

Śuddha-bhakti Cintāmaṇi

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Chapter 31- *Achieving Steadiness*

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- Alex first met the hari-nāma party while on his way home from the university.
- After three years of computer science study, he was convinced that technology was not what he was looking for.
- Absorbed in his disappointment, Alex hardly noticed the robed chanters until he almost bumped into them—and when he did he was at once confronted by a shaven-headed monk who offered him a booklet in exchange for a donation.
- By the time the booklet was purchased, the chanting party had moved on, their music merely an echo in Alex’s head—and for no reason that he could fathom the echo seemed strangely familiar. [Inadvertently hearing the holy names and purchasing a book, Alex had no idea who the Vaiṣṇavas were, nor did he have a desire for spiritual life. These were pious acts performed unknowingly, or *ajṣāta-sukṛti*.]

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- The book Alex received, *Easy Journey to Other Planets*, didn't even make it to the bookshelf.
- He left it in the foyer of his home and forgot about it until some weeks later when his mother asked, "Alex! Is this your book?" "Yes!" he answered, and took the book into the study for a casual read.
- But the casual read soon turned into an eye-opening experience.
- Alex read of a spiritual alternative to the rat race for which he was being groomed.
- The spiritual alternative presented in the pamphlet seemed both scientific and theistic, at the cutting edge of modernity but steeped in antiquity.
- He wanted to learn more, but his new girlfriend and impending exams temporarily suppressed that desire.

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- Later, he even saw the devotees distributing food at a rock festival and avoided them.
- Still, it didn't take long for his interest to rekindle after his girlfriend ditched him and his parents chided him for his mediocre grades.
- At the end he decided to visit the local Hare Kṛṣṇa temple, where he purchased a copy of Bhagavad-gītā As It Is. [The unknowing pious acts Alex had performed fructified when he read Easy Journey to Other Planets.
- His devotional piety (bhakty-unmukhi-sukṛti) was his appreciation of Prabhupāda's writing.
- In a distressed condition (ārtah), he turned to Kṛṣṇa, which began his fruitive devotional service (karma-miśra-bhakti)]

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- Alex was sharp, and the Gītā fascinated him.
- This was not the pamphlet of a new sect but the philosophical underpinnings of an ancient world religion—Vaiṣṇavism.
- He read the book through, first, and then went back to study it more carefully.
- The author’s train of thought was logical, consistent, authoritative, and demanding.
- Kṛṣṇa was not mincing words.
- After constructing a philosophical fortress impenetrable to doubt or scepticism, Kṛṣṇa wanted the listener to capitulate.

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- Śrīla Prabhupāda substantiated Kṛṣṇa’s exclusive call to surrender in every purport of every verse.
- Kṛṣṇa and His empowered representative were like an invincible tag-team that Alex could not disregard without being untrue to himself.
- “This is just what I’ve been looking for,” he cried. “This is it!” [By studying the Gītā, Alex’s distress disappeared and he became fixed in knowledge of Kṛṣṇa’s divinity (jṣāna-miśra-bhakti)]
- The ISKCON temple was a handsome townhouse near the commercial district, and the devotees operated a small self-service restaurant on the ground floor.
- Alex took advantage of the temple’s proximity to his university campus and began to frequent the restaurant at lunchtime.

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- The food was not only delicious but unique.
- Alex could not fathom how his newfound faith was literally being nourished by his meals.
- Above the restaurant was a temple room complete with altar, Indian paintings, and a deity of Śrīla Prabhupāda, the founder of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement and author of the new books he had been reading.
- It was here that Alex would regularly hear from devotees—and from one devotee in particular, Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa Dāsa.

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- Alex would put questions to Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa from his study of the Gītā, and the two would talk well into the afternoon. [Faith in and knowledge of Kṛṣṇa consciousness prompt a sincere person to associate with devotees (sādhu-saṅga) and to inquire from them about the cause of the soul’s entanglement in matter and the process of liberation through devotional service.]
- Gradually, Alex’s perception of the world and his own way of life changed.
- He recognized the futility and transience of a godless life, and he was now convinced that the God of all religions was the speaker of the Bhagavad-gītā, Śrī Kṛṣṇa.
- He became a vegetarian, set up an altar in his room, and began to chant japa daily.
- His parents greeted these developments with mixed feelings.

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- Alex was their only child.
- They welcomed his early rising, regular bathing, and cheerful self-confidence, but they worried about his increased detachment from his studies and promising career.
- One morning over breakfast Alex's father said, "Son! Balance your religious practices with fulfilling your worldly responsibilities.
- Many good people consider their profession a service to humankind.
- Service to humankind is real service to God."
- Alex did not reject his father's proposal at once, but after discussing it with Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa later that day he concluded that such conditional worship of the Lord would not satisfy Kṛṣṇa's call to surrender.

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- [Seeing Alex’s initial practices, which constituted unsteady devotional practice (aniṣṭhita-bhajana-kriyā), his alarmed parents proposed that he serve God by working for humankind, that is, to perform karma-miśra-bhakti]
- One winter day, Alex returned home to find his parents in the living room conversing with what appeared to be a Hindu priest.
- He was dressed in Indian clothes—dhotī and kurtābut unlike the temple devotees, he had a large red dot on his forehead instead of Vaiṣṇava tilaka.
- After introducing himself as the head priest of the Hindu mandira (temple), the brāhmaṇa guest, at the behest of Alex’s parents, began to extol what he called “the true path of sanātana-dharma.”

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- According to the brāhmaṇa, whose name was Trilokeshvara Mishra, Lord Kṛṣṇa’s real followers neither preach nor artificially renounce the world as do the members of ISKCON.
- Instead, as Kṛṣṇa states in the Gītā (3.6–7), real devotees perform karma-yoga and are elevated gradually and systematically from earth, to heaven, and then beyond to Vaikuṅṭha.
- “Your qualification to serve Kṛṣṇa, Alex, is your profession. Karmaṇy evādhikāras te. But you should work with detachment as an offering to the Lord.”
- Alex was confused by the brāhmaṇa’s scripturally supported argument.

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- In the presence of another authority on the Gītā he thought, “Maybe there are other ways to follow Kṛṣṇa than the way taught by the devotees.”
- [The Hindu brāhmaṇa, though culturally attuned to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, did not have pure faith.
- He thus advised Alex to follow the indirect path to perfection rather than the direct path, pure devotional service.
- Because Alex’s faith and knowledge were still weak, his beginner’s qualification (kanisthādhikāra) could not protect him from being confused by the apparent contradiction.
- Thus his confidence in the devotees waned.]

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- Trilokeshvara Mishra’s preaching had affected Alex.
- He stopped visiting the temple and eating at the restaurant.
- But he could not give up reading Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books or chanting on his beads.
- He continued doing these things at home, albeit with less enthusiasm than before.
- In fact, Alex even began to woo an attractive Gujarati girl who was in his class.
- One day, as he and his new girlfriend dined at an Indian restaurant, Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa walked through the door with an armful of books.

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- He greeted Alex warmly, and after delivering a set of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books to the restaurant manager, presented Alex with the newest Back to Godhead magazine.
- He then invited him to visit the temple.
- For some reason Alex could not quite explain, he felt ashamed.
- He looked at the door through which his devotee friend left and then at his new girlfriend, Sunita. His face flushed as he realized, “I’m in māyā.” [Although Alex had just begun his practice of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, Kṛṣṇa did not forget his service, even though done neglectfully. (Bhagavad-gītā 2.40) He thus arranged for Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa to meet Alex again and inspire him to surrender further (guru-kṛṣṇa-prasāde pāya)]

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- Alex resumed his regular visits to the temple, but this time he attended with Sunita.
- She was an avowed demigod worshipper, and the exchanges between her and Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa intrigued Alex.
- What intrigued him most were their arguments about whether in the ultimate issue God was personal or impersonal.
- He felt like his intelligence was at the centre of a tug-of-war in which his attachment to Sunita was on one side and his respect for Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa on the other.
- He had to decide for himself, so he dove headlong into a study of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books—Śrī Īsopaniṣad, the Second Canto of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, and at last, Kṛṣṇa book.

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- Within a month he had no doubt that God was the Supreme Person, that the Supreme Person was Kṛṣṇa, and that in His original form Kṛṣṇa was a cowherd who enjoyed pastimes of love in rural Vṛndāvana.
- “This is the answer without a doubt,” he concluded.
- And by his readings he came to another conclusion—one that surprised even him: he found himself wanting to be like Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa.
- He wanted to give this priceless knowledge to others.
- As Alex gazed admiringly at a picture of Śrīla Prabhupāda, he felt an overwhelming sense of obligation and love for His Divine Grace.
- “You saved me. You gave me a reason to live! A reason to die!” And Śrīla Prabhupāda smiled back.

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- This was Alex's first spiritual experience.
- Prabhupāda, who had left this world before Alex was born, was present in his photo.
- From that formal portrait, Śrīla Prabhupāda showed his pleasure with Alex by smiling.
- When Alex saw that smile he felt as if the whole world was pleased with him.
- He had never felt so good.
- He wanted to feel this way forever.

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- More, he wanted the whole world to feel this way. [Implicit faith in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings and Alex’s systematic study of them brought Alex to the stage of surrender (śaraṇāgati), or commitment to Lord Caitanya’s mission.]
- As the instructing spiritual master of all his followers, Śrīla Prabhupāda bestowed mercy on the new recruit, mercy that gave him the strength to act on his commitment (guru-kṛṣṇa-prasāde pāya)]
- Alex was twenty-two when he received his first book and twenty-four when he enrolled in the three-month introductory course at the temple’s small farm on the outskirts of the city.
- His parents raged, begged, and cajoled.
- Sunita cried and offered to marry him.

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- Trilokeshvara Mishra even visited the farm where Haridāsa, the temple president, politely but soundly defeated the brāhmaṇa’s arguments.
- Alex was resolute.
- He now had a clear purpose in life: he wanted to please Kṛṣṇa by pleasing his representatives, especially Śrīla Prabhupāda.
- None of his relatives, friends, or acquaintances could budge him from his resolve.
- Alex shaved his head clean on the day he arrived at the farm.
- Adorned with the small tuft of hair called a śikhā, small beads of tulasīround his neck, neatly drawn tilaka on his forehead, and dressed in a dhotī and kurtā, Alex looked effulgent.

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- “You look like you just stepped down from Vaikuṅṭha,” said a smiling Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa. [Alex could take to the direct path of pure devotional service by Kṛṣṇa’s grace, which descended to him through Śrīla Prabhupāda and his representatives. This direct path is the path of liberation (moksaiṣyāmi māśucaḥ)]
- The temple programme was not new to Alex.
- He had lived in the temple for as many as three days at a time, but he had never intended to stay.
- After the early morning cold shower, he tried to follow the meaning of the hymns sung at maṅgalārati, tulasy-ārati, and guru-pūjā.
- It was a lot to take in at once.

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- He found the japa period rewarding and the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam class stimulating.
- But most invigorating was breakfast.
- He had never enjoyed eating quite like this.
- The fruit, cereal, and milk were the same ingredients his mother served, but when offered to Kṛṣṇa their taste was special.
- Alex became conscious of the farm's Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa deities through the effect They had on the food offered to Them.
- Although he had seen Gaura-Nitāi downtown and Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa at the farm, somehow Their presence had not registered with him.

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- The impact of Their divinity dawned in him more and more as he engaged in committed service to Them.
- This service had begun with his tongue—with tasting the remnants of the food offered to Their Lordships. [Kṛṣṇa reveals Himself in proportion to the devotees' service and surrender (*ye yathā mām prapadyante*).
- Thus to neophytes the significance of devotional activities such as deity worship—for instance, that Kṛṣṇa is present in the deity—is not appreciated in the beginning, but grows as they advance.
- At the stage of ecstasy the spiritual significance of both devotional service (bhakti) and Kṛṣṇa are fully realized.]
- The first day was filled with classes on Śrīla Prabhupāda's books, devotional life, and the culture of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism.

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- There was lunch—another unforgettable experience—time for rest, and then a few hours of chanting with the other devotees on the streets of the city.
- In the minibus that drove the devotees back from hari-nāma-saṅkīrtana, Alex met a married couple, George and Sheila, who had joined a few weeks earlier.
- They had both been art students, and whereas George was outgoing, a joke a minute, Sheila was grave and demure.
- When they entered the temple room for gaurāratī, George engaged Alex in a kind of boisterous dancing that made Alex abandon all inhibitions and better taste the nectar of the holy names.
- Alex, who did not mix easily with people, had found a friend; or rather, a friend had found him.

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- After evening Bhagavad-gītā class and supper, the men retired to their quarters, the women to theirs.
- Lying awake in the darkness, Alex thought over the day's events. It had been exciting.
- “I wonder how many days it will take for me to become a pure devotee?” he wondered.
- He had rarely slept elsewhere than in his own room at his parents' home, and it took some time for him to fall asleep.

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- When he did, he dreamed of devotees, kīrtana, and the deities. It was all very wonderful. [Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted his followers to be trained not only in philosophy but in the culture through which that philosophy is applied, the pure culture of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Śrīla Prabhupāda therefore called the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement a cultural revolution.]
- Most days of the introductory course were like the first day, and when the course was complete there were many similar days in what became Alex's place of service, the downtown preaching centre.
- But during his first year of service something happened to Alex's initial enthusiasm and clear purpose.
- Day by day, his habits and desires from the life he had left behind, feelings he had thought were gone for good, gradually crept back into his consciousness.

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- In addition, his normal attentiveness in japa, class, and personal study was being undermined by unbecoming thoughts, drowsiness, and petty distractions.
- Alarmed by what he perceived in himself, Alex approached his mentor Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa and revealed his mind.
- “Expect more of the same,” replied his more experienced friend.
- “You are at the beginning stage of devotional service and there are many unwanted things to be purified from the heart before you can chant and hear without distraction.”
- Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa placed his hand on Alex’s back. “Remain strict in your practices and persevere. Your time will come.”

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- Alex was comforted by this advice, although it predicted a long struggle ahead.
- Whenever obstacles or bad habits attacked him full force he would remember Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa’s words: “Remain strict in your practices and persevere.
- Your time will come.”
- He had faith in Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa Prabhu, whose guidance had already helped him overcome many difficulties.
- Alex was confident it would continue to do so, now and in the future. [The past unwanted habits of neophytes make them susceptible to the influence of the lower modes of nature. Thus their devotional service is unsteady (aniṣṭhita-bhajana-kriyā). Such unsteadiness has six symptoms, one of which is sporadic endeavour (ghana-taralā). It is also fraught with obstacles such as disinterest (apratipatti).

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- If such unsteady behaviour is not kept in check it results in offences to the holy name (aparādhottā) and mistakes in executing service (bhakty-utthā), which make unsteady service even more unsteady. To overcome such unsteadiness, Alex received two essential instructions: remain strict in spiritual practices and persevere.]
- Since leaving the introductory programme Alex had been engaged in temple services such as washing kitchen pots, cleaning the building, and doing the men's laundry.
- It was menial service, but it was rewarding.
- Alex felt especially good when he was on his hands and knees scrubbing the bathroom floor.

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- Still, his mind sometimes screamed, “This is undeserving of a university student with a 140 IQ!” Still, he persevered.
- And George was always there, never far away, having become a waiter in the restaurant.
- He would always raise Alex’s spirits with humour and good advice.
- George and Alex shared a common, secret desire as well: they both wanted to distribute books.
- They served, watched, and listened to the book distributors when they returned from their distribution on the streets or door to door.
- Both friends wanted to dive into the ocean of nectar in which the book distributors were obviously swimming.

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- When because of that desire they could no longer fix their minds on their respective services, George and Alex nervously asked the temple president, “Can we become book distributors?”
- “Yes!” came the answer.
- “But first give me some time to find someone else to do your services.” [The two main limbs of Lord Caitanya’s mission are to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa (kṛṣṇa-nāma) and to show mercy to living entities (jīva-dayā). Generally, proper chanting under Lord Caitanya’s guidance results in the devotee developing a mood of compassion, displayed by some form of preaching activity—in this case, book distribution.]
- The taste of book distribution surpassed Alex’s expectations, despite the intense austerities he had to perform in order to do it.

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- That taste fuelled his desire to study Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books even more than he had done before joining the temple.
- When Alex applied what he read, for example, Prabhupāda’s guidelines on regulative devotional service, he gained increased mastery over his mind and senses.
- This experience boosted his faith in the scriptures and the devotional process, and he became very serious about spiritual life.
- While Alex was diving into the ocean of knowledge contained in Prabhupāda’s books, George was feasting on the ecstasy of book distribution.
- In this way the two friends delighted in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

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- One evening while chatting over prasāda, they both came to the same conclusion, “We should get initiated!” [By strictly following the principles of regulative devotional service (vaidhī sādhana-bhakti), Alex was able to control the urges of the mind, belly, and genitals even while impurities (anarthas) remained in his heart. This gave him great faith in the potency of the rules and regulations. Devotees serious about advancement, who understand the principles of devotion, are naturally inclined to commit themselves to the disciplic succession through the process of spiritual initiation (dīkṣā).]
- Senior devotees regularly visited both the preaching centre and the farm.
- Alex had listened to and observed the behaviour of these Vaiṣṇavas.
- Many were exemplary, some, by his limited perception, were less than ideal.

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- He had heard about senior devotees, initiating spiritual masters, abandoning both their disciples and Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- He wanted to make the right choice.
- He had already accepted Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa Prabhu as his śikṣā-guru, but Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa would not and could not accept disciples in the presence of his own spiritual master.
- In Govinda Mahārāja, Alex found a Vaiṣṇava in whom he could place his full faith.
- Alex was drawn especially to Govinda Mahārāja's strict adherence to devotional principles and his very philosophical presentation of Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings.
- Alex associated closely with Govinda Mahārāja for a year, and even travelled with the Mahārāja as his servant for three months.

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- At the end of this time, Alex’s initial impression was solidly confirmed and he asked for and received initiation during the Gaura-pūrṇimā festival in Māyāpur. Alex’s new name was Acyutānanda Dāsa. A little more than a year later, when Govinda Mahārāja was visiting the temple, Alex received second initiation, mantra-dīkṣā, and became a brāhmaṇa.
- George and his wife Sheila had been initiated a little earlier by Bhakti-prabhāva Swami, an Indian sannyāsī well thought of for his discourses on Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes and his sweet singing of Vaiṣṇava songs.
- Their new names were Gaura Hari Dāsa and Śīlavatī Devī Dāsī. [Both disciple and spiritual master should be fit, and they should get to know each other by close association. Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa was the natural choice as dīkṣā-guru for Alex, who had complete faith in him.]

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- But etiquette forbade Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa from accepting disciples in the physical presence of his dīkṣā-guru.
- Alex had faith in the potency of following the regulations of devotional service, so he accepted Govinda Mahārāja, a guru who for him embodied commitment to the rules and regulations.
- Gaura Hari, also a strict devotee, found his primary inspiration in Kṛṣṇa consciousness from the taste he got from preaching and kīrtana.
- He and his wife accepted a guru who, while also strict in devotional practices, confirmed and nurtured the kind of attraction they had in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.]

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- Initiation, especially second initiation, seemed to open new horizons in Acyutānanda’s Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- He chanted the Gāyatrī mantra, occasionally worshipped the temple deities, and felt officially recognized as a member of an illustrious disciplic succession.
- Younger devotees turned to him for guidance as a “senior devotee.”
- He liked being in the position of an advisor, an authority, yet he sometimes felt dissatisfied with the parroted answers he gave to controversial questions: Was the fallen jīva ever in the spiritual world?
- Can a devotee who is not liberated serve as guru?
- Is there a place for spontaneous devotional service in ISKCON?

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- Acyutānanda wrote Govinda Mahārāja, spoke to Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa, and met with the temple president.
- Their guidance helped.
- Still, he felt his understanding of the philosophy was piecemeal.
- One day Acyutānanda was asked to explain the meaning and purpose of the Brahmā-gāyatrī.
- Dissatisfied with his response, he decided to study everything in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books on the subject.
- While continuing his new service as saṅkīrtana leader, Acyutānanda collected and collated everything Śrīla Prabhupāda had written about all seven Gāyatrī mantras.

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- His project completed, he thought, “Now I am getting somewhere.”
- And truly he was!
- He better understood the meanings of the Gāyatrī mantras and how to chant and contemplate them properly.
- But his enthusiasm was quickly shattered as he revealed to Gaura Hari, “I have been chanting Gāyatrī for years, but mechanically, not knowing what I was chanting or why.” [In following the regulative principles of devotional service, inattention (pramada) and lethargy (laya) often cause devotees absorbed in the acts of devotion to lose sight of the goal: to remember Kṛṣṇa (smartavyaḥ satatam viṣṇuḥ) in love. For example, chanting the Gāyatrī mantra can become a mechanical activity rather than an absorption in guru, Gaura, and Kṛṣṇa (smaraṇa).

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- If performed strictly, vaidhī bhakti will gradually purify the heart, and by good association, allow the devotees to free themselves of such offensive practices. Otherwise, their devotion becomes spoiled (niyamāgraha)]
- Gaura Hari gave his friend an impish smile and said, “And how consciously have we been performing any devotional activity?”
- Acyutānanda was startled. Gaura Hari’s answer was a challenge. “What do you mean?” he asked.
- “Take for example tulasī-kīrtana,” Gaura Hari replied. “What does it mean?”
- Acyutānanda said, “We pray to Tulasīdevī for devotion to Lord Viṣṇu.”
- Gaura Hari moved a little closer to his friend.

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- “What does ‘ei nivedana dhara, sakhīra anugata koro’ mean?”
- Acyutānanda gave the translation, and as he did so he realized that the viṣṇu-bhakti spoken of in tulasī-kīrtana meant the vraja-bhakti of the gopīs.
- He was too embarrassed to say what he thought: “All these years I have mouthed words that I never took to heart.”
- Gaura Hari left it at that.
- He knew that a word to the wise to Acyutānanda was enough.
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- That night Acyutānanda could not sleep.
- His talk with Gaura Hari had opened a Pandora’s box for him.

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- In his mind he reviewed the devotional practices he performed every day and contemplated their meaning and purpose.
- How often had he chanted prayers such as Śrī Gurv-aṣṭaka without feeling?
- How often had he sung in kīrtana as a form of recreation?
- How often had he read pages of scripture without remembering a word?
- Acyutānanda vowed to take his spiritual practices more seriously, to chant japa more carefully, and to curb the enjoying spirit that made him revel in acts of devotion he did not fully understand.
- Acyutānanda was true to his vow—at least for a few months.

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- Then again, without his noticing it, complacency and inattention diluted his devotional practices and brought him to the edge of despondency.
- With encouragement from seniors he again picked himself up and began his practices with renewed enthusiasm.
- In this way years came and went, and Acyutānanda accepted a variety of services, such as saṅkīrtana leader, introductory course director, temple president, and finally the head of university preaching.
- But inside he always hankered to be the devotee he wanted to be—and that others thought him—a really steady devotee. [Unsteady devotees, while trying to steady and upgrade their devotional practices, often take vows they cannot maintain (niyamākṣamā). Due to spiritual weakness their efforts remain sporadic (ghana-taralā)]

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- Acyutānanda, now thirty-four years old, observed that even after ten years of active devotional service, the desire for material enjoyment still haunted him.
- More specifically he still contemplated sex.
- He would catch himself looking at the women in the temple.
- Even when visiting with Gaura Hari, now a pūjārī for Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa at the farm, Acyutānanda would sometimes have unbecoming thoughts about attractive Śīlavatī, a truly saintly devotee.
- For the first time since joining, Acyutānanda began to seriously contemplate whether he should marry.
- “But why am I even thinking like this?”

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- he wondered.
- After initiation Acyutānanda had weighed the pros and cons of marriage in light of his past experiences with women and his realizations in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- He concluded that he should stay celibate and perhaps accept sannyāsa later in life. “Why has my resolve waned?”
- Acyutānanda turned to Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa, whose marriage of a few years had recently ended with his wife’s leaving Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- He even telephoned his spiritual master for the first time in their relationship.
- Both guides advised Acyutānanda to reassess his spiritual practices.
- Those found lacking should be fortified.

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- Those that were sound should be made sounder.
- Then after some time Acyutānanda should reevaluate his situation. “You may find,” his guru mahārāja concluded, “that whether or not to marry will no longer be an issue.”
- Acyutānanda knew that the following period would be a watershed in his devotional life.
- He tried to control his flickering mind and withdraw it from thoughts of “should I or shouldn’t I,” and “if I should, then whom?”
- Instead, he tried to fix his mind on his efforts to evaluate and rejuvenate his Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

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- [If after some years the expected results of devotional practices, such as increased attachment to Kṛṣṇa, are not forthcoming, if instead certain material desires are found to be waxing, devotees should not doubt whether Kṛṣṇa consciousness works; rather, they should investigate their own consciousness and behaviour to determine what they are doing to obstruct the fruits of devotional service from ripening. If with senior guidance their practices are found to be faultless, then they should be patient until the fruits appear in their own time.]
- Acyutānanda seriously appraised his devotional life.
- In retrospect he could see that laxity in his devotional ways and offences to the Vaiṣṇavas and the holy names were the primary causes of his weakened state.
- Although he was rock steady in attending the morning programme, Acyutānanda was often inattentive, especially during the japa period.

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- Although he had good relationships with the Vaiṣṇavas, he was prone to point out their defects to third parties.
- He remembered that he had once neglected a senior devotee who was known to have had a difference of opinion with his spiritual master, and that he had sometimes resented his GBC over management issues.
- “As a result of these transgressions,” he thought, “I have lost the holy name’s mercy.”
- Thus over the years the spiritual strength he had enjoyed as a new devotee had waned to a shadow of its original might.
- Where was the innocence, the simplicity, the bliss he had tasted before becoming a “senior devotee,” an “advanced devotee,” an “authority to be respected”?

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- For the first time since he had become a devotee, Acyutānanda's determination to face the challenges ahead of him waned.
- He took a two-week leave from the temple and went to the farm to chant, read, pray to the deities of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and to be with Gaura Hari.
- This brief respite, especially the long talks with his friend that sometimes stretched into the late hours of the night, gave him a new lease on life. [Offences (aparādha) to the holy name and to Vaiṣṇavas may stunt and even uproot devotees' devotional creepers.]
- Even well-intentioned and serious devotees like Acyutānanda may inadvertently commit offences.
- At such times the offences should be identified and rectified lest they cause devotees to fall from the path of bhakti.]

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- In his usual good-natured way, Gaura Hari stressed that Acyutānanda must immediately rectify his offences to Vaiṣṇavas, great and small, and beg their forgiveness.
- He then suggested that in addition to his strict external practices Acyutānanda be more attentive to his inner spiritual development.
- **Gaura Hari:** “What is the goal of your practices?”
- **Acyutānanda:** “Love of God!”
- **Gaura Hari:** “And what kind of love of God will you develop, for which form of Godhead?”
- **Acyutānanda:** “Like that of the Vraja-vāsīs for Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndā-vana?”

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- Gaura Hari: “And are you doing that?”
- Acyutānanda was about to reply “yes,” but caught himself.
- He realized that he had been so absorbed in preaching, in setting a good example, in regularly reading Prabhupāda’s books, that he had neglected the very purpose of these activities—developing the mood of attachment to Kṛṣṇa.
- In the silence that followed Gaura Hari revealed a side of himself previously unknown to Acyutānanda.
- In Śīlavatī’s presence Gaura Hari spoke of their past difficulties in controlling their mutual physical attraction, and how on occasion they had succumbed to it.
- But by developing attachment to the deities, husband and wife had brought that attraction under control.

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- By cultivating attachment to the deities they had actually neutralized their sex desire.
- In an atypically sober way, Gaura Hari predicted that the emerging attachment to Kṛṣṇa that had already filled their hearts would not only eradicate their material attachments and become the source of all auspiciousness, but it would also awaken their ecstatic devotion.
- That ecstatic devotion would be the seed from which love for Kṛṣṇa would sprout.
- Gaura Hari suggested that Acyutānanda practise devotional service with a new meditation: how to develop ecstatic devotion to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.
- He cited a letter in which Śrīla Prabhupāda had encouraged a devotee to make his every act a conscious offering of love to the Lord.

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- Gaura Hari concluded, “In this way you will experience ever increasing bliss, and your desire for marriage will vanish.” [The two results of devotional service in practice are the destruction of material miseries (kleśaghñī) and the appearance of all-auspiciousness (śubhadā). Rūpa Gosvāmī defines sādhana-bhakti as the practice by which devotees aspire to achieve ecstatic devotion (bhāva-bhakti). To be unaware or forget the purpose of sādhana, as Acyutānanda had done, is akin to driving in a car with no idea of where one is going. Such mechanical devotional service is called niyamāgraha.]
- In the years that followed, Acyutānanda concentrated more on becoming a Vaiṣṇava than on looking like one.
- He removed from his heart the inclination to equate seniority by years or position in the institution with spiritual achievement.

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- As he approached his fortieth year, he was attentive to chant the holy names with feeling, and he called out to Kṛṣṇa for mercy.
- He read from Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books and listened to Vaiṣṇavas more with a view to developing pure devotion than acquiring philosophical knowledge.
- In his dealings with devotees and nondevotees alike, he always tried to follow the instruction in the third verse of Śrī Śikṣāṣṭaka.
- With time the attraction in his heart for female companionship subsided, and as predicted by his well-wishers, Acyutānanda’s desire for marriage disappeared.
- As it did, he gained self-confidence and strong faith in the process of devotional service.

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- He had spoken with Govinda Mahārāja on his last visit, and the aging sannyāsī had smiled with pleasure and said, “You passed the test! I am very proud of you.”
- Acyutānanda had learned many lessons from this experience.
- The first was to keep his mind and senses under full control by his purified intelligence, and the second was never to lose sight of the purpose of his devotional practices and services.
- As a result of his resolute, offenceless devotion, the truths of devotional service, like many parts of a jigsaw puzzle, gradually began to fall into place.
- The philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness was no longer the jumble of disconnected thoughts Acyutānanda had grappled within the past.

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- It was a synergistic whole that gave him piercing insight into the principles of devotional service and the world preaching of the institution.
- Controversies such as the ṛtvik issue, ISKCON's relationship with the Gauḍīya Maṭha, and the relevance of the GBC—controversies he had in the past addressed with passionate rhetoric—he now saw with dispassionate wisdom.
- In this way, after gaining mastery over his senses, Acyutānanda brought his power of speech under control, and taking shelter of the mode of goodness, he finally bridled his mind and became fixed in pure devotional service.

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- [These are some of the symptoms of steadiness (niṣṭhā), which appear with determined practice.]
- Acyutānanda, like many devotees, came face to face with the insufficiency and the precarious nature of unsteady devotional service (aniṣṭhita-bhajana-kriyā).
- With the help of strong association and purposeful practice, he was able to consolidate his spiritual assets and reach the happy stage of steady devotion.]
- Haridāsa, the temple president at the farm, then decided to try his hand at entrepreneurship. For personal reasons he preferred to be a supporting member of the congregation rather than a full-time devotee.

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- The head of the preaching centre was transferred to fill the vacancy, and Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa Prabhu, who had been in charge of temple preaching for almost twenty years, became the new temple president of the downtown temple.
- Subsequently, Acyutānanda was given the responsibility of receiving guests and overseeing the lunch programme in addition to his duty as head of university preaching.
- Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa and the new farm president then decided to arrange a Kārttika pilgrimage to Vṛndāvana and Māyāpur for about forty devotees.
- A number of senior sannyāsīs, Govinda Mahārāja included, would guide the devotees.
- Acyutānanda was elated.

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- It would be the first time in many years that he would be with his guru mahārāja in the holy dhāma.
- Although Śīlavatī would stay back to worship Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Gaura Hari was also coming along. [Although visiting holy places is appropriate for all kinds of devotees, those whose minds are controlled and who are free of material desire (madhyama- and uttama-bhaktas) are especially qualified to do so. Such serious devotees go on pilgrimage for only one reason—to gain spiritual benefit.]
- Acyutānanda had been to the holy dhāma many times, but this time was special.
- The company of Govinda Mahārāja, Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa, and Gaura Hari, the ecstatic kīrtanas, the relaxed discourses, and the special Puruṣottama month, were like monsoon showers of nectar to Acyutānanda’s budding Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

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- As that bud opened, one petal at a time, Acyutānanda felt emotions he had read about in The Nectar of Devotion.
- These emotions reminded him of the day when Śrīla Prabhupāda had smiled at him from a picture.
- He had occasionally tasted these emotions while distributing books, in the midst of great kīrtanas, and during exceptional japa sessions.
- Acyutānanda was feeling ecstasy.
- One day while visiting the Krishna-Balaram Mandir he entered into conversation with a disciple of Śrīla Prabhupāda.
- The conversation ultimately turned to the subject of spontaneous devotional service and how it was the duty of all of Śrīla Prabhupāda's followers to cultivate it.

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- Acyutānanda was reserved.
- He had read and discussed Śrīla Prabhupāda’s many words of caution about spontaneous devotion, especially as it is practised by sahajiyās and bābājīs in Vṛndāvana and elsewhere.
- He felt uncomfortable discussing such an elevated topic while standing in the temple courtyard.
- He tactfully excused himself and returned to the nearby āśrama, where the pilgrims from his yātrā were staying.
- Over the next few days he pondered what he had heard about spontaneous devotional service and decided that it was best to approach his spiritual master with his questions.

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- Acyutānanda thought, “I should get guidance on this topic from my guru mahārāja.
- What attitude should I have toward the rāga-mārga?” [The holy places of Vṛndāvana and Māyāpur are impetuses (uddīpana) that help awaken attachment to Kṛṣṇa. It is unfortunate that in many cases the residents of these holy places try to forcefully impose attachment to Kṛṣṇa on the pilgrims. Such “preaching” is generally an indication of the lack of qualification of the proponents of such so-called spontaneous devotion.]
- At first Acyutānanda was hesitant to approach Govinda Mahārāja.
- He knew how strict his spiritual master was, especially on the topic of imitative devotional service.

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- But Acyutānanda was pleasantly surprised by the ease and openness with which Govinda Mahārāja received his questions.
- “You should know,” his guru mahārāja replied, “that regulative practice is our sādhana and the spontaneous love of the Vraja-vāsīs our sādhya.
- However, regulative practice eventually leads to spontaneous cultivation.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda was guarded about voicing these things, but he wrote about them extensively in his books.
- Read his Caitanya-caritāmṛta to understand what our ācāryas have written on the subject.
- If you feel that those instructions apply to you, consider deeply how you would incorporate them into your life.

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- At the same time, you should continue to externally conduct yourself in exactly the same way as you do now.
- When you think you have the answers to these questions, we can talk again.”
- Acyutānanda was honoured by the trust his spiritual master had shown in him.
- He also recognized that Govinda Mahārāja was testing him.
- If he could maturely understand Śrīla Prabhupāda’s teachings on rāgānuga-bhakti without making a public issue of what he had read, Govinda Mahārāja was willing to discuss the matter further.
- If he could not, then Acyutānanda could expect his spiritual master to rein him in and continue to guide him as before—perhaps even under closer supervision.

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- A few days later he came to know that Govinda Mahārāja had informed Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa of their talk.
- Puṣṭa Kṛṣṇa would join Mahārāja in monitoring him. Acyutānanda vowed that he would not let them down.
- Inspired by his Vṛndāvana encounters he would study the subject of spontaneous devotion guided by the teachings of scripture and the ācāryas.
- [Acyutānanda's interest in vraja-bhakti was fuelled partly by the influence of his Vṛndāvana-Māyāpur pilgrimage and partly by what he had read in scripture.
- This is the beginning of spontaneous devotion mixed with regulative devotion (rāga-vaidhī bhakti).

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- Considering the caution with which Śrīla Prabhupāda dealt with spontaneous devotion, devotees at niṣṭhā and beyond well-versed in his instructions will generally temper their eagerness for rāga-bhakti by constant reference to these instructions.
- This is the path more suited to ISKCON and its members.
- Careful attention to the rules of bhakti helps check possible deviations that can arise as a consequence of spontaneous practice.
- Only a few devotees will have unmixed eagerness for vraja-bhakti.
- Still, that will not in any way affect their external conduct, which stays the same as that of devotees practising regulative devotional service.

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- It simply means that the mood of their attraction to vraja-bhakti, as they progress from steadiness to ecstasy, is slightly different.
- But both classes of devotees must adhere to ISKCON's laws as well as the guidelines of what to hear, speak about, and remember, as described in this book.]

ka-mdhurya-sevnanda-prptira kraakṛṣṇa-mādhurya-sevānanda-prāptira kāraṇa
kṛṣṇa-sevā kare, āra kṛṣṇa-rasa-āsvādana

- When one attains the transcendental bliss of an intimate relationship with Kṛṣṇa, he renders service to Him and tastes the mellows of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 20.126]