



PRINCETON BHAKTI VEDANTA INSTITUTE

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The Universal as Identity with Itself in Otherness

While Rasaraja das Prabhu with kartals (hand cymbals) was chanting the Holy Name at Princeton's Palmer Square Park I intermittently handed out our brochures before returning to the Bhakti Vedanta Institute (BVI) center for our weekly *sadhu sangha* with Sripad Bhakti Madhava Puri Maharaja, Ph.D (Sripad Puri Maharaja).



Rasaraja das Prabhu during Harinam

How do we understand the difference between the changing body and one's identity that remains the same throughout such changes, Sripad Puri Maharaja asked as he began speaking to those who gathered for today's *sadhu sangha*. "Wouldn't your identity change?" guest, Ralph, asked. In response Sripad Puri Maharaja quoted Socrates, who had said "first you have to catch me," when asked where he should be buried after he leaves his body. "When Socrates is sitting down, lying down, eating or running, these are all changes of the body but we don't say it is a different Socrates in each situation. It is the same Socrates although the body is changing in space and time. So what is it that we are calling Socrates?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked.

"One thing I am wondering: these people are human beings like us, right?" Ralph interjected. "Yes, of course," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "So why do we put them on a higher level?" Ralph replied. "Because they are understanding what you are not understanding. Can

you explain what Socrates understood? Then we would put you on the higher level, otherwise you would be like the people who are trying to bury Socrates," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "Some things are permanent and some are temporary. Permanent things maintain their identity, the temporary is always changing," "We don't identify with that," Rasaraja das Prabhu said as Sripad Puri Maharaja came right back to his opening question of what is the difference between the identity that is preserved in itself and the body that is always changing. "There's some difference there, correct? One is always persisting and the other constantly is dissipating," Sripad Puri Maharaja said.



L-R Amit ji, Sripad Puri Maharaja, Ralph and Rasaraja Prabhu "It's like there are two different realities – permanent and temporary, where the permanent has more importance since we identify our self with the permanent," Sripad Rasaraja das Prabhu said. "You can't have one without the other," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded then asked, what in our experience can we use to explain such a situation. People never think of it, but it exists in all facets of our lives."

"I think it's permanent when something is passed along and is kept alive, when you are talking about Socrates' thinking," guest Ralph responded. "That is our memory of Socrates but what is Socrates? What are you? You are traveling here, there, everywhere but you

maintain the same identity despite your location in space and time, so how do you explain what *you* are?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked. "I am a very caring human being, so to me the most important thing is being able to help people and love them," Ralph responded. He used to do food shopping for the elderly people on his lunch break.

"That is your character, but who is it that bears that character?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked. Referring to the idea of color Sripad Puri Maharaja said, "The color white is found to exist in clouds, cotton, white picket fences and snow-capped mountains, though each one of these things are different. So what do we call that which remains the same in different instances?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked then responded, "It is called a 'universal'. There is also another related term called a 'particular' or an instance of a universal. Just like 'tree' is a universal term for all the different instances of particular trees we may come across in our experience."

"A picket fence is a particular thing, but white is universal. 'White' is more like a property of things than a thing itself. If there were no white things we would not be able to think or form the judgement 'it is white.' In all our experiences we find properties that are universals related to particular things - two aspects that are different but not separate from one another. The soul preserves its self-identity like a universal related to a particular body which is always changing, i.e. presenting a sequence of different instances. The soul, in this case, is not a property of the body but the essence of it."

"The body is the property or possession of the self, as when you say, 'This is *my* body.' The body is a particular thing but you would not call yourself a thing because, like a universal, it does not have an objective but a subjective existence. You might say like Descartes, 'I am because I think,'" Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "If there were no thinking you would not be able to say 'I'. 'I' is not a thing you can pick up in your hand."

"But we are more than a thought," Ralph said. "Yes, but feelings also fundamentally arise from thoughts," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "The 'I' is recognized by the act of the self reflecting upon itself. Self reflection determines one's identity or allows one to say 'I.'"



Amit ji, Saba, Sumrah with Sripad Puri Maharaja and Ralph during *sadhu sanga*

Sripad Puri Maharaja further explained the difference between the "permanent" and the "changing" by citing the Greek paradox of 'The ship of Theseus.' "A ship leaves port with enough planks aboard to replace any that rot during the journey. If all the planks have been replaced does the same ship that left the port return home. The ship has an identity but the changing of the planks doesn't change that identity. The identity (universal) of the ship is not the same as the planks (particulars) from which it is constructed. This is something the scientists also don't understand when they think that the cell is made up of molecules without realizing that the molecules don't constitute the unity or identity of the living cell. The soul or life principle universally pervades the particular molecules of the body of the living organism." Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "That is why in the Bible, it says "God took the dust of the earth and made Adam by 'breathing life into him.' The breath of life is the essential divine principle that converts the body as an aggregate of earth or matter into a living organism. The scientists don't understand that today. They only consider the chemicals. They cannot understand what's enlivening those chemicals to produce a living organism. When an organism dies, the same chemicals are all there as when it was alive but it behaves like a decaying chemical system, not like a self-maintaining biological system."

"The real necessity of the soul is there and it is not just some vague or superstitious belief. There are those who understand such things, who cultivate and teach the knowledge of the invisible and not only what can be seen. What we see is only the superficial appearance of a deeper reality. The most substantial thing should not be treated frivolously. We have to take it seriously and that's why the discipline of *bhakti-yoga* (devotional path) is there. People are willing to take up the discipline of making spiritual progress because there's something substantial to be gained and we should not become diverted from that by simply running after the things that are superficial in the phenomenal appearing world," Sripad Puri Maharaja continued. "Intelligent life is not a matter of merely fulfilling our material aspirations like animals. That's not what human life is meant for. As human beings, we have our rational faculty and that's the most important feature that distinguishes us from all other living entities in this universe. It is the highest vocation of a human being to utilize that, to cultivate that and to develop his spiritual knowledge and get free from the superficial plane of existence. Our real life is in the dedicating world of divine service. Vedic culture teaches us not to remain mesmerized by the appearing, phenomenal plane of mundane enjoyment."

"Where does human relationship fit in?" Ralph asked. "First we have to understand that relations of the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave are not the real relations but mere reflections of the true reality of spiritual relations," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "What are the real relations?" Ralph inquired. "That requires understanding our real

nature as infinitesimal spiritual sparks of God's energy. You said you are a loving and caring person but what are you loving and caring about?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked. "It's about caring for and loving people," Ralph said. "That seems like a noble sentiment but it can easily lead to self-conceit. First you have to understand who is the person, which is not merely a thing or a body. You also have to understand what it means to help them. For instance, it is said, 'You can give a man some rice and feed him for a day but if you teach him how to farm he can feed himself for a lifetime,'" Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "So what you are doing for others depends on your understanding of what is actually helpful. If you understand the higher universal sense of the self and you try to help people understand that, you are giving more benefit to them than by merely supplying their material needs." "You are talking about two extremes," Ralph said. "I am explaining which is more valuable," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. "If you want to help people on the material plane only, whatever help you are giving them will ultimately lead to their death."



L-R Surottama Pr., Ralph, Sobha ji, Bakula Mataji, Rasaraja Pr.

Ralph spoke about his parents both being in the hospital at the same time and left their bodies two weeks apart, then asked Sripad Puri Maharaja, "If I were to tell you that, how would you respond to that?"

"It is very sad and unsettling to lose someone we love. The Supreme Lord Krishna tells Arjuna, 'The wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead.' (*Bhagavad-gita* 2.11) Death gives us cause to remember that one day you are soon going to wind up like them. Thus the English poet John Donne wrote: 'Ask not for whom the funeral bell tolls, it tolls for thee.' As a spiritual teacher I would have to ask if you understand your eternal self. Your parents are also eternal. You don't have to worry about them. From your perspective they are dead, but only the body dies while the soul remains eternal," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.

At this point of *sadhu sanga*, our friend Amit ji, and guests Sumrah and Saba (who heard about our program through the local newspaper's list of events) joined us.



Amit ji, Saba and Sumrah

"How about helping your fellow-man, is that in the spiritual?" Ralph followed-up with. "Of course, if you have the ability to help someone then you must help them. However, people are restricting themselves to only thinking about material benefit for one-another and that's not enough. That's what the spiritual teachers have come to tell us - there's something much more valuable that we are completely ignoring. You already have your material involvement but why are you indifferent to your spiritual concerns?" Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.

Amit ji then interjected, "I think no matter how much you pamper the body, everything is temporary and one day you have to go, so knowing the science of spirit before your death is very important because the body has to go anyway, no matter how many injections you put in the body, or whatever help you have given. By the law of nature, the body will die but before the body goes, the *Gita* says don't waste your time, try to learn the science of spirit. This is what he (Sripad Puri Maharaja) was saying. One of the greatest brains humanity has produced is Albert Einstein, he at the end of his life, like Dr. Oppenheimer, also realized the science of spirit. They were familiar with the *Bhagavad-gita*."

"When we are teaching spiritual knowledge, self-realization, we want to make a distinction between empirical material (which is for us) and transcendental spiritual reality (which is by and for itself). Transcendental reality means that which cannot be described in terms of phenomenal things of our finite experience."

"Is that the same as transcendental meditation? I think in the '60's it was popular," Ralph asked. "Yes, it's been known for a long time. Transcendental meditation or the idea of transcendence has been known for millennia. Those who understand that there's something more than just the physical, they can relate to the noumenal plane which is more real to them than the phenomenal plane is to the material empiricist," Sripad Puri Maharaja responded.

"In the *Bhagavad-gita* it is mentioned that just as the body is passing from childhood to youth to old age, the soul is maintaining its identity despite

all those changes. There occurs a total change in your physical body. Even the scientists explain there's a process of anabolism and catabolism going on within the body. Every cell is dying (catabolism) and being replaced with new material (anabolism). When you eat, you are supplying new material that was not present in your body before. So in that way the body is constantly in a state of flux, but you are basically the same identity you are now," Sripad Puri Maharaja said. This is confirmed in Srila Bhakti Raksaka Sridhara Maharaja's *Bhagavad Gita - The Hidden Treasure of the Sweet Absolute: Chapter 2 Verse 13: The Constitution of the Soul*

*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."

"What is that which is permanent within the changing world?" Sripad Puri Maharaja continued. "This is where the spiritual knowledge of the *Bhagavad-gita* begins. In chapter two Sri Krishna is describing the science of the soul. That which remains the same is called soul (*atma*). The soul is not a thing that you can see with your eyes or hold in your hands but we can understand its eternal presence by this example," Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "The *Gita* is telling us, 'Don't neglect what is eternal/permanent because it cannot be seen just because we are used to seeing impermanent physical things. The eternal idea also has a reality more important than the things we call real.' Who you are is more essential to you than just the body. The breath is more essential than the nose. Loosing your nose is not as critical as loosing your breath. The *Gita* is trying to tell us that 'transcendental reality' which is not visible or physical also has its reality and meditation is meant to fix our attention on that plane. If your attention can become fixed there, all other problems will resolve themselves automatically."

Just as the soul is permanent in all instances of the changing body, so too the present is what is permanently with us in every fleeting moment of time. Thus the one thing that is eternal in your life right now is the present. We can meditate on the eternal daylight of the present in the constantly ceasing to be and coming to be of the moments of time or 'becoming'. Along with the self the present is always with us, although we think of it as completely flickering," Sripad Puri Maharaja explained then asked how do we grasp the present? "As ethereal as it may seem, it is really the most substantial moment we have. Today a lot of people are teaching 'being in the

present.' First you have to understand what the present is then you can understand how valuable it is and what it means to be in the present. So this is eternity - the present never ceases to cease. To meditate on the present or to be in the present is therefore to mediate on the eternal. The soul and the present are eternal notions that belong to the eternal world. These are not things that we can measure with an instrument yet they are most valuable and substantial to our lives."

"If the soul is eternal then what is death?" Sripad Puri Maharaja asked then responded. "Your body is constantly dying already. Your baby body is already gone. We call it growth but growth doesn't really make clear that when something is growing it involves a ceasing to be (dying) and a coming to be (rebirth) going on all the time. The ceasing to be and the coming to be, together we call 'becoming.' Heraclitus, an early Greek philosopher, said everything is flux. Fixed Being is not the reality - everything is becoming. There's a dynamic to actuality and we are part of that. We are also becoming that doesn't merely cease at death but also comes to be in the next rebirth. That's the eternal nature of becoming. The eternal is not static, it's dynamic. The more we can become conscious of that process or development that is the essence of our lives we realize what is Spirit whose nature is alive and dynamic. Matter means what is dead. Transcendental meditation is meant to develop our awareness, our consciousness of that reality, that spiritual plane," Sripad Puri Maharaja said. "Here we engage in meditation which is also called *kirtan* or *sankirtan* which is a spiritual meditation in the form of congregational singing or chanting. When we meditate we sing the names of God (Krishna, Rama). Krishna is mentioned in the *Gita* which is part of the *Mahabharata*, and Rama is mentioned in the *Ramayana*. These names of God, when we chant them, are meditations on the spiritual transcendental reality of which we are part."



L-R Saba, Sumrah, Sripad Puri Maharaja with kartals, Surottama Prabhu, Ralph, Bakula Mataji, Rasaraja Prabhu playing dhol and Amit ji during kirtan.

"In Sanskrit, hearing is called *sravanam* and chanting is *kirtanam*. From hearing and chanting, using the ear and the tongue comes *smaranam* (remembering). Not just any kind of remembering but Visnu *smaranam* (remembrance of Lord Visnu / Krishna). If you are hearing and chanting the names of God, what is the result? *Smranam*, remembrance of God – *Visnu smaranam*," Sripad Puri Maharaja explained. "When teaching children the multiplication tables they have to hear and repeat the lessons. This process produces remembering. Remembering Krishna is called

Krishna consciousness. There is also *pada sevanam* [humble service of the devotees], *arcanam* [workship], *vandanam* [prayers], *dasyam* [servanthood], *sakhyam* [friendship], and *atma-nivedanam* [complete surrender of oneself].” *Srimad-Bhagavatam* mentions these nine process of bhakti yoga (devotional service in 7.5.23-24)

“We speak of Mother Nature but who is the father? In the *Bhagavad-gita* Krishna says He is the seed giving father. The Bible says that Adam was created from the dust of mother earth but the seed giving father, God, had to breathe life into Adam. The breath of life doesn’t come from the earth, it comes from God, so He’s the seed giving father. The mother nurtures the child within her womb but the father gives the seed for the mother to nurture. The earth (nature) is the mother but the seed of life comes from God, therefore, life is divine, not merely natural” Sripad Puri Maharaja explained. “The scientists cannot feed us because they cannot produce life. They cannot make even blade of grass or a grain of rice. They know the chemical composition but they cannot combine those chemicals to make a grain of rice.. Life comes only from life, not from chemicals.. Life requires life for its sustenance – *jivo jivasya jivanam*, (life requires life to live). Not that we have to eat animals in order to live. We don’t do that. We are vegetarians but we take vegetables, fruits and grains – living entities that don’t run away from you when you try to eat them. We then offer it to Krishna first before eating it. This is called *prasadam* (mercy of God). All food is coming to us by the mercy of the Lord. We can cultivate them but have no capacity to produce them by our own powers, so nature also is divine. Both the seed giving Father and Mother Nature are divine. In the highest sense the Female and Male forms are called Radha (energy) and Krishna (source of energy).”

“Who is Rama?” our guest Saba asked. “In the Maha Mantra it is another name of Krishna. Rama means the pleasure potency of Krishna,” Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. “Krishna is the supreme independent person among all persons. He not only enjoys pure pleasure but He’s also the source of pleasure (Rama). Krishna is the source, the reservoir of all pleasure so whatever He enjoys, it automatically pervades His whole creation and all the creatures of that creation. That is why when chanting the Holy Names of Krishna, we are glorifying Him and getting pleasure from that. It is our true nature to remember Him and be happy with Him, to recognize our real relationship of serving His pleasure. By serving His pleasure we are not the losers, so the more we chant intently with selfless dedication and love the more devotional inspiration we will get in reciprocation.”

“What is the relationship between Rama, Krishna, Radha and Om?” Saba followed-up with. “Radha and Krishna represent the male-female aspects of the Absolute or Complete Whole. God is not alone. As a person He’s not a separate identity by Himself - that would be a mere

abstract being. Krishna is sometimes called Lord Krishna. Lord means that there’s something to lord it over. King means there must be subjects, a kingdom, ministers, army, and so on. When we talk about God, generally mean the one who has created everything, so without a creation there’s no meaning to the word creator (God). Krishna is the source of all His energies – spiritual, material and marginal in between.. Radharani is His *shakti* (energy). Krishna is the source of energy, the dynamo, and Radharani is His internal potency or energy,” Sripad Puri Maharaja responded. “Rama represents the pleasure potency that Krishna enjoys and is distributed to others through His own enjoyment, which is His natural constitutional make-up. Pleasure’s highest form is called *prem* (love) so that *prem* that Krishna enjoys is only possible if there is a beloved. Krishna is the lover and His beloved is Srimati Radharani, but for Radharani, it’s the opposite. Krishna is her beloved and She’s the lover.”

“Rama also has another more popularly known meaning as the name of one of the avatars of Krishna. That is discussed in another context in the epic *Ramayana*, which tells of the history of Rama’s appearance.’

“Om is also written AUM where we can see it has three parts – a, u and m, AUM thus represents Krishna, Radharani and the pleasure of *prem* that exists between them. There are several other meanings also but this is the highest meaning of AUM. Sometimes Om refers to just the impersonal Brahman that doesn’t appear to have any of those distinct features. The dot on the symbol can also refer to the *Jiva* (the living entities) who are also there in AUM, the Absolute Truth. AUM is a representation of the complete absolute truth in its totality, so everything must be present there.”

After Sripad Puri Maharaja spoke a very interactive conversations followed as the audience broke into groups to continue discussing what had been said, after which *prasadam* was honored by all.



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