

Around 2011, the GBC Body formed an official Hermeneutic Committee to discern, through debate and discussion, principles by which devotees should understand the statements of Prabhupāda, Śāstra, and previous Ācāryas, in a way that follows our Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, as taught by Prabhupāda. The GBC appointed the following members to the Hermeneutic Committee: Badrinarayana Prabhu, Druta Karma Prabhu, Bhakti Vikasa Swami, Radhika Ramana Prabhu, and, Hridayananda Dasa Goswami. Vraja Vihari Prabhu acted as the committee’s moderator.

The committee undertook its task in the spirit of this verse from *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*: “A sincere student should not neglect the discussion of such [philosophical] conclusions [*siddhānta*], considering them controversial, for such discussions strengthen the mind. Thus one’s mind becomes attached to Śrī Kṛṣṇa.” [CC 1.2.117]

In 2013, on behalf of the GBC Hermeneutic Committee, Druta Karma Prabhu wrote a paper presenting the committee’s conclusions, after about two years of discussion. In that paper, he stated, “Śrīla Prabhupāda is the instructing spiritual master for all members of ISKCON. Yet even among his faithful followers, questions may arise on how to understand some of his statements. There is thus need to establish reasonable hermeneutical principles to understand Prabhupāda’s statements, which are of various kinds.”

In this paper, I seek to further clarify that understanding. I will engage here in both *hermeneutics* and *exegesis*. *Hermeneutics* aims here to establish rules one follows to ascertain the meanings of sacred texts. *Exegesis* is the act of interpreting or explaining the actual meanings of such texts, by application of reasonable hermeneutic principles.

Prabhupāda himself strongly emphasized the need to combine religion with philosophy, ie sound reasoning. On that topic, I will now quote from my paper on the GBC and constitutionalism in ISKCON.

“Philosophy does not mean to merely memorize a dogma or doctrine, but to reason logically [about any claim]...” In his purport to *Bhagavad-gītā* 3.3, Prabhupāda writes, ‘Religion without philosophy is sentiment, or sometimes fanaticism.’ A fanatic is ‘a person with extreme, unreasoning enthusiasm,’ or a person ‘with extreme and uncritical enthusiasm or zeal, as in religion or politics.’ (Uncritical here means ‘forming a judgement without objective analysis and evaluation.’)

“Prabhupāda confirms this sense of philosophy as the ability to reason, the opposite of fanaticism, in a *Bhagavad-gītā* class [12.20.68]: ‘You should be religious, but should understand everything philosophically. Otherwise one becomes fanatic, religious fanatic. In the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* it is clearly said that *śrī-kṛṣṇa-caitanya dayā karaha vicāra* [CC 1.8.15] ...try to understand the gifts of Caitanya Mahāprabhu by your *philosophical understanding*.’

“Prabhupāda here translates the words *karaha vicāra* as ‘understand by ...philosophical understanding.’ The original Sanskrit word *vicāra* means ‘pondering, deliberation, consideration, reflection, examination, investigation.’ The standard *Samsad Bengali Dictionary* gives synonymous or identical meanings for *vicāra*: ‘consideration, deliberation; argument; discussion; decision; inference.’

“Note that inference is ‘a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning.’ Thus Prabhupāda’s famous teaching that one must combine religion with philosophy, as well as Lord Caitanya’s own words, both indicate that one should not merely memorize a religious doctrine, [nor merely espouse a conviction] but that we should be able to reason faithfully and logically about the Absolute Truth. Prabhupāda steadily teaches this: ‘Science must be based on logic and philosophy. Science means that. And religion means sometimes sentiments. So religion without philosophy is sentiment, and philosophy without religion is mental speculation. Both must be combined. Then it is

perfect. You cannot have religion without philosophy. That is sentiment, fanaticism. And if you simply take philosophy without religion, without sense of God, this is mental speculation. *So religion must be on the basis of science and logic. That is first-class religion.*[9.10.73] ’

“Clearly, to circumvent philosophical reasoning, and yet insist on one’s exclusive orthodoxy, fits the classical definition of fanaticism as defined by Prabhupāda and standard dictionaries.”

In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, Kṛṣṇa emphasizes the need to practice spiritual life with reason, i.e. *buddhi*. “The word *buddhi* indicates *intelligence, reason or judgment*. It is the power to discern where to enter and where to exit, what to do and what not to do, in pursuit of our rational self-interest. *Buddhi* tells us what is benign and what is malign, what liberates and what enslaves. *Buddhi* makes these crucial distinctions [Bg18.30].” (*Gītā Guide* p 59)

Kṛṣṇa emphasizes the importance of *buddhi-yoga*, literally, “the spiritual practice of reason.” We find a powerful example of this emphasis in the *Gītā*’s second chapter, *Contents of the Gītā Summarized*. In verse 2.39, Lord Kṛṣṇa effectively divides the chapter in two parts: “That which I have taught you [thus far] is *buddhi*, reason, in a philosophical sense [*sāṅkhye*]. Now hear about it [*buddhi*] in practice [*yoge*]. By such *buddhi*, spiritual intelligence, you will give up the bondage of karma.” Since Chapter Two summarizes the entire *Gītā*, one may say that the *Gītā* is teaching *buddhi*, spiritual intelligence or reason as a key element in the path of bhakti-yoga. Indeed, the word *buddhi* occurs *twelve more times* in this chapter alone!

I will give one more example of the *Gītā*’s focus on a rational spiritual practice, i.e. *buddhi-yoga*. In the *Gītā*’s famous verse 10.10, Lord Kṛṣṇa declares that to those souls who are constantly devoted to Him with love, He gives the spiritual practice of reason, *buddhi-yoga*, “by which they come to Me!” Thus Lord Kṛṣṇa makes eminently clear that He is teaching a spiritual science that requires from us an intelligent, reasoned, devotional response.

Undoubtedly, we approach Kṛṣṇa through *bhakti*, devotion. The means and end are pure *bhakti*. But Lord Kṛṣṇa also states at 10.10 that we approach Him through *buddhi-yoga*, defined in the standard Sanskrit dictionary as “devotion of the intellect,” or even as “intellectual union with God.”

Recall as well that at 7.17, Lord Kṛṣṇa declares that of the four kinds of persons who approach Him, the best is the *jñānī*, the wise or learned person who is *eka-bhaktiḥ*, fixed in pure devotion.

The *Upaniṣads* are famously the *jñāna-kāṇḍa*, the knowledge portion of the Vedas, and the *Gītā* is celebrated as *Gītā-upaniṣad*, as Prabhupāda teaches. We all know that a simple soul without formal education can be the greatest lover of Kṛṣṇa, as were the Gopīs. Still, in the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa steadily emphasizes the importance of analytic reason, *buddhi*. This emphasis perfectly matches Prabhupāda’s own insistence on the need for both religion and philosophy.

Prabhupāda often called Krishna consciousness a *spiritual science*. If it is to remain so, his followers must have a clear, precise, *scientific* grasp of his teachings. And a key category of that spiritual science is the Ācārya himself. Thus, if ISKCON is to embody and transmit a true spiritual science, it must have a clear, precise, scientific understanding of its own Founder-Ācārya.

I will add that Prabhupāda’s first direct instruction to me was that I should acquire a good academic education, and then present Krishna consciousness to other educated people. Prabhupāda also wrote to me and many other devotees that to succeed, ISKCON must attract the educated class. So, much is at stake in the attempt to maintain a scientific understanding of our sacred tradition, and its Founder-Ācārya, Śrīla Prabhupāda.

ISKCON must always preserve the highest Vaiṣṇava etiquette toward its Founder-Ācārya. We must honor Prabhupāda fully and never offend him. Thus, there is a natural reluctance in ISKCON to set limits on Prabhupāda’s authority, even when Prabhupāda himself consistently teaches those limits.

ISKCON cannot preserve a spiritual science with a flawed understanding of its Founder-Ācārya. Since ISKCON is the best hope to establish the yuga-dharma for this age, it is essential that ISKCON grasp precisely Prabhupāda’s philosophical explanation of his own powers and limits.

Our most precious gift from Prabhupāda is a true spiritual science. And a flawed understanding of Prabhupāda, even if motivated by a wish to glorify him, must damage his mission, perhaps forever. History repeats, and we have many historical examples of great religious movements that permanently deviated from their founder’s teachings, due to their zeal to glorify their founder beyond his own self-description.

How do we understand Prabhupāda? The same way we understand all spiritual knowledge — by guru, sādhu, and śāstra. Prabhupāda himself always taught this.

“As stated by Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura, sādhu-śāstra-guru: one has to test all spiritual matters according to the instructions of saintly persons, scriptures and the spiritual master...A bona fide spiritual master does not mention anything not mentioned in the authorized scriptures. Ordinary people have to follow the instructions of sādhu, śāstra and guru. Those statements made in the śāstras and those made by the bona fide sādhu or guru cannot differ from one another.” [ŚB 4.16.1 purport]

“Śrī Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura has explained who is spiritual master...He says, sādhu śāstra guru vākya tinete kariyā aikya...you have to test these three things...Sādhu, saintly person..., śāstra, scriptures, and spiritual master.” [Seattle 9.25.68]

“Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura advises, sādhu-śāstra-guru-vākya, hṛdaye kariyā aikya. The meaning of this instruction is that one must consider the instructions of the sādhu, the revealed scriptures and the spiritual master in order to understand the real purpose of spiritual life. Neither a sādhu (saintly person or Vaiṣṇava) nor a bona fide spiritual master says anything that is beyond the scope of the sanction of the revealed scriptures. Thus the statements of the revealed scriptures correspond to those of the bona fide spiritual master and saintly persons. One must therefore act with reference to these three important sources of understanding.” [CC 1.7.48]

Similarly, “We can approach God by understanding a saintly person [sādhu], studying the Vedic scriptures [śāstra], and following the instructions of the bona fide spiritual master [guru]...”

“Sādhu, śāstra, and guru corroborate one another.” [Beyond Illusion and Doubt 7]

The GBC sent the Hermeneutic Committee a series of questions, including this: “Are the statements of guru also to be regarded as śāstra?”

In his paper, expressing the committee’s view, Druta Karma Prabhu writes, “According to Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura, we accept the words (vākya) of sādhu, śāstra, and guru. The three are interrelated but distinct. ‘Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura sings: sadhu-śāstra-guru-vakya, cittete kariya aikya. If we want to become saintly persons, or if we want to return to our original Kṛṣṇa consciousness, we must associate with sadhu, śāstra, and guru (a bona fide spiritual master). This is the process.’ (SB 4.26.12 purport) Similarly -- ‘We can approach God by understanding a saintly person [sādhu], studying the Vedic scriptures [śāstra], and following the instructions of the bona fide spiritual master [guru].’ [Similarly,] ‘Sādhu, śāstra, and guru corroborate one another.’ [Beyond Illusion and Doubt 7]”

DKP continues: “We should not collapse the distinctions among them. They are always given as three corroborating authorities. Prabhupāda emphasizes that the ultimate authority is indeed śāstra: ‘Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura says, sadhu-śāstra-guru-vākya. One should accept a thing as genuine by studying the words of saintly people, the spiritual master and the śāstra. The actual center is the śāstra, the revealed scripture. If a spiritual master does not speak according to the revealed scripture, he is not to be accepted. Similarly, if a saintly person does not speak according to the śāstra, he is not a saintly person. The śāstra is the center for all.’” (Cc. Madhya 20.352 purport).

Prabhupāda here teaches the message of Lord Kṛṣṇa who states:

tasmāc chāstraṃ pramāṇaṃ te kāryākārya-vyavasthitau
jñātvā śāstra-vidhānoktaṃ karma kartum ihārhasi [Bg 16.24]

“Therefore śāstra is your evidence in determining what is duty and what is not duty. Knowing the stated rules of śāstra, you should do your duty here.”

Later, I will explain further why we must preserve the three distinct sources of spiritual knowledge, with the overarching understanding that “...śāstra is the center for all.”

We must also understand that *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* is our most important Śāstra. Druta Karma Prabhu writes in his paper, “Jīva Gosvāmī establishes the *Bhāgavatam* as primary evidence, and all ācāryas in our line accept it as such. For example, in his *Daśa-mūla-tattva*, Bhaktivinoda Thakura states: ‘Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī...ascertains that the *Srimad Bhāgavatam* is the best source of evidence.’ And in *Jaiva Dharma* [13.1], Bhaktivinoda Thakura says: ‘The essence of the vast Vedas is summarized and compiled in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, making this book the epitome of all evidences.’

“In *Caitanya Bhāgavata*, Lord Caitanya said: ‘[Those] philosophical conclusions on the bhakti path, available in *Bhāgavatam*, have no parallel in any other scripture.’” [Antya 3]

In the same *Caitanya Bhāgavata*, Lord Caitanya said to Devānanda Paṇḍita: “As all incarnations of the Lord, like Matsya, Kūrma etc. are self-manifest and appear and disappear at will, similarly *Bhāgavatam* is not a text composed by mortals. It is transcendental and appears and disappears by God's will. The *Bhāgavatam*, having disappeared, once again appeared on Vedavyāsa's tongue by Krishna's mercy.” [Antya 3]

In the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* [2.23.115] we find this statement:

tabe sanātana saba siddhānta puchilā
bhāgavata-siddhānta gūḍha sakali kahilā

“Thus, Sānātana Gosvāmī inquired from Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu about all the conclusive statements [siddhānta] concerning devotional service, and the Lord very vividly explained all the confidential meanings [siddhānta] of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*.”

An equation is here established between *saba-siddhānta*, all spiritual conclusions, and *bhāgavata-siddhānta gūḍha sakali*, all the confidential spiritual conclusions of the *Bhāgavatam*.

We should also note that Lord Caitanya, as the perfect spiritual master, simply explained the knowledge of Śāstra, *Bhāgavatam*

Caitanya-caritāmṛta [2.24.316] also describes the authorship of the *Bhāgavatam*: *tumi vaktā bhāgavatera*, “My dear Lord, You are the original speaker of the *Bhāgavatam*.”

The Lord is not only the speaker of the *Bhāgavatam*; He is nondifferent from the *Bhāgavatam*. Thus CC 2.24.318 declares: *kṛṣṇa-tulya bhāgavata-vibhu*, “*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* is as great as Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Lord.”

Since Prabhupāda emphasizes that Śāstra is the central authority, and since the *Bhāgavatam* is our main Śāstra, and since Lord Caitanya taught Sanātana Gosvāmī that the *Bhāgavatam* gives our philosophical conclusions, how does the *Bhāgavatam* describe the symptoms and powers of a bona fide Vaiṣṇava guru?

The *Bhāgavatam* famously begins with three grand, prefatory verses, that begin with *janmādy asya yato 'nvayād*. We then learn that a group of learned sages, headed by Śaunaka Ṛṣi, gathered in Naimiṣāraṇya to perform a great sacrifice to benefit the world. The next verse states that they respectfully presented questions to their teacher, Sūta. In the following verse 1.1.6, we begin to hear those questions, in which the sages clearly explain Sūta's qualifications to teach the *Bhāgavatam*. Thus, in their very first statement, the sages of Naimiṣāraṇya tell Sūta why they are accepting him as their guru, why he is qualified to act as a bona fide spiritual master: Sūta is qualified because he properly studied, and can explain, Śāstra.

“The sages said, ‘O sinless one, you have indeed studied and taught the Purāṇas, with the sacred histories, and indeed the Dharma-Śāstras.’”

*ṛṣaya ūcuḥ tvayā khalu purāṇāni setihāsāni cānagha
ākhyātāny apy adhītāni dharmā-śāstrāṇi yāny uta* [1.1.6]

The sages then explain that Sūta, by the mercy of his teachers, knows all of this, ie he knows the Śāstras, by *tattva*.

vettha tvam saumya tat sarvaṁ tattvatas tad-anugrahāt

Thus, to understand the qualification and knowledge of a true guru, we must grasp this term *tattva*, especially because Lord Kṛṣṇa uses this same word in the famous verse 4.34, “Learn the truth... from those who have seen *tattva* (*tattva-darśinaḥ*).”

In Vaiṣṇava theology, *tattva* especially indicates a fundamental category of truth, such as viṣṇu-tattva, jīva-tattva, or prakṛti-tattva. The *Bhāgavatam* also states that to understand the Absolute as brahman, paramātmā and bhagavān is to know *tattva*. [1.2.11]

In the celebrated verse, 4.34, Lord Kṛṣṇa emphasizes *tattva* in yet another way. He states that “the seers of *tattva* will teach you knowledge, [for] they have knowledge, *upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattva-darśinaḥ*.”

Kṛṣṇa here uses the standard term for knowledge, *jñānam*, a term that Kṛṣṇa defines at Bg 13.3 *kṣetra-kṣetrajñāyor jñānam yat taj jñānam mataṁ mama*, “I take knowledge to be that knowledge of the field and the knower of the field.” Since Kṛṣṇa explains in this section that there are two knowers of the field, the *jīva* and the Lord, Kṛṣṇa is clearly stating here that knowledge, *jñānam*, is to know the three *tattvas*: 1) the field, or *prakṛti*; 2) the knower of the field, *jīva*; and 3) the knower of all fields, *īśvara*, Kṛṣṇa Himself.

It is thus explicit that a bona fide guru who has “has seen the Truth,” is naturally a *tattva-darśin*, because the Truth is knowledge of the three *tattvas*.

Prabhupāda implicitly refers to *tattva* in his pranāma-mantra in that he describes the impersonalists as nirviśeṣa-vādīs, advocates of nirviśeṣa. The Sanskrit word nir-viśeṣa means without [nir] distinction [viśeṣa], and refers in Prabhupāda's pranāma-mantra to the impersonalists who do not know *tattva*, and thus do not distinguish between Viṣṇu-tattva and jīva-tattva, or between one jīva and another jīva, or who think that Kṛṣṇa's body is material, thus failing to distinguish between Viṣṇu-tattva and prakṛti-tattva.

The Caitanya-caritāmṛta uses the term *siddhānta* (settled doctrine or truth) as a virtual synonym of *tattva*, as we see in this verse:

“Kṛṣṇa-tattva, bhakti-tattva, up to rasa-tattva — the Lord taught [Rūpa Gosvāmī] all the siddhānta of the Bhāgavatam.” [CC 2.19.115]

Thus it is tattva, or siddhānta that a bona fide guru thoroughly knows and teaches, as we see in the verse quoted above: “Then Sanātana asked about all siddhānta. The Lord explained all confidential siddhānta of the Bhāgavatam.” [CC 2.23.115] After accepting Lord Caitanya as his teacher, Sanātana inquired about siddhānta, and the Lord, in reply, explained siddhānta. Thus conclusive, categorical spiritual truth, cited from Śāstra, is the curriculum of the guru-disciple relationship.

CC 2.9.239 praises the Brahma-saṁhitā as a siddhānta-Śāstra.

And CC 3.5.86, states that Lord Caitanya manifested bhakti-siddhānta, the settled theological truths of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, through Sanātana Gosvāmī.

Indeed Mahāprabhu’s mission was to establish siddhānta. Thus, CC 2.9.44 states: “Everywhere, the Lord established Vaiṣṇava-siddhānta. No one was able to break (refute) the Lord’s siddhānta.”

Note that Prabhupāda translates this verse as follows: “Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu established the devotional cult everywhere. No one could defeat Him.”

Thus Prabhupāda equates ‘the devotional cult’, the Lord’s movement, with the establishing of siddhānta. And the Lord was victorious because no other preacher or scholar could defeat His siddhānta.

When Lord Caitanya gave Rāmānanda Rāya two important books, Kṛṣṇa-karṇāmṛta and Brahma-saṁhitā, the Lord told Him, “Whatever you have told Me about devotional service is all supported by these two books.” [CC 2.9.323-4] In Bengali, the Lord literally said, “Whatever siddhānta you told me,” tumi yei siddhānta kahile. Thus, Prabhupāda translates siddhānta as “devotional service.” In other words, the essence of acting as a guru or teacher of Kṛṣṇa consciousness is to teach siddhānta. There are many other examples in the Caitanya-caritāmṛta.

Back in the Bhāgavatam’s first chapter, the Naimiṣāraṇya sages then make clear that a bona fide guru not only understands Śāstra comprehensively and categorically (tattvataḥ), but also extracts the essence of Śāstra, so that all souls can achieve beatitude. The sages told Sūta, “There are many varieties of scriptures, and each enjoins many duties. Therefore, O sage, select the essence of all these scriptures and explain it for the good of all living beings, so that their souls may be fully satisfied.” [ŚB 1.1.11]

Again, the guru’s special knowledge comes from Śāstra, as confirmed in the well-known verse:

tasmād guruṁ prapadyeta jijñāsuḥ śreya uttamam
śābde pare ca niṣṇātaṁ brahmaṇy upaśamāśrayam

“Therefore, one who wants to know the supreme good should surrender to a guru who is deeply versed in the spiritual Vedas, and fixed in the shelter of the Absolute [brahman].” [ŚB 11.3.21]

I will provide here from Druta Karma Prabhu’s paper, more replies to GBC questions.

GBC: What is the status of Prabhupāda 's statements not drawn from shastra?

DK: Śrīla Prabhupāda’s followers accept his translations of śāstra and direct quoting of shastra as śāstra. But in purports, letters, lectures and conversations, Prabhupāda made other statements...on worldly topics with no reference to śāstra. If Prabhupāda’s followers find direct sastric support for these words, Prabhupāda’s words are taken as authoritative. For example, Prabhupāda said that Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose showed that plants have sensations. He did not support this concept with shastra, but śāstra does support this.

“Prabhupāda’s non-sastric predictions may not come true. For example, Prabhupāda said in 1975 that World War III would take place very soon and that “Russia will be finished.” The war did not take place.

Ravindra Svarupa Prabhuh heard from others that when asked about this, Prabhupāda said “Kṛṣṇa changed His mind.”

GBC: Can there be mistakes in Prabhupāda 's statements?

DK: “Prabhupāda himself said that the guru is not omniscient like God and should not be expected to know everything perfectly... Apart from mistakes in grammar, recalling verses, or details of material affairs, one may question an interpretation of śāstra in a non-siddhānta matter. For example, based on the Fifth Canto, Prabhupāda said that the moon is further away from the earth than the sun.

“There are some problems here. First, Bhāgavatam does not give line of sight distances of the sun and moon from earth. We also have evidence from Surya Siddhānta, which Prabhupāda took as authoritative śāstra, that the moon is closer to earth than the sun. Sadaputa Prabhuh extensively discusses these points in his Vedic Cosmography and Astronomy.”

GBC: What role does Śrīla Prabhupāda 's historical context play in understanding his teachings?

DK: “Śrīla Prabhupāda’s views were certainly not completely dictated by his cultural and historical context. But like all pure devotees serving within the material world, he was placed by Krishna in a particular cultural and historical context, of which he was obviously aware. By the arrangement of Kṛṣṇa, he was guided into...that cultural and historical context--for example, his becoming involved with the pharmaceutical business and Gandhi’s nationalist movement. So, we accept that by Krishna’s arrangement Prabhupāda did respond to his historical context, and manifest influences from it, in different ways at different stages of his life.”

GBC: How should Prabhupāda 's followers understand and apply his statements that are largely socially unacceptable?

DK: “Vaishnavas may respectfully put questions and doubts to the guru, as Arjuna did to Krishna. Prabhupāda’s disciples sometimes questioned his statements and instructions and he removed their doubts on siddhānta without modifying his position. But in non-siddhānta issues, he sometimes modified his statements on further reflection, or on receiving better information, such as in the matter of polygamy. Thus, ISKCON members may respectfully question the utility of Prabhupāda’s non-siddhānta statements that disturb the modern world.

“[For example] Here is a statement about women, made by Śrīla Prabhupāda , that was unpopular when he made it, and would be unpopular today: ‘Where is woman philosopher, mathematician, scientist? Not a single [one].’ [Morning walk Bombay, Jan 9, 1977] If a member of ISKCON were questioned about this particular statement, it would be best to concede that Śrīla Prabhupāda was mistaken. There are many women scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. If Śrīla Prabhupāda had said, ‘Where is woman philosopher, mathematician, scientist? Not as many as men.’ Or ‘Not as famous as men,’ that could be accepted as true. But taken as stated, the statement is not true.

Details and basic principles

DK: “In chapter 6 of NOD, Rūpa Gosvāmī and Prabhupāda distinguish between the unvarying basic principles of bhakti, and variable details that can be adjusted according to time, place, and circumstances. In his purport to ŚBh 4.8.54, and elsewhere, Prabhupāda strongly urges that we adjust details according to time, place, and circumstances. He did not claim that only he could or should make such adjustments.”

DK: “While a faithful devotee should not search out and advertise the guru's or the acarya's so-called errors, sometimes other people bring out such 'mistakes' and the devotee must reply intelligently, which may include admitting that within a limited range there may be some few mistakes in Śrīla Prabhupāda's statements, which do not affect the overall correctness of his presentation of Krishna consciousness. Intelligent people often look for a reasonable hermeneutic in a prospective religion. If we offer them one, they are often encouraged to go forward in their Krishna consciousness. Also, many intelligent devotees, even if they don't bring it up to us, do notice mistakes and this can cause them to doubt basic teachings that should not be doubted. Thus, it is right and valuable that we are mentioning that minor mistakes may occur, because this knowledge, for many devotees, serves as a safety valve, and preserves their faith in Śrīla Prabhupāda's important teachings.

“Śrīla Prabhupāda's...core values and understandings were those of a pure devotee of Krishna. And based on his core values and guidance from Krishna, he (like all of our Ācāryas) responded to various aspects of the cultural and historical context in which he found himself. His responses sometimes reflected and incorporated elements of [the] cultural milieu in which Krishna placed him.

“Śrīla Prabhupāda ... in his...books, correspondence, lectures and conversations...made... statements that are supported by direct sastric evidence,...[as well as] statements that are not supported by direct sastric evidence, and [also detailed] instructions to disciples.”

We must keep in mind that Prabhupāda's act of commenting on mundane subjects is not a mundane act. Prabhupāda acted with pure devotion for Kṛṣṇa. Sometimes he served by commenting on mundane topics in the fields of history, politics, economy, psychology etc.

Prabhupāda himself stated in his purport to ŚB 1.5.22, “Human intellect is developed for advancement of learning in art, science, philosophy, physics, chemistry, psychology, economics, politics, etc. By culture of such knowledge the human society can attain perfection of life. This perfection of life culminates in the realization of the Supreme Being, Viṣṇu.”

Similarly, “When advancement of knowledge is applied in the service of the Lord, the whole process becomes absolute... Therefore, all the sages and devotees of the Lord have recommended that the subject matter of art, science, philosophy, physics, chemistry, psychology and all other branches of knowledge should be wholly and solely applied in the service of the Lord... Scientific knowledge engaged in the service of the Lord, and all similar activities, are all factually Hari-kīrtana, or glorification of the Lord.”

Siddhānta and Kṛṣṇa-līlā

Jīva Gosvāmī states in his Tattva-sandarbhā that Śāstra gives perfect siddhānta. Ācāryas do not disagree about this siddhānta. However, we see that rigor is sometimes relaxed for līlā details. Here is evidence:

1. Ācāryas do disagree on līlā details.
2. Sanātana Gosvāmī, Viśvanātha Cakravartī and other Ācāryas even give līlā details that differ from the Bhāgavatam's account.
3. Prabhupāda often gave non-literal translations of līlā, focusing instead on siddhānta precision.
4. Thousands of ISKCON devotees, including leaders, go to Vṛndāvana and listen faithfully as local devotees recite hundreds of līlā stories not given in Śāstra, nor by the Ācāryas.
5. Druta Karma Prabhu writes: “In questioning His father's Indra-yajña, Krishna distinguishes between folklore customs and śāstric injunctions. Kṛṣṇa said, ‘Clearly explain this ritual. Is it based on scriptural injunction, or is it an ordinary social custom? (SB 10.24.7) There are examples of Prabhupāda making līlā claims that are not strictly śāstric, but of a folk nature. For example, he said that Karna came

from Kuntī's ear (karṇa = ear), and that is the origin of his name. Thus, he says in a Bhāgavatam purport: 'To keep [Kuntī's] virginity undisturbed, the sun-god arranged to give her a child that came from her ear, and therefore the child was known as Karna.' [SB 9.24.34] The Bhāgavatam verse itself does not mention an-ear birth, and neither do other Ācārya commentators. Nor do Mahābhārata or other Śāstras state that Karṇa received his name by an ear-birth. But we do find the idea that Karna was born from Kuntī's ear in Kashiram Das's Bengali retelling of Mahābhārata. 'When Sūrya heard Kuntī's plea (about virginity), he suggested that their son would be born through her ear. Giving her this reassurance, the sun god returned to his abode. Because the child was born through the ear, his name was Karṇa.' [2658-9]"

I raise here a common question among devotees: can we approach Śāstra to confirm Prabhupāda's words? Some say that we cannot do so, that we have no access to Śāstra except through Prabhupāda. However, this claim raises major problems for ISKCON, as I will explain.

If I am incapable of understanding what Śāstra literally says, then it logically follows that I am incapable of confirming that Prabhupāda has faithfully presented Śāstra.

If I am incapable of personally confirming that Prabhupāda faithfully presents Śāstra, then on what basis do I accept Prabhupāda as a faithful teacher of Śāstra?

In fact, I am capable of confirming that Prabhupāda faithfully and accurately presents Śāstra, because I can see what Śāstra says.

One might then argue that if we are capable of understanding Śāstra by ourselves, why do we need a spiritual master? There is a simple answer. I am not able to independently ascertain the ultimate meaning of Śāstra, but upon hearing the true purport of Śāstra from a bona fide guru, I am capable of comparing that teaching to Śāstra, and confirming that the teaching correctly explains Śāstra.

This is a common experience. For example, a mathematician may be unable to solve a difficult math problem. But when the answer is given, that same mathematician can then go back to the problem and confirm that the answer is correct.

Or, even after studying Sanskrit grammar, one may be unable to translate a difficult Sanskrit passage. But when one hears the correct translation, one can then return to the difficult passage and easily confirm that the translation does indeed follow all the grammatical rules, and is correct.

Indeed, in almost all areas of study, there are truths that we can recognize upon hearing them, but that we cannot independently derive. Analogously, we cannot understand by ourselves the science of Kṛṣṇa. But when we hear from a bona fide guru or Ācārya, we then understand that it is true, by realization and the confirmation of Śāstra. After all, we are taught not to accept a guru until we confirm by realization and Śāstra that his or her teachings are bona fide and true. Prabhupāda himself always taught this.

Any science, including spiritual science, is based on objective principles that can be applied broadly. We can easily test our principles the way we test any scientific principles — by seeing if they can be applied in all analogous cases.

Let us apply this test to the following hermeneutic system endorsed by many devotees:

1. Although we follow guru-sādhu-śāstra, we cannot approach śāstra, nor sādhus, except through Prabhupāda.

2. This means that we are not qualified to personally verify that Prabhupāda has accurately represented Śāstra and sādhus.

3. Thus, we accept Prabhupāda’s teaching as faithful to Śāstra and sādhus not because we have personally verified it (we are unqualified to do so), but rather because we know by realization that Prabhupāda is a pure soul and thus his teachings are faithful to Śāstra and sādhus.

Let us apply these exact hermeneutic principles to impersonal teachings and see the result.

Impersonalist students make the following claims:

1. Although we follow guru-sādhu-śāstra, we cannot approach śāstra, nor sādhus, except through our impersonal guru.

2. This means that we are not qualified to personally verify that our impersonal guru has accurately presented Śāstra and sādhus.

3. Thus, we accept our impersonal guru’s teaching as faithful to Śāstra and sādhus not because we have personally verified it (we are unqualified to do so), but rather because we know by realization that our our impersonal guru is a pure soul and thus his teachings are faithful to Śāstra and sādhus.

If our hermeneutic principles are trully a spiritual science, as Prabhupāda claimed, they must be applicable to all interpretations of Śāstra. Yet the hermeneutic principles given above cannot be valid because when applied universally, they lead to an absurd conclusion, namely that an impersonal or even atheistic interpretation of Śāstra, such as the Gītā, is correct and valid!

If we take Prabhupāda’s teachings seriously and follow the process of guru-sādhu-śāstra, we easily verify that Prabhupāda has perfectly presented tattva and siddhānta. And we effectively show that apasiddhānta or false teachings fail the hermeneutic test.

Hermeneutic hypocrisy is not an option for ISKCON, if we really seek to persuade intelligent people, as Prabhupāda ardently desired. Many devotees do not feel a need to ever analyze Prabhupāda’s statements on any topic through the lens of guru-sādhu-śāstra. That is certainly their devotional privilege. However, ISKCON can hardly claim to teach a spiritual science, and then chastise or punish those who apply the scientific hermeneutic principles taught by Prabhupāda himself. Prabhupāda taught that if the guru asks for water, one should not bring milk, thinking that milk is better than water. Similarly, when Prabhupāda asks for theological water, we should not bring theological milk. We should understand Prabhupāda in strict accord with his own teachings.

Ultimately, Prabhupāda himself best explained his own epistemic powers and limitations. We can see this clearly by studying his use of a single English word. That word is “opinion.”

As I will show, Prabhupāda’s use of the word opinion is paradoxical. Śāstra often teaches through paradox, an apparent contradiction that can be resolved by deeper investigation. The Īsopaniṣad 5 presents three paradoxes in one verse:

“[1] The Supreme Lord walks and does not walk.”

“[2] He is far away, but He is very near as well.”

“[3] He is within everything, yet outside of everything.”

In her prayers, ŚB 1.8.30, Queen Kunti states two paradoxes:

“The birth of the Unborn...”

“The doings of the non-doer...”

Similarly, at ŚB 1.8.32: “The unborn is born.”

Lord Kṛṣṇa gives a paradox in the Gītā 4.18: “One who can see inaction in action, and action in inaction, is intelligent among human beings.”

Prabhupāda regularly speaks paradoxically in his use of the word opinion. Here are but a few of many examples:

1a. “I never said, ‘In my opinion.’ ... What is the value of my opinion?”

1b: “In my opinion [Russia] is a poor country.”

It is easy to resolve this paradox. In 1a, Prabhupāda refers to his citing direct statements of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Here is the full quote:

“I have never said anything which is not spoken by Kṛṣṇa. I never said, ‘In my opinion.’ ... What is the value of my opinion? I am imperfect being.” [ŚBh 8.3.74]

It is not literally true that Prabhupāda “never said in my opinion.” In fact, he said it many times as in 1b: “In my opinion [Russia] is a poor country.”

It is also not literally true that, “I have never said anything which is not spoken by Kṛṣṇa.” Kṛṣṇa never said in any Śāstra that “Russia is a poor country.”

The obvious point is that when Prabhupāda claims he never gives his opinion, he refers to his presentation of tattva and siddhānta. Prabhupāda does not consider his statements about worldly affairs to be tattva and siddhānta, because a pure devotee never gives personal opinion about tattva and siddhānta, as Prabhupāda correctly claims.

Indeed, Prabhupāda considers the notion that he is always correct in worldly matters to be ludicrous, which means, “so foolish, unreasonable, or out of place as to be amusing; ridiculous.”

Prabhupāda states, “How I can give opinion on medical science? That is ludicrous. I can give opinion in my jurisdiction -- that's all right -- but if somebody asks me opinion about some medical treatment or some legal implication, so what can I do?” [5.16.70, Los Angeles]

Prabhupāda’s “jurisdiction” is Kṛṣṇa-tattva, perfect śāstric knowledge of Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Similarly: “So, [God] knows everything because He is perfect. But I do not know. Although it is by my energy this body is produced, I do not know how these veins are created, how these bones are created. I do not know. Therefore, I am not God. I do not know.” [Lecture on ŚB 6.1.22–25, 12.13.70 Indore]

Prabhupāda also disclaims direct knowledge of material facts that are mentioned in Śāstra, but are beyond his personal knowledge. “We accept Kṛṣṇa as our guru. If He is perfect in knowledge, our knowledge is also perfect. As far as we’re concerned, we do not have to be perfect in ourselves, but if we receive knowledge from the perfect, our knowledge is perfect. We cannot say that we understand that there are nine hundred thousand species of life in the ocean because we have studied the entire ocean. Rather...we take this information from scriptures, and therefore it is perfect. This is the Vedic process.”

Conversation / Morning walk - Venice Beach LA, April 1973

Since a guru's duty is to give that Kṛṣṇa-science, Prabhupāda assumes that his disciples have enough common sense to understand that he is referring to the spiritual science when he claims to never give his opinion, as in this statement, "Therefore, we don't say, in my opinion, 'our opinion.' We say 'Kṛṣṇa says this,' that's all." [3.13.75]

Similarly, "whatever question you are asking, we are answering from Vedic literature. We are not answering ourself. That is the difference. The evidence is from the Vedic literature. I don't say that 'In my opinion it is like this.' We don't say." [5.16.75]

Obviously, Prabhupāda's disciples often asked him about practical, worldly matters, and Prabhupāda answered. Prabhupāda did not always answer these questions "from Vedic literature."

Prabhupāda states, "Whatever I have said, I am quoting from the Bhagavad-gita. You have seen it... I never say, 'It is my opinion,' 'I think.' No, I never say like that." [6.7.75 Room Con w/ Yogi Bhajan]

Obviously, Prabhupada said many things that he was not "quoting from...Bhagavad-gītā." But everything Prabhupāda said on tattva and siddhānta, he did indeed quote or paraphrase from Bhagavad-gītā. This solves the paradox.

Similarly, Prabhupāda makes this striking claim "A bona fide spiritual master does not mention anything not mentioned in the authorized scriptures." [ŚB 4.16.1P] Clearly, Prabhupāda here refers to his authoritative presentation of Gauḍīya-vaiṣṇava-siddhānta, since he mentioned so many things that are not directly "mentioned in the authorized scriptures."

Prabhupāda often stated that he had no magic. "We are not wonderful men. But our only business is that we are speaking only the same thing as Kṛṣṇa has spoken. That's all. There is no magic. This is the magic." Bombay 4.4.74

"We do not say that we are perfect, we have become God, or we have...so many magic jugglery. No, we have nothing to do [with] that. No magic, no jugglery, no God. Simply to become servant of God, and whomever we meet, we speak the words of God, that's all. Then you become guru. This is our mission." [Room Conversation, March 13, 1975, Tehran]

"Therefore sometimes, when people say in India, "Swamiji, you have done wonderful." And yes, I do not know. I'm not a magician. But, so far I am confident that I did not adulterate the words of Kṛṣṇa. That's all. That's my credit." LA 5.9.72

"We don't manufacture anything, any jugglery of words, any magic... We simply carry out the order of Caitanya Mahāprabhu and we simply repeat 'Kṛṣṇa-upadeśa.'" [Aligarh 10.9.76]

"What Kṛṣṇa has said, we say, that's all... I don't manufacture. I have no extraordinary power or I cannot show magic or jugglery of words. But I do sincerely present what Kṛṣṇa has said."

Prabhupāda disavows having any magic or extraordinary power. He is simply repeating what the Lord has said.

Prabhupāda often claims that everything he says comes from guru and śāstra. This is true only if Prabhupāda is referring to tattva and siddhānta, not otherwise. "But I am speaking not my manufacture. I heard it from my Guru Maharaja. He told me that these are these, like that. I don't speak anything which I have not heard from my Guru Maharaja." [Bhuvanesvara 1.24.77]

Similarly, "He is guru who speaks only what Kṛṣṇa has spoken. This is the shastric injunction." Bombay [11.13.74]

"To become a guru there is no difficulty, provided we repeat the same thing as Kṛṣṇa says. And if you say something more or less, then you are not a guru. Very simple thing. Very simple thing." [Bombay 12.2.74]

Prabhupāda says here that one who says “something more or less” than Kṛṣṇa is “not a guru.” Clearly this does not include worldly matters.

“We are not going to teach anything which is not spoken by Kṛṣṇa and which is not supported by Kṛṣṇa Caitanyadeva. This is our principle. This is Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement.” [Mayap 3.27.75]

“Don't adulterate—I think, in my opinion. These nonsense things should be given up. We should always be aware that we are insignificant creature. Our opinion and thinking has no value.” [Mayapur 3.28.75]

Prabhupāda here states that to say, I think, or in my opinion, is a “nonsense thing.” In exact conformity with Bg 4.34, Prabhupāda is clearly referring here to tattva or siddhānta. In fact, Prabhupāda never gave his own thoughts or opinions about them. But he did often say, I think and in my opinion on worldly topics.

I will now give additional Prabhupāda statements making the same simple point. In Prabhupāda's words, it is ludicrous not to grasp this point.

“That we may be imperfect, that doesn't matter. We are imperfect. Just like this child, he is imperfect. Everyone knows. But if he says, ‘My father has informed me that this is microphone,’ so this knowledge of ‘[this] is microphone’ is perfect because he has received from the father, experienced father.” [Tehran 3.13.75]

“We speak whatever Kṛṣṇa has spoken. That's all. Of course, we try to impress upon you with your reason, logic, but we shall speak the same thing [as Kṛṣṇa spoke], not anything else.” [Philadelphia 6.12.75]

“So, I am not a scholar. I am simply... Whatever is said there, I am trying to distribute in a palatable way.” [Vrindavan 6.26.77]

“We are not presenting anything that we ourselves could manufacture. Whatever we manufacture is sure to be defective or deficient.” [TLK Vs 32]

Ā“cārya means one who knows śāstra. He will not speak anything which is not in the śāstra.... He must give evidence from the śāstra. Therefore... whenever we speak something, immediately we quote from authoritative śāstra. [Chicago 7.8.75]

“But in, in Vaishnava philosophy, even Caitanya Mahāprabhu, although He was Kṛṣṇa Himself, whenever He spoke something, immediately He gave evidence from the śāstra. Even Kṛṣṇa. While He was speaking Bhagavad-gīta, He also gave reference to the Vedānta-sūtra.” [Calcutta 1.31.73]

“And that is guru. Guru does not say anything of his own manufacture or research. He says only what he has heard from the Supreme.” [Room talk 12.9.73]

“No follower of Vedic principle will say, ‘It is my opinion.’ Your opinion is nonsense. What you are? This is the way of understanding Vedas. Śuśrūma. Therefore Veda is known as śruti and smṛti. There is no such thing that ‘In my opinion, I comment like this. I take the meaning like this.’ No. You have to understand it by the śuśrūma process or śrota-panthā, by hearing from the authorities.” [SB 6.1.39 2.21.70]

“... whenever we speak something, we immediately give evidence from the Bhagavad-gītā. It is not that... ‘In my opinion it is...’ No. We have no opinion. We don't give our opinion. We present Bhagavad-gītā as it is, that's all. As Kṛṣṇa says, we say the same thing. (Hong Kong 1.31.74)

“...even Caitanya Mahāprabhu, although He was Kṛṣṇa Himself, whenever He spoke something, immediately He gave evidence from the śāstra... Kṛṣṇa is Supreme Personality of Godhead, but He was also giving reference. He also said, yaḥ śāstra-vidhim utsṛjya vartate kāma-kārataḥ [“One who gives śāstra’s rule, lives by selfish actions.” Bg. 16.23]. We cannot give up śāstras. If we give up śāstra, then Kṛṣṇa says, na sa siddhim āvāpnoti na sukhaṁ na parāṁ gatim. [“He does not achieve perfection, nor happiness, nor the supreme destination.” Bg 16.23] If we give up śāstra, if we manufacture our own words, own śāstras, these are all rascaldom. That should not be accepted.”

“Caitanya Mahāprabhu does not give you anything which is not in the śāstra. He’s ācārya, although He’s God Himself. He can make śāstra. Whatever He does, whatever He speaks, that is śāstra. But still, because He’s playing the part of ācārya, He immediately gives Vedic evidences. That is the way of ācārya. Ācāryas will never say, ‘I think, it is my opinion.’ No. Such things are not accepted. No personal opinion. It must be supported by Vedic evidences. That is called paramparā system, genuine system of understanding. As Kṛṣṇa says, evaṁ paramparā-prāptam imaṁ rājarṣayo viduḥ [Bg. 4.2]. No change. Therefore we are presenting Bhagavad-gītā as it is. We do not change. We have no power to change. Then where is the authority of Bhagavad-gītā? [ŚB 1.2.11, 2.22.72]

Guest (1): Do you think reincarnation is there...

Prabhupāda: Yes, that is stated in the śāstra.

Guest (1): It is in the śāstra. What is your opinion about it?

Prabhupāda: I have no opinion. I take śāstra as it is.

Room Conversation with Indian Guests - [3.13.75, Tehran]

“Some spiritual teachers say, “In my opinion you should do this,” but this is not a guru. Such so-called gurus are simply rascals. The genuine guru has only one opinion, and that is the opinion expressed by Kṛṣṇa, Vyāsadeva, Nārada, Arjuna, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, and the Six Gosvāmīs.” [SSR Ch 2]

Prabhupāda does give his opinion

In contrast, here are instances, always about worldly matters, where Prabhupāda directly states that he is giving his opinion.

“It is also my opinion not to move the Press to L.A. but keep it in N.Y. Removal is not my opinion. [Letter to Hansaduta, 1.12.74]

“In my opinion, there is not a single Christian.” [Bombay 4.5.77]

“It is my personal opinion that at the present moment except for a few persons, practically there is no man in the world who is strictly religionist, Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Buddhist.” [Letter to Purusottama 11.3.68]

“Maybe some other planet they are going. That is my opinion. Because the description of the moon planet does not tally.” [Paris 6.9.74]

“People everywhere, all over the world, they are all good. Only the leaders make them bad. That's all. That is my opinion.” [Bombay Morning walk 3.27.74]

“Therefore, I say India got independence not due to Gandhi. It is due to Hitler. That is my opinion. I have got reason.” [MW LA 6.11.76]

“In my opinion, clean shaved Brahmacharies & Grhasthas in saffron robes look like angels from Baikunta... And if somebody dresses like nice American gentleman without any robes, I have no objection;” [Letter to Damodar 10.13.67]

Note, when Prabhupāda says, ‘my opinion,’ he is clearly telling us that he is not basing his view on Śāstra.

“I am traveling all over the world. My opinion is that, materially, America is happy. And spiritually some portion of India is happy. Otherwise, there is no happiness all over the world.” [LA Morning Walk 4.29.73]

“You will be glad to know that just yesterday, in the Los Angeles Times there was publication of my opinion about the moon planet excursion.” [Letter to Gopala Krishna 6.5.69]

“We are all individual. I have got my individual opinion; you have got your individual opinion. Oneness means when these individual opinions are coincided in the matter of surrendering to Kṛṣṇa; that is oneness.” [NOD 10.31.72]

Similarly, “We are all individual souls...At present...we have got our individual opinion. Why I differ from your opinion? Why you differ from my opinion? Why you have got your own ideas, I have got my own ideas? I agree with you? These are all individual things. That is not a homogenous amalgamation. The individuality is maintained, eternally.” [3.5.73 Calcutta]

Here is one of Prabhupāda’s most famous and explicit statements that his perfection is in the spiritual realm, not in material omniscience.

Jayadvaita: sometimes the acarya may seem to forget something or not to know something, so from our point of view, if someone has forgotten, that is...

Prabhupāda: No, no, no. Then...

Jayadvaita: ...an imperfection.

Prabhupāda: That is not the... Then you do not understand. Acarya is not God, omniscient. He is servant of God. His business is to preach bhakti cult. That is acarya.

Jayadvaita: And that is the perfection.

Prabhupāda: That is the perfection. Hare Kṛṣṇa.

Jayadvaita: So, we have a misunderstanding about what perfection is?

Prabhupāda: Yes. Perfection is here, how he is preaching bhakti cult. That's all. [Morning Walk Mayapur 4.8.75]

Prabhupāda directly states that to think the guru is perfect in material matters is a misunderstanding.

Prabhupāda often stressed that he taught perfect knowledge of directly spiritual topics. “So, śābde pare ca niṣṇātaṁ brahmaṇy upaśamāśrayam. Guru means he is expert in transcendental science...” [Lecture ŚB 7.9.50, 4.5.76 Vṛndāvana]

Likewise, “Perfect transcendental knowledge comes from the expert spiritual master...” [SB 11.10.13]

In light of this, and many other, statements where Prabhupāda insists that he is not materially omniscient or infallible, how are we to understand other statements where Prabhupāda or Śāstra speak of an Ācārya as having all knowledge? If we examine these statements closely, we find that in every case, they refer to spiritual and not material knowledge.

For example, in Bhagavad-gītā 7.2, Lord Kṛṣṇa states, “I will explain to you fully knowledge with realization, knowing which there will remain nothing further to be known in this world.”

It is well known that the Lord and His great devotees give additional spiritual knowledge in the Bhāgavatam and other Śāstras. Yet Kṛṣṇa claims in the Gītā that there will remain nothing further to be known. This paradox, like the others we discussed earlier, is easily solved. In fact, Lord Kṛṣṇa, in the

Gītā is giving us complete basic knowledge of tattva and siddhānta. So, there is no further tattva or siddhānta to explain, though the Bhāgavatam and other Śāstras certainly give us further information about the complete system that Lord Kṛṣṇa reveals in the Gītā.

Thus, in Bhagavad-gītā 7.19, Lord Kṛṣṇa declares that after many births, a wise person surrenders to Kṛṣṇa, knowing Him to be everything. Thus, to know Kṛṣṇa is to know everything, as the Lord reiterates ten verses later at 7.29: “Taking shelter of Me, those who endeavor to be free from old age and death, know the the entire Absolute, the Higher Self, and everything about action.”

At 15.19, Lord Kṛṣṇa again declares that to know Him is to know everything. “One who, unconfused, knows Me as the Supreme Person, knows everything.”

The point is quite clear. A pure devotee knows everything in the sense that he or she knows Kṛṣṇa, and Kṛṣṇa is everything. Arjuna explains how Kṛṣṇa is everything in the Gītā 11.40, “You encompass everything. Thus, You are everything.”

And of course, Lord Kṛṣṇa declares at 10.8, “I am the source of everything. From Me, everything emanates.” The simple conclusion: to know Kṛṣṇa is to know everything in a categorical, spiritual, realized sense. And in that sense, the guru knows everything.

In his purport to ŚB 2.4.6, Prabhupāda states, “For every unknown thing, we have to learn and inquire from a learned personality. The question of creation is also one of such inquiries to be made to the right person. The spiritual master, therefore, must be one who is sarva-jña [one who knows everything], as stated hereinbefore in connection with Śukadeva Gosvāmī. Thus all inquiries on God which are unknown to the disciple may be made from the qualified spiritual master, and here the practical example is set by Mahārāja Parīkṣit.”

Prabhupāda very clearly states here that a qualified guru knows everything in the sense of knowing Śāstra, and thus being able to answer questions on the basis of the complete spiritual information given in Śāstra.

The Bhāgavatam 7.2.22 describes the individual soul as sarva-vit, or “one who knows all.” Thus every pure soul knows everything, in the sense of knowing Kṛṣṇa. And Prabhupāda is a pure soul, who thus, in this spiritual sense, knows everything.

In ŚB 10.1.12, Parīkṣit addresses Śukadeva as sarva-jña, “You who know everything.” Of course, Parīkṣit is referring to topics of tattva and siddhānta, as explained in the Bhāgavatam.

Prabhupāda refers to this in his purport to ŚB 2.4.6, using the same term, sarva-jña: “The spiritual master, therefore, must be one who is sarva-jña... Thus all inquiries on God which are unknown to the disciple may be made from the qualified spiritual master... the practical example is set by Mahārāja Parīkṣit.”

The spiritual master knows everything in that he can answer “all inquiries on God,” not on every mundane topic. Indeed, even a bona fide student knows everything, as Prabhupāda explains. Ā “cāryavān puruṣo veda: one who is guided by the bona fide spiritual master knows everything as stated in the Vedas, which set forth the standard of infallible knowledge.” (SB 7.15.56 Purport) Note here that infallible knowledge is that found in Śāstra.

And as cited earlier, Prabhupāda explains that a bona fide guru may not understand all that Śāstra teaches on mundane topics.

“...we do not have to be perfect in ourselves, but if we receive knowledge from the perfect, our knowledge is perfect. We cannot say that we understand that there are nine hundred thousand species of

life in the ocean because we have studied the entire ocean. Rather...we take this information from scriptures, and therefore it is perfect. This is the Vedic process.” [Morning walk Venice Beach LA, 4.73]

Just as one who knows Kṛṣṇa knows everything, the Gītā gives a corollary. Those who do not accept Kṛṣṇa basically know nothing: “Know that those who envy and do not follow My teaching are bewildered about everything, ruined and mindless.” [Bg 3.32] Clearly atheists and materialists know many things about the material world. But Kṛṣṇa declares that they are sarva-jñāna-vimūḍhān, “bewildered about all knowledge.” Clearly, Lord Kṛṣṇa refers to knowledge, as explained in the Gītā, as knowledge of the soul, God, and the ultimate reality of physical nature.

Prabhupāda would change his views on material topics when he received better information. I will give here one excellent example where Prabhupāda declares that the soul is too small for science to measure, but then quickly changes his view when he receives scientific information.

Prabhupāda: Just like I was speaking that the measurement of the living entity is such and such. So how God has become so small? Aṅor aṅīyān mahato mahīyān [Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.2.20]. This is... one ten-thousandth part of the tip of the hair. I don't think any scientist can have any measuring instrument

Krishna Tiwari: I think that can be measured.

Prabhupāda: Acchā?

Krishna Tiwari: It can be measured.

Prabhupāda: It can be measured?

Krishna Tiwari: Yes.

Prabhupāda: It can be measured; otherwise how it is said?

[Conversation 5.16.73 Los Angeles]

Similarly: “I do not claim that I am Sanskrit scholar, I am this big man, that man, no. Whatever books I have written, only about this — Kṛṣṇa. In our book in every page you will find Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa.” [12.26.76]

Note: Prabhupāda here claims to have written his books. Lord Kṛṣṇa clearly inspired and guided Prabhupāda in his writing. But we cannot claim that Lord Kṛṣṇa directly wrote every word, and therefore any statement in Prabhupāda's books on a material subject must be infallible. Prabhupāda often claimed that he wrote his books. Here is a sample of these claims:

Woman reporter: Have you written all of these books?

Prabhupāda: Yes, I have written all these books.

[Press conference 7.9.75 Chicago]

“So in my absence you read the books. What I talk, I have written in the books.” [Walk 8.7.75 Toronto]

“I am the author of this book...I have written this book.”

[Conversation 9.22.71 Nairobi]

Dhīra-kṛṣṇa: ...we take your books on the library party to the professors at the universities...

Prabhupāda: I am surprised how I have written so many...

[Walk 3.1.75 Atlanta]

“I have written all these books...”

[Conversation 8.29.77 Nairobi]

“Yes. I have written about fifty books of four hundred pages on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Bhagavad-gītā, Caitanya-caritamṛta, Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu, and these books are very popular in the foreign countries, Europe and America.”

[Conversation 8.21.75 Bombay]

And most poignantly, Prabhupāda states in his purport to ŚB 1.5.11, “We know that our honest attempt to present this great literature conveying transcendental messages for reviving the God consciousness of the people in general and respiritualizing the world atmosphere is fraught with many difficulties. Our presenting this matter in adequate language, especially a foreign language, will certainly fail, and there will be so many literary discrepancies despite our honest attempt to present it in the proper way. But we are sure that with all our faults in this connection the seriousness of the subject matter will be taken into consideration, and the leaders of society will still accept this due to its being an honest attempt to glorify the almighty God.”

One simple comment: for Lord Kṛṣṇa, there is no “foreign language.”

Of course, no sane devotee teaches that Prabhupāda is God, but it is fairly common to attribute to Prabhupāda a type of omniscience and infallibility that in fact, as Prabhupāda insists, only reside in God. Prabhupāda declared the notion that he knew all material subjects to be ludicrous, that is, comically ridiculous. We know that Kṛṣṇa does speak through a pure devotee, but not in a way analogous to Lord Kṛṣṇa’s Brahmā-vimohana-līlā in which the Lord became Himself an exact replica of His pure devotees.

Were it true that Lord Kṛṣṇa always speaks and acts through the body of a surrendered pure devotee, it would follow of logical necessity that we know nothing of Prabhupāda. After all, by this theory, we never heard Prabhupāda’s own words, nor did we see his personal actions. Prabhupāda’s only action was to fully surrender to Lord Kṛṣṇa. After that, it was Kṛṣṇa who said and did everything.

A logical consequence of this absurd theory is that the more one surrenders to Lord Kṛṣṇa, the less of a full and unique person one becomes, which of course is the very opposite of the truth. This false theory would lead inexorably to the conclusion that in the spiritual world, inhabited by pure devotees, Lord Kṛṣṇa only speaks to Himself, dances with Himself, etc., since pure devotees do nothing but offer their devoted bodies and voices to the Lord for His service. They do not have perceptible personalities of their own. Thus, Kṛṣṇa’s Brahmā-vimohana-līlā, in which He became the cowherd boys and calves of Vṛndāvana is a type of model for the entire spiritual world.

In fact, it is only this absurd, non-śāstric theory that could justify the claim that everything Prabhupāda said is true, a theory that Prabhupāda repeatedly rejected, for only Lord Kṛṣṇa is omniscient and infallible in all matters. To avoid such errors, we must let Prabhupāda explain himself. We cannot unwittingly, in the name of devotion, reject Prabhupāda’s self-description in favor of our own view. We learn the entire spiritual science from Prabhupāda. That means we must learn about Prabhupāda from Prabhupāda himself.

Some ISKCON leaders, though personally understanding Prabhupāda’s teachings about his powers and limits, are reluctant to let these principles be openly discussed in ISKCON, fearing the effect on

neophyte devotees. The idea is that neophytes will only follow an Ācārya whom they believe to be infallible even in material matters.

Another fear is that, although Prabhupāda himself taught that some of his words are infallible, while others are fallible, his followers should not try to apply this distinction to his teachings. They fear that a Prabhupāda follower may mistake one category for another, or doubt everything Prabhupāda said.

I find both these fears to be largely unfounded. The first assumes that though Śrīla Prabhupāda presented a spiritual science, there are not enough spiritual scientists in ISKCON to safely and accurately apply Prabhupāda's fallible/infallible distinction. However, if this is the case, Prabhupāda would have failed to train a class of his followers as spiritual scientists and ISKCON would be unable to present a true spiritual science to the modern world.

The second fear assumes that Prabhupāda, as he presented himself, cannot attract or retain intelligent followers. In fact, the truth is the opposite, as Druta Karma Prabhu explains, "While a faithful devotee should not search out and advertise the guru's or the acarya's so-called errors, sometimes other people bring out such 'mistakes' and the devotee must reply intelligently, which may include admitting that within a limited range there may be some few mistakes in Śrīla Prabhupāda's statements, which do not affect the overall correctness of his presentation of Krishna consciousness. Intelligent people often look for a reasonable hermeneutic in a prospective religion. If we offer them one, they are often encouraged to go forward in their Krishna consciousness. Also, many intelligent devotees, even if they don't bring it up to us, do notice mistakes and this can cause them to doubt basic teachings that should not be doubted. Thus, it is right and valuable that we are mentioning that minor mistakes may occur, because this knowledge, for many devotees, serves as a safety valve, and preserves their faith in Śrīla Prabhupāda's important teachings."

Druta Karma Prabhu adds, "Here is a [Prabhupāda] statement about women, that was unpopular when he made it, and would be unpopular today:

"Where is woman philosopher, mathematician, scientist? Not a single [one].' [Morning walk Bombay, 1.9.77]

"If a member of ISKCON were questioned about this particular statement, it would be best to concede that Śrīla Prabhupāda was mistaken. There are many women scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. If Śrīla Prabhupāda had said, 'Where is woman philosopher, mathematician, scientist? Not as many as men.' Or 'Not as famous as men,' that could be accepted as true. But taken as stated, the statement is not true."

Neophyte devotees are confused by these ideas only when they have not been taught properly. Devotees who are taught correctly are not bewildered. To the contrary, as Druta Karma Prabhu states, most are relieved and grateful to receive a rational way to reconcile Prabhupāda's truly exalted status with some statements that are challenging to modern people.

As Lord Kṛṣṇa explains in Bhagavad-gītā 4.2, the spiritual science can be lost over time. *Sa kāleneha mahatā yogo naṣṭaḥ*. History shows that religions have a tendency to deviate from the founder's original teachings, often in the name of glorifying the founder. We cannot change our basic philosophy, or conceal parts of it, whenever we feel it necessary to 'protect' neophytes. As Druta Karma Prabhu explains, intelligent devotees seek a rational explanation of Prabhupāda's statements on non-Śāstra topics.

Further, we cannot simply declare that Prabhupāda's insistence on the limits of his knowledge is but a sign of his humility, and not actually true. In real cases where Prabhupāda, out of humility, stated something about himself which is not literally true, he often stated the literal truth elsewhere. Thus,

Prabhupāda sometimes said he was not a great devotee, but many other times, he revealed that he could see Krishna, that he had never deviated in his preaching, that Lord Kṛṣṇa was acting through him, and that we must serve his mission and not hear from other Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, who did not follow him.

Lord Caitanya played the role of a devotee of Kṛṣṇa. But on many occasions, such as His Mahā-prakāśa, He revealed his identity as Kṛṣṇa. Similarly, Prabhupāda showed deep humility, but also clearly explained his position as a pure devotee.

If one claims that Prabhupāda's frequent denials of his own material omniscience or infallibility were simply humility, then we should find many other statements where Prabhupāda asserts his material omniscience and infallibility. But we do not find such statements.

Prabhupāda very often stated that his non-śāstric knowledge was limited, and that he spoke perfectly only when repeating Kṛṣṇa's words, and Śāstra. We do not find that elsewhere, Prabhupāda clearly and regularly stated the opposite — that he did in fact have perfect, non-śāstric knowledge of this world. Thus, there is no basis to state that Prabhupāda was merely being humble when he said that he did not have perfect non-śāstric knowledge.

Many years ago, some devotees wrote a book falsely claiming that merely for preaching purposes, Prabhupāda taught what he did not really believe — that souls can fall from Kṛṣṇa-loka. The GBC categorically rejected this unwarranted attempt to psychologize Prabhupāda's teachings. In our present case as well, it is dangerous to presume Prabhupāda's motives when he has not personally disclosed them.

We receive the Krishna conscious science from Prabhupāda, ISKCON's Founder-Ācārya. Prabhupāda himself is a major component of that science. So, it is essential that we understand Prabhupāda strictly according to the spiritual science that he taught. Otherwise, the eternal science of Kṛṣṇa, in its epistemic structure, will appear to the public as a mere faith claim, among so many others.