

PRINCETON BHAKTI VEDANTA INSTITUTE

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Conversation With a Social Worker

With a heat wave gripping the tri-states area, we decided to hold Harinam indoors at our Bhakti Vedanta Institute (BVI) center at Princeton University as part of our weekly *sadhu sangha* with Sripad Bhakti Madhava Puri Maharaja, Ph.D (Sripad Puri Maharaja). However, due to the long holiday weekend many guests were not able to attend. Guest Ralph Zelman, was one fortunate soul who attended. Using the opportunity, Sripad Puri Maharaja asked if there were any questions, which then sprang into a open conversation with the audience.

According to the Jewish faith, guest Ralph, who was never "*bar mitzvahed*" (a ceremony for admitting a 13 years old boy as an adult member of the Jewish community) said, "You could do no wrong. They are very flexible on the rules." In giving an example, he said, "On Yum Kippur you are supposed to fast but if for health or some other reason you don't, you are forgiven." In agreement, Sripad Puri Maharaja said, "Yes, they are very liberal. Their main concern is to live a good, moral and ethical life." "In the Jewish religion, age 13 is normally the first *bar mitzvah*, however, "you can be *bar mitzvahed* at any age, so I can still be *bar mitzvahed*," the middle-aged Ralph continued joyfully.

After discussing several topics the conversation led to "how society broke down" to the level it is today, including attitudes, language, vocabulary and the disconnect level of communication. Ralph spoke about the "Theater for the New City" hosted in New York, that "takes street kids and volunteer professionals in the acting field, to teach them how to act via street plays" related to everyday life in an impoverished area. "It is very educational and positive because it is giving these kids a positive thing to do" and it is also "educating people in general on life

and what they go through living in these very bad neighborhoods," Ralph continued.

"There are children today that find school irrelevant to their lives. Why has that division between the educational ethics and the ethics of the way people live their lives today happened? Why was that division created?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked. In response based on a college research paper Ralph had done on a city program called "Head Start" he said, "Poverty is like a cancer" which is based on several needs for the whole family, such as "education, decent living conditions and proper health care." In agreement Sripad Puri Maharaja said, "My understanding of how the whole situation arose can be traced to the 1950's when Russia sent the first Sputnik into orbit. The USA became shocked that Russia had quietly gained a technological advantage over the US. Their method for getting that advantage was based on teaching the whole population to be materialistic, irreligious, atheistic and to simply work for the communal benefit of the state. The American mentality at that time was very religious, believing in things like creation more than evolution. The government determined that the emphasis on science was lacking in America," Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "In Russia science education was the main thing they were interested in and thus they became technologically more advanced. Recognizing that, the ARPA/DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) was formed in the US, where the emphasis was going to be placed on teaching more science education. Just a few years earlier (1953) the structure of DNA was hypothesized by Watson and Crick. After those events no one would ever teach any other theory of life than Darwin's theory of evolution. No other theory on life was ever allowed or

funded so that everyone was to be taught that 'you are nothing but a chemical reaction' and that we evolved from the lower creatures. Like this the whole attitude undermined the religious mentality, and materialism became the standard metaphysics because it was not only good for science and technology, it was also good for consumerism to be rid of the spiritual dimension of life," Sripad Puri Maharaja continued. "With that the whole emphasis of the family going to church together or developing a spiritual unity within the community was all undermined and that caused the rise of all these different problems of poverty, crime, aimlessness, and depression that people face today."



Sripad Puri Maharaja with guest Ralph and Rasaraja das Prabhu during *sanga*

"On the other hand, when China saw America becoming so prosperous, they realized that one important factor missing in Chinese culture was Christianity. After that, they wanted people to become Christians realizing that the mainspring for American productivity and enthusiasm was coming from what is called the 'Protestant Ethic' (a concept that emphasizes hard work, discipline and frugality)," Sripad Puri Maharaja continued. "This was the one element that was missing in the Chinese culture, so China wanted to import that. They realized it was the one thing that could drive their people to excel and compete with America, so they encouraged it and invited the Christians to come in and convert people under carefully State controlled circumstances.. The people who picked up that work ethic became more productive workers."

"Oh I don't like that. That is brainwashing, like slaves," Ralph said. "To some extent it's brain washing but that spiritual spark is necessary. We are spiritual beings and without that core spiritual connection we lose the energy from which a meaningful life springs. They lose the whole sense of what human civilization is for," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. According to Ralph, "Before Russia changed under communism, it had more schools and libraries than we have. Their laws were much greater than our because it was not done for money. Money was sort of like a drug. It was there for its own sake. Health care was very antiquated but everyone had access to it, so you had all your basic needs that even today, there are people there that are doing well because they can make money now. There are lots of people there that are worse off now than they were

before even though with their religion and everything they don't have that safety net."

"The Russians are very spiritually inclined people. Today you will find the Krishna Consciousness movement is very popular there after the fall of communism - it became widespread because they have that inherent interest," Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "They have that Protestant ethic now and that is brainwashing them," Ralph said. "The Protestant ethic has its spiritual origin, though it became more materialistic. It has a spiritual root," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "People do not realize that religion has an essential role in the proper functioning of the state. It's like this body without a soul, it is not going to last at all and similarly a state without a religion, is not going to last," Sripad Puri Maharaja said.

Referring to his recent heart surgery, Ralph said, "I believe that God saved my life when I was in the hospital because under the conditions I went through, I really didn't think I was going to be alive today. It was only God that pulled me through."

"When people lose their faith in something greater than themselves, when people limit themselves to only what they can understand, see, experience and dream, that becomes an envelope that will ultimately suffocate them. There has to be an exit from all of that. They have to have a way for their spiritual creativity and imagination to go beyond all these finite limited things if they are to have that enthusiasm to do whatever it is that we do here, otherwise this world is only meant for one thing, which everyone knows but ignores, yet still it is there," Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "Whatever we do here - becoming educated, having a nice family, a good job, advanced civilization - whatever it is, it is always limited by the insurmountable boundary of death. Everything will come to an end. We are all meant to die here in this universal 'gas chamber.' It doesn't matter how much money or education you have, you are going to die. No one will make it out alive, therefore, that fact is permanently there within the human psyche. That is part of our make-up as finite beings, but there's a way out. Because we know we are finite, we must also be infinite. Other than living in the illusion of denial, religion provides that rational way out because without surpassing death (finitude) in our life, the whole thing become fatalistic and depressing. "

"How does religion give you a way out?" Ralph asked. "Because religion teaches us about our infinite, eternal life. Spiritually we are eternal. We have an eternal life, beyond the plane of mortality. This material universe is called *Mrityalok* (place of death) and the infinite spiritual world is called *Amrit* (deathless). *Mritya* means death and *amrita* means deathless. *Amrit* also means nectar. There's a world of deathless nectar that is awaiting us. Eternal life – *sat-chit-ananda*, eternal life and nectar awaiting us. Without that inner sense of hope, faith in what is beyond this enclosed world we would not be able to survive without becoming overwhelmed by the reality that no matter what you do the conclusion will be death," Sripad

Puri Maharaja responded. "And the eternal life has nothing to do with the body?" Ralph followed-up with. "No, the body is by nature temporary. But do we have experience of anything eternal? Sripad Puri Maharaja asked. "People can speak about an eternal world but what proof do you have that it actually exists? People don't realize the very nature of the eternal spirit they are a part of and that is directly experienced by everyone."

"What is it?" Ralph enquired. "It's called the 'present.' The present moment is a gift that is always with us and it's the only essential thing that we have in our life but people are always looking for something else and that is what is leading to death, to temporality, because everything else is mortal," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "When we are younger, we focus on a future goal of what we want to become yet it's really 'no goal' in the sense that the goal is you're going to die," Ralph said. "The real goal is to make the most of what you have right now but what is that?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked then said, "To understand the eternal in the temporary, that's the goal, to grab hold of that and make the most of it. How to do that? That is what religion, spirituality is teaching. Don't become involved in the temporary. Here's something eternal and we are part of it. How to grasp that, how to understand that and how to cultivate that life is what needs to be taught and if we loose sight of that and start worrying about the family collapsing, the society going in different directions, it becomes a self destructive mentality because we forget the most important thing, our eternal spiritual identity, " Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "The problems of life are a mystery that seems to have no solution. Yet there's something more direct, very personal and very real that we've lost sight of. Religion is supposed to teach that but it's not doing its' job properly when it also becomes involved in all those temporary, deathly diversions. So somebody has to wake up, realize these things, understand them and apply it to themselves in order to teach it to others. That's what we are trying to do here. That's what our books are meant for - to inspire people to go in the spiritual direction of immortal life."

After a brief pause, he asked "What is the method for controlling the life energies, the thinking, the senses that are being drawn away from the true eternal reality? How to withdraw from all the diversions back to the center?" In response, Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "That is called *yoga*. *Yoga* means to bring your energies that are dispersed in the environment back into focus. *Yoga* is not only meant for understanding the spiritual but also to understand who is the controller of the spiritual world, where that energy is coming from and what is the center to which it is all directed. That center is described as *Ishwara* (God), in the *Patanjali yoga* system. Meditation is on *Ishwara*. *Ishwara Parama Krishna*. *Ishwara* means the owner and controller of all. The name *Hrsikesh* means the controller of the senses.. *Hrisika* means the senses. *Isha* means the controller so *Hrsikesh* is the controller of the

senses. We are not the controller of the senses. There's another controller of the senses that is higher than ourselves and that is God, Krishna. He is the controller of our senses but we have to make that connection with Him in order to control the senses."

"We don't create the world around us. It is already there. We don't even create our thoughts. They are not ours," Sripad Puri Maharaja said then asked, "How does a thought come to you? Do you produce thoughts? Do you know how they are produced by your brain? Although nobody knows how thoughts are being created yet we confidently say 'I think.'"

"By events in our lives," Ralph said but then Sripad Puri Maharaja asked "How does an event cause thoughts? You believe that thoughts and events are connected. They are related but neither events nor thoughts are caused by you. If you don't know how you think, or breath, or to do anything, then how can you claim you do it? It's automatically being produced, so where is that ability coming from?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked then said, "We don't know how it's happening because there's a higher controller of all that and until we come in connection with who is creating all those things, we will never be free from those things that actually control us. Ultimately, that is what *yoga* is meant for, to reconnect, refocus upon the controller, *Ishwara*. There is a controller in this world, the creator. There's a center and by loosing connection with that center, we become distracted by so many other things that are generated from the center. By losing our sense of connection with the center, we get distracted by the peripheral events. The peripheral world is not going to benefit us because it is not feeding the center. It's only leading us further toward death. As soon as we loose the spiritual anchor, connection, or root, the whole thing begins to die. Those that have no vision or understanding of that reality, go on in ignorance (*Maya*) of what they are meant for or what the reality that they are a part of is and how to get re-connected with that and to become nourished by it. They become interested in so many unnecessary things that they lose their way."

"How did you learn all this?" Ralph asked. "All knowledge comes from Gurudeva through reading, hearing, meditating and putting what is taught into practice (*bhakti yoga*) and by the realization, thoughts that come from those practices, which are meant to reveal the higher concepts. All else is ignorance, and when we are cleansed from all those other useless thoughts and things, then we can get a clearer vision of what is what. Just like looking in the water, if it's muddy you can not see the bottom but when the water becomes clear then you can see what is really there at the bottom of it all. That's what we want – to have a clear mind by eliminating all these other things so we can see what is going on there at the bottom of it all," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "*Bhakti yoga* is a discipline no doubt and even in a lifetime you may not complete the course, but you will not loose whatever progress you make. Whatever benefit we can realize in this one lifetime that will benefit us in another lifetime as well. The soul is eternal. The body will die but the soul will go on so we have to keep

applying ourselves. As much opportunity as we get in this lifetime to make some progress we should take that opportunity to do it. If you are fortunate enough to make some progress in this lifetime then you have gotten the greatest benefit this life can offer. Forgetting your material benefit do as much as you can in this life for your spiritual bank account, as we call it," Sripad Puri Maharaja continued. "The divine knowledge, spiritual wealth is there but we have to learn how to sacrifice ourselves to that realm and see how it influences and adjusts all the other things. Sometimes we are thinking about all the material problems we have to solve but attending to those problems in a very direct way without knowing the root of the problem we will not solve it. We will never get to any solution. By finding the root cause then we can see how everything will clear up and it's not always direct. It's like when you take food, you don't consume food through your hand but the hand puts food into your mouth which delivers it to the stomach, so it may not always seem direct but it's actually most direct. We don't water the leaves of a tree but the root. In this way what we think is indirect is the most direct way."

"In society, people replace worship of God with something else, maybe a movie-star, a sports star, a rock star. Following what another person does by the way they speak, dress or behave - they seem to be like a God for them in some way," Rasaraja das Prabhu said. "They try to replace God with something else but in the end, their idols get old, diseased and die then they are replaced with somebody else. They say they don't believe in God but the way that the people behave in their lives, it's like they replace God with someone, a normal human being."

"They made Steve Job (Apple Inc. co-founders) look like he is God but to me, when you die, the most important thing is 'what kind of person you are.' From my understanding he was a terrible person the way he treated his family. He made so much money but at the end he also died," Ralph said.

"From what I've read about him he was affectionate to his family. But what is interesting is that when he (Steve Jobs) was a young computer geek and working in his garage he was going to the ISKCON temple to take *prasadam*, (sanctified food). He said it 'would be the only good meal he would really have for the whole week,' and that he 'loved it,'" Sripad Puri Maharaja said. He sure drifted far away," Ralph said. "Maybe he never really drifted because he always seemed to be absorbed in his own ambitions. But the interesting thing is when he died, on his death bed just before his last breath, he uttered 'Oh Wow!' three times. Whatever he may have seen, the only thing he could exclaim was 'Oh Wow!' I think that experience came as a result of the *prasadam* he had honored earlier," Sripad Puri Maharaja continued.

"He may not have been the most perfect man, as none of us are, but he did take *prasadam* and that is very auspicious in anyone's life. Secondly, when he was talking to people about his life, his biography, he would publicly mention about having gone to the temple and getting his best meal there. I thought that was a wonderful thing for a famous (public figure) like him to say something like that in glorification of Krishna *prasadam*. I think that was a special grace given to him, and thereby his spiritual bank account that we were talking about before, received a big deposit."


"But he didn't live a spiritual life," Ralph said. "Spiritual potency does not depend upon what you do or what you think about it. It's transcendental to all of that. Fire burns by the potency of fire itself. A child may not know its potency but it burns nonetheless. You may think you're just eating some vegetable but because it has been offered to Radha and Krishna, it's sanctified. Just like in the Catholic Church, when you receive communion, it's considered the body and blood of Christ after it is sanctified by the priest's offering. It's no longer just bread and wine. If you consume the offering, you are getting sanctified. You are being transformed by it just like that bread and wine were transubstantiated, so whoever knowingly or unknowingly consumes it is also being transformed to some degree," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.

"Can a Jew do that?" Ralph asked. "Anybody can. It doesn't matter who you are, even a dog can get benefit from eating *prasadam*. Whatever potency there may be in the offering becomes part of us also. So we always respect *prasadam*," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.



At this point *prasadam* was served and honored by all.

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

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