

The Greatest Purifying Process

How anyone can be elevated to the platform of a Brahmana

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For VIHE Bhakti Vaibhava Study of Canto 3 - Part 2



Content: Analysis of Devahuti's Prayers (Verses 3.33.6-7) to Lord Kapiladeva

Study Aim: Understanding, Personal Application, Mood and Mission

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Introduction

White Elephant — That's how the westerner devotees were called when Srila Prabhupada brought them for the first time to India. For many, it is still very astonishing that someone who was born in the west, in a materially opulent country, takes up Krishna Consciousness and lives a simple life of a sadhu.

From the many personal interactions that I have had over the years, there is one that I remember specifically. It was in Rishikesh at the foothills of the Himalayas, when I came out of the holy waters of the Ganges river, where an old Baba stared at me. The expression on his face was full of astonishment. While I was drying my body with a gamcha, he approached me and asked: „Where did you get this upavita from?!“ „Well, from my Gurudeva, at the time of my Brahmana Initiation“. The Baba inquired further „Oh, do you also use it?“ I answered: „yes, sure, three times a day for reciting my Gayatri!“ Although still somewhat puzzled, the Baba was obviously moved and smiled at me with a bright and friendly face saying: „Accha! Gayatri, very good!“

While people, in general, show great respect and appreciation for those of us being born in the west and sincerely taking up Krishna Conciseness, there are still many who also doubt our status as a brahmana.

In Switzerland, people sometimes ask me: „but how is it that you have become a priest, a brahmana? You are Swiss, you did not take birth in a brahmana family. How is it that Indians accept you as their priest?“

And in India, you have the smarta brahmans, the orthodox or conservative priests who certainly question our qualification to act as a brahmana. Srila Prabhupada himself faced a lot of opposition when going to the west and turning mlecchas, cast-less people, into brahmanas.

Srila Prabhupada, however, understood that a brahmana becomes a priest not by birth, but by his qualification and by his activities. Based on this understanding, Prabhupada created brahmanas by initiating western disciples and elevating them to the position of a brahmana.

Who is a Brahmana?

Speaking of the position of a brahmana — Who can actually be called a true brahmana, especially nowadays in the age of Kali? There are many sastric evidence that one is a bahmana by quality and activity and not simply by birth. Unfortunately, in Kali Yuga there are many so-called brahmanas who are proud of their birth but are not living a brahminical life:

„In Kali-yuga, there are only so-called brahmanas by birth (..) They do not perform the duties that brahmanas should perform, and do not know brahma vastu, param brahma, or Krsna, but they are very proud to wear a brahmana cord.“ 1

“As the elephant made of wood, as the deer made of leather, so the non-learning brahmana, these three merely bear their names. As the eunuch is useless among women, as the cow is useless among cows, as a gift to the ignorant person is useless, even so, is the brahmana useless who is devoid of the Veda.” 2

The duty of a brahmana is to know the param brahma, Krsna. If a brahmana is not knowledgable and does not know the goal of life, he is a brahmana by name only. Srila Prabhupada states:

„Formerly the garbhādhāna reformatory system was prevalent, but at the present moment, there is no such garbhādhāna, or seed-giving ceremony. Under these circumstances, no one knows if a man is factually born of a brāhmaṇa father. Whether one has acquired the qualification of a brāhmaṇa depends on the judgment of the bona fide spiritual master. He bestows upon the disciple the position of a brāhmaṇa by his own judgment. When one is accepted as a brāhmaṇa in the sacred thread ceremony under the pāñcarātriṇī system, then he is dvija, twice-born.“ 3

There is a story of Satyakama in this regard. A boy who wanted to study the Vedas, which was only possible for those born in a brahmana family, was asked by Gautama Muni: "Who is your father?" So he said that "I do not know." "Then go to your mother. Ask her." The mother could not say (..) So he came back to Gautama Muni, "Sir, my mother also does not know. She said that she had many connections, 'I do not know who is particularly your father.'" But Gautama Muni immediately accepted him, "Yes, you are a brahmana, because you are truthful. Nobody dares to say like that, that 'I do not know my father's name. My mother said that she had many connections.'" Because he was truthful, satyaṁ samo damas titiksa, so by the quality, he was accepted immediately, and he was initiated, that "You have the qualities of a brahmana." 4 So as Srila Prabhupada pointed out, it is the spiritual master who can recognize who is actually qualified to be a brahmana and who not. This is also confirmed by the Six Goswamis:

Sanātana Goswami wrote his Vaiṣṇava smṛti, Hari-bhakti-vilāsa, which was specifically meant for India. In those days, India was more or less following the principle of smārta-vidhi. Srila Sanātana Goswami had to keep pace with this, and his Hari-bhakti-vilāsa was compiled with this in mind. According to smārta-brahmanas, a person not born in a brahmana family could not be elevated to the position of a brahmana. Sanātana Goswami, however, says in the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa (2.12) that anyone can be elevated to the position of a brahmana by the process of initiation.

yathā kāñcanatām yāti kāmasyaṁ rasa-vidhānataḥ
tathā dīkṣā-vidhānena dvijatvaṁ jāyate nṛṇāṁ

“As bell metal is turned to gold when mixed with mercury in an alchemical process, so one who is properly trained and initiated by a bona fide spiritual master immediately becomes a brahmana.”

There is a difference between the smārta process and the goswami process. According to the smārta process, one cannot be accepted as a brahmana unless he is born in a brahmana family. According to the goswami process, the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa and the Nārada Pañcarātra, anyone can become a brahmana if he is properly initiated by a bona fide spiritual master. 5

The same principle is confirmed in the pages of the Bhagavatam by Devahuti. While offering prayers to Lord Kapiladeva, she speaks two wonderful verses in glorification of the devotees of the Lord and the potency of the Lord's Holy Name. This essay will explore the meaning of these two slokas and Srila Prabhupada's purports on these verses.

The Potency of the Holy Name

yan-nāmadheya-śravaṇānukīrtanād
yat-prahvaṇād yat-smaraṇād api kvacit
śvādo 'pi sadyaḥ savanāya kalpate
kutaḥ punas te bhagavan nu darśanāt

„To say nothing of the spiritual advancement of persons who see the Supreme Person face to face, even a person born in a family of dog-eaters immediately becomes eligible to perform Vedic sacrifices if he once utters the holy name of the Supreme Personality of Godhead or chants about Him, hears about His pastimes, offers Him obeisances or even remembers Him.“ 6

Devahuti is saying that anyone can become a brahmana (one who is eligible to perform Vedic sacrifices) by the influence of the Holy Name. In his purport, Srila Prabhupada first mentions the potency of the Holy Name, that He can purify anyone from all sinful reactions.

„Herein the spiritual potency of chanting, hearing or remembering the holy name of the Supreme Lord is greatly stressed. Rūpa Gosvāmī has discussed the sequence of sinful activities of the conditioned soul, and he has established, in Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu, that those who engage in devotional service become freed from the reactions of all sinful activities.“ 7

There are many slokas that express the potency of the Holy Name such as:

nāmno hi yāvati śaktiḥ
pāpa-nirharaṇe hareḥ
tāvat kartuṁ na śaknoti
pātakam pātakī naraḥ

"Simply by chanting one holy name of Hari, a sinful man can counteract the reactions to more sins than he is able to commit.“ 8

avaśenāpi yan-nāmnī
kīrtite sarva-pātakaiḥ
pumān vimucyate sadyaḥ
siṁha-trastair mṛgair iva

"If one chants the holy name of the Lord, even in a helpless condition or without desiring to do so, all the reactions of his sinful life depart, just as when a lion roars, all the small animals flee in fear.“

9

As mentioned in the purport, Srila Rupa Goswami, has explained how the chanting of the Holy Name can free one from all sinful reactions. The cause of sin is avidya, ignorance. It is due to one misidentifying one's self with the body that lusty, sinful desires (bijam) appear in the heart. This is followed by the sinful action performed (papam) and as a result we get a reaction. First unmanifested (aprarabdha) and then manifested (prarabdha), and as a result, we suffer. But even if we go and perform some atonement, because the sinful inclination (kutam) is still there, we will again desire and act in a sinful way and the suffering continues. However, by the power of the Holy Name, the heart is cleansed and the true identity of the living being is revealed. By destroying avidya, ignorance, about our true identity, we become established in our true nature as servants of God and can end all sinful activities.

How the Stage of Chanting is Attained

One could question, “But how is it that simply by chanting the holy name of the Lord that one can become a holy man, who can be compared to the most elevated brahmana?“

Srila Prabhupada states: „To eradicate such doubts in the minds of unbelievers, this verse affirms that the stage of chanting of the holy name of the Lord is not sudden, but that the chanters have already performed all kinds of Vedic rituals and sacrifices.“ 10

aho bata śva-paco 'to garīyān
yaj-jihvāgre vartate nāma tubhyam
tepus tapas te juhuvuḥ sasnur āryā
brahmānūcur nāma grṇanti ye te

„Oh, how glorious are they whose tongues are chanting Your holy name! Even if born in the families of dog-eaters, such persons are worshipable. Persons who chant the holy name of Your Lordship must have executed all kinds of austerities and fire sacrifices and achieved all the good

manners of the Āryans. To be chanting the holy name of Your Lordship, they must have bathed at holy places of pilgrimage, studied the Vedas and fulfilled everything required.“ 11

This is a very powerful statement by Devahuti that anyone who is chanting the Holy Name of the Lord is glorious and that he or she must have undergone all other processes of purification in past lives.

Srila Prabhupada gives an analogy in this regard:

„Just as a student in a law class is to be understood to have already graduated from general education, anyone who is engaged in the chanting of the holy name of the Lord—Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare—must have already passed all lower stages. It is said that those who simply chant the holy name with the tip of the tongue are glorious.“ 12

How to attain this glorious stage? How many Names does one have to chant?

„It is said herein that nāma, a singular number, one name, Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, is sufficient. It is not that one has to chant all the holy names of the Lord. The holy names of the Lord are innumerable, and one does not have to chant all the names to prove that he has already undergone all the processes of Vedic ritualistic ceremonies. If one chant once only, it is to be understood that he has already passed all the examinations, not to speak of those who are chanting always, twenty-four hours a day.“ 13

Which Name should be chanted?

„It is specifically said here, tubhyam: "unto You only." One must chant God's name, not, as the Māyāvādī philosophers say, any name, such as a demigod's name or the names of God's energies. Only the holy name of the Supreme Lord will be effective. Anyone who compares the holy name of the Supreme Lord to the names of the demigods is called pāṣaṇḍī, or an offender.“ 14

How to chant?

„The holy name has to be chanted to please the Supreme Lord, and not for any sense gratification or professional purpose. If this pure mentality is there, then even though a person is born of a low family, such as a dog-eater's, he is so glorious that not only has he purified himself, but he is quite competent to deliver others.“ 15

Not only does he become qualified but he even becomes qualified to deliver others! And yes, the Holy Names of the Lord have to be chanted in the proper mood — to please the Supreme Lord! So we need to ask ourselves „How often do I chant the Holy Names to actually please the Supreme Lord?“

Towards the end of his commentary Srila Prabhupada again gives an analogy:

„The very word grṇanti, which is used in this verse, means to be already established in the perfectional stage of ritualistic performances. If one is seated on the bench of a high-court and is giving judgment on cases, it means that he has already passed all legal exams and is better than those who are engaged in the study of law or those expecting to study law in the future. In a similar way, persons who are chanting the holy name are transcendental to those who are factually performing the Vedic rituals and those who expect to be qualified (or, in other words, those who are born in families of brāhmaṇas but have not yet undergone the reformatory processes and who therefore expect to study the Vedic rituals and perform the sacrifices in the future).“ 16

Are All ISKCON Devotees Great Yogis?

Does this mean that every person who chants Hare Krishna Mantra must have been a great Yogi, Sage or Mystic in his past life? If the answer is yes, what could be a danger with this understanding? And if the answer is no, how is Devahuti's statement true?

Generally, a devotee understands that on his own he cannot achieve anything and that his present status in Krishna Consciousness has been attained only by the mercy of Guru and Gauranga. Srila Prabhupada mentioned several times that it was he who created good fortune for us. Although many devotees certainly have already practiced some form of spirituality in their previous lives, it is not necessarily true for all. But then how to understand Devahuti's words? The following analogy gives us a deeper understanding:

Generally speaking one gets a Ph.D. or doctorate title through studies at a university. That's the general path and one who becomes successful in this way can be compared to the sadhana siddha, one who attained perfection by following all the rules and regulations of vaidhi bhakti. On the other hand, a university sometimes also awards an honorary doctorate to someone who, although he did not undergo general study but has actually attained the necessary qualification to hold such a title. He can be compared to a person who attains perfection by the mercy of the Lord, kṛpā siddha.

In the same way, some of us may have in fact undergone all the different processes like austerities and fire sacrifices, bathed at holy places of pilgrimage and studied the Vedas and others might not have done all this but by good fortune came in touch with a pure devotee and were elevated to that platform.

Conclusion

Whether we have already been practicing Krishna Consciousness in our previous lives or not we should understand our good fortune and give all the credit for our achievements to Guru and Krishna. There is no place for pride in bhakti. There is a very instructive Prabhupada Memory in this regard:

Once Srila Prabhupada gave initiation to two devotees. One was a hippy from the west, with a very low, sinful background and the other was from south India, from an elevated, pious brahmana family. To the western disciple Srila Prabhupada told „Never forget where you have come from!“ and the south Indian devotee was instructed: „Forget about your brahminical background!“ Two completely opposite instructions, but both given for the same purpose: to become humble. For the Western devotee, it was helpful to remember his past from time to time, that made him humble, whereas for the Indian devotee that same remembrance would have led to pride.

From this, we can understand, regardless from where we have come, by the mercy of Srila Prabhupada and our Spiritual master we have received the Holy Name by which we are able to elevate ourselves to the highest platform.

Another conclusion that we can draw from these two prayers of Devahuti is that we should respect all the devotees regardless of their background. Whoever chants the Holy Names of the Lord is glorious and should be given respect. We never can know who is who, some new person might have been a great yogi in his past life and another person might have attained the association of the devotees by some good fortune.

These slokas are also very important since they represent Srila Prabhupada's mood and mission very much. Srila Prabhupada came to the west with the understanding that anyone can be elevated to the platform of a brahmana or a Vaishnava. Understanding Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu's prophecy that His Holy Name will be spread in every town and village around the world, having full faith in the instructions of his spiritual master and full faith in the potency of the Holy Name, Srila Prabhupada started the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

All glories to the devotees of the Lord. All glories to the Holy Name of the Lord and all glories to Srila Prabhupada, the sena pati, commander in chief of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu's Sankirtana Mission!

- 1 - Atri-samhita (372)
- 2 - Manu Smriti 2.157
- 3 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.33.6, Purport
- 4 - Lecture on SB 1.5.22 in Vrindavana, August 3, 1974
- 5 - Hari-bhakti-vilāsa (2.12)
- 6 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.33.6
- 7 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.33.6, Purport
- 8 - Bṛhad-viṣṇu Purāṇa
- 9 - Garuḍa Purāṇa
- 10-16 - Srimad Bhagavatam 3.33.7, Text/Purport