

"I started off as a confused, doubtful person, without many skills. Being in a small group gave me the opportunity to clear all my doubts. The group leader helped me to find the solution to every problem. Now I am a group leader myself. Because of the training I got, I have no fear in dealing with different people and can preach to them effectively. By becoming a facilitator one also gets managerial capabilities. Bhakti-vriksha helped me even in my material life: it made me persuasive and able to handle crises."

Mukunda Murari Prabhu

Mukunda Murari, totally committed and responsible, is one of the pillars of the *Yatra*.

He says, "Through the Bhakti-vriksha method we can train many leaders in Krishna consciousness, which is very much required at present. This program enables everyone to practice, to grow, and to preach. Devotional service gives me full satisfaction, and seeing people's lives changing gives me even greater satisfaction."

Rupa Caitanya Prabhu and Baladayini Mataji

Though he started to preach only a couple of years ago, Rupa Caitanya is an inspiring leader. He is full of fire, extremely earnest, yet humble. So is his wife, Baladayini. She never gives up preaching to even the most reluctant people and manages to bring them in by perseverance, patience, and determination.

Rupa Caitanya says, "Originally Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura designed this system. For me Bhakti-vriksha means to spread the message of Lord Caitanya by practicing individually and collectively. While conducting Bhakti-vriksha meetings our whole family is fully engaged, physically and mentally. My wife, Baladayini, cooks, contacts the lady members and encourages them to advance. She conducts children's programs and goes to other buildings for preaching. I contact colleagues at the office, attend classes and other programs, call people to the group meetings or visit them in their homes. For this reason, we must devote most of our free time to reading and daily *sadhana*.

"We are experiencing a very dynamic, blissful and peaceful life. It is difficult to express in words the amount of satisfaction we receive when we preach. The method is so versatile that it can be applied anywhere and everywhere."

Nimai Gauracandra Prabhu and Rani Radhika Mataji

Nimai Gauracandra, a resourceful and talented preacher, has made preaching his life's mission. His equally fired-up wife, Rani Radhika, and their two initiated children ably support him.

He says, "Bhakti-vriksha is a way to bring misguided souls to the right path of life by helping them to develop an intimate relationship with devotees. It can change the lives of ignorant people who would either not be God conscious or be God conscious in an improper way. Collectively they learn by imitating other devotees and individually by the senior devotees clearing their doubts.

"By conducting various Bhakti-vriksha and outreach programs we have learnt the scriptures better and now we can clear the doubts of new devotees. Our time used to be spent in mundane activities, but now is used properly."

Divya Kesava Prabhu

Divya Kesava is another ardent preacher.

He says "The tree of devotion can give protective shade and shelter to the entire human society. It can convert the material into the spiritual, distress into happiness, and finally can lead us to Krishna's abode. Participating in the Bhakti-vriksha system made me improve my behavior, my speech, and my actions. It has increased my punctuality and simplicity, and has removed my fears. I am planning to construct a house and temple in my native place in Kerala to make the entire village Krishna conscious."

Caitanya Prakasa Prabhu

Caitanya Prakasa, a multi-linguist, specializes in preaching at various labor camps around the city. He is always bursting with new ideas for spreading the message. His house has been converted into a *brahmacari asrama*.

He says, "It is through Bhakti-vriksha that I learnt about Krishna consciousness. I also learnt how to deal with non-devotees, how to follow the Vaisnavas, and how to get relief from material life by chanting. I came to know what is a guru, how a guru should be, and how to serve him. I have been able to change my material habits and use my material facilities in Krishna's service. My mind keeps telling me to preach to people and make them devotees.

"My spiritual goal is to eventually expand Bhakti-vriksha in my city, Bangalore, in South India, bringing Krishna consciousness to everyone's doorstep."

Mitra Govinda Prabhu

Gentle and soft-spoken, but steel-framed in his determination to serve Krishna, Mitra Govinda has been a devotee for nine years.

He says, "After a tiring day in the office, people like me find respite in the tree of devotion, in discussing the glories of the holy name and Lord Krishna's pastimes. Before Bhakti-vriksha life was full of problems, directionless. I knew nothing apart from eating, sleeping, socializing, and discussing boring topics. Bhakti-vriksha is much more enjoyable. Now I get up early, I finish my morning ablutions, and I eagerly chant my rounds. I have to some extent realized that irrespective of religion, caste or country we are all spirit souls, children of Lord Krishna.

"Now I even enjoy going to work, which earlier I found boring. I do it as a service to Krishna. I have the desire to teach Krishna consciousness to all classes of people since most of them are living an aimless life. Srila Prabhupada wants everyone to preach to the suffering humanity and fulfill the mission of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu."

Bhakta Sreekanth

Sreekanth has been helping others to run Bhakti-vriksha meetings and now he has independently begun to conduct them.

He says, "Lord Caitanya planted this tree. It has been watered and nourished by Lord Caitanya along with Nityananda Prabhu, Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura, and Srila Prabhupada. Srila Prabhupada, with his devotion for Krishna and his compassion for the fallen souls, is a major branch that gives ample shade.

Testimonials from Preachers

"By its preaching one small branch of this Bhakti-vriksha made me understand the essence of the Vedas. It showed me ideal examples of how a human being should act. It has also made me capable of facing trouble. My behavior towards other people in society has changed even though my devotional service is so minute.

"I want to convey to everyone everything I have learnt. My first preference is to give this knowledge to the people of India, who are near a fresh water pond but, despite being thirsty, are unable to drink from it. I pray to guru and Krishna to give me the strength and ability to have good *sadhana* and to bring many souls under the divine shelter of the lotus feet of Srila Prabhupada and Sri Krishna."