

Did Srila Prabhupada Have a Provisional Preaching Strategy Regarding the Origin of the Jiva?

by Suhotra Swami

On the COM terminal in Sofia, Bulgaria, I happened to find some saved downloads from the Philosophical Exchange Conference. I am not a member of the PEC, nor do I intend to become one. But I read with interest some exchanges made in September on the jiva falldown question.

There is one point I wish to address. May the Vaisnavas be pleased with me while I do so. I do not intend to stir up again the kind of "flaming" responses and counter- responses that were evident in the downloads I perused.

The one point I wish to address is this: the notion that Srila Prabhupada's statements affirming Vaikuntha as the origin of the jiva constitute a provisional, desa-kala-patra (place-time-circumstances), preaching strategy. They are not meant to convey the ultimate truth.

Recollections of ISKCON, 1971-77

I joined ISKCON in late 1971. Before Srila Prabhupada departed from our sight, I travelled widely, visiting almost all ISKCON temples in the USA and 4 in Europe. Twice I went to India. During those 6 years I met and discussed philosophical topics with many devotees. I saw no evidence at that time of a provisional strategy that Srila Prabhupada had to resort to, i.e. by telling his disciples that the jiva fell from Vaikuntha even though it wasn't really true. While I remember many ISKCON controversies from November '71 to November '77, I do not remember any vexation over the origin of the jiva question. It was a complete non-issue in those days. I recently asked my Godbrother Aja Prabhu if he'd ever heard any debate on this subject while Prabhupada was on the planet, and he confirmed the same -- no. The origin question became a snarl only after 1977, when some ISKCON members began to take spiritual instructions from HH BR Sridhara Maharaja of Navadvipa. That is when I first remember speaking with devotees who were doubtful about this aspect of the philosophy.

It is true that in Srila Prabhupada's time, a controversy about the origin of the jiva did come up in Australia. That is when His Divine Grace made his "kaka-tal-nyaya" remarks to Madhuvisa Swami, who was GBC there. But I do not recall it becoming a big deal in the US temples. We had other things on our mind --

mainly, distributing Srila Prabhupada's books. Prabhupada answered a few letters on the subject from Jagadish and others. I did not become aware of these answers until much later. They were simply not in circulation. Hardly the makings of a much-needed provisional strategy.

I think many Prabhupada disciples who are still with ISKCON will agree that in some respects, the mood of the Society was much more innocent then than now. Any word emanating from Srila Prabhupada was nectar, pure and simple. We were all falling all over ourselves to lap that nectar up without questioning it. Here's where the provisional strategy theory just doesn't add up. If Prabhupada had declared once and for all that the jives originated in the brahmajyoti, I would have accepted it without thinking twice. Even if he had declared that the jivas originated off of Mother Yasoda's kitchen stove, I would have accepted that without thinking twice also. No problem. Likewise if Prabhupada had said once and for all that the jivas were never in Vaikuntha. Again, no problem.

Now, what I actually learned about the origin of the jiva in those years was, while mainly Srila Prabhupada said the jives were once in Vaikuntha, sometimes he said they came from Brahman. At least once he indicated they were never personally with Krsna before. (I'm referring to the following quote. "The mature devotees, who have completely executed Krsna consciousness, are immediately transferred to the universe where Krsna is appearing. In that universe the devotees get their first opportunity to associate with Krsna personally and directly." -- from Krsna Book Ch. 28). But anyway, NO PROBLEM. PRABHUPADA SAID IT. NECTAR, PRABHU.

I recall a different attitude among devotees then, than that reflected in the PEC discussion of the origin of the jiva now. Then, Srila Prabhupada's statements were simply not subject to our tarka (logical argumentation). We were afraid to speculate. In those days there was always an older devotee nearby to tell you were in maya, Prabhu. So what was the need of an emergency strategy to ward off doubts about where we came from? In any ISKCON temple of that time you could hear the phrase "Srila Prabhupada says . . ." 50 times a day if you heard it once. Nobody cared too much if one "Prabhupada says" seemed to contradict another. It was all nectar.

Insubstantial logic (tarko apratistha)

I'm not putting my hand on my heart for blind faith here. We all want to understand Srila Prabhupada's instructions on a deeper level, both for our individual spiritual progress and for progress in our preaching. But, tarko apratistha -- logical argument is not the basis of that understanding. One must follow the mahajana Srila Prabhupada. Thus the truth hidden in his

heart will become revealed to us by the grace of guru and Krsna. Yasya deve para bhaktir yatha deva tatha gurau.

I've failed to devise a logical framework into which every one of Srila Prabhupada's statements on the origin of the jiva fits, seamlessly resolving all apparent contradictions. I admire the devotees who continue to put forward some such frameworks. They seek the truth. But the logic of, "whenever Srila Prabhupada said the jiva originates in Vaikuntha, it was part of strategy to get Western people to have faith in his overall message," is flawed. This claim is tarka of the most insubstantial kind. Here's some reasons why.

1) Srila Prabhupada himself never suggested that he used such a strategy. I think he would have said something about it to at least 1 or 2 most trusted disciples. Prabhupada's vision for his movement extended thousands of years into the future. If it was a strategy, surely he'd reveal it as such to someone for posterity's sake. He did not want the movement he sacrificed so much for to go off the philosophical track after he left this world. As explained before, the jiva question was not a very contentious issue during Prabhupada's time on this planet. It was not that he was being badgered by this question day after day. It was not that ISKCON would be ruptured if the truth came out. Most of us were ready to accept anything Srila Prabhupada told us at any time. So why, if some of his statements on this question were just provisional, did he keep mum about that fact until the end?

2) We have no sastric information of a Vaisnava acarya resorting to a compromise on the origin of the jiva in the past, although Vaisnavas preached to Muslims. A book entitled "Tatastha-sakti-tattva" by a follower of HH BR Sridhara Swami argued that Srila Prabhupada had to preach that the jiva fell from Vaikuntha because Western minds would have had great difficulty in understanding the actual explanation. If you know Western history, you know that Europeans rediscovered their own Greek philosophical heritage in the writings of medieval Muslim scholars. As a Semitic faith, Islam shares many theological concepts with Judeo-Christianity. Why did Prabhupada have to do for the Europeans what earlier acaryas did not have to do for the Muslims? The intellectual orientation of both groups is very similar (nirvisesa-vada).

3) The plain fact is that apparent contradictions between different explanations of the origin of the jiva just didn't matter to most of Srila Prabhupada's Western disciples before 1978. I think most were not even aware that there were any such apparent contradictions. So why did Srila Prabhupada need to adopt a strategy of compromise on a philosophical point that we weren't thinking about anyway? Of all the things that Prabhupada might want to compromise in preaching to Western people, the origin of the jiva question belongs at the bottom of the list.

The four rules would come first, so troublesome were they for his disciples to keep. Why didn't he hedge on the moon landing? I remember more controversy about that in the '70s than the origin of the jiva.

4) What strategic purpose could Srila Prabhupada have had in deliberately contradicting himself, saying one thing in one place and (apparently) the opposite thing in another place? That's not indicative of a strategy. The provisional strategy argument just doesn't make sense.

I think the real answer is simply that the origin of the jiva question is a fish too big for our nets, like the Matsya-avatara.

Prabhupada on the origin of the jiva before ISKCON

The BBT publication entitled Renunciation Through Wisdom further invalidates the compromise-for-Westerners strategy argument. This is a translated collection of Srila Prabhupada's Bengali essays written before he came to the West. Clearly, when Srila Prabhupada wrote these essays, he did not have to resort to a preaching strategy aimed at Westerners. He was preaching to Bengalis, many of whom were well-versed in Gaudiya Vaisnava philosophy.

From Renunciation Through Wisdom we learn that the jiva did indeed fall down from an original position in transcendence, on page 37. "The Supreme Lord is absolutely independent and can exercise free will over all; because the spirit soul is qualitatively the same as the Supreme Lord, the Lord does not annul his minute free will. The spirit soul unfortunately misuses this God-given minute free will and falls into the dark well of nescience and illusion. Once the spirit soul takes shelter of maya, the illusory material energy, he develops the material qualities of goodness, passion and ignorance. The spirit soul loses his original characteristics and develops a new nature, which is controlled by the three modes of material nature, and this continues until such time as he transcends them."

One might propose that Srila Prabhupada's above reference to an original state, before the jiva's fall, means the impersonal Brahman. But I do not find such an idea supported anywhere in Renunciation Through Wisdom. In this book Srila Prabhupada does not accept nondevotional inactivity in the impersonal brahmajyoti as the original state of the living entity. So how could the jiva "fall" from it? "Lord Caitanya discusses in detail the jiva's eternal constitutional position as Lord Krsna's servant and how the jiva is put into illusion, or maya, when he tries to be the supreme enjoyer" (Page 146). On page 147 he writes, "The last word in knowledge is not self-realization or Brahman

realization. There is more to realize--namely, that the jiva is the eternal servant of Lord Krsna. This realization is the awakening of supramental consciousness, and the activities a jiva performs in such consciousness are the BEGINNING of his eternal life" (emphasis mine). I emphasized the word "beginning" because devotional service is simultaneously the living entity's beginning of eternal life after untold births and deaths, and his beginning in the sense of "his original state" before he fell into birth and death. Devotional service as the original state of the jiva finds support in other quotes from Renunciation Through Knowledge. "Persons who act in this way become progressively detached from matter and attached to Lord Krsna's devotional service. Thus they are able to purify the mirror of their hearts, extinguish the forest fire of material existence, and become situated in their ORIGINAL, spiritual position." (Page 36) "Similarly, the soul infected with the material disease should want to return to his pure, ORIGINAL state without annihilating his individual identity." (Page 124)

Therefore, the jiva's beginning in eternal life cannot be the state of inactive impersonalism. Inactive impersonalism is simply a function of materialism that prevents one from attaining transcendence: "The Mayavadi's unnatural desire to deny the inherent characteristics of his conscious self is the very same desire that keeps him from attaining liberation" (page 147). On page 161, the same point is made: "A few among them [impersonalists] may have a moment's glimpse of transcendence, but end up concluding everything backwards. They fall prey to the erroneous impersonal principle." As Srila Prabhupada confirmed many years later in a letter to his Western disciple Revatinandana Swami, the impersonal state is already a fallen condition. What's good for the Bengalis is good for the Westerners.

On page 149 of Renunciation Through Wisdom, Srila Prabhupada writes about the real transcendental state in the following terms. "In that state, one perceives Brahman, the Supersoul, and the Supreme Lord as one. Such higher perceptions are possible only when one's mind and senses are transcendental..." In referring to "transcendental" mind and senses, Srila Prabhupada surely indicates the spiritual body. Similarly, on page 141, Srila Prabhupada explains the meaning of sarvam khalv idam brahma as follows. "Although He is the source of unlimited potencies, He eternally exists in His transcendental, personal form. This form manifests in three aspects, namely, as He sees Himself, as a loving devotee sees Him, and as He is seen by His competitors and enemies." I would rather let Srila Prabhupada's words speak for themselves, but in case it slipped by, that was a very clear indication that competition and enmity toward the Lord begins on the eternal platform in relationship with His "transcendental, personal form."

On page 95, Srila Prabhupada states in clear language that the jiva originates in Vaikuntha. "The Vaikuntha planets are a product of the spiritual energy of the Lord. The living entities belong to this spiritual energy, but because they can reside in either the spiritual world or the material world, even though they are originally spiritual they are designated as tatastha-sakti, or marginal potency." Note Srila Prabhupada's emphasis. "Even though they are originally spiritual" precedes and modifies his definition of "marginal." That cannot mean anything else than that the jivas originally belong to Vaikuntha, which is "a product of the spiritual energy of the Lord." Only because they can make a choice between spirit and matter are the jivas called marginal. As Drutakarma Prabhu puts it, it's not that "marginal" means the jivas "popped out of the tata."

Back to impersonalism being the fallen state, and how one may enter that fallen condition from the position of devotional service: "A person who cannot grasp this subtle principle of simultaneous, inconceivable oneness and difference of the Lord and His energies will sure degenerate into an impersonalist, or Mayavadi. He will be forced from the path of devotion and become silent." (Page 79)

Another refutation of the notion that the jiva originates from anywhere else than his rightful position as a servant of Krsna is found on page 39. "Forgetful of this relationship with Lord Krsna, the living entity falls into the clutches of maya, or illusion."

Please note again that I am not so much making an argument here that the jiva fell from Vaikuntha. I am arguing that the claim that Srila Prabhupada said the jiva fell from Vaikuntha just as a preaching strategy for his young Western disciples is pretty flimsy. I base my rebuttal of this claim both on my own experience as a disciple of Srila Prabhupada, and on the above quotes from Renunciation Through Wisdom, a book not written for Westerners.

Someone may entertain doubts about the veracity of the translation from the Bengali into English. Let me just mention that I spoke with the translator of Renunciation Through Wisdom, Sarvabhavana das, in 1990 about the origin of the jiva question. His opinion was that the conditioned souls could never have been part of the internal potency. Despite his bias, a very different explanation of the origin of the jiva is discernable in the English translation. Safe to say that this explanation is not the translator's own.

Quotes from Renunciation Through Wisdom can also be used to support the other side of the argument. From page 36: "They exist at a level of realization far above the impersonal realization of the Absolute, for they are free from the contamination of vainly

trying to merge into the Supreme and usurping His Absolute position. They never fall down from this stage of consciousness." But it is not the purpose of this text to go into that. I admit that Srila Prabhupada explained the origin of the jiva from different points of view. But I do not believe we can dismiss any of these explanations as desa-kala-patra strategies. Some things are just beyond our present comprehension.

Acintya means we must accept

"Acintya refers to that which we cannot understand but have to accept. Srila Jiva Gosvami has said that unless we accept acintya in the Supreme, we cannot accommodate the conception of God. This must be understood. Therefore we say that the words of sastra should be taken as they are, without change, since they are beyond our arguments. Acintyah khalu ye bhava na tams tarkena yojayet: 'That which is acintya cannot be ascertained by argument.' People generally argue, but our process is not to argue but to accept the Vedic knowledge as it is. When Krsna says, 'This is superior, and this is inferior,' we accept what he says. It is not that we argue, 'Why is this superior and that inferior?' If one argues, for him the knowledge is lost." (SB 10.13.57, Purport). When Srila Prabhupada writes "this is superior, and this is inferior," the question of the difference between the nitya-mukta and nitya-baddha jivas arises in my mind. Perhaps we cannot understand all of Srila Prabhupada's pronouncements on this matter. But we must learn to accept them without trying to grade them according to our own weak suppositions.

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