Starting the Counselor System

At the beginning of this counselor project, nobody took it seriously. Because everyone was more concerned with what has to be done today. But today doesn't last forever, that's the problem. We have to think of the future of our movement. We started with three senior grihasthas. We asked them to take responsibility to guide and train those who would like to learn from them, and we personally tried to give them some training. Then we made this system available to our congregation. Not so many, but some signed up and the counselors started by having meetings every two weeks, while also trying to care for the devotees on a personal level, throughout the week. Then I had to go to America. When I came back to Mumbai I asked, "How is the counselor system working?" and they said, "The counselor system? Oh, we forgot about it." There wasn't much interest. I said, "Interest or not interest, there is a need in our society to develop this type of programs. Please, try it." And they said, "Yes, yes, we'll try it." So, they restarted having some meetings. Then I went to America again and came back a few months later: "How is the counselor system?" "Ohâ€¦ Hare Krishna... we forgot about itâ€¦" "I have come to remind you," I told them, "it's important, it's necessary!" and they said, "Oh yes, yes, yesâ€¦"

The first need is therefore that the leaders understand the necessity and then make other devotees imbibe the feeling of necessity. After that they started taking it very seriously and it became so wonderful. The arrangement was that each counselor would take responsibility for entire families, based on personal care, not on management. Every two weeks all the families of the counselor group would meet together in a different house. The first thing they would do is discussing the philosophy; they would learn it very systematically. They have reading materials that everyone in the group studies and every week they all take an exam on the material they covered the previous week. Everyone also learns how to lead and sing in kirtan, how to set up an altar at home and how to cook prasadam. The counselors always preach about the great importance of having strict sadhana while living in the congregation as a grihastha. In every meeting they put a lot of attention into teaching proper Vaisnava etiquette, how to deal with Vaisnavas and how to respect and serve them; how women should deal with brahmacaris, how they should deal with other ladies' husbands and with one another; how husbands should deal with their wives and with other women, with brahmacaris and with other men. Besides discussing Srila Prabhupada's books, Vaisnava etiquette and proper standards of sadhana, they also discuss the problems they have and they help one another. And then, beyond the meeting, on a daily basis the counselors individually contact their counselees. When they took this system seriously it became so attractive that soon hundreds of people were joining the groups. And the people being trained became first class examples of grihasthas and became fit to train others. It began with three counselors and about fifteen families, and now it is up to forty counselors and about seven hundred families. And among them, without counting the temple devotees, there are four hundred initiated devotees, who are strictly following the four regulative principles and are completely dedicated to serving Srila Prabhupada's mission. And it's growing like anything. But more important than growing is the quality of the care for each devotee. This is our great emphasis. If we grow so fast that we can no longer properly take care of even the most insignificant individual, then our growing is a liability, rather than an asset.

The Purposes of the Counselor System

The ultimate aim is to thoroughly care for each devotee. Here are the purposes of applying the counselor system within the congregation of grihasthas:

To educate and train married devotees to live according to the Krishna conscious principles of the grihastha asrama;

To provide systematic training to devotees in matters of philosophy, sadhana and Vaisnava behavior, etiquette, lifestyle and attitudes;

To provide a formal framework within which personal care and attention can be extended to all devotees so as to make them feel loved and wanted and part of a wonderful spiritual family;

To foster warm personal relationships and a spirit of love and trust among devotees, based on Krishna conscious principles;

As a forum through which allocation of service, organization of major events, communication of important decisions, etc., can be facilitated;

The "Report on the Social Development Program at Radha-Gopinatha Temple" includes also descriptions of how the counselor system works, the responsibilities of the counselors, how they are trained and nominated, and how the counselors train the counselees. Counselors take care to train the devotees in household life in the following areas:

How to be ideal grihasthas by keeping Krishna in the center;

How to maintain proper devotional standards at home (regarding kitchen, altar, behavior, sadhana, etc.).

How to be proper wife/husband/parent/child, etc. as per scriptures;

How to balance economic and social responsibilities with spiritual vows;

How women should deal with men, particularly brahmacaries and sannyasis;

How men should deal with women;

How to have proper attitude towards other asramas;

The counselors also resolve conflicts and disagreements within a family, between a devotee and his relatives or between two devotees and thus train them to deal with others in a Krishna conscious way;

A manual of Vaisnava Etiquette and Lifestyle has been prepared for the guidance of devotees and portions of this manual are discussed in every meeting;

Happiness: The Secret Preaching Weapon

The result of applying this system is that devotees are very happy; they are trained and they feel cared for. There is no greater preaching than a happy devotee. The best book distributors in history are those who look very blissful. I watched for years my Godbrother Vaisesika Prabhu. He is a tall devotee with a big smile and eyes full of happiness. He runs to somebody, smiles blissfully, shakes his hand and says: "Nice to meet you!" And the other person thinks, "I never met such an happy man in my whole life!" Then Vaisesika says, "This is a book about love of God. Please, take it." and the person takes it. Also Sacinandana Maharaja, when he approaches people with books, they just see a happy person and think, "Give me such books. I also want to learn to be happy." But if then people come to the temple and see that devotees are morose, gossiping and doing their service grudgingly, they will think, "Yes, the book is very nice, but I don't believe it's practical." But if they come to the temple and see that the devotees are working together unitedly, that they are happily chanting, happily taking prasadam, happily serving and happy with one another, the guests will think, "I want to read and understand these books. I want to be part of this movement." Therefore, if we want to persuade the world to accept Krishna consciousness, the most important investment is to make the devotees happy. If they are happy they will have the strength to continue despite the greatest difficulties in life. If the devotee is happy he will want to make everyone happy. There is nothing that he can't do; there is nothing that he will not do. The happiness of the devotees enlightens people's hearts and invites them to take shelter of the holy names of Lord Krishna's.

Srila Prabhupada said that we are turning hippies into happies. Once a Christian priest told Srila Prabhupada, "Your disciples are so bright-faced. Most young people today are dull and intoxicated, but your disciples are so happy." Prabhupada quoted that priest on many occasions. Srila Prabhupada told us "Chant Hare Krishna and be happy!" he didn't say, "Chant Hare Krishna and gossip. Chant Hare Krishna and be miserable." So it's the duty of the leaders to teach people how to be happy by chanting Hare Krishna, not just for one day or for one year, but for the rest of their life.

Committees For Caring For Devotees

To facilitate the counselors in giving the most complete service to every family, we developed various committees consisting of counselors and other devotees of the congregation who are interested in helping and are capable of helping. The spirit behind these committees is to use our God-given intelligence to think of all the problems grihasthas may have-on any level-and have a group of devotees who will help to solve these problems. The purpose is to create such a feeling of love, trust and care that people will be inspired to chant Hare Krishna and to serve this great mission of Srila Prabhupada.

Children Committee

The first committee is the children's committee. Grihasthas in the congregation face a great challenge in trying to infuse their children with Krishna consciousness. But children who are enthusiastic to be Krishna conscious make their parents so happy to be Krishna conscious. In fact, if the children are Krishna conscious, the parents are very afraid to fall into maya, because the children always watch and drag them: "Let's go to the temple. Why are you oversleeping? Why are you not chanting your rounds?" In helping the children to desire to be Krishna conscious one of the most important factors is to make them feel that they have an important responsibility within our mission. Therefore we selected four very sincere teenage girls and asked them to take charge of this department, and no adult would be allowed to interfere. The girls were very happy. They started to organize one program a month, where the children do everything and the parents are only allowed to watch and do what the children tell them to do. The children were very happy. This is one of the most popular programs of our temple: one Saturday night every month, in the temple, we invite everyone to come and we usually get seven to eight hundred people, serious people. First the children sing bhajans (and they play all the karatalas, mridangas and harmoniums) and then there is arati, and the children lead the arati and again play all the instruments. They also act as Master of Ceremonies, making all the announcements and introducing the next child. And then there is the class. Little children-five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven years old-give class, sitting on the seat and speaking in the microphone. Usually they tell pastimes of Krishna or of Lord Caitanya. Each time six children give class-each speaking for about ten minutes-and all their classes are perfectly sastric and parampara. A five-year-old girl is giving the lecture and eight hundred people are listening with great attention. And some people are crying, weeping through the whole program, because they are so proud to see that these little children are such wonderful Vaisnavas. At the end of the class all the adults cheer: "Haribol! Haribol!" Then we have drama. The children write the script, the children produce the drama and direct it, the children make all the costumes, and all the actors are children. They perform two dramas, each about twenty minutes long. After the drama all the children together chant slokas from Bhagavad-gita and then we also have a puppet show. The children make the puppets, the children write the scripts, the children do the puppetry, and the adults just watch. And at the end there is a big, big kirtan.

As a result of this program, all month long the children are practicing; they meet together many times a week to rehearse their dramas and practice their kirtans and their stories. The parents have never seen their children so Krishna conscious before. Three or four times a day the children practice on their parents the class they are going to give in public. For the whole month, all day long, they are just practicing singing the bhajans, playing the mridanga or reciting the lines for their drama, neglecting everything else. And the children feel that they are leaders of our movement; they feel that they have the responsibility to preach to the masses, and they are so excited. They love this program. They feel: "This is the time when the parents listen to us. We can preach to them." and in this way the children really feel a place within Prabhupada's preaching movement, not just sitting and watching and listening, but actually taking the lead. And the parents are more ecstatic than their children seeing them taking so much responsibility and becoming so enthusiastic. And their relatives-who would never come to the temple-when their nieces, their nephews or their grandchildren are giving the lecture or are starring in the drama, they come to watch them. They won't come to see us, but they come to see the children. People who would never come to the temple come to the temple, and they all make the same mistake: they bring their children. And when their children see all the other children leading kirtans, telling stories, speaking philosophy and doing dramas, they say: "Mummy, next month I want to be in this!" And then they have to bring their children to the temple for the rehearsals, and they have to associate with the other mothers, and then they become devotees. Hare Krishna.

So, this is a wonderful program, and it is a way to help the grihasthas to serve their children and making them Krishna conscious. There is also a Sunday school every Sunday, where some of our senior ladies teach the children so many nice stories, slokas, and basic Vaisnava etiquette. We have such an overwhelming response from these children's programs, and I believe that any temple could do it. Srila Prabhupada explained that the young generations are the future leaders of our society; we have to enthuse them.

Women Committee

The second committee is the women's committee. We have four very senior ladies who conduct these meetings every two weeks, each time at a different lady's house. Attendance is completely voluntary and any woman from the congregation can come. Usually fifty or sixty ladies attend, and it's growing. The first thing they do is that one of the senior ladies give a lecture on a great Vaisnavi in our history, like Jahnava Devi, Sita Devi, Kunti Devi, Gandhari or Visnupriya. They discuss the qualities and the surrender of these great ladies and then discuss various issues such as how to be a better mother, how to be a better daughter, and how to deal with problems in their house and in their lives. In this way these women sincerely try to help and serve one another. All the time women come to me and tell me: "I had never felt such close friendship and love with the other women of our movement as I am feeling since I am coming to these meetings. Due to the nature of my life, my family and my service, I did not know most of these ladies, but now I am actually learning to know them and we are caring for each other. We have become such dear friends and we're helping each other to become better women in Krishna consciousness." This is one of the greatest results of this program.

Business Enterprise Committee

"The next is the business enterprise committee, where grihasthas set up various businesses specifically to fund the temple. Right now the entire Sri Sri Radha-Gopinatha temple is funded by the donations of grihasthas in the congregation. We have no life-membership program. We have no brahmacaris collecting. When brahmacaries distribute books, whatever money they collect goes to the BBT. The grihasthas who work outside support all the temple projects, and this business committee is to increase and improve the quality of how the grihasthas contribute. I will give you an example of the kind of businesses the grihasthas are setting up. Within the congregation there are about seven hundred families in the counselor system, but there are well over a thousand families closely connected with the temple. Everyone has to go shopping-for grains, vegetables, fruits, soap, oil, and everything else for the household-and materialistic people get the profit. So two of our grihastha devotees buy all the produce wholesale, all the soap, the grains, the vegetables, everything, and every family in the congregation is invited to buy from them instead than from the shops around their house. The devotees have delivery service, bringing everything right to their house. The price is the same as in the market but all the profits go to the Hare Krishna temple, so it's sure to be a success.

Employment Committee

The fourth committee is the employment committee, to give employment to grihasthas. Sometimes, for instance, after ten years of service a brahmacari gets married. What is he supposed to do? Now he has a wife and expenses. After this so many people leave the association of devotees, because they have no means of supporting their family. So-for devotees who so desire-the employment committee arranges jobs in the association of devotees. One of the projects we established to accomplish this is the Bhaktivedanta Hospital. Srila Prabhupada said that Mayavadis fall from the brahmajyoti and then open hospitals, and he condemned their equating philanthropy-serving the body of men-with service to God. But that is not our goal; it is something completely different. By Krishna's arrangement we have about twenty five initiated devotees who are cancer surgeons, general surgeons, orthopedic surgeons, gynecologists, pediatricians, anesthesiologists, radiologists, general practitioners, ayurvedic doctors, dentists and dental surgeons, ear-nose-throat specialists, pathologists, skin specialists and venereal disease specialists. They are all serious devotees, attentively chanting sixteen rounds, strictly following the four regulative principles, enthusiastic to preach and completely dedicated to Prabhupada's movement. Most of them are counselors too. And their patients are also becoming devotees. For example, Madhavananda Prabhu is a pediatrician, a child specialist. This mother and father have a five-year-old daughter; the daughter becomes sick and their family doctor is out of town on vacation. So they take the child to Madhavananda and he gives some medicine to the child. Then he gives prasada to the parents and starts telling them a little about Krishna to see if they are interested (if people are not interested, he stops, if they are interested, he continues). They were interested and he brought them to a program. Then he brought them to a Sunday Feast and now the five-year-old daughter, the mother, the father, the sister of the mother, the husband of the sister of the mother, the brother and the brother's wife they are all chanting sixteen rounds, following the regulative principles and are completely committed devotees. And this is only one out of dozens of examples of how the patients of these doctors are becoming Krishna conscious. So the doctors decided: "Instead of all having our private practices, why don't we just start a hospital together? We have enough doctors to run a whole hospital." Therefore the congregation came together and built the hospital. One of its purposes is to employ devotees in the association of other devotees. To run a hospital you need electricians, carpenters, plumbers, managers, business managers, finance managers, personnel managers, accountants, people for cleaning, cooks, drivers, nurses, lawyers and publicity people. Within a hospital you can practically employ any occupation. Therefore about one hundred seventy five devotees of all these different occupations, who were just working for karmis or privately, gave up their jobs and started working together in the Bhaktivedanta Hospital, where they can finance their families and never leave the association of devotees. Two wings of the hospital are dedicated to alternative medicine: ayurvedic, panca-karma, homeopathy, acupressure, acupuncture and various other natural methods. There is a Radha-Krishna temple right across the street and everything served to the patients and the staff is maha-prasadam. And in every room there is a speaker with two channels, one with Prabhupada giving lecture and one with Prabhhupada singing kirtan. And you cannot turn the speaker off, you can either turn it soft or loud. There is also Srila Prabhupada's Bhagavad-gita next to every bed. Many people can become devotees.

Another purpose of this hospital is that the Vaisnavas really want to serve the devotees worldwide. In America, for instance, it usually costs ten, twenty or thirty thousand US dollars just to be in a hospital for a week to get an operation, and it's a depressing, materialistic atmosphere. The Bhaktivedanta Hospital is five-story high and it has a hundred and thirty beds. Thirty beds have been reserved for charity, and probably those thirty beds will be mostly filled with Hare Krishna devotees who have given their life to this movement and need some major work. They can be treated, in the association of devotees, for free or almost free.

"The spirit behind these committees is to use our God-given intelligence to think of all the problems grihasthas may have-on any level-and have a group of devotees who will help to solve these problems. The purpose is to create such a feeling of love, trust and care that people will be inspired to chant Hare Krishna and to serve this great mission of Srila Prabhupada.

Marriage Board

This is actually the best board, because marriage is a big, big problem in our society. Both brahmacaris and grihasthas will agree on this. This board facilitates young people to get married without polluting the atmosphere. What happens if a lady-living in the temple or coming to the temple-decides: "I need to be married"? Or if a man, who is either living in the temple or coming to the temple, decides: "I really should marry"? Or if a brahmacari, who has been serving for some years, decides: "Really, I should get married"? If there is no senior devotee to help, the temple becomes like a hunting ground; like a forest were people cast glances at each other. Young girls look at the brahmacaris like bz-z-z-z, and the brahmacari either goes: "Ah, save me, Krishna!" or he also goes bz-z-z-z. It becomes very disturbing and it's a problem. At one point respectable young girls who are visiting become afraid to come, they feel uncomfortable in the temple, because men approach: "Mataji, will you marry me?" These poor young ladies are trying to give up material life and come to learn about Krishna, and some man comes up: "Mataji, I love you, please marry me." Very disturbing.

I will not ask if these things happen here, because they happen everywhere. Wherever the two different sexes are, these things happen. So, the idea of the Marriage Board is that there are very senior, experienced, responsible, Krishna conscious grihasthas, who help bringing people together for marriage. Therefore, no one is allowed to go bz-z-z-z, and men and women are not allowed to mix freely. Men and women should respect and honor one another; they should not be disturbing one another. So, if any man or woman wants to get married-or the parents want them to get married-they submit their names to the Marriage Board. The Board's position is not to arrange marriages, but to help young people decide for themselves, in a respectful way. They match horoscopes, but that's just one consideration, because in our experience no two astrologers will give you the same advice. But it gives some indication. Then the marriage counselors seriously ponder the person's position in society, the level of seriousness the person has to be a devotee, the way the person wants to surrender in the future, the nature, the personality, the family background-they thoroughly consider all these things. And when they really feel that it could be a good combination, they suggest to the boy and suggest to the girl. And if both are favorable, they arrange for them to meet each other. They meet at the home of one of the marriage counselors, where they are not alone and not in an unrespectable environment. The counselors actually talk to each of them and tell them what they should discuss meeting each other, otherwise, the man and the woman just come and look at each. Therefore the counselors tell them what are the important things to discuss, and once the discussion starts, the candidates spontaneously start expressing what they expect of the person they marry; they talk about their past and their inclinations. Afterward, if either one is not interested, the counselors try to find someone else. But if they are interested the counselors arrange more meetings, until man and woman decide positively or negatively. If they decide that they want to get married, the marriage counselors go through a big austerity: they try to convince the parents of both sides to give their blessings.

This Marriage Board has already helped in arranging at least fifty very promising, successful marriages. If a brahmacari wants to get married, he goes through the same process, and the whole congregation helps him. Most of our brahmacaris remain brahmacaris, but sometimes they have this inclination, and they are encouraged, not discouraged. For example one of our brahmacaris, Rohini Kumar Prabhu, was living in the ashram for five years, doing excellent service. He was leading the BBT translation team for Marathi (the language of Maharashtra, the state of Mumbai) and he was doing excellent as a brahmacari too. But people saw that his nature was that in the future he might not remain very happy as a brahmacari. So he was asked to consider marriage. He considered it and he decided, "yes." The Marriage Board arranged that he meet a very nice young lady and the counselors also talked to the parents and got their blessings. Then the Marriage Board arranged all facilities for the marriage ceremony in the temple.

Housing Committee

And then they approached the next committee, the Housing Committee, which tries to get the congregation to help devotees who need housing. Once Rohini Kumar and Radha Sakhi, his wife, were married, the congregation raised enough money-more than 15,000 US dollars-to buy them an apartment. The congregation bought the house, put it completely on their name, and then arranged an employment for Rohini Kumar. The idea is that a person who was for many years a renunciant, if he wants to get married, he shouldn't need to think, "Now what do I do?" all of a sudden. He should be given whatever he requires by the congregation of grihasthas. And the congregation is in ecstasy doing that, because they really feel that they are helping each other. And every brahmacari in the ashram knows: "If I spend ten or twenty years as brahmacari, and in the future, somehow or other, I require marriage, I won't be completely left in the dark. This congregation of devotees is so loving and caring; they will provide for me, if I just remain Krishna conscious." In this way the Housing Committee has arranged nice housing for many devotees.

Financial Assistance Committee

Also this group of devotees works with the rest of the congregation. If a devotee is in emergency, the congregation raises the funds to help. For example some time back instance a devotee, a retired, older man, needed heart surgery. Within one or two days the committee made the appeal and the congregation raised the funds for the entire heart operation. He would have died otherwise, because he had no money for the surgery. This experience not only gave great faith to this devotee, but made everyone in the congregation think: "If I am part of this Hare Krishna movement and sincerely serve this society, If anything ever happens to me these people would love and help me."

Health Committee

The next committee is comprised of our doctors. Basically all the members of our congregation who sincerely follow the principles and endeavor to serve Srila Prabhupada's mission, get free medical care, free medicine, and free hospitalization for the rest of their lives, for them and for their entire families.

Farm Community Committee

And the next committee is the Farm Community Committee. We purchased fifty acres of very fertile land about five hours from Mumbai. Since we also preach in the villages, we have many devotees who are farmers. They will move to this community and make it an organic, self-sufficient farm community, and all the produce for the temple will be naturally grown there by devotees. They will also sell the produce to the congregation. They will do cow protection and till the land with oxen. There will also be a vanaprastha community, a facility for old, retired devotees, to be cared for and be given nice service for the rest of their lives.

These are some of the committees; there are a few more, but the idea is to try to have devotees serve each other on every level, to generate that feeling of love and trust. The idea is to help the counselors to create an atmosphere where all of the families within our congregation are very, very happy and enlivened to go on with their Krishna consciousness. We have seen that if grihasthas feel secure in the love and help of other Vaisnavas around them, they become extremely enthusiastic and ecstatic to serve Krishna and do wonderful, wonderful service for this mission. In brief, these are some ways we are trying to serve the grihastha community, to create a social form in which the grihasthas can serve each other, take more responsibility, and give each other great happiness.