

Introduction

You shouldn't need to read this book. In 1977 the resplendent truth shone with blazing clarity. Now, more than two decades later, the same priceless treasure still radiates its perfection. We have read and reread the Lilamrita, meditated upon the diaries, studied the folio, and dabbled in the video-taped memoirs. Film captured "The Final Lesson" - at least once a year many senior devotees struggle to watch it. As old age nears, the therapy of reliving those painful yet sweet days diminishes any lingering hopes for material enjoyment. Reminding us that we will have our own appointment with death, Srila Prabhupada said, "Don't think this isn't going to happen to you."

The transcendental and pure departure of Prabhupada is a divine monument for ISKCON. He displayed for us a disappearance equal to the greatest passings in Bhagavata history. Bhisma-deva, of course, is the ideal. Surrounded by interplanetary sages, earthly elites, and Lord Krishna Himself, Grandfather Bhisma powerfully reciprocated the Pandava's love. Overwhelmed by affection, the peerless general cried, remembering the ordeals of the five brothers, their mother, and their wife. In perfect consciousness and mental clarity, he instructed raja-dharma to Yudhisthira, and offered wondrous prayers to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Then he left the world with eyes fixed on the four-handed form of Krishna, with eyes red like the rising sun. "Knowing that Bhisma-deva had merged into the unlimited eternity of the Supreme Absolute, all present there became silent like birds at the end of the day."

The passing of Haridas Thakura wrings the heart of even stonelike readers of Caitanya-lila. With Mahaprabhu seated before him, Haridas focused his eyes on the Lord's lotus face. Placing the Lord's lotus feet on his heart, Haridas then reached for the dust of all the assembled Vaisnavas, to adorn his head. Chanting "Sri Krishna Chaitanya," drinking the beauty of the Lord's face, the namacarya left. His passing set off a marvelous festival of Vaisnava reciprocation. The loving exchanges erupted so intensely that afterwards Lord Chaitanya Himself decreed: "Anyone who has seen the festival of Sri Haridas Thakura's passing away, anyone who has chanted and danced here, anyone who has offered sand on the body of Haridas Thakura, and anyone who has joined this festival to partake of the prasadam will achieve the favor of Krishna very soon. There is such wonderful power in seeing Haridas Thakura."

The fortunate devotees who personally tended Srila Prabhupada in his last days, as well as those who prayed for his health from afar, would never claim parity with the personalities who surrounded Bhisma-deva and Thakura Haridas. Yet, any nonenvious devotee who sincerely meditates on accounts of Prabhupada's passing cannot deny a transcendental fact: extraordinary rivers of loving reciprocation overflowed. Prabhupada's leaving this world was a rare pool of bhakti, into which Krishna, Prabhupada, and the devotees dived together. The depths of that reciprocal nectar still astonish humble readers today. Because of Prabhupada, even the lowest could taste the highest. Isn't that the mission of Mahaprabhu?

By Srila Prabhupada's choosing to depart in such a heart-wringing way, he so mercifully bequeathed to us a legacy of divine love. The months leading up to his passing gave us a taste of the perfect reciprocation available on the pure spiritual plane. But nothing is too sacred for Kali's fiendish schemes. Into this cherished sanctum of Prabhupada's pastimes, the bold darkness of Kali seeks access.

Now the Age of Quarrel wants us to believe that Prabhupada's servants - hankering for his post - killed him with poison. The concoction is that although Prabhupada knew the awful secret, he kept silent. Externally he submitted to the murder, while internally he remained transcendently fixed in his service to Krishna. A few times, according to the tale, he gave verbal hints: "someone is poisoning me." The Internet and a home-published book have spread this fetid brew around the ISKCON world.

As Satsvarupa das Goswami eloquently writes in the Lilamrita: "Prabhupada knew, even better than his disciples, that there was much he could do if he remained in the world, but he simply wanted to see what Krishna desired. He saw strong evidence, however, that his life was about to end, at least according to the condition of his physical body, and this in itself indicated that Krishna's desire was that he soon leave this world."

Often during the months preceding his departure, Prabhupada would point out the unavoidable symptoms of the end. One instance: "Krishna can accomplish anything, but from the physical condition there is no hope." A devotee protested that Krishna is the supreme controller. Prabhupada acknowledged the almighty role of the Supreme, but pointed out the routine medical fact: "The brain is working, but the body is not allowing. Don't worry. Everyone will die today or tomorrow. I am also an old man. There is nothing to be regretted. It is up to Krishna."

Other times, regardless of his physical condition, Prabhupada would intensely spotlight the transcendent will of Krishna. He said devotees could daily pray: "If You want him to stay, please cure him, and if not, please take him away. We are fully surrendered to You. Now it depends on Your desire to keep him alive or let him leave this world." Later Prabhupada allowed a simplified version of this prayer. It shortened into the famous mantra that pervaded ISKCON temples during those intense months: "My dear Lord Krishna, if You desire, please cure Srila Prabhupada."

Who can forget the ninth day of October, 1977. Suddenly Krishna placed the decision in Prabhupada's hands. Opening his eyes, Prabhupada said, "Krishna wants me to do as I like. The choice is mine. Krishna has given me full freedom." We all know the pastime. The devotees huddled, and then tearfully returned to Prabhupada, desperately begging him to stay. After deep consideration, followed by a noncommittal yawn, Prabhupada replied, "All right" - as if concluding an insignificant topic. Devotees have crowned this moment as history's most casual decision on life or death. And Prabhupada did stay, for another month of the most profound loving exchanges.

The poison people think they can destroy this legacy of divine love. True, some poison adherents are just misguided and befuddled - temporarily overcome by the toxic fumes of propaganda so thick in the air these days. Others, however, suffer much more sinister afflictions. Their devilish tactics have made countering the absurd charges a trip into the heart of darkness.

The Arsenic Ruse: First, the poison folks mislead you about the test they had run on hair said to be from Prabhupada. Arsenic level 3.0 ppm - poison for sure! "Undoubtedly Srila Prabhupadamaliciously poisoned," their poison book declared.

Really? Actually the laboratory test they themselves sponsored gave only 2.6 as the highest reading. Upping it, they obviously thought, would serve their nefarious purpose well. What's worse, though, is the utter ridiculousness of the entire arsenic ploy.

The average reader trembles to hear the word arsenic, the famous deadly poison that shows up more frequently in Hollywood murder mysteries than in real life. Few realize

that arsenic is the twentieth most common element in the earth's crust. It's almost everywhere, in pesticides, underground water, smelting processes, Oriental medicines, and even in our bodies.

Now what about arsenic levels and Prabhupada? Even taking the fudged figure of 3.0 ppm, have we uncovered clues to a heinous crime? Should we immediately call for Batman and Robin? How many of us know that scientists specializing in toxin analysis agree that even arsenic levels up to 10 ppm can be considered normal? For example in Mexico City and Glasgow, scientific studies have clearly shown that hair of the normal population averages an arsenic content of 4.8 ppm and 3 ppm respectively. Larry Kovar from General Activation Analysis, one of the preeminent labs in the world, wryly nailed the coffin shut for the arsenic idiocy: "For your information, my hair has about 3 ppm arsenic - the last time I tested it (I'm still alive, I hope)."

The Whispers Time-Waster: Here the imagination finds no reins. Listen carefully and speculate. You, in your own home, can play FBI and catch the bumbling killers surrounding Prabhupada. Hear them blurt out their evil deed on tape. Next, you can jump on the Internet and vilify the ISKCON leader of your choice.

Let's get right to the core of the whispers ploy. By comprehending the whole situation, anyone can see that Prabhupada, whether speaking Hindi or English - either to the kaviraj or his disciples - gave the same purport. Crystal clear, he said, "Not that I am poisoned." When referring to poison, Prabhupada was merely hypothesizing about the possible effects of improper medicine. The symptoms could resemble poisoning, he noted. Consequently, along with the arsenic, we can also toss out another paranoia. Forget the foolishness that Prabhupada revealed the supposed horrible cause of his death to Hindi speakers like the kaviraj, while mercifully hiding this dark truth from his innocent disciples.

What about those startling tapes said to contain whispers of the word "poison" in the background? Relax. They are from the very same day that the bad medicine was publicly discussed by Prabhupada and the devotees. Naturally the devotees, among themselves, were quietly trying to piece together the exact purport of what the founder-acarya was conveying.

The whisper-wallahs allege they've heard other fragments denoting foul play. On the same tape containing the alleged poison fragments, the following whispers were also allegedly found:

"He's gonna die"
 "Listen, he's sayingÉgoing to die."
 "Yes, a heart attack time."

Nimble-minded devotees will notice that this recording comes from the same day that the kaviraj issued a solemn warning: if Prabhupada were allowed to do Govardhana-parikrama on a bullock cart, he would suffer a heart attack almost immediately and die. Hence, even if indeed the whispers are what some claim, still there is a one-hundred-percent logical explanation. Naturally, the devotees, once again, were discussing the latest developments, following the lead of their spiritual master.

Advanced Diabetes, Plain and Simple: The poison folk like to play doctor. After they scare you with arsenic and whispers, then what comes next? Amateur, almost childish medical claims comprise the remainder of their campaign. Try this one for size, from the poison book: "Not one doctor or kaviraj even mentioned diabetes as a factor in His

Divine Grace's health." Obviously, diagnosis is best left to medical experts - not do-it-yourself dabblers, with an overt agenda. For those readers with time, this book gives the details that completely deflate the poison balloon of its hot air.

Probably most of us will just turn to the official statement by Doctor Andrew McIrvine. He was the surgeon who operated on Srila Prabhupada in England, September 8, 1977. By physical examination, he had immediately perceived that Prabhupada's dangerous state of health came from advanced diabetes, resulting in severe damage to the kidneys and other systemic problems. Upon running a laboratory analysis of blood and urine, the doctor found the obvious completely verified. He then operated on Prabhupada and saw him at the Manor the next day. His final judgment: Prabhupada's physical demise was 'irreversible'.

McIrvine was the last Western doctor to examine Prabhupada. His professional analysis stands on its own. Yet, if we combine it with the symptoms described in TKG's Diary and other recollections, the picture becomes even fuller - vivid to the point of pain. Moreover, we should not fail to note that just two months later, in November, the British surgeon's prognosis of 'irreversible' came to its momentous culmination.

The shameless, grasping for straws, may try to cast doubt upon this doctor's expertise. After all, Prabhupada was famous for branding doctors and lawyers as the greatest cheaters. Therefore, let us recall Prabhupada's own evaluation of McIrvine, published in TKG's Diary - long before the doctor's statement emerged: "We came out of the hospital and returned by ambulance to the Manor. To everybody's satisfaction, Prabhupada passed urine without difficulty. Prabhupada said, "He is a very good doctor. Had we been in India, in Vrindavana, this could never have been performed."

The Reverse Speech Travesty: What happens when bunglers try their hand at a hot new investigative tool? Reverse Speech Technology, while certainly not fully validated, has been known to generate intriguing insights. The poison people took to it, obviously hoping for a crowd pleaser. Perhaps the esoterica-prone devotees would lap it up.

The supporters of Reverse Speech are convinced it's a new form of communication, with the ability to uncover a deeper truth and meaning behind our words. The theory is that as we speak consciously, the brain sends out messages from the unconscious. These messages, said to occur constantly throughout language, are considered clearly audible about every 10 seconds, when a recording of normal speech is played in reverse.

David Oates, the dean of Reverse Speech, is an Australian. You'll read how Australian devotees ingeniously contacted him, and how he quickly exposed the sham. The poison advocates had sought his blessings for their Reverse Speech rendition of Prabhupada's poisoning. The e-mail sent to him tells the story: "Of course I also wanted to know if you would give an endorsement for my work, and if we can do a radio show on the subject."

Oates handed over to the Australian devotees both the request and his fiery reply: "I cannot and I will NOT endorse your work . . . Do me one final favor and stop doing Reverse Speech and stop representing yourself as representing me. You are dishonest and a sleaze!"

Oates and his staff analyzed the Reverse Speech projections that supposedly revealed the murderous intent of Prabhupada's disciples. The analysts were angered to find that of the seventeen reversals documented, only seven were accurate. But

these did not refer to death or murder. "Bogus," was Oates' conclusion. Three other Reverse Speech analysts concurred.

If you do read this whole book, you'll certainly become indignant, to varying degrees. Acaryas such as Narottama das Thakur instruct that we should indeed feel disarming degrees. Acaryas such as Narottama das Thakur instruct that we should indeed feel disturbed when witnessing offenses to the Lord and his devotees. Krodha bhakta-dveni jane. In this way, even anger can be perfectly employed, in Krishna's service. Naturally we will question: how could someone concoct this poison madness! How many of our dear fellow devotees temporarily fell victim to this smut campaign? And why so much time and energy wasted, out of necessity, debating this crazy idea? While praying for the rectification of those struck down by this epidemic, we should help them to recover.

How can we soothe the dear disciples of Prabhupada who cared for him with such love in his last days? Study the film "The Final Lesson." What do you see in their faces then? Certainly the slanderous poison campaign - specifically directed at them - has brought them anguish. Importantly, what about the pain borne by their sincere followers? Can we stop despicable nonsense like this from breaking out in ISKCON again?

Undeniably, the deadly toxin played a significant role in a worldwide decline of enthusiasm and trust. "Just see - even Prabhupada's departure is now suspect!" ISKCON's unity even in cherishing Prabhupada's Final Lesson was broken. Assuredly, most devotees did not swallow the scam entirely. Nevertheless, forced to cope with the poison mongers' agenda, we have all suffered an immeasurable loss: we've had to dare entertain the unthinkable, about a Prabhupada-lila so crucial and precious for us.

The solution is not to harry and hound the original perpetrators of this madness. Those who fermented this potion know their motives. For some insight, this book presents the testimony of Jagannatha das, AKA Jeffery Juliano, who defected from the poison brewery. The correspondence with David Oates also sheds light.

For ISKCON as a whole, the best response is that we look deeply within ourselves. How much do I harbor within myself the potential for malicious envy and ill will toward other devotees of the Lord? For how many vaisnava-aparadhas am I responsible? Looking outward to discover the germs of contamination is a protective necessity. But our major work should be within. What tendencies for rancor do I harbor in my own heart?

The farce, 'the poisoning of Prabhupada', has dramatized the effects of rampant vaisnava aparadha that periodically plagues our society. Thanks to the Internet, just one click of a mouse button, and your offenses multiply a thousand times. Ruining your spiritual life was never easier. One single e-mail text, copied and forwarded, can immediately inundate the entire devotee-world with deadly offenses, instead of nectarean krsna-katha.

Srila Prabhupada has explained that the first offense to the holy name applies not just to those we may agree are pure devotees. No. He says that to blaspheme any devotee who has dedicated his life to preaching the glories of the Lord is injurious. Furthermore, sastra does not allow us to take comfort in the thought that "It's him or her they're offending - not me." If Vaisnavas, either individually or as a society, remain silent when offenses are perpetrated, their spiritual standing will wane. The silence that often greets the mass distribution of offenses is a sad indicator of a worrisome

plight: we may have become desensitized to vaisnava-aparadha. This affliction, if not checked, can single-handedly rend the devotional fabric of ISKCON.

Finally, let us meditate on how to access that wondrous reciprocal love so evident between the devotees and Prabhupada in his final months. In the triad of divine love, the disciples also possessed influence - not just the Supreme Lord and Prabhupada. This three-way tug of love unleashed a torrent of spiritual emotion. Remember Prabhupada in July 1977, voice choked with deep emotion, saying: "Oh, your intense love for me. I am living for you. . . . I am so much indebted, taking so much service."

Never forget Prabhupada's declaration in November, 1977 - the very last few days of his stay in this world. Devotees told him he was about to drive them mad from attachment steeped in anxiety. Prabhupada turned to his Godbrother Niskincana Krsnadasa Babaji and said, "just see how much affection they have for me." We will never allow conniving minds to sully the effulgence of this divine passing.

The pastime of Krishna's sena-pati bhakta departing will always remain our fountain of spiritual vitality and determination. And most importantly, it will always shine as our final lesson in the nectar of real love. Prabhupada is dearest to Krishna, and we pray to remain dear to Prabhupada, by revering his devotees. Lord Krishna Himself personally instructed Durvasa Muni how He sees His bhaktas, after the volatile sage offended Ambarisa Maharaja:

aham bhakta-paradhino
hy asvatantra iva dvija
sadhubhir grasta-hrdayo
bhaktair bhakta-jana-priyah

"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." (S.B. 9:4:63)

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