

Śrī Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta

by Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī

Preface

By

Gopīparāṇadhana Dāsa

at Girirāja Govardhana

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THE HERO'S QUEST for the extraordinary—an ever-recurring theme in literature—reflects the urge of every heart at its noblest to discover the full possibilities of life.

Anyone dissatisfied with the scant potential of mundane existence is naturally stimulated by the prospect of finding, even vicariously, a world of greater liberty.

There should be some better place for the soul.

Why should happiness be so elusive, and why should confusion and resentment always shroud the mind's eye, making it unable to see clearly what's in front of it?

Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī's Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta is a gemlike example of the quest genre, but different from the sort commonly encountered in fable and fiction.

Nārada and Gopa-kumāra, the respective heroes of this book's two parts, are searching for a key to fulfillment much subtler than wealth, influence, mundane love, the Fountain of Youth, or even the Holy Grail.

Nārada has vast experience of the cosmos, Gopa-kumāra is illiterate and naive, yet they share the same vision of what is most valuable.

What both want is not to conquer or exploit on any level, but to explore the mystery of selfless service.

As Nārada already knows, and Gopa-kumāra will gradually learn, the superior mode of life they seek is personal and defined by the interplay of those who take part in it, rather than by material laws of nature.

The cynosure of the spiritual world in which Sanātana Gosvāmī and his protagonists feel at home is one special person, the object of the selfless love Nārada and Gopa-kumāra value above all.

Nārada knows this special person, Kṛṣṇa, as the prince of the Yadus,
and Gopa-kumāra contemplates Him as a young cowherd like
himself.

Śrīla Sanātana takes it for granted that Kṛṣṇa-Gopāla is supreme,
that Kṛṣṇa is the creator and controller of everything, and leaves the
task of proving it to his brother Rūpa Gosvāmī, who later takes it up
in his Laghu- (“smaller”) bhāgavatāmṛta.

Here in the Brhad- (“bigger”) bhāgavatāmṛta the main questions are
in whom and in what realm is love for the Supreme Person most
intimately known.

At first glance the structure of Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta may to modern readers seem repetitious, but the plot does have a logic of its own, which it develops the way classical Indian music develops themes, repeating them again and again with subtle embellishments.

In Part One, for example, the same thing happens to Nārada over and over: He goes to someone who is supposed to be Kṛṣṇa's most favored devotee, praises that person, and is rebuked, refuted, and redirected to someone else.

Yet in this cyclic repetition we discern a progress, although not a linear one aiming at a single point.

We learn much more than the simple fact that someone in particular is the greatest lover of God.

Yes, the young gopīs of Vṛndāvana are unquestionably Kṛṣṇa's best devotees, but for neophytes still addicted to material lust, merely establishing the gopīs as a distant ideal is of little practical use, and may even be dangerous.

By understanding that to emulate the gopīs' perfect devotion is extremely difficult, honest persons might feel frustrated, and the dishonest will imitate anyway and degrade themselves.

Therefore Nārada in his encounters with various devotees carefully traces out the real foundations and natural progress of pure devotion, in a way that readers can follow according to their own spiritual disposition.

Unlike the material existence we all know, in which survival depends on our ability to jockey ourselves into better positions than competitors and garner our share of the limited resources for control and enjoyment, on the transcendental plane of love of God the resources are unlimited, and everyone competes instead to prove that others are better than themselves.

This remarkable quality, unknown in material life, is evident even in the sincere beginners in devotional practice whom Nārada meets first, the brāhmaṇa of Prayāga and the southern king.

They and the more and more elevated devotees of Kṛṣṇa Nārada visits—the king of heaven Indra, Lord Brahmā, Lord Śiva, Prahlāda, Hanumān, the Pāṇḍavas, the Yadus, and Uddhava—deprecate themselves, not from lack of self-esteem but out of complete honesty, in which they appraise from their own points of view who really has Kṛṣṇa's mercy.

Nārada, as an itinerant preacher, is the best person to undertake this survey of devotional attitudes.

Not tied down to any particular place or situation, he is accustomed to meeting different ways of seeing things.

And he has the good humor to tolerate being rebuffed by every saintly person he tries to glorify.

Gopa-kumāra, the main character of the second part of Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta, is an innocent young cowherd from the vicinity of Kṛṣṇa's favorite hill, Govardhana.

After a mysterious brāhmaṇa initiates him into the ten-syllable Gopāla mantra, a yearning to search out Lord Gopāla awakens in Gopa-kumāra's heart.

Like Nārada in Part One, Gopa-kumāra searches throughout the material universe; but he also travels beyond, into the kingdom of God, Vaikuṅṭha, and yet further to the most confidential realms of the kingdom of God—Ayodhyā, Dvārakā, and Goloka.

The final message of the second part of Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta is the superexcellence of Goloka Vṛndāvana, the personal abode of Kṛṣṇa in His original identity as the darling son of the cowherds, the lover of the gopīs.

Śrī Rūpa Gosvāmī, who regarded his elder brother Śrīla Sanātana as his spiritual master, acknowledged indebtedness to Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta in his definitive textbook on devotional service, Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu (1.4.13):

śrīmat-prabhu-padāmbhojaiḥ
sarvā bhāgavatāmṛte
vyaktī-kṛtāsti gūdhāpi
bhakti-siddhānta-mādhurī

“Our divine master has revealed in his Bhāgavatāmṛta all the sweet conclusions of devotional philosophy, including its most confidential secrets.”

This edition of Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta is not the first English translation of the work, but is the first attempt to present in English the entirety of the author's own commentary, which he called Dig-darśinī.

This ~~commentary~~ is ~~invaluably~~ helpful for studying Brhad-bhāgavatāmṛta deeply.

I have not translated the Dig-darśinī verbatim, but have given a close paraphrase that includes almost all of Śrīla Sanātana's points, with a few explanatory additions of my own.

Typically for a Sanskrit scriptural commentary, the Dig-darśinī includes grammatical and syntactic analysis of the text, which I have incorporated in the translation.

The rest of the commentary is also uncongenial to being translated literally, because Sanskrit commentaries are written in a stylized prose whose meaning is more suitably conveyed in English by careful paraphrase than by literal translation.

Readers who would like to see a sample of how my commentary derives from the Dig-darśinī-tīkā may refer to page 763 in the appendixes.

The text I translated comes from three printed editions, those of Purīdāsa, Bhakti-śāstrī Gosvāmī of the Saurī Prapannāśrama, and Bhakti-śrīrūpa Bhāgavata Mahārāja of the Caitanya Maṭha.

All three editions are printed in the Bengali script and include the Dig-darśinī commentary (in the Caitanya Maṭha edition only for the second part).

Sanātana Gosvāmī too wrote his original manuscript in the Bengali alphabet, but we have chosen to print our Sanskrit text in the more widely known Devanāgarī.

Our proofreaders and I carefully compared the three texts I consulted (one of which, Purīdāsa's, notes variant readings from two manuscripts), and when different readings arose I made my own choices on which to use.

I found that in each case the alternative readings almost never made an important difference in meaning, and the commentary and the logic of the text itself helped me choose.

For those interested, I have noted in "Variant Readings of Śrī-Brhad-bhāgavātamṛta" the alternative readings of the editions consulted.

Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī, in his commentary and sometimes in the verses of Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta, cites hundreds of verses from Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam and other scriptures, especially various Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata.

In several instances, the Bhāgavatam verses as quoted by Śrīla Sanātana differ slightly from the text of the Bhāgavatam published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.

Again, these differences almost never significantly change the meaning.

I have used the author's readings of these verses, even when they differ from the BBT version, and have listed the variants in "Readings of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam Verses that Differ from the BBT Edition."

Verses quoted from other Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata I have simply given as Śrīla Sanātana presents them, with chapter and verse numbers taken from the Venkateśvara Press edition of the Purāṇas (reprinted by Nag Publishers and others) and the Pune critical edition of the Mahābhārata.

The other sources I have consulted are listed in the Bibliography.

While working on this book I have had the undeserved good fortune to be living at the location of Gopa-kumāra's story, Śrī Govardhana, first on the shore of Mānasī-gaṅgā next door to Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī's bhajana-kutīra, and more recently by the very side of Girirāja at Dāna-ghāṭī.

I hope that some flavor of these all-ecstatic holy abodes has penetrated my ignorance and found its way onto these pages.

I am only a very imperfect servant of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda and his servants.

I cannot pretend to have any profound understanding of Srīla Sanātana Gosvāmī's revelation of the most sublime spiritual truths.

I am also a clumsy writer.

Only because this book has been expertly edited by my dear godbrothers Keśava Bhāratī Prabhu and Jayādvaita Swami is it now as readable as it is.

They have worked hard to turn my crude manuscript into something that does justice to the original text, and for this I will be forever indebted.

After dedicating nearly thirty years to the preaching mission of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Keśava Bhāratī Prabhu has now started an editing career that is already bearing wonderful fruit.

Jayādvaita Swami was Śrīla Prabhupāda's own editor and is the one person who best knows the high standards of Bhaktivedanta Book Trust publishing.

I am confident that anything passing his scrutiny must be acceptable to Śrīla Prabhupāda and his predecessors.

I am also very thankful to my wife, Arcā-mūrti, my old friend Draviḍa Prabhu, and Śrīmatī Viśākhā-priyā for their editorial comments, to Ksamā Dāsī for skillful proofreading, to Durmada Prabhu for assistance in compiling “Variant Readings of the Text of Śrī-Bṛhad-bhāgavātamṛta” and locating scriptural citations, and to Rasa-varṣī Prabhu for helpful research.

My thanks to our BBT publisher Brāhma Muhūrta Prabhu for his encouragement and commitment, to our production manager Govinda Mādhava Prabhu, to our artist Dīna-bandhu Prabhu, and to the other BBT devotees working on the book’s production in Sweden and elsewhere.

My life belongs to the BBT, and I am grateful to be working under its shelter.

My thanks also to Pūrṇānanda Prabhu, Brāhma Muhūrta Prabhu, and Madhupati Prabhu for their Financial contributions toward the First printing of this book.

I pray to the Vaiṣṇava readers of this translation for their blessings and their tolerance of my faults.

I want only that Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī, Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma, and undeviating devotion to Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Madana-gopāla receive the proper glorification they deserve.