



# PRINCETON BHAKTI VEDANTA INSTITUTE

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### Time and Immortality

Our weekly *sadhu sangha* at Princeton's BVI (Bhakti Vedanta Institute) center began with Harinam Sankirtan. Raasaraja das Prabhu on *mrdanga*, accompanied by Sripad Bhakti Madhava Puri Maharaja, Ph.D (Sripad Puri Maharaja) and Bhakta Chad on *kartals*, along with Bhaktin Zhanna, then later joined by Bhaktas Adam and Scott and Bhaktin Joey.



L to R: Guests: Chad, Raasaraja das Prabhu, Sripad Puri Maharaja and Zhanna

"Can that which is mortal become immortal?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked then responded that "Of course, that is not possible. That would be like trying to get light from darkness. Light doesn't come from darkness, darkness comes from light that is covered or blocked. A rock can block the sunshine so that a shadow or darkness appears behind the rock. In a similar way life doesn't come from matter. Life comes from life, while matter comes from life. In Vedic philosophy, the subtle produces the gross. Srila Sridhar Maharaja once commented that it is easier to understand how the concept of a rock can come about in consciousness, than to think about how a rock can produce consciousness or a concept of itself. In order to understand immortality, we have to proceed in a similar way: the mortal is like the covering of the immortal. When immortality is covered we get mortality then what kind of mortality is that? Sripad Puri Maharaja asked then responded, "In Sanskrit this world is called *Jagat* (that which goes, moves, changes). To move means to change, so *Jagannatha* means the master (*nath*) of the *Jagan* (universe), the Lord of the Universe. The world or universe is the changing, phenomenal existence that we experiences through our senses."

"In the *Srimad Bhagavad-gita* it is explained that this material world is of a temporary nature. That which changes can imply movement in space - it is there then it is not there. It may also imply that something comes into being and then ceases to be - creation and destruction, birth and death. It is explained in the *Gita* that this material world is like an inverted tree where the roots are going up and the branches are going down. Where do we have experience of that type of tree?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked. "Reflection in the lake," Raasaraja das Prabhu responded. "Yes, a tree on the land and its reflection in the water. In the water the roots appear at the surface and the trunk and the branches all seem to go down - so it's a mirror reflection, an inverted reflection."

"Material existence means we are part of the world of reflection, and thus necessarily part of the original world that is the source of the reflection. When you look in the mirror you see your own reflection but the left and right sides are reversed. You will see the left side of your body on the right side in the mirror and the right side of your body on the left side of the mirror reflection. If you hold your right hand up to the mirror it will appear as if your left hand is in the reflection," Sripad Puri Maharaja continued, "It is said that when you look at objects in the world, light comes through the lens of the eye, and an image appears inverted on the retina, yet we see it up straight because it is not the eyes that see, the mind is also involved and it flips things around because that's the way we want to see things. We see things the way we think they should be, not just the way it appears on the back of the retina. Perception scientists did some experiments where they put glasses on people that would make the world appear upside down through those lenses so that the image at the back of the retina is up straight. Then after they wear these glasses for a while the mind flips the whole thing so that everything appears up straight again. This indicates that it is not merely the image on the retina that is causing some mechanical stimulation in the brain, but the mind is interpreting the

stimulation indicating that intention or will is involved in seeing. It is also known that if a person who is born blind due to some physiological defect, when surgery is used to correct that defect the person is still not immediately able to see but has to *learn* how to see, how to interpret the stimulations of the eye. This indicates that the mind plays an important role in sense perception.”



L to R: Bhaktas Scott, Adam, Bhaktin Joey and Rasaraja das Prabhu

“What is the inverse or the negation of one - what do you get? Sripad Puri Maharaja asked. “Minus one,” guest, Zhanna responded. “Yes, minus one because negation is not the annihilation or subtraction of one. It inverts, changes it yet there are philosophers or thinkers who claim negation produces zero so that by negating this world they believe they get nothing. These are called *sunyavadis*. They believe that the ultimate truth is the negation of this world interpreted as a subtraction producing zero, nothing. Then there are the *mayavadis*, also called *nirvisheshha*. They think that the negation of this world means you get something else that is the subtraction or annihilate of all differences to produce a oneness without any distinctions,” Sripad Puri Maharaja said. “The Vaisnava (worshippers of Lord Vishnu/Krishna) conception is that when you negate the material world you get something else that is full of variety called the spiritual world which is the origin of the reflection and that is filled with difference and distinctions. Just like that reflected tree indicates that there is a real tree, when we negate the reflection, we get the real tree and when we negate the real tree, we get the reflection. The Vaisnava conception is that there is a spiritual world that is just like this material world but they are different in a very fundamental way. The reflection in the mirror certainly exists and looks real but it isn’t.”

“What causes the reflection of the spiritual reality into the inverted material world? What is the difference between the material and the spiritual worlds? Sripad Puri Maharaja asked his attentive audience then responded, “*Bhagavad-gita* describes different yoga processes – *karma yoga*, *jnana yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *ashtanga yoga*. *Karma yoga* is the process by which one acts for some fruitive result or benefit in relation to the mundane world. This produces action and reaction or *karma* - something like Newton’s second law - every action produces a reaction. *Jnana yoga* is more subjective. It involves subtle or subjective activity for knowledge. Both the subjective and the objective are considered in the *Samkhya* system to be material. In the *Samkhya*

system there are eight elements – earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intelligence and false ego that refer to the material energy. so that *jnana* (knowledge) doesn’t get beyond the material conception. The *jnana yogis* becoming too absorbed in the subjective plane forget the objective plane. That is as one-sided as *karma yogis* are toward the objective,” Sripad Puri Maharaja continued. “Both are extremes, and as one-sided they become abstract because in reality the subjective and objective work together , just as we were explaining that the mind is necessary to interpret what we perceive. It’s not that the eye can see something and it’s just the eye that is involved in this seeing. The eye does not see, it is just the instrument through which seeing occurs. The subjective and the objective are not separable although they are different. It is not a dualistic conception that we are dealing with where one is independent of the other. They both work together and yet together they are considered in *Samkhya* to be part of the material world. But beyond *karma* and *jnana*, and even beyond yoga of various types, *bhakti*, the plane of devotion, dedication and self-forgetfulness directs us toward Krishna where He can be found, understood and approached. *Bhaktiya mam abhijanati* – ‘I can be known only by *bhakti* (devotion, love.’” *Bhagavad-gita*, 18:55 confirms this.

*bhaktiya mam abhijanati  
yavan yas casmi tattvatah  
tato mam tattvato jnatva  
visate tad-anantaram*

“Through devotion, he realizes that I am the Lord of all potencies and the Sweet Absolute. Then, realizing his divine relationship with Me, he enters the company of My intimate associates who are non-different from My very Self.”



Adam, Rasaraja das Prabhu, Zhanna, Joey and Scott

“So love changes our whole demeanor toward the world, others, and the environment. Krishna is the ultimate reality and when we can develop within our heart the mood of devotion, love of Krishna, then by His grace we will be transformed and see things in a totally different way. By His mercy, grace, and potency He can lift the veil of *Maya* (illusion) from our eyes. *Maya* is said to be the veil that covers our vision of Krishna and of the spiritual world. So what appears to us as the material world is not the ultimate truth. It is only an appearance. We call it phenomenal (appearance). What appears to us as the material world only arises from our attitude of exploitation (*karma*) and renunciation (*jnana*),” Sripad Puri Maharaja explained. “One may see the spiritual world by grace from above. In the

*Bhagavad-gita* Krishna explains the process of *bhakti*, dedication and surrender. Surrender means it is not by our own power that we can reach Krishna. Everything is controlled by His various energies: the internal (*antaranga-śakti*), external (*bairanga-śakti*) and marginal ((*tatasthā-śakti*). Krishna is called *Ishvara* (controller) and it is by the will and grace of God that we can be saved. Even in the Bible it is mentioned that ‘Not by your own works but by grace you are saved, lest you become proud.’ “

“Nothing we can do will get us to our destination unless we receive the grace of Krishna. He can engage us in His devotional service and by His grace give us entrance to the spiritual world - the world of eternal knowledge and bliss... *sat chit ananda*. *Sat* means eternal. In the material world there is *asat* (temporality), just like when you dream. A dream is real because it is something you are experiencing but then you wake up and it is gone, temporary, so you say, ‘Oh it was just a dream.’ Likewise, this material world lasts for a certain amount of time but then it is gone. The modern scientists accept this. So there’s certainly something there but it’s ethereal, constantly changing, appearing and disappearing.”

“Sri Sri Sridhar Maharaja, in a beautiful book called *The Search for Sri Krishna - Reality the Beautiful*, explains that there is a reality that is very beautiful, sweet, and charming but the way to reach that is through devotional service and the grace of guru and Krishna. It’s not like we become immortal by cryogenics - not like that. We are soul and it is spiritual by nature; immortality is our fundamental, spiritual nature. When watching a movie, the movie starts and ends, but the viewer is there before and after the movie. The viewer gets absorbed in the movie, identifies with the movie, but does not begin or end with the movie.”

“There’s one American of the psychedelic culture named Baba Ramdass, who wrote a book entitled *Be Here Now*. Eckhart Tolle is also promulgating ideas about living in the present, the ‘now.’ So what is so special about the present?” Sripad Puri Maharaja asked then responded, “If we were to pick out one thing in our entire life-experience that has always been with us, we would have to say it was the ‘present.’ We think of the present as some point in time, but the present is not in time; it is time - specifically the appearing and vanishing of time. Each moment appears then disappears. Each moment is negated and then the negation itself is negated to give rise to a new moment, one that results from the negation of the negation of the previous moment. This pure negativity is time. It is also death, which is the Unconquerable Supreme for the atheists. Thus Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-gita* 11.32, ‘I am Time, almighty destroyer of worlds and all beings.’ *kalo'smi loka-ksaya-krt praoriddho*. Because Krishna is the absolute, everything is for Him and nothing is independent of Him. Whatever appears to be independent of Him, like this material world, is influenced by this negativity, and thus has a temporal (temporary) nature, appearing and disappearing. But those who selflessly

surrender to Him in love are engaged as His devoted servants in His eternal *lila (pastimes)*”

The present constantly remains with us throughout all the changes of body from childhood, youth, to old age. This negativity conceived as a negative unity is the self or *atma*, that remains embodied as the *jivatma* through all the changes of the body. The *Bhagavad-gita* explains that we remain the same. ‘*Dehino 'smin yatha dehe /kaumaram yauvanam jara.*’ *Kaumaram* means childhood, *yauvanam* means youth and *jara* means old age.” *Bhagavad-gita*, 2:13 confirms this.

*dehino 'smin yatha dehe  
kaumaram yauvanam jara  
tatha dehantara-praptir  
dhiras tatra na muhyati*

“As the living being passes through the bodily changes of childhood, youth and old age, it similarly attains another body at death. The wise are not deluded by this.”

*Dhiras* means a person who is sober doesn’t identify the changing body with the self. Thus *dehino 'smin yatha dehe* - the embodied soul is not the body, and if he is wise he is not intoxicated by the sensuous world of change, because he has *dhiras tatra* (sober understanding). He has the wisdom to discern the difference between what he is (the eternal soul) and the temporal body. It is called wisdom because it is not knowledge of a worldly nature. It’s realized knowledge that gives us entrance to our true spiritual nature. That kind of knowledge is called transcendental knowledge, because it concerns matters that transcend the mundane world. That is part of the *chit* (cognitive/conscious) potency of the Lord and of the spiritual plane. That knowledge is the knowledge of the truth,” Sripad Puri Maharaja explained. “The real meaning of knowledge is that which distinguishes reality/truth from illusion for the benefit of all. Other types of knowledge don’t really tell us the difference between what is real and what is illusory. Anyone can come up with so many ideas, but do they correspond to what is real or are they merely products of our own imagination? We can only know that when we know the difference between illusion and the truth.”



L to R: Guests: Zhanna, Joey, Scott, Adam and Chad

“To learn the truth, Krishna advises us (*Bhagavad-gita* 2.34) to approach the *tattva darshana*, one who not only knows the truth but sees it (realizes it). Such a person is respected as guru. We may pick up a book like the *Gita* and read it, but we probably heard about the importance of the *Gita* from a person. The book is also published by a person, usually with a commentary by a person. A painting is made by an artist, a person, who is much more than the painting. In this way the person and the book are to be distinguished. Krishna advises that we approach the person leaned and realized in the scriptures as well as the scriptures. Why would we want to avoid the person or guru?”

There is a book by Srila Sridhar Maharaj entitled “*Sri Sri Prapanna-jivanamrita* (The Nectar of the Surrendered Souls). The word *Prapanna* means surrendered, *jiva* means the living entity and *amrit* means nectar. In that book, he has compiled many different verses that describe the nature and process of surrender. Before we can get to the plane of devotion, we have to come out of the exploitive mentality, thinking ourselves lord over our material environment, withdraw from that and surrender to the higher plane, which is above us and more sacred than ourselves,” Sripad Puri Maharaja explained. “In the material conception, we hold ourselves more sacred than what surrounds us, therefore, thinking we can enjoy it. In the higher conception, we are manipulated by that higher plane to which we have to surrender then dedicate ourselves. We have to become more submissive to the higher plane. By that process of surrender, service, self-sacrifice, self-forgetfulness and devotion we can regain our immortal position, which we always and already are as spiritual participants of the eternal world. It already exists, but we have lost contact with it and therefore we are thrown into a plane of temporality, the world of material existence.”

“When you described *karma* and *jnana yoga*, I was under the impression, that even for the *karma-yogi*, who renounced the fruit of their action, it may not be like devotional practice but it can still be like sort of transcendental. Do you feel like it is different?” Bhakta Adam asked.

“Krishna explains in the *Bhagavad-gita* 5.2 that renunciation of action and selfless action both lead to liberation from the modes of material nature. Of these two, selfless action is considered superior because it requires renouncing attachment and aversion even while performing actions. This can lead us to the transcendental platform of selfless action in devotion, or devotional service,” Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. “Actually, Krishna explains to Arjuna how to act without attachment to the results in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the *Gita*. Of course, Arjuna was acting as a friend directly under Krishna’s order or Will, and thus it is transcendental.

“In taking *prasadam* (food offered to Krishna) for example, is that action causing some new karmic reaction?” Adam followed-up with.

“Krishna explains in the *Bhagavad-gita* 9.28 that whatever is done as a devotional offering in sacrifice to Him is freed from the bondage of action and its auspicious or inauspicious consequences. I think we want to distinguish between acting selflessly on our own by offering the result of such action to Krishna, and acting in the devotional service of Krishna as a surrendered soul under the direction of Guru, understanding guru to be the servant of Krishna’s Will. The *vaisnava acharyas* accept service that is performed under the order and guidance of a *vaisnava guru* as being the proper conception of service. Sri Cahitanya Mahaprabhu taught this in His *Sikshastakam - dasa dasanu dasa*, servant of the servant of the servant of the gopies; not the direct service of Krishna. If we cannot do that, due to lack of *sukriti*, then selfless service may help us to come to that platform if we knowingly or unknowingly somehow serve a *vaisnava* in our independent endeavors.”



L to R: Sripad Puri Maharaja, Guests: Zhanna, Joey, Adam, Chad and Rasaraja das Prabhu

If somebody does something bad, is it also by the will of Krishna?” guest Zhanna asked.

“The activities of the material world are produced by the influence of modes of material nature: passion, ignorance and goodness (*raja, tama, sattva guna*). They belong to the external energy of Krishna called the *bahiranga shakti*. Thus it is not directly controlled by Him. Still, everything has a purpose, and some people think that if something ‘bad’ happens why would God allow that. For instance, when Krishna asked Arjuna to fight and kill so many people they knew so well, Arjuna thought it was a bad thing. But Krishna knew he had to save future generations from the evil effects of the Kurava’s who were ruling at that time,” Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.

“Sometimes I think there are two ways of doing bad things. Sometimes we contemplate it and that’s a bad thing, but sometimes we do it without thinking. These are two different things but the results are both *karma*, right?” Zhanna inquired.

“The laws of material nature are very strict. Newton’s law of action and reaction does not depend on our knowing or not knowing it. If a child puts her hand in a fire it will burn even if she does it unknowingly. So we must

become very eager to get out of this merciless material world as soon as possible. Only by appealing to the mercy of Krishna and His devotees can we be engaged by them in the transcendental devotional service world of the Lord and become liberated from the influence of material existence," Sripad Puri Maharaja replied.



L to R: Guests: Joey, Scott, Adam and Chad during Sadhu Sanga

"I feel that my life is a perpetual movement of striving. Should one have any concept of an arrival point of reaching a destination? Is there ever this point that I would say 'Ok, I am doing my best. I am where I belong?' Guest, Scott asked.

"As I explained in the beginning, the soul is always situated in its eternal spiritual nature but that awareness has become covered," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.

"So that feeling of not arriving at all, is essentially not correct?" Scott followed up with.

"The covering of *maya* (illusion) prevents us from understanding that we are never independent of Krishna. In the spiritual world there may be a feeling of separation from Krishna as we know from the pastimes of Srimati Radharani and the *gopies*. But that feeling of separation is due to love, not out of ignorance due to the modes of material nature. In the material world, unhappiness and distress is due to our forgetfulness of our eternal relationship with Krishna," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.

"There are times I wonder if there is some validation of what I am doing. Is it the right thing? What are the signs posted along the way to say 'Ok, I am doing what I should be doing,'" Scott continued.

"We can know by direct experience if we are becoming happy, detached from material things and persons, and associating with saintly persons. No one has to say you are satisfied after a good meal. You can know it directly yourself. Sometimes if we are really confused we may pray for some sign or direction in our life. The Lord is not unconscious of the needs of His devotees. At the same time a practitioner must not become impatient and lose faith while making slow progress in

devotional life. We may have many faults that have to be overcome before we can proceed to the next stages of spiritual development. We can get results if we apply ourselves and practice *bhakti yoga* sincerely and humbly. It has to be a real thing; we don't want an imaginary result," Sripad Puri Maharaja answered.



Sripad Puri Maharaja with Guests: Zhanna, Joey and Scott

"I feel like there's not really any good or bad *karma*. They are both a problem - which doesn't mean you should try to pursue bad things. There should be a way that you become very good, but ultimately that is not the end - that is only a material reality," Bhakta Adam said.

"Krishna is the Absolute Good, the Absolute Autocrat. We only have to put our faith in Him, and His pure representative Sri Gurudeva. Faith means to believe that simply by serving Krishna all good will come to everyone, just as watering the root of a tree will serve all the leaves and branches," Sripad Puri Maharaja concluded.



Sripad Puri Maharaja with Zhanna, Joey, Adam, Scott, Chad and Rasaraja das Prabhu

With this our wonderful *sadhu sanga* came to an end after prasadam was served and honored by all.

All Glories to Sri Guru and Sri Sri Gauranga  
Sri Bhakti Nirmal Acharya Maharaja ki jai  
Sripad Bhakti Madhava Puri Maharaj ki jai

Your humble servant,  
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