**Chapter 9: Fictional Prabhupadas**

*While developing a personal relationship with Srila Prabhupada, it is important to dispel impersonal and sentimental misconceptions we may have about him.*

Studying Srila Prabhupada’s teachings without studying his life, and how he lived and applied those teachings, is impersonal. And becoming attached to Prabhupada’s personality without studying and following his teachings is sentimental. Both approaches give us a “fictional Prabhupada” we should avoid. Let’s look at some examples---some obvious, some not.

**IMPERSONAL FICTIONS**

*“Prabhupada Is God”*

Strange as it sounds, this fiction once possessed some of of Prabhupada’s leading disciples. It happened during the summer of 1970.

That spring Prabhupada had countered a threat to his movement. While expanding Krsna consciousness in the Americas and Europe, he was meeting some resistance in India. A few inimical swamis were trying to prevent ISKCON from acquiring land in Mayapur, the birthplace of Lord Caitanya.1 Worse, they were spreading a minimized view of Prabhupada, which was affecting the faith of some of his leading disciples in America.

To counter the threat, Srila Prabhupada formed a Governing Body Commission of trusted devotees, whom he would prepare to manage the movement’s worldwide preaching in his absence.2 After correcting the misled leaders, he deployed four of them as *sannyasis*,3 to travel and preach with full faith in guru and Krsna.

As the young renunciants toured ISKCON America that summer, the gravity of their offense to Prabhupada weighed on them. Mortified at how they had been minimizing his spiritual stature, they began to maximize him, even deify him, citing scriptural references about the spiritual master being nondifferent from Krsna Himself.

In late August the group traveled to New Vrindaban,4 West Virginia, for the Janmastami/Vyasa-Puja festivals5 amid the largest gathering of ISKCON devotees to date. The *sannyasis’* apocalyptic message: Prabhupada is God, Krsna, and because we haven’t recognized him, he has rejected us and gone back to India. Without understanding that Prabhupada is God, our chanting is useless.

Their propaganda so disturbed the devotees that the Governing Body phoned Prabhupada for guidance. Prabhupada thundered his reply: “They have committed the greatest offense. There is only one thing worse than underesti-mating the guru---overestimating the guru. They have said I am God. Therefore, if I am God, they also can become God. This is impersonalism.”6

Banishing the offenders from his Society, Prabhupada said they could return if they separately opened centers, inspired people to take up devotional service, and preached the truth: the spiritual master is not God. God is God. The genuine spiritual master is God’s authorized representative. Any so-called spiritual master who says he’s God is as good as a dog.

End of fiction.

*“ISKCON* ***IS*** *Prabhupada”*

Although less obvious than the previous fiction, the giveaway is ***IS***. To equate ISKCON in all respects with Srila Prabhupada repeats the impersonal flaw of oneness without difference. Prabhupada’s oft-quoted statement on the subject is flawless: “ISKCON is my body.” Although this quotation was never recorded, reliable ear-witness testimony is abundant, and the following letter excerpt says the same thing: “You are all my limbs of my body. Unless you cooperate, my life will be useless.”7

Indeed, wherever Prabhupada’s followers don’t cooperate, a part of his ISKCON body falls ill. And if the noncooperation becomes systemic, all of ISKCON falls ill. The unfailing cure: re-immersion in Srila Prabhupada’s life, teachings, mood, and mission, especially his admonition to cooperate.

Interestingly, Prabhupada also rejected as material this fiction’s inverse--- “Prabhupada **IS** ISKCON”: “Suppose if I say, ‘I am everything in this, my institution,’ does it mean I have lost my personality? No, no….If somebody says that ‘Bhaktivedanta Swami is everything,’ does it mean I have lost my personality? That is material understanding.”8

As ISKCON’s founder-*acarya*, Srila Prabhupada is certainly ISKCON. At the same time, everything in ISKCON doesn’t equal Srila Prabhupada, his Society’s life and soul. As the philosopher Emerson once observed, “An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.”

*“The Governing Body Commission* ***IS*** *Prabhupada*

This fiction betrays an incomplete understanding of the first item Srila Prabhupada declared in his will: “The Governing Body Commission (GBC) will be the ultimate managing authority of the entire International Society for Krishna consciousness.” (Declaration of Will, 4 June 1977, Vrindavan)

Sometime after Prabhupada signed his will, he called for his personal secretary in the middle of the night. The secretary’s diary discloses what happened next:

He could not sleep; thinking of the will had kept him up. “Amongst the GBC, have you selected one after me who will succeed?” I replied that we felt that we should manage together as a group, that none of us was more qualified than the others. “Yes, each of you can be *acarya* of your zone.9

*Acarya*, yes---but not the **founder-*acarya***—a crucial distinction it would take the GBC years to assert.

After Prabhupada’s passing, regional imitations of his pivotal position sometimes turned ISKCON’s zones into cultish kingdoms. The offenses devastated many---gurus and disciples alike. While the imitation was abating, the GBC began to consider more deeply Prabhupada’s mandate for the Body. Finally, in March 2013, the Body published its matured understanding of the GBC as the Society’s “ultimate managing authority”:

When we use the word “authority” in the context of the managerial structure, we do not mean an absolute, infallible authority---such as the authority of scripture---but the mandate to organize the preaching movement so that it is aligned with the instructions of Srila Prabhupada.10

Again, “The GBC **IS** Prabhupada” is a fiction because it is incomplete, identifying the oneness but ignoring the difference between ISKCON’s infallible founder-*acarya* and its ultimate, yet fallible, managing authority, the Governing Body Commission.

*“Prabhupada Is The Guru Only Of His Initiated Disciples”*

A hangover from ISKCON’s “zonal-*acarya*” nightmare, this impersonal fiction arose from ignorance of the founder-*acarya’s* personal, foundational role in the lives of all generations of his followers.

In 1994, as Srila Prabhupada’s Centennial year was approaching, the GBC began to present a more definitive understanding of Srila Prabhupada’s position by passing its first founder-*acarya* resolution. The resolution began as follows: “Srila Prabhupada is the foundational *siksa-guru*11 for all ISKCON devotees because he has realized and presented the teachings of the previous *acaryas* of the Brahma-Madhva-Gaudiya *sampradaya*12appropriately for the modern age.”13

At ISKCON Mayapur, some five months after this resolution was passed, the day of Prabhupada’s Vyasa-puja arrived. As the sun rose outside the temple, a Prabhupada initiate was chanting on his beads when he noticed a young devotee had stopped chanting to have a morning snack. Tactfully, he approached the young man.

“Oh, Prabhu,14 maybe you didn’t know. We’re fasting till noon today for Srila Prabhupada’s Vyasa-puja.”

Squinting into the sun, the snacker was blunt: “You say that because Prabhupada is *your* spiritual master; he’s not *my* spiritual master.” And with that he went back to his snack.

Incredulous, the Prabhupada initiate didn’t know what to say, so he just walked away. “I guess no one told him about the founder-*acarya* resolution,” he mused. “To give staying power to its legislation, the GBC needs to follow up with

education.”

Fortunately, that’s happening more these days, so to continue our contribution, let’s identify and dispel some sentimental fictions about Srila Prabhupada.

**SENTIMENTAL FICTIONS**

*“Illusory Prabhupada”*

This fiction draws its title from ISKCON educator Bhurijana Dasa’s account of what happened while he and his wife, Jagattarini Dasi, were pioneering Krsna consciousness in Hong Kong.

To attract Chinese people to Krsna in the early1970s, Prabhupada had allowed Bhurijana and Jagattarini to adjust their appearance and dress. As guests started coming to their programs, more adjustments followed---in their food, music, mood, and decor---which in turn attracted more guests. The Chinese were becoming devotees.

As they adapted their outreach, however, Bhurijana and his wife also began to neglect their spiritual practices. Resting and rising later, they were chanting Hare Krsna without the support and focus the quiet, early morning hours provide. They thought themselves too busy to study Prabhupada’s books, and material desires began to reenter their hearts. But flush with success, they imagined they still had Prabhupada’s approval.

Then an aerogram arrived. In two weeks Prabhupada would be arriving in Hong Kong, his secretary wrote, so get ready.

By the time Prabhupada arrived, Bhurijana and Jagattarini had prepared a beautiful rose garland and arranged a fancy hotel room. After picking him up in a Rolls Royce, they expressed to Prabhupada how wonderful it was to see him again.

Turning to Bhurijana, Prabhupada was grave: “What is your morning program?”

“Well, Prabhupada, we don’t really have so many guests in the morning right now, so we usually don’t have much of a morning program.”

Prabhupada disapproved.

“Guests may or may not be coming, but why don’t you have a morning program? Whose disciple are you?”

Shaken awake, Bhurijana realized he had become a disciple of illusion.

I had been imagining a Prabhupada that allowed a compromise of purity and Krsna conscious practices. When I was suddenly confronted with the real Prabhupada, the illusory Prabhupada dissolved like mist after sunrise. Prabhupada, as he himself said, was “90% liberal,” but that other 10% was strict.15

Despite his disciples’ preaching success, Prabhupada knew if they continued to neglect their spiritual practices, they would gradually succumb to the Lord’s illusory energy. To avoid becoming illusory disciples of an “illusory Prabhupada,” we need to continue living in the clear light of his protective intructions.

*“Figurehead Prabhupada”*

Not long ago Queen Elizabeth II became England’s longest-serving monarch. And perhaps the most popular one too, as the adoring crowds on her jubilee tours have attested. Yet the queen has no real authority over her people, no parliamentary power like the prime minister. Elizabeth’s influence is purely sentimental because, like almost all monarchs today, she is a figurehead.

By contrast, when Srila Prabhupada toured ISKCON as its founder-*acarya*, he commanded absolute authority over his disciples. He did this by the transcendental knowledge he revealed, as well as his own endearing example of pure devotional service. Keen to see his knowledge and example inspire all generations of his followers, Prabhupada took steps to protect his foundational role in ISKCON. One step was the introduction of his daily *guru-puja.*16

In April 1974, after one of his morning walks on Bombay’s Juhu Beach, Prabhupada went up to the temple as usual to offer his respects to the deities.17 At the time the devotees would offer flowers both to the deities and to Prabhupada. But this morning, in plain view of the deities, Prabhupada sat on his dais to receive full worship, with his disciples singing “*Sri Guru Vandana*,” a traditional Bengali song glorifying the guru.

The song praises pure service to the guru as the way to obtain the full mercy of God. Since Prabhupada was the only guru in ISKCON when he introduced the hymn, his direct disciples didn’t witness its full purport. Today, as successive generations of gurus and disciples come together daily to sing to Prabhupada, the significance of his position as the *jagat-guru*18 continues to grow. Far from being a mere figurehead without real presence in the hearts and minds of his sincere followers, Prabhupada lives in the core of their very being. *Janme janme prabhu sei.* “He is my lord birth after birth.”

Only failure to follow Prabhupada’s teachings will leave us with a sentimental, “Figurehead Prabhupada,” akin to the next despairing fiction.

*“Gone-Forever Prabhupada”*

On July 16, 1975, at a packed press conference in Berkeley, California, a reporter challenged Prabhupada: “What will happen to the movement when you die?”

“I will never die,” Prabhupada replied. “I shall live in my books, and you will utilize.”

If Prabhupada’s reply sounded defiant, it was also an invitation. To know Krsna and transcend death, anyone could read and use the knowledge he was translating and explaining in his books. Especially his followers, who rested as Prabhupada wrote through the night. The problem, he would chide them, is that they didn’t read his books, where he was making himself most available.

As inspirational as Prabhupada’s personal presence was, his writings speak of a deeper intimacy by following his instructions. In fact, this was his own experience while executing the order of his spiritual master. Although he was only with Srila Bhaktisiddhanta perhaps a half dozen times, he always felt him to be right by his side: “There is no difference between the spiritual master’s instructions and the spiritual master himself. In his absence, therefore, his words of direction should be the pride of the disciple.19

Although Prabhupada’s form and initiations were certainly divine, it is his

everlasting instructions that sustain us over time. “He lives forever by his divine instructions, and the follower lives with him.”20 “Living still in sound,”21 Prabhupada will now dispel one more “forever fiction.”

*“Diksa-guru Forever Prabhupada”*

This sentimental fiction arose in the 1980s to counter zonal *acaryas* who were imitating the position of the founder-*acarya.* But to protest guru abuse by claiming the founder-*acarya* appointed himself as everyone’s perpetual *diksa-guru* betrays ignorance of Prabhupada’s consistent teachings.

Keep trained up very rigidly and then you are a bona fide Guru, and you can accept disciples on the same principle. But as a matter of etiquette it is the custom that during the lifetime of your spiritual master you bring the prospective disciples to him, and in his absence or disappearance you can accept disciples without any limitation. **This is the law of disciplic succession** [my emphasis]. I want to see my disciples become bona fide Spiritual Master and spread Krishna consciousness very widely, that will make me and Krishna very happy.22

Further:

Because people are in darkness, we require many millions of gurus to enlighten them. Therefore Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s mission is, He said, that “Every one of you become guru.” [If you say,] “But I have no qualification. How can I become guru?” There is no need of qual- ification. “Still I can become guru?” Yes. “How?” Whomever you meet, you simply instruct what Krsna has said. That’s all. You become guru.23

No need to sentimentally (and illegally) appoint Srila Prabhupada as everyone’s perpetual *diksa-guru.* Blessed are *all* of Prabhupada’s disciplic descendants who already have him as their foundational guru, their *founder-acarya.* And blessed are the gurus who enrich, enhance, and deepen that relationship.

Finally, to protect us from the false pride that can prevent us from being the guru Lord Caitanya wants us all to be, Srila Prabhupada reveals the mood of a true guru:

A spiritual master takes his disciples as his spiritual master. That is the position. He thinks that, “Krsna has sent me so many spiritual masters.” He does not think himself as spiritual master. He thinks himself their servant. Because they have to be trained. Krsna has appointed him to train them. Therefore he thinks himself as servant of the disciples. This is the position.24

Full immersion in our founder-*acarya’s* life, teachings, mood, and mission is the best prevention, and cure, for all kinds of “fictional Prabhupadas.”

NOTES

1Mayapur, in West Bengal, India, is the birthplace of Lord Caitanya, Krsna’s “Golden Avatar.” 2*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, Chapter 31: “A Threat Against ISKCON. 3In Vedic culture, a renunciant whose preaching is enriched with knowledge and detachment. 4The first ISKCON rural community, founded in 1968 and named after Vrindavan, India, the village where Lord Krsna sported as a boy. 5Back-to-back festivals on the ISKCON calendar celebrating the advent anniversaries of Lord Krsna and Srila Prabhupada. 6*Radha-Damodara Vilasa I*, Eleventh Wave: “New Vrindavan Shakedown.” From author Vaiyasaki Dasa’s interview with Madhudvisa Dasa. 7Letter to Brahmananda Dasa, 17 July 1968, Montreal. 8Conversation with college students, 11 July 1973, London. 9*TKG’s Diary: Prabhupada’s Final Days, entry for 27 June 1977.* 10”Harmonizing ISKCON’s Lines of Authority,” GBC Policy Paper, March 2013, Mayapur. 11A *siksa-guru* is an instructing spiritual master. 12A *sampradaya* is a spiritual community or tradition. 131994 GBC Resolution No. 35, “The Founder-Acarya Statement.” 14Prabhu means “master” and is the way devotees formally address one another. By serving the Lord’s devotees, one pleases the Lord. 15*My Glorious Master*, Bhurijana Dasa. 16*Guru-puja* is the ceremony to formally worship the spiritual master. 17Deities are forms of God authorized by scripture and worshiped by devotees. 18A *jagat-guru* (“world-guru”) is a guru of gurus, a universal teacher. 19*Sri Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Adi-lila*, 1.35, Purport. 20From the Dedication page in the First Canto of Srila Prabhupada’s *Srimad-Bhagavatam.* 21”Living still in sound” is a phrase from a verse Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura inscribed on the sacred tomb of Srila Haridasa Thakura in Puri, India. 22Letter to Tusta Krishna Dasa, 2 December 1975, New Delhi. 23Lecture, 21 May 1976, Honolulu. 24*Nectar Of Devotion* lecture, 23 October 1972, Vrindavan.

*Unencumbered by impersonal and sentimental misconceptions about Srila Prabhupada, in Chapter 10 we’ll look at how to cultivate our own personal, foundational relationship with him as his eternal loving servants.*