

The Inconceivable ... One More Time

Ravindra Svarūpa Dāsa

A number of Back to Godhead readers have written—several at formidable length—to express doubts or objections concerning the essay “On Conceiving the Inconceivable,” published in this column last summer (July/August). I hope it will be helpful for me to respond to the more significant points raised.

You may recall that the essay addressed the conceptually vexing question How did the conditioned soul—the *jīva*—get that way? Upon this topic—“the *jīva* issue”—a small but prolix band of people in and about ISKCON have piled up a great number of words. I was loathe to add to them. For to expend time and energy on this issue goes counter to the instructions of Śrīla Prabhupāda. “What is the use of such discussion?” he wrote about efforts to comprehend the causal history of the *jīva*’s falldown. “Don’t waste your time with this.”¹

Why did I go against such clear instruction? How did I become so foolish as to rush in where angels fear to tread? It happened like this.

Last year ISKCON’s Governing Body Commission, on which I serve, had to deal with an uproar caused by a 300-page book on the “*jīva* issue” that a couple of devotees had just written and published.

The controversy arose over the way in which the authors attempted to resolve the issue. The reader may recall that the issue centers upon the apparent incompatibility of two authoritative accounts of the origin of conditioned souls. One account—which receives by far the most stress in Prabhupāda’s teachings—tells that the conditioned souls were originally Kṛṣṇa conscious, but that they willfully repudiated service to Kṛṣṇa and in so doing fell from the spiritual into the material world. The second account holds that conditioned souls have been so perpetually, while the eternally liberated souls in the spiritual world never fall.

How are these two accounts to be reconciled? The controversial book before the GBC reconciled the two simply by throwing out the first of them. Yet how is it possible to dispose of that account? After all, it is a prominent leitmotif of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teaching. It is presumed by the name Śrīla Prabhupāda gave this very magazine. The story of the *jīva*’s fall, theorized the book’s authors, is Prabhupāda’s benevolent fiction. It is a myth, a white lie, invented by Prabhupāda because we Westerners are mentally incapable of accepting the concept of a soul that has simply always been conditioned.

Asked to pass judgment on this theory, the GBC resolved that this way of solving the *jīva* issue was unacceptable. The GBC ruling went no further, but naturally in discussion the question came up of what sort of resolution would be acceptable. To further the GBC’s discussion, I produced the little paper later published in these pages. I labored to keep the paper short—a minimalist work—because I wanted to be considerate of the GBC as well as

Back to Godhead Magazine, Issue 30-01, 1996.

faithful to Śrīla Prabhupāda's instruction not to waste time—mine or the readers'—on this issue.

The editor of *Back to Godhead* read the little essay, liked it, and published it here. He saw the brevity of the article as a virtue.

Some readers, however, have seen it as a vice. Several in particular have deplored the paucity of “quotes”—they mean explicit citations and quotations from authorities. One reader claims that such references are a requirement, especially when presenting “a new elucidation,” while another asserts their absence sufficient in itself to prove the article “mental speculation” and nothing more.²

It is not the case that a Kṛṣṇa conscious article requires explicit citations and quotations. As a brand-new devotee, I received much knowledge and inspiration from a little piece by Śrīla Prabhupāda called “On Chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa.”³ A paradigm of brevity and elegance,⁴ it is innocent of any quotations or references. Yet one who knows the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness recognizes that every word is faithful to authority.

When I wrote the *jīva* article, I had supposed that devotees would similarly have little trouble recognizing the source of the ideas in it: Śrīla Prabhupāda. Rather than presenting “a new elucidation,” my article set forth my spiritual master's own resolution of the “*jīva* issue.” In the rest of this essay, I will provide the quotations to show that.

Some of the demand for proof-texting focused on a premise of the article: that the account of the fall of the *jīva* is an authoritative narration. Is there indeed scriptural and traditional authority for it?

Yes.

In the Fourth Canto of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Nārada Muni narrates the allegorical story of King Purañjana. In the part that concerns us, Purañjana has just died and his widow, Vaidarbhī, is lamenting piteously. A brāhmaṇa approaches the queen and introduces himself as her “eternal friend.” The brāhmaṇa, who symbolizes the Supersoul, says to the grieving queen:

My dear friend, even though you cannot immediately recognize Me, can't you remember that in the past you had a very intimate friend? Unfortunately, you gave up My company and accepted a position as enjoyer of this material world. My dear gentle friend, both you and I are exactly like two swans. We live together in the same heart, which is just like the Mānasa lake. Although we have been living together for many thousands of years, we are still far away from our original home.⁵

Commenting on these verses,⁶ Śrīla Prabhupāda explains that the passage “gave up My company and accepted a position as enjoyer of this material world” refers to the soul's fall from the spiritual into the material world. To explain “how the living entity falls down into

this material world,” Śrīla Prabhupāda quotes Bhagavad-gītā 7.27: “All living entities are born into delusion, overcome by the dualities of desire and hate.”

“In the spiritual world there is no duality, nor is there hate,” Prabhupāda says. But “when the living entities desire to enjoy themselves, they develop a consciousness of duality and come to hate the service of the Lord. In this way the living entities fall into the material world.” He elaborates further: “The natural position of the living entity is to serve the Lord in a transcendental loving attitude. When the living entity wants to become Kṛṣṇa Himself or imitate Kṛṣṇa, he falls down into the material world.”

In Nārada’s allegory, the brāhmaṇa speaks of himself and the queen as two swans—symbolically the Supersoul and the soul—who have wandered together far away from their “original home.” What place is that? Prabhupāda explains:

The original home of the living entity and the Supreme Personality of Godhead is the spiritual world. In the spiritual world both the Lord and the living entities live together very peacefully. Since the living entity remains engaged in the service of the Lord, they both share a blissful life in the spiritual world. However, when the living entity wants to enjoy himself, he falls down into the material world.⁷

It is clear that Nārada Muni teaches here in Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam that the conditioned souls dwelt originally in the spiritual world, their homeland, where they enjoyed a relation of active service with Kṛṣṇa. However, these souls willfully gave up Kṛṣṇa’s company in order to become enjoyers. Śrīla Prabhupāda explains that they wanted to imitate Kṛṣṇa rather than serve Him. As Prabhupāda states it elsewhere in his Bhāgavatam commentary: “The first sinful will of the living entity is to become the Lord, and the consequent will of the Lord is that the living entity forget his factual life and thus dream of the land of utopia where he may become one like the Lord.”⁸

In addition, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam repeatedly speaks of liberation in Kṛṣṇa consciousness as a restoration, a return, a reawakening, a recovery, a remembering. Nārada Muni uses such language himself a little further on in his allegory of the soul and Supersoul:

In this way both swans live together in the heart. When the one swan is instructed by the other, he is situated in his constitutional position. This means he regains his original Kṛṣṇa consciousness, which was lost because of his material attraction.⁹

In this verse “regains his original Kṛṣṇa consciousness” is a translation of *naṣtām āpa punaḥ smṛtim*. Kṛṣṇa consciousness is literally a lost (*naṣtām*) memory (*smṛtim*), which is gained (*āpa*) once again (*punaḥ*). In Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam this terminology of forgetting and once again remembering is invoked over and over.¹⁰ Remembering, regaining, returning, recovering—all these terms presuppose a past state that had once been ours, had then become lost, and will be ours once more. Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam teaches it, and so, of course, does Śrīla Prabhupāda.

Śrīla Prabhupāda as Authority

What I have given is sufficient to establish the authority of the account of the jīva's fall, and I will leave it at that. I may disappoint readers who will want proof-texting from authorities who stand between Nārada Muni and Śrīla Prabhupāda in the disciplic succession. I am confident, however, that Śrīla Prabhupāda is a bona fide spiritual master. As such, he is a "transparent medium" who represents (literally, presents over again) the entire tradition coming from Kṛṣṇa. To those readers who claim not to have found in those authorities confirmation of the teaching spelled out here, I can only suggest that you go back and look again. Śrīla Prabhupāda undoubtedly understands those authorities better than you or I. Go back, and this time use Śrīla Prabhupāda as your guide.

Śrīla Prabhupāda is uniquely qualified to understand spiritual teaching. Such understanding is hardly a matter of academic scholarship. The Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad, in its concluding verse (6.23), tells who among its readers will have revealed to them the purport of what they've read: only a great soul, a mahātmā, who possesses pure devotion (parā bhakti) to the Lord and, in equal measure, to his spiritual master. Śrīla Prabhupāda himself exhibited extraordinary devotion to the Lord and to his guru. Only because of that devotion was he empowered to achieve unprecedented success in preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness throughout the world. I take the greatness of his success as a measure of his greatness of soul, and therefore I accept him as empowered by Kṛṣṇa also with the ability to penetrate deeply into the meaning of spiritual teaching. It is therefore my policy to follow him in his understanding.

This is what I tried to do in my Back to Godhead article. It is not that Śrīla Prabhupāda was silent on the "jīva issue." His disciples brought it up a number of times, and there are lectures, letters, and conversations in which he addressed it head on. Never once do we find him so much as hinting that Nārada Muni's account of the origin of bondage is a myth or fiction. Rather, he defends that account vigorously and teaches his disciples how to reconcile it with the statements that there is no fall from Vaikuṅṭha, the spiritual world.

"Eternally Conditioned"

The central point in Śrīla Prabhupāda's reconciliation is that every single soul is in fact eternally liberated (nitya-mukta) and not a single soul ever really leaves the spiritual world. The so-called "conditioned souls" (nitya-baddha) only superficially appear to be so to themselves, and their apparently bound state is an illusion of such vanishingly small duration and significance that it is virtually of no weight at all in the true scale of things.

Thus, Śrīla Prabhupāda said that the appellation nitya-mukta is factual, while the appellation nitya-baddha is only a manner of speaking. "You are not eternally conditioned," Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote one disciple.

You are eternally liberated, but since we have become conditioned on account of our desire to enjoy [the] materialistic way of life, from time immemorial, therefore it appears that we are eternally conditioned. Because we cannot trace out the history of the date when we became

conditioned, therefore it is technically called eternally conditioned. Otherwise the living entity is not actually conditioned.¹¹

As Śrīla Prabhupāda affirmed in a Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam lecture,¹² “We cannot be eternally conditioned, because we are part and parcel of Kṛṣṇa. Our natural position is ever liberated, eternally liberated.” The term “eternally conditioned,” according to Śrīla Prabhupāda, is not accurate from the philosophical point of view, but is a figure of speech.

Constitutionally every living entity, even if he is in Vaikuntha-loka, has [a] chance of falling down. Therefore the living entity is called marginal energy. But when the falldown has taken place for the conditioned soul is very difficult to ascertain. Therefore two classes are designated: eternally liberated and eternally conditioned. But for argument’s sake, a living entity being marginal energy, he can’t be eternally conditioned. The time is so unlimited that the conditioned souls appear to be eternally so, but from the philosophical view they cannot be eternally conditioned.¹³

Even as Śrīla Prabhupāda speaks of the soul’s fall from Vaikuṅṭha, he also upholds the statements that Vaikuṅṭha is that place from which no one falls. The deep truth of the matter is that we are even now in Vaikuṅṭha but we don’t know it. Lecturing on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 2.9.1, Śrīla Prabhupāda directly says that now he will reply to those who ask, “How did the living entity, who was with Kṛṣṇa, fall into the material world?” Prabhupāda then states that the fallen condition is merely an appearance: It “is simply the influence of the material energy, nothing more; actually he has not fallen.”

Prabhupāda gives this example: Just as clouds passing in front of the moon at night make the moon appear to move, so the material energy makes the soul, who is eternally with Kṛṣṇa, appear to be fallen. “Actually, the moon is not moving. Similarly, the living entity, because he is a spiritual spark of the Supreme, has not fallen. But he is thinking, ‘I am fallen. I am material. I am this body.’ ”

The second example Śrīla Prabhupāda uses comes directly from the Bhāgavatam verse. A dreaming person manufactures an alternate dream-self that he temporarily takes to be his real identity. Thus, the dreamer imagines himself undergoing all kinds of adventures. Say in a nightmare he dreams he is running in panic through a dense jungle at night, a huge and hungry tiger chasing him down. With a thudding heart, he hears the tiger coming inexorably closer. Then claws rake his back, and fangs crush his neck, and he wakes up screaming in terror. With relief he sees he is safe in bed. The fictional dream-self is gone. All along he had been safe in his own bed. He was never lost in any tiger-infested jungle.

So, when someone asks, “When did we come into contact with this material nature, the answer is that we have not come into contact. By the influence of the external energy we think we are in contact. Actually we are not fallen. We cannot be fallen. We have simply created a situation. Rather, we have not created a situation; Kṛṣṇa has given us a situation. Because we wanted to imitate Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa has given an opportunity.

As the dreamer forgets that he is safe in his own bedroom, so we have simply forgotten where we really are: the spiritual world.¹⁵

Crow and Tāl Fruit

Śrīla Prabhupāda gives a more elaborate description of the nature of the jīva's bondage in the paper entitled "Crow-and-Tāl-Fruit Logic."¹⁶ He sent this paper to the GBC representative in Australia in June of 1972 to settle a controversy that had arisen there over this issue.¹⁷ "Crow-and-Tāl-Fruit Logic" presents Prabhupāda's most thorough statement of the solution, and the paper was circulated throughout ISKCON. I saw it in Philadelphia that year and studied it carefully. Upon it I have based my reflections in the Back to Godhead article on eternity and time.

Prabhupāda begins his paper by asserting our eternal and permanent relation with Kṛṣṇa. "We never had any occasion when we were separated from Kṛṣṇa," he says, and then he uses Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam's analogy of a dream to explain how the illusion of separation arises. He also takes care to explain how it is possible for even a liberated soul to become illusioned:

Our separation from Kṛṣṇa is like that. We dream this body and so many relationships with other things. First the attachment comes to enjoy sense gratification. Even [when we are] with Kṛṣṇa the desire for sense gratification is there. There is a dormant attitude for forgetting Kṛṣṇa and creating an atmosphere for enjoying independently.¹⁸

He then continues his exposition:

We cannot say, therefore, that we are not with Kṛṣṇa. As soon as we try to become the Lord, immediately we are covered by māyā. Formerly we were with Kṛṣṇa in His līlā, or sport. But this covering of māyā may be of very, very, very, very long duration; therefore [in the interim] many creations are coming and going. Due to this long period of time it is sometimes said that we are ever-conditioned. But this long duration of time becomes very insignificant when one actually comes to Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

It is like in a dream: We are thinking it is a very long time, but as soon as we awaken we look at our watch and see it has been a moment only. To give another example: Kṛṣṇa's friends were kept asleep for one year by Brahmā, but when they woke up and Kṛṣṇa returned before them, they considered that only a moment had passed.

So this dreaming condition is called non-liberated life, and this is just like a dream. Although in material calculation it is a long, long period, as soon as we come to Kṛṣṇa consciousness this period is considered a second.

Here Śrīla Prabhupāda explains how this condition of illusion is "very insignificant." Not only is it insubstantial like a dream, but it is also momentary. Although within the dream

unlimited years seem to pass, in reality the dream lasts virtually no time at all—a “moment” or a “second.”

Then Śrīla Prabhupāda offers another example of how a seeming long duration of time can last only an instant. He recalls the story of how the cowherd boys napped under the spell of Brahmā for only one *truṭi* (or 8/13,500 of a second) of Brahmā’s time while an entire year passed in human time.¹⁹

Śrīla Prabhupāda invokes the relativistic temporal structure of creation to explain how the illusion of the *jīva* is insignificant, and I followed him in my article. I attempted only to elaborate Śrīla Prabhupāda’s explanation in a more systematic and explicit manner. In the example of the cowherd boys, one *truṭi* of Brahmā’s time is contrasted to one year of human time. If we consider the case of the sleeping *jīvas* rather than the sleeping cowherd boys, how much greater would be the contrast between real time (in the spiritual world) and dream-time (in the material world)? Obviously, the “moment” in real time would become vanishingly small—infinitesimally small—while in “dream-time” it would become infinitely great—anādi, without a traceable beginning.

In short, Śrīla Prabhupāda uses the example of dreaming to say that the soul never really leaves *Vaikuṅṭha*. And he alludes to the contrast between eternity and time to show that the soul’s period of illusion is objectively instantaneous, that it lasts virtually no time at all.

This is how I derived my explanation from Śrīla Prabhupāda. I focused my article on the relation between time and eternity because that seems the source of much of the difficulty in thinking about the *jīva* issue. I did not for a moment think that I was going to figure out the inconceivable, as some readers have charged. Rather, I simply tried to highlight what makes the subject so difficult to conceive.

Māyāvāda Philosophy?

One reader objected that the account in my article presents “Māyāvāda philosophy.” Quoting from my article, he writes, “‘For the logic of eternity dictates that no one falls from eternity—even if he does so.’ Here the author attempts to convince the reader that conditioned existence is an absolute illusion, a mere figment of the imagination, because the conditioned soul never really left the spiritual world.” As I have shown, Śrīla Prabhupāda teaches that conditioned existence is indeed a figment of the imagination, and that the conditioned soul never really does leave the spiritual world.

This is not Māyāvāda philosophy, however. The impersonalistic Māyāvāda philosophy claims that the Absolute has no energies: There is no material world, no dreaming existence; indeed, there is no *jīva* who dreams. On the contrary, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 2.9.1 clearly states that the agent which produces the *jīva*’s illusion is Kṛṣṇa’s own, real energy. My statement “No one falls from eternity—even if he does so” can only be construed as denying material existence by ignoring the second half of the statement.

Back to Godhead Magazine, Issue 30-01, 1996.

Another reader seems to have been misled by taking the diagram of the temporal structure of the world somewhat too literally. For simplicity's sake, I depicted that structure by means of an equilateral triangle. A more accurate diagram, of course, would have the two ascending sides converging infinitely toward the center axis—an asymptote—never actually to meet. Similarly, the two sides in descending would infinitely diverge as they grew closer and closer to the baseline.

A triangle with an apex, however, could suggest that the illusion of matter doesn't exit at all; it "disappears" absolutely. In fact, that illusion does exist as illusion. From the point of view of reality, however, that illusion suffers a radical reduction in value and being. Material existence is like the flicker of a hallucination so quick, so close to subliminal, that afterward you are not sure it was there at all.

Did it happen or not? Never mind—here's Kṛṣṇa. Let's get on with our game.

Notes

1. See “Śrīla Prabhupāda Speaks Out,” page 29.
2. Both readers, however, neglected to supply the requisite “quotes” in support of these assertions.
3. Once the title article of a street distribution booklet published by ISKCON Press (New York), “On Chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa” has been reprinted under the title “Chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa Mahā-mantra,” in the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust anthology *The Science of Self-Realization*.
4. Elegant in the sense that a mathematical proof is said to be elegant.
5. Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 4.28.53–54.
6. We are reminded that Śrīla Prabhupāda called his commentaries “purports,” comments to make clear the intended meaning, sense, and purpose of the verse.
7. Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 2.9.1, purport.
8. Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 2.9.1, purport.
9. Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 4.28.64.
10. For instance, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 3.31.15, 4.20.25, 6.16.57, 10.84.25, 11.2.37.
11. Letter to Aniruddha Dāsa, November 14, 1968.
12. Lecture on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.10.5, given June 20, 1973, in Māyāpur, India.
13. Letter to Upendra Dāsa, October 27, 1969.
14. The lecture, given in Tokyo on April 20, 1972, appears on page 7 of this issue of *Back to Godhead*.
15. During a class in London (July 30, 1971) on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 6.1.15, Śrīla Prabhupāda answered a question about our position in the spiritual sky before we fell by saying, “You are already in the spiritual sky. . . . Actually we are always in the spiritual world.”
16. The paper appears in this magazine, on page 29.
17. In that case, some devotees were propagating the theory that since no one falls from Vaikuṅṭha, the conditioned souls must have fallen from the Brahman effulgence. In “Crow-and-Tāl-Fruit Logic,” Śrīla Prabhupāda rejects this theory. A few years earlier he had responded to the same theory in a letter to Revatīnandana Dāsa (June 13, 1970): “Those who are in the Brahman effulgence they are also in the fallen condition, so there is no question of falling down from a fallen condition. When fall takes place, it means falling down from the non-fallen condition. The non-fallen condition is Kṛṣṇa consciousness.”
18. Śrīla Prabhupāda consistently taught that souls do in fact have the option of exercising their freedom even in the spiritual world and hence of falling into the illusion of material existence. Because the soul is a spiritual part of God, he has inherent independence or free will, which some misuse. For a sample of Śrīla Prabhupāda's elucidations on the point, see: Lecture on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 6.1.5 (London, July 30, 1971); discussion at the end of lecture on Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 7.108 (San Francisco, February 18, 1967); conversation with Dr. John Mize in Los Angeles (June 23, 1975); conversation with disciples in Māyāpur (February 19, 1976); conversation with disciples in Washington, D.C. (July 8, 1976); letters to Jagadīśa Dāsa (February 27, 1970, and April 25, 1970).
19. “When Lord Brahmā returned after a moment of time had passed (according to his own measurement), he saw that although by human measurement a complete year had passed. . . .” Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 10.13.40. The word for “moment” in this verse is *truṭi*. A *truṭi* is the

Back to Godhead Magazine, Issue 30-01, 1996.

smallest measure of material time. According to Śrīla Prabhupāda's purport to Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 3.11.14, a truṭi equals 8/13,500 of a second.