Introducing the Counselor System

by His Holiness Radhanath Maharaja

Service To The Vaishnavas - The Highest Religious Principle

Vaisnavism has been manifested in its purest and most wonderful form through the love and teachings of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu and His associates. The most beautiful aspect of Lord Caitanya's pastimes is the loving interaction between Him and His devotees, and among the devotees themselves. Although He is the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Caitanya played the role of the devotee just to teach us how to conduct our lives as devotees. In Navadvipa sometimes Lord Caitanya would bow down to His devotees and take the dust from their lotus feet. Sometimes He would wash their clothes with His own hands. Sometimes, on the bank of the Ganges, He would fold their clothes. Sometimes He would bring them clay from the Ganges to use as tilaka. Sometimes He would see devotees carrying loads and He would take the load upon Himself and would carry it. In these and many other ways, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu taught by His own example that the highest of all religious principles is the service to the Vaisnavas.

After taking sannyasa Lord Caitanya made His home in Jagannatha Puri. Every year the devotees of Bengal would come to meet Him during Caturmasya, and Lord Caitanya would personally meet them on the outskirts of Puri. Lord Caitanya, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, would put a fragrant garland on each devotee. The master of all creation would personally decorate the limbs of each devotee with sandal pulp. He would embrace the Vaisnavas and would praise them, filling their heart with love. When He saw their wives bowing down to Him at a distance, He would praise them also by saying: "Whatever knowledge, whatever devotion, whatever saintliness these devotees have, their wives possess the same". Thus He would completely satisfy all devotees by His personal embrace and by glorifying their good qualities. He would also make sure that the devotees had proper accommodations—clean rooms with water and servants—and prasadam. In this way Lord Caitanya personally served His devotees, and this increased the devotees' desire to serve Him and serve each other. If the Lord sees that His devotees are so exalted that He desired to serve them, how should we then see the devotees and desire to serve them?

The Essence of Varnasrama

This is the essence of our culture: to learn how to be the servant of the servant of the Vaisnavas. This is the basic spirit of the scientific process of daivi-varnasrama-dharma. The conclusion of varnasrama is Lord Caitanya's sloka, "I am not a brahmana, ksatriya, vaisya, or sudra. Nor am I a brahmacari, grihastha, vanaprastha, or sannyasi—these are all temporary designations—my only true identity is to be the servant of the servant of the servant of the Lord of the gopis, Lord Krishna." This is the conclusion. This is the spirit. Still, when Lord Caitanya was a brahmacari, He acted as a perfect brahmacari. When He married, He behaved as a perfect grihastha. And when He took sannyasa He strictly followed all the regulative principles of the sannyasi. So He taught us the importance of following the principles of varnasrama, but understanding that the goal is to utilize these different positions to express our devotion to Krishna. Daivi-varnasrama-dharma in essence is to educate people—according to their nature and propensity—to utilize their talents in the service of God to develop pure love of God. In the society of devotees all the different segments should respect one another, should harmonize with one another, understanding that we need to help each other to purify the heart and to become Krishna conscious.

Caring for Every Devotee

How to apply these principles today, in our society of devotees, is a great challenge. But it is essential, because without it so many problems will play havoc in our society. For a society to be strong, all members must know their duties, and everyone should care for each other. Care means personal attention in serving each devotee. This is the one of the greatest needs of our society. We are preaching the most personal theology in the world: Krishna is a person and every living being is also a person. Everyone has an eternal relationship with God; every one has an eternal relationship with His part and parcels. As Krishna says: "You cannot show love for Me unless you show love for My devotees, and even show love to those who forgot that they are My devotees." Sometimes in our society we become so highly philosophical that we forget that we are people.

Devotees need encouragement and basic facilities to be happy and serve Krishna throughout their life.

A devotee has given his whole life to serve this mission, and then he becomes very sick. He needs help. He lays sick on the floor "I can't do my service." And we say, "You are in maya. You are not the body." "Thank you. Philosophically it's true: I am not this body and I am in maya, but I need your help to get out of maya and transcend this body. I need the love, support and care of a Vaisnava to take me through this."

Srila Prabhupada was so caring to his devotees. On the first Gaura Purnima festival the only existing building was not yet finished. The first night that the devotees were there Srila Prabhupada got up in the middle of the night to look in each room to see if each devotee was properly taken care of, to see if everyone had a mosquito net. He would also ensure that there was prasadam for all of them and when they were getting sick he was very concerned about their health.

In Vrindavana, during his last months on the planet, Srila Prabhupada was so sick that he couldn't even walk. When he had to go upstairs two British devotees would pick him up and would carry him in his chair. One of these devotees had a boil in his foot, and once, while he was carrying Srila Prabhupada, something hit the boil. The devotee said "Oh!" and tried to hide it, but Srila Prabhupada understood. Srila Prabhupada could not eat for months and had lost so much weight. His body was only bones. In these state most people would think about themselves. What was a little boil for a big, strong, young devotee, in comparison with Srila Prabhupada's condition? Still, Srila Prabhupada asked: "What is your problem?" "No problem, Srila Prabhupada, no problem" said the disciple. But Srila Prabhupada insisted: "No, no, please, tell me", and then he saw the boil and told him exactly what medicine to put. He told him to take the leaf of a certain tree, put it in mustard oil, boil it, and apply this at least three times a day. The next day, when that devotee was carrying Srila Prabhupada upstairs, Srila Prabhupada asked: "How is your foot? Let me see." And for the next several days, until the boil was completely cured, Srila Prabhupada would inquire with attention and concern. How much do you think this increased the love of that devotee for Srila Prabhupada? He felt: "Srila Prabhupada is so concerned with such an insignificant disciple like myself. I am not a big preacher or anything like that." This is bhakti. When devotees have physical or mental difficulties it's an opportunity for us to express our love for them. It's an opportunity to express our love for Krishna through serving a Vaisnava.

The Emergency

In the history of the Hare Krishna Movement it is very, very rare that someone leaves the society because he finds a higher philosophy: there is no higher philosophy. Srila Prabhupada gave us the topmost, most complete philosophy and the most perfect and pure process to follow. Why then people leave this movement? Mostly because they feel not cared for by the Vaisnava society. They feel treated impersonally. They feel that their material and emotional needs are not being fulfilled and they discontinue the spiritual practices. When devotees become dissatisfied, some of them leave the society to go into the world just to try to get a lot of money. Others go for some New Age so-called religious ideas, where people said: "You are very nice. You are very nice." And the devotee thinks, "At least they say that I am nice." Others go to some other branch of Vaisnavism because they feel: "At least these people will care about me." But if the devotees were properly cared for in the Hare Krishna Movement, practically no one would ever want to leave. And that is why Srila Prabhupada said that the second half of his mission was to establish the varnasrama-dharma society, to care for devotees throughout their entire lives, so that they can be happy in Krishna consciousness, serving according to their propensity.

Srila Prabhupada established big, big, book distribution. He opened over one hundred temples and started massive preaching around the world. But at one point Srila Prabhupada said: "Now it is time to boil the milk". We must continue to expand the preaching, but we must also put maximum energy in properly training the devotees how to be Vaisnavas, how to practice sadhana, how to understand the duties of the grihastha, the brahmacari, the vanaprastha, the sannyasi. We must especially train devotees in the principles of Vaisnava etiquette. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu said, "Observance of Vaisnava etiquette is what makes a devotee beautiful in the eyes of God." And what is Vaisnava etiquette? It is how to properly respect, honor and care for each other, on every level. And this is the emergency. Our society has become quite big, and many people are leaving, because they don't feel properly cared for. Couples are divorcing because they don't know how to be a grihastha. Brahmacaries are doing a lot of crazy things because they don't know what means to be brahmacari. And when devotees who dedicated their lives are in need—financial, medical, or mental need—they feel all alone, and nobody wants to help them. This is an emergency situation: our society must develop a Krishna conscious social system so that devotees can live harmoniously together, advance and be happy in Krishna consciousness.

The Sri Sri Radha Gopinatha Mandir Experience

n our Sri Sri Radha-Gopinatha Temple—in the Bombay neighborhood named Chowpatty—we tried to implement this spirit of varnasrama in our social development programs. It may not be the perfect presentation. It may not be as full and comprehensive as described in the scriptures, but it is something practical. And the result is that devotees are very happy, they are getting trained and feel cared for.

When devotees feel that the Vaisnava society is caring for them, the result is that they would do anything to serve the society. When devotees don't feel cared, it is a great austerity to serve the society. But if we serve the devotees, the devotee spontaneously wants to serve.

One requirement is what has to be done today. We need money today, go out and get money. We need to cook today, go and cook. We need to clean, go and clean. We need to do puja, go and do puja. What has to be done today, has to be done today. But the problem is that if someone just does what has to be done today, after ten years he realizes, "I have no future." We should think of the future of each devotee. We should engage every devotee with two directions in mind: one, what has to be done today, and two—more important—what is the master plan to keep this devotee happy in devotional service till the day of leaving the body and going back to Godhead? We tried to impress upon the leaders of our temple and congregation that they need to engage people in this way. From the very first day they should think what it takes to keep that particular devotee healthy in Krishna consciousness for the next forty or fifty years. Therefore we have set up different programs, through which Srila Prabhupada and Lord Caitanya's mercy has been working very wonderfully.

The Essence Of Daivi-Varnashrama-Dharma

We can speak for days and weeks and months and years and lifetimes about daivi-varnasrama-dharma but, in essence, daivi-varnasrama-dharma is to educate people — according to their nature and propensity — to utilize their talents in the service of God, to develop pure love of God. We are not these bodies. We are neither men nor women. We are neither American, nor Russian, nor Indian. We are neither old nor young, neither educated nor uneducated. We are not Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists or Jews. These are all temporary, external designations. We are eternal souls, eternal servants of Krishna. Originally we are all Krishna conscious entities; our goal of life is to awaken our natural love for Krishna, and bhakti, devotional service, is the only means to achieve that. Everyone is conditioned by his previous karma and therefore in human society we find so many different tendencies. We have to serve the Lord with our material mind and senses but, due to our different natures, we cannot all serve in the same way. In every social system—capitalistic or communistic, atheistic or theistic—people have different propensities. Some are natural teachers, priests, leaders or administrators. Others are happy doing business, buying and selling. Srila Prabhupada said that you can put a vaishya in any place with nothing and, somehow or other, as if by miracle, he would sell things and make a lot of money. Others are happy doing hard manual work, farming or making bread. There are people who are naturally inclined to renunciation and brahmacari life, and others who are much happier in the grihastha-asrama. And there are also the vanaprastha and sannyasa stages. We need to develop a social organization, within our society, to take care of the devotees so that they can be happy in Krishna consciousness for the rest of their life. Srila Prabhupada expected us to work together to accomplish this. In our temple in Mumbai, India, Sri Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir, we have tried to implement the spirit of varnasrama in our social development. I will try to explain some of the programs we are doing in our sincere attempt to serve the Vaisnava community. Such programs can be applied anywhere. In the beginning we were just watching, analyzing why devotees leave the association of other devotees. We were thinking that is necessary to establish training for the various varnas—brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas and sudras. Srila Prabhupada emphasized it but it is so complicated, because in the city environment it's difficult to identify the real varna of a person. On one level a grihastha may be living outside as part of the congregation, doing excellent sadhana, preaching, cultivating many people and doing pujari service. In this way he is like a brahmana, but as occupation he may be a businessman, that is vaishya, or he may work in a factory, that is sudra. So what is he? He is a Vaisnava.

The Problems of Grihasthas

Devotees may have their home, their family, their occupation, and at the same time be very responsible and exemplary, maintaining a pure sadhana and a tremendous desire to serve the other Vaisnavas and Srila Prabhupada's mission. Grihasthas need to be trained. In the outside society there is a high divorce rate and because of that influence there is also divorce within the Krishna conscious society. I believe that we could prevent most of these disasters if husbands and wives were trained on how to live together and respect each other in Krishna consciousness. Senior grihasthas can help. They know the philosophy; they have been through many experiences; they can teach how to solve marriage problems and to keep Krishna in the center. They can explain how to balance one's occupation—where one has to deal with materialists and make money—with one's keeping a strong sadhana and association of devotees. The can guide on how to raise Krishna conscious children. As a sannyasi, we have a certain insight that grihasthas sometimes don't have. I'll tell you what it is. So many grihasthas approach me and tell me of their problems: family problems; economic problems; problems with husband; problems with wife; problems with children; problems with mother, father and everybody else; problems with sadhana; problems with the mind, and everyone thinks that they are unique problems. But my insight is that everyone has the same problem, in slightly different versions.

A senior, trained, Krishna conscious grihastha can help to solve these problems. That was the first idea of the counselor system: many people were coming to me, but actually grihasthas should help grihasthas; they have more realization than the sannyasis, they have practical experience. Not only that, when they help others they make so much spiritual advancement themselves. Why should we keep all the spiritual advancement for us? Let other devotees take the problems and make spiritual advancement. And the more they preach, the more they extend themselves to help, the more they feel completely ecstatic to be devotees. And although they may be living outside, they are cultivating, they are training, they have to be very attentive, and they have to be very good examples. They are preachers! And they are training other grihasthas to do the same thing. In this way the congregation becomes a tremendous spiritual asset for our movement.