

Vaishnava Aparadha

The Mad Elephant Offence

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For VIHE Bhakti Vaibhava Study of Canto 4 - Part 1



Content: Analysis of Vaishnava Aparadha based on the Chapters 2-7

Study Aim: Understanding, Personal Application

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Intro - Six Kinds of Vaishnava Aparadha

„Oh no, this Mataji is also here! Why is that Prabhu joining our group? I don't like that fellow.“ We might sometimes feel like that, and it's probably not possible to be friends with everyone. However, we should be careful, for it is said that to not become joyful upon seeing a Vaishnava can be considered a Vaishnava aparadha!

Vaishnava aparadha is compared to a mad elephant: „when a mad elephant enters a nice garden, it spoils the entire garden. Similarly, if one becomes like a mad elephant and commits offenses at the lotus feet of a Vaishnava, his entire spiritual career is halted. One should, therefore, be very careful not to commit offenses at the lotus feet of a Vaishnava.“ 1

The Skanda Purana lists different kinds of offenses against a devotee of the Lord. Killing a Vaishnava is an offense, that's pretty obvious. Indra had to do penance at Mansa Sarovar for a thousand years to become freed from his offense after he killed Vritrasura. To blaspheme a Vaishnava is another aparadha. Daksa offended Lord Shiva in this way and had to suffer the consequences. To be envious like Gopala Capala (towards Srivasa Thakur) or to become angry with a Vaishnava, like Saubhara Muni who became disturbed by Garuda, is also considered to be an offense. Indra failed to show respect to his Guru Brhaspati and lost all his power because of that. As mentioned in the beginning, even to not feel joyful upon seeing a Vaishnava is another form of aparadha. This shows how careful we should deal with and feel respect for each other.

I remember how I had a hard time with a particular devotee at the temple. I really did not like the guy and tried to avoid his association. Actually, he was a good devotee, but his mood was just so different from mine. One day, while walking in the city, all of a sudden, I saw that same devotee on the other side of the street. Very spontaneously I raised my arms and called out „Haribol Prabhu!“ and felt so happy to see a devotee of Krishna in the midst of all these people who do not show any interest in spiritual life. „Wait a minute,“ I told to myself. „Why do I feel so much joy seeing that devotee, I thought I don't like him?“ At this moment I realized how silly it was to maintain such enmity toward that Prabhu, after all, he is a devotee of the Lord.

There is a very instructive story in regard to offending a devotee by not becoming joyful upon seeing him:

One day in Vrindavana, Srila Rupa Goswami sat rapt in meditation and felt great bliss in his heart. While sitting in his samadhi he observed a wonderful pastime. The Gopis were decorating Srimati Radharani while Krishna stood behind Her watching. Krishna revealed His presence to the sakhis, but Radharani was unaware that He was there. In many ways, the Gopis braided and decorated Radharani's hair and then they placed a mirror before Her. As She gazed at the beauty of Her own face, Radharani also saw Krishna's moonlike face in the mirror. Radha became very shy and quickly covered Herself with Her clothes. The Gopis happily laughed at this and Srila Rupa Goswami also joined their laughter.

Just at that moment, a Vaishnava arrived who was very eager to see Rupa Goswami. Seeing Rupa Goswami laughing, the Vaishnava did not say anything, but feeling sorrowful in his heart he went away. (This Devotee named Krishnadas was lame and unable to walk properly and he thought that Rupa Goswami was laughing at his disability). After that incident, Srila Rupa Goswami suddenly lost his vision of the Lord's pastimes and began looking everywhere.

Considering the situation very carefully, he concluded that someone must have come to see him while he was absorbed. He thought "Because I did not honor the person who came, I thereby committed an offense."

After both of them, Krishnadas and Rupa Goswami, came to see Sanatana Goswami the misunderstanding was cleared and both Vaishnavas begged for forgiveness from each other. Srila Narahari Chakravarti concludes the story by saying: „Although Srila Rupa Goswami is a highly elevated devotee very dear to Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, the Lord used him to teach us the danger of Vaishnava aparadha. (..) Be careful not to see a Vaishnava's fault, and always sing their glories“ . 2

Daksha Curses Lord Shiva

The Srimad Bhagavatam gives us a very interesting narration that shows what can happen to someone who blasphemes a Vaishnava. It's the Story of Daksha cursing Lord Shiva as described in Chapters two to seven of the fourth Canto. What follows is a short summary of the story with the important statements of Srila Prabhupada's Purport and the lessons we should learn from this episode:

Once the leaders of the universe performed a great sacrifice in which all the great sages, and demigods assembled. When Daksha entered there, shining like the sun, everyone, except Brahma and Shiva, stood up to show respect to the greatest of the Prajapatis. When Daksha noticed that Shiva had not shown respect to him, although being his son in law, he became very angry and began to speak harsh words.

He called Shiva a shameless and proud person and said: „Pretending to be an honest person, he accepted my daughter's hand, and thus accepted himself as my subordinate. This monkey-eyed person has married my deer-eyed daughter but now has failed to respect me even with sweet words. Though not desiring, I gave my daughter to this unqualified man, like teaching Vedas to a sudra. Like a mad man, he sometimes laughs and sometimes cries. He smears crematorium ashes on his skin, wears a garland of skulls and bones. He is actually Shiva, auspicious in name only, in fact, he is the maddest and inauspicious creature, he is unclean, the Lord of the ghosts and has an impure heart. Therefore Lord Shiva, the lowest of all the demigods, should not have a share in the sacrificial oblations!“ 3

In this way did Daksha in great anger blaspheme and curse Lord Shiva in front of all the assembled personalities and then left the sacrificial arena.

Infected by anger, Nandisvara counteracted Daksha and all the assembled Brahmanas who had tolerated the cursing of Shiva without saying anything. And as a result of that, Brghu Muni started to counter-curse the Followers of Lord Shiva. Seeing all this cursing and counter cursing Lord Shiva felt very sorry, became morose and left the place without saying anything.

Srila Prabhupada praises Lord Shiva's reaction to the whole situation: „Here Lord Śiva's excellent character is described. In spite of the cursing and counter-cursing between the parties of Dakṣa and Śiva, because he is the greatest Vaiṣṇava he was so sober that he did not say anything. A Vaiṣṇava is always tolerant, and Lord Śiva is considered the topmost Vaiṣṇava, so his character, as shown in this scene, is excellent.“ 4

Chapter three then describes a conversation between Lord Shiva and Sati. Daksha, Sati's father had arranged for another great sacrifice, neglecting Lord Shiva. Sati still wanted to go, since it would be a great opportunity to see many family members. Lord Shiva tells her to better not go since it is not wise to see a person who is disturbed in mind and looks at his guests with angry eyes. Because of the connection to me, Shiva assured Sati, Daksha will not be happy to see you. Chapter four informs us how, In spite of Lord Shiva's warnings, Sati anyway went and became very unsaid seeing the sacrifice being performed devoid of oblations for Lord Shiva.

Thus she expressed her frustration to her father saying: „Who expects you would hate a personality like Lord Shiva, who has no superior or rival in this world, who is the most beloved of all and who is without any enemies?“ 5

Sati then gives an interesting description of how one should deal with an offender:

„If one hears an irresponsible person blaspheme the master and controller of religion, one should block his ears and go away if unable to punish him. But if one is able to kill, then one should by force cut out the blasphemer's tongue and kill the offender, and after that one should give up his own life.“ 6

In his purport Srila Prabhupada clarifies the practical application for us which is leaving the place or block one's ears: „If one is a brāhmaṇa he should not give up his body because by doing so he would be responsible for killing a brāhmaṇa; therefore a brāhmaṇa should leave the place or block his ears so that he will not hear the blasphemy. If one happens to be a kṣatriya he has the power to punish any man; therefore a kṣatriya should at once cut out the tongue of the vilifier and kill him. But as far as the vaiśyas and sūdras are concerned, they should immediately give up their bodies.“ 7

Sati then saying the Words: „Therefore I shall no longer bear this unworthy body, which has been received from you, who have blasphemed Lord Śiva. If someone has taken food which is poisonous, the best treatment is to vomit“ then gave up her body in a blazing fire in front of everyone by mystic yoga process. 8

Chapter Five then describes Lord Shiva's reaction after hearing what happened. He creates the demon Virabhadra who takes revenge and kills Daksa and his followers. Only by the interference of Lord Brahma (in Chapter 6), the situation is settled and Daksha regains his life, but receives the head of a goat, since the original head was destroyed and just to remind him of his past deeds.

What can we learn from this Episode?

Of course there is much more to say about this pastime, but that's the story in a nutshell. What can we learn from this? The question should be raised, that why did Daksha became so disturbed? It was due to his false pride. And here is the lesson, pride comes before the fall!

„Dakṣa was appointed the chief of all Prajāpatis. That was the cause of his excessive pride. When a man becomes too proud of his material possessions, he can perform any disastrous act, and therefore Dakṣa acted out of false prestige.“ 9

Because Daksha saw himself superior to Shiva because of his bodily relationship, instead of giving respect to Lord Shiva, he was demanding respect.

That's the main point here. We are advised to always take a humble position and not expect respect but rather be ready to always give respect to everyone:

trinad api sunichena taror api sahisnuna amanina manadena kirtaniyah sada harih „One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind, one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.“ 10

Therefore Bhaktivinoda Thakur said that the day I think I have become a Vaishnava is a very dangerous day. Why? „If I falsely think that `I am a Vaishnava`, then I shall look forward to receiving respect from others. And if the desire for fame and reputation pollute my heart, then certainly I shall go to hell instantly.“ 11

Therefore understanding the danger of the Mad Elephant Offence we should be very careful in our dealing with Vaishnavas and should always see ourselves as the servants of others. In this way, we are in a save position.

How to counteract Vaishnava Aparadha?

What should we do if we happened to commit a Vaishnava Aparadha, knowingly or unknowingly? The remedy is only one, we have to beg forgiveness to that Vaishnava we have offended. This fact was very clearly established in the pastime of Ambarish and Durvasa Muni. After committing a serious aparadha towards Ambarish, Durvasa Muni was fleeing from the Sudarshan Cakra of the Lord searching for shelter, but no one could help him. When he finally reached Lord Vishnu he had to learn that only Ambarish could help him:

„The Supreme Personality of Godhead said to the brāhmaṇa: I am completely under the control of My devotees. Indeed, I am not at all independent. Because My devotees are completely devoid of material desires, I sit only within the cores of their hearts. What to speak of My devotee, even those who are devotees of My devotee are very dear to Me.“ 12

„The pure devotee is always within the core of My heart, and I am always in the heart of the pure devotee. My devotees do not know anything else but Me, and I do not know anyone else but them.“ 13

Then the Lord advises Durvasa Muni to go to Ambarish immediately, without a moment's delay and ask for forgiveness!

So all ought the devotees are very tolerant, as we saw in the example of Lord Shiva, the Supreme Personality of Godhead does not tolerate any offenses towards his dear devotees. Only if they forgive, will the Lord be satisfied.

But is asking for forgiveness enough? „In order to be free from offenses unto great souls, one should please that same personality whom one originally offended through constantly engaging in the process of bhakti (..) Offenses to great devotees may be relieved either by experiencing the calamities they bring or by attaining the favor of the offended devotee“ 14

There are two things: ksama, forgiveness and anugraha, favour. If we have offended a Vaishnava it is essential to ask for forgiveness, no doubt about that, but then, in addition, we should also try to get the favour of that Vaishnava. We should try to please that devotee in order to really make sure that we have attained his favour. Only then can we be sure to have counteracted our aparadha.

If I, for example, lend some money to my friend and that friend shows up one day and tells me that he is not able to pay the money back. I might forgive him because I know that he goes through a hard time and has financial difficulties but that does not mean that I am happy about the situation. But if my friend then finally pays the money back or for example offers me some service like helps me with the removal of my furniture, then I might say ok, now it's ok again.

Similarly, if I offend someone I should not only apologize but try somehow or other to also please that devotee. This is a very important principle to keep in mind.

How to avoid Vaishnava Aparadha?

The best thing, of course, is to avoid Vaishnava Aparadha in the first place. How to do that? As already mentioned before giving respect to everyone is the antidote to aparadha. If I train my mind to see good in others, then the chance to offend someone will be reduced.

While Daksha is an A-sadhu a fault finder, Shiva is a true sadhu, Sati said:

„Twice-born Dakṣa, a man like you can simply find fault in the qualities of others. Lord Śiva, however, not only finds no faults with others' qualities but if someone has a little good quality, he magnifies it greatly. Unfortunately, you have found fault with such a great soul.“ 15

„There are some highly qualified persons who accept only the good qualities of others. Just as a bee is always interested in the honey in the flower and does not consider the thorns and colors, highly qualified persons, who are uncommon, accept only the good qualities of others, not considering their bad qualities, whereas the common man can judge what are good qualities and what are bad qualities. (..) But Satī accused her father, You are just the opposite. Although Lord Śiva has so many good qualities and no bad qualities at all, you have accepted him as bad and found fault with him. Because of your accepting his good qualities to be bad, instead of your becoming the most exalted soul you have become the most fallen.“

This is a very often repeated subject matter in the Bhagavatam. A Vaishnava gives respect to others, sees the good in others and if he is looking for fault, he is doing that in his own heart, not in others. The Bhagavatam gives us also very practical tools, spiritual techniques we can say to develop such respect for everyone.

An advanced devotee will offer respects to everyone — even to cats and dogs:

*vidyā-vinaya-sampanne
brāhmaṇe gavi hastini
śuni caiva śva-pāke ca
paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ*

“The humble sage, by virtue of true knowledge, sees with equal vision a learned and gentle *brāhmaṇa*, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater [outcaste].” 16

If we understand, that we are all brothers and sisters, eternal part and parcels of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, we can learn to respect and love each other. Understanding that the Lord personally resides in everyone's heart, our bodies become temples of the Lord. To see others as a temple of the Lord is a wonderful meditation that can be an extremely powerful tool to avoid Vaishnava Apradha.

Lord Rshabdeva instructs his sons therefore as follows: „My dear sons, you should not envy any living entity — be he moving or nonmoving. Knowing that I am situated in them, you should offer respect to all of them at every moment. In this way, you offer respect to Me.“ 17

Remembering this instruction we will not only be able to avoid Vaishnava Aparadha as far as possible but will also attract the Lord's causeless mercy upon us!

Hari Om Tat Sat, Vrindavana, 11.April 2019, Krishna Premarupa Dasa

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- 1 - Srimad Bhagavatam 6.17.15, Purport
 - 2 - Sri Krishna Kathamrita No.6 - Vaishnava Aparadha, page 19
From Srila Narahari Chakravarti's Sri Bhakti-ratnakara, fifth wave
 - 3 - Summary of Verses SB 4.2.10-18
 - 4 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.2.33, Purport
 - 5 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.4.11
 - 6 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.4.17
 - 7 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.4.17, Purport
 - 8 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.4.18
 - 9 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.3.2, Purport
 - 10 - Sri Siksastakam Vers 4
 - 11 - Kalyana Kalpataru, Song: kripa kara vaisnava - Prayer to a pure Devotee
 - 12 - Srimad Bhagavatam 9.4.63
 - 13 - Srimad Bhagavatam 9.4.68
 - 14 - Srila Jiva Goswami Bhakti Sandarbha 265.57-58
 - 15 - Srimad Bhagavatam 4.4.12
 - 16 - Bhagavad Gita 5.18
 - 17 - Srimad Bhagavatam 5.5.26

