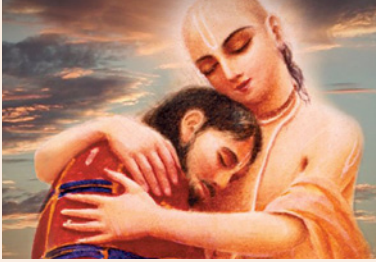




THE TREE OF LIFE



Amṛta Vāṇī 1 *The Trunk, part 1: Sattva as a Guiding Principle & Physical Well-Being*

Amṛta Vāṇī 2 *The Trunk, part 2: Mental Well-Being*

Amṛta Vāṇī 3 *The Crown: Compassion*

Amṛta Vāṇī 4 *The Roots: Bhakti-Sādhana*

3) THE CROWN OF THE TREE OF LIFE: COMPASSION

The ego and its concerns are what isolate us from everyone else. In order to overcome this separatist mentality we need to learn the opposite – the compassionate mentality. Even if we do everything else sincerely in spiritual life, without practicing the main *dharma* of Vaiṣṇavas – *dayā* – it is not possible to make spiritual advancement. As Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura writes, “Śrī Kṛṣṇa is quickly pleased with persons who desist from causing pain and anxiety to other living entities out of compassion for them. Dayā, compassion, is the foremost Vaiṣṇava quality.” (Jaiva Dharma, chapter 20)

In the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (3.21.31) Kapila teaches, “Showing compassion to all living entities, you will attain self-realization. Giving assurance of safety to all, you will perceive your own self as well as all the universes in me, and myself in you.”

How is it that one attains self-realization by being compassionate to others? The *Brahmā-vaivarta Purāṇa* explains, “The Supreme Lord Keśva only remains in the company of persons who are free of a

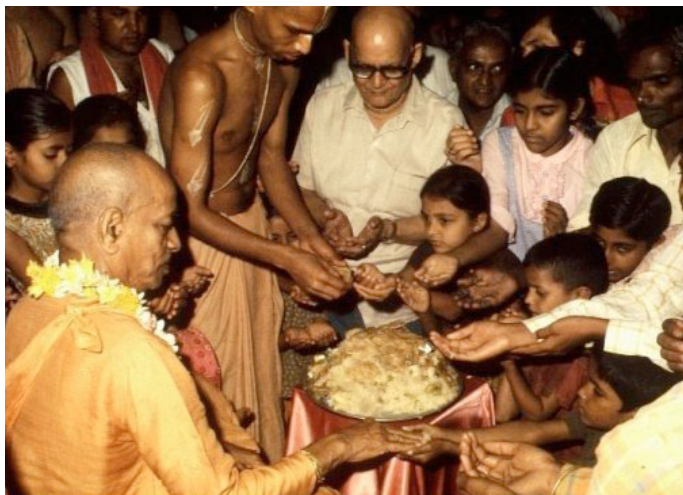
mundane conception of life, the ego, ‘I’ and ‘mine’.” In other words, the ego is what separates us from the Lord. It is like a huge mountain range between us and Kṛṣṇa. Therefore, every true spiritual path encourages its followers to leave the world of one’s ego and practice compassion. This is confirmed by the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (4.12.36): “The self-effulgent Vaikuṇṭha planets, by whose illumination alone all the illuminating planets within this material world give off reflected light, cannot be reached by those who are not merciful to other living entities. Only persons who constantly engage in welfare activities for other living entities can reach the Vaikuṇṭha planets.”

EXERCISE

In his commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā*, Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura writes about a three-step practice for cultivating compassion.

A person who wants to be compassionate must

- 1) First become aware that we are all equal on the level of the soul.
- 2) Understand that every one of us suffers and enjoys in the same way.
- 3) Make a firm resolution to do something for the upliftment of others.



Becoming a compassionate Vaiṣṇava takes maturation of the heart – from selfishness to self-less care. It is not easy; it really means to enter the school of compassion. Start by seeing people with “equal eyes”. See that their happiness and distress feels just like your own and do something concrete for their benefit. If you can enter this stream of compassion even a little bit, even one minute a day to start with, you will witness two effects: first, you will think more of Kṛṣṇa, and second, you will enter into a flow of universal compensation. In other words, what you give out to others will come back to you. Although this is not the motivation of compassionate people, it is something they experience on the side.

SIDEBAR: Preventing Compassion Fatigue

In order to act compassionately in the long-term, we need to pair it with mature self-compassion. You can only make a sustained effort to take care of others if your own tree of life is strong. Mature self-compassion means to take care of the vehicle for spiritual practice (*sādhana-śarīra*) that Kṛṣṇa has offered us: the body and mind – so that they can function well and not disrupt our desires to serve. It also means to love and accept oneself maturely, as a part of Kṛṣṇa, and while being mindful of one’s weaknesses, to not remain stuck in self-criticism. Psychological studies have shown that when people try to change a habit and criticize themselves whenever they fail in acting on their new habit, they are ultimately less successful in improving than people who react with self-compassion. It is important not to be your own worst enemy by constantly criticizing yourself. Here is a prayer by Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Thākura (from *Śrī Bhajanāmṛta*) that expresses this mood: “With my body, mind and speech may my love for God and his servants increase day by day. Let me love the service of God and the singing of his name! Let me love all those who incline towards him and those who want to be awakened. Let me also love myself who am inclined toward him so that I may attain devotion to him.” If you hate yourself, if you constantly judge yourself, if from

morning to evening you allow your inner critic to get down on you, you will lose your motivation for devotional service.

As applies to any virtue in this world, we need to stay balanced regarding self-care and compassion. Self-care and compassion are in a positive tension – they complement each other. If we exaggerate one or the other, they become de-valued and even harmful. Usually, when we notice that we have exaggerated compassion and find ourselves in a state of compassion fatigue, the automatic human reaction is to go to the other extreme – selfishness. Then we fling back and forth between selfishness and self-denial or compassion fatigue. However, as the developmental square shows, we should try to raise our consciousness from self-denial or compassion fatigue to self-care. Eventually, with practice, we can master both values – compassion and self-care – and apply them according to the circumstances. In this way we always stay in the *sattvic* balance of these important values, without going to *rajasic* and *tamasic* extremes.

(For more information on how to practice a new mind set, see the handout “*Developing Sattvic Attitudes*” attached to this email.)

Value and Development Square

