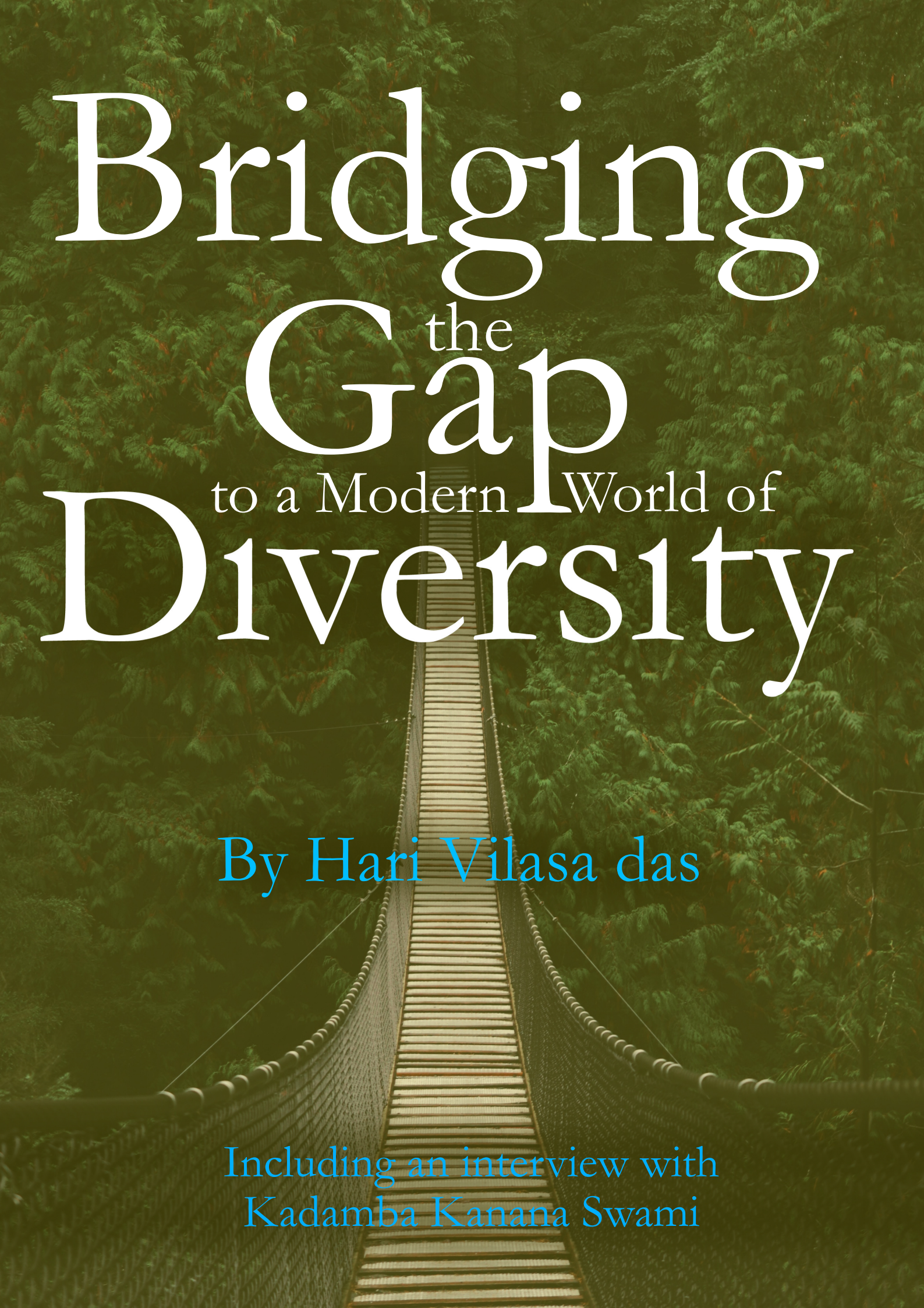


The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a long suspension bridge with a wooden plank deck, stretching from the bottom towards the top of the frame. The bridge is flanked by dense, lush green trees and foliage, creating a sense of being deep within a forest. The lighting is soft, and the overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green.

Bridging the Gap to a Modern World of Diversity

By Hari Vilasa das

Including an interview with
Kadamba Kanana Swami



Bridging the Gap to a Modern World of Diversity

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Dedicated to:



His Divine Grace
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

1. Introduction

The devotees who have taken shelter of the lotus feet of Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu take the responsibility for distributing nectarean devotional service all over the world. They are like clouds pouring water on the ground that nourishes the fruit of love of Godhead in this world. The devotees eat that fruit to their hearts' content, and whatever remnants they leave are eaten by the general populace. Thus they live happily. [CC. Madhya 25.276]

The spirit of Lord Chaitanya's movement is one of overwhelming generosity. It starts by first taking a bite of that fruit of devotional service and tasting it for ourselves. We chew on it and are amazed by its unique flavor - an experience we never had before. The more we eat the more we become convinced that this fruit is something extraordinary. And as the nourishment provided by these spiritual fruits transforms our lives, we develop a desire to also share it with others.

But the material world is a peculiar place. Even though everyone is struggling to find some substantial happiness and meaning, very few are willing or able to give the process of devotional service a fair go. Some are too paranoid; others are too lazy. Some are too conservative and others are too crazy. Anyone who has tried knows that distributing the fruits of devotional service is not an easy task.

Among His own associates, Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu laughingly said, "I came here to sell My emotional ecstatic love. Although I came to Vārāṇasī to sell My goods, there

were no customers, and it appeared necessary for Me to carry them back to My own country. All of you were feeling unhappy that no one was purchasing My goods and that I would have to carry them away. Therefore, by your will only, I have distributed them without charging." [CC. Madhya 25.168-170]

As it spreads around the globe, Kṛṣṇa consciousness is interacting with a multitude of different people, each with their own cultural background. And it has to deal with a fair amount of prejudice and misunderstanding. There are different ways to deal with this. "Bridge preaching", as it has become known in the Vaiṣṇava community, is an approach where the presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness is adjusted to make it more accessible, more relatable and less intimidating to a new audience.

In this booklet, we would like to offer some thoughts on building these bridges to people of the modern world – what it entails, what to be careful of, and we also look at some of the successful bridge projects running in the world today. It is simply meant to stimulate discussion and perhaps inspire some creativity in our attempts to give every person in the world the opportunity to render devotional service.

2. On The Bridge: A Discussion

The following discussion took place between Kadamba Kanana Swami and Hari Vilasa Dasa on the topic of reaching out to the modern world while at the same time maintaining our integrity. The rest of the book is simply a development of the points raised in this discussion.

HVD: First, why is there a need for a discussion about bridging the gap between the traditional and the modern world?

KKS: Some think that the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement should simply stick to its own culture of directly glorifying Kṛṣṇa because that culture is made of pure, transcendental substance. Any indirect or covered presentation of the bhakti process would just water down the potency of what is presented, or worse - become a deviation of the bona fide teachings. We might go over the bridge to reach out to others and never come back ourselves. On the other hand, others feel that unless we present ourselves in a way that is relevant and interesting to modern people, this movement will not really catch on in the Western world.

HVD: Wherever there is a difference of opinion, it is worthwhile to have a discussion and look at it from different angles of vision. But the simple solution seems to be just sticking to the straight and narrow. Why bother with other things if there is a risk involved?

KKS: Well, before we talk about the need for ‘bridging’, let’s just have a look at what kind of ‘gap’ we are dealing with.

HVD: Ok, that makes sense. Why is there this gap that separates us from the modern world?

KKS: Śrīla Prabhupāda came to the Western world and without conforming his dress or presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, he gradually transplanted an entire tradition from East to West. He started with the philosophy and theology of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu and His followers, and gradually introduced the entire Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava culture: he and his followers dressed in robes, decorated themselves with tulasi and tilaka, sat on the floor to eat rice, dahl and subji without a spoon or fork, offered obeisances by bowing their entire body to the floor, and a host of things that were alien to a Western audience.

Śrīla Prabhupāda's non-compromising presentation of the Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava teachings and explicit formulation of the four regulative principles clearly stand in contrast with mainstream, modern society. No intoxication, including drugs, alcohol, and even coffee and tea are prohibited. No gambling. No eating of meat, fish or eggs. No sexuality outside of marriage and even within marriage it is limited by spiritual principles.

HVD: It is like something from another world.

KKS: And also from another era. The Vaiṣṇava tradition in its modern form has roots going back 500 years and in its classical form more than 5,000 years. And it is our fidelity to the scriptures that brings us in conflict with many modern ideas and sentiments.

HVD: On so many fronts.

KKS: Traditional views may not align with modern views on gender equality or on LGBT. There are controversies over scientific issues like Vedic cosmology. Śrīla Prabhupāda said they never went

to the moon. Then there are cultural issues like dress and haircuts, an Indian style diet, and rituals like offering obeisances, worshipping a plant or a fire sacrifice. Even something as simple as rising 4 am in the morning can look radical.

HVD: It definitely goes much further than merely religious issues. Even between us and other religions there is a gap, even though we share a belief in God.

KKS: Deity worship, for example, is such a sensitive issue in Abrahamic traditions.

HVD: And even from other Eastern traditions we are divided due to our firm stance against impersonalism and voidism. What are the consequences of these gaps?

KKS: It separates us to a certain extent from normal society. The four regulative principles make it hard for devotees to partake in normal, social functions and festivals. Even something like Christmas, an integral part of the very fibre of mainstream society, can be difficult. Family relationships may become strained over such issues. The traditional Hare Kṛṣṇa lifestyle is a very different, separate subculture within society at large. The culture has its benefits in supporting and protecting its members in their practice and beliefs, but certainly creates a gap in connecting to ‘normal’ people.

HVD: So the gap is quite clear. We are not merely a religion, but also a foreign one at that, and there are many boundaries between us and the average person. Preaching, whether in the traditional temple or outside it, are attempts to cross that gap between the devotees and the public. But what makes bridge preaching different?

KKS: When it comes to bridging the gap, the first step is generally an adjustment on the cultural platform. The devotees may wear regular ‘Western’ dress or offer a vegetarian, vegan menu in a more Western style. Women may come more to the forefront than they would in a traditional Vaiṣṇava culture with Eastern roots.

HVD: And usually events take place in venues where people don’t have to take off their shoes or bow down before entering. So certain things that are part of the traditional culture which are difficult to understand or appreciate are adjusted or left out. We also see the other side, where things that are not part of the tradition are added in an attempt to reach out to a wider audience.

KKS: Bridge projects would include identifying particular target audiences, who are already closer to the Kṛṣṇa conscious or Vedic teachings, and connecting with their interests. So many people practice hatha yoga, which has its roots in the Vedic culture. Many people are vegans or vegetarians, meaning they will have an interest in our culture of cooking. There are the ecologically minded, environmentally friendly human beings, who share our vision for eco-villages or animal protection. There are many people interested in astrology, which is after all also part of Vedic culture. Then there are just spiritual or religious people in general who are interested in inter-faith or inter-cultural dialogue. And those with an interest in disciplines like psychology, philosophy, politics, etc.

HVD: So, bridge preaching means connecting with these people on their own terms, to a certain extent?

KKS: Yes. For example, many devotees have gradually entered into the academic field. Not just as outsiders making presentations to

an academic audience, but they became academics themselves and became authorities in academic Vaiṣṇava territory.

HVD: And we see many devotees becoming yoga teachers, ecologists, etc. and reaching out to people with that identity. Would you say certain bridges are better than others?

KKS: I think that the best ‘bridges’ are those, where we find elements of Vaiṣṇava philosophy or culture that might be relevant for people in general, without altering the concepts of Kṛṣṇa philosophy in any way.

HVD: Can you give an example?

KKS: For example, one could speak about the three modes of material nature straight from the Bhagavad Gita. The mode of goodness is material, but it is a bridge toward transcendence. When we go totally transcendental, many people will struggle to follow or appreciate, but most people can easily see the merit of a lifestyle and behavior in the mode of goodness. That is the bridge that Kṛṣṇa Himself builds in the Bhagavad Gita, wherein He discusses the modes of nature at great length. The Bhagavad Gita takes Arjuna, a conditioned soul, beyond his limitations by a gradual process, with the mode of goodness as a bridge to the realm of transcendence. Thus, by focussing on things within our tradition, we stay closer to home and it’s easier then to take the next step.

HVD: So just speaking about the modes of nature, even though it’s all Bhagavad Gita, is not enough?

KKS: Sooner or later, we would have to take it a step further and address the real purpose of the Gita, which is surrender in devotional

service to Kṛṣṇa. And the closer you start to that point, the easier it is. If we get stuck on a bridge, even if it is from the Gita, we would not tap into the real substance, and our audience might never make it to the other side of the bridge. If we would spend too much time out there, we would dry up. In the Bhāgavatam we find how Vyasadeva is feeling despondent after writing all the Vedic literature. Narada Muni, his spiritual master, concludes that it is due to the fact that although he has enumerated many philosophical points about matter and spirit, he has not directly glorified Kṛṣṇa and devotional service to Him.

HVD: What about other bridges that are still Vedic but not really part of Bhakti?

KKS: There are a whole host of bridges that are less part of our core philosophy, but still belong to the Vedic paradigm. These are the Vedic sciences like Yoga, Ayurveda, Astrology, Vastu, etc. They are more interesting to common people because they offer solutions for material life. Devotees can often also make money that way. Still, to bring people from there to the process of pure devotional service can be challenging

HVD: I have also experienced that. One becomes comfortable to speak about material wellbeing because everyone agrees with it and finds it interesting. But when you start speaking more directly about Kṛṣṇa and the need to surrender, not everyone can accept it or is comfortable with it.

KKS: It takes expertise and also courage from the presenter to do that.

HVD: Amongst these Vedic bridges, do you think some work better than others do?

KKS: Personally, if I would have to choose between presenting Kṛṣṇa consciousness through an introduction of hatha yoga or through an introduction to Vedic ecology, I prefer the latter. Both are related to matter, but the green lifestyle is a little closer to home. Hatha yoga is not directly part of the Bhakti Yoga process, whereas a green lifestyle is. The eco-agenda is a part of Prabhupāda's movement. He repeatedly said that one can't eat nuts and bolts, and preferred a natural lifestyle and started farm projects at great expense and effort. He saw this as the long-term direction for society at large.

HVD: Definitely something we can work with, seeing that the whole world is now starting to focus on the green agenda. The good thing about the ecological identity is that it also requires people to change their lives and sacrifice bad habits, whereas something like yoga is all about personal health and wellbeing and not so much about sacrificing one's comfort. But it's a little difficult to base a bridge project with the eco identity in the cities, though.

KKS: For the present, there is a lot left to do in the cities. Currently, 55% of the world population is urbanized, and it is expected to rise to 68% by 2050. But the point is just that certain identities work better than others, and the closer it is to home, the easier it is to bring it to Kṛṣṇa.

HVD: What about your first encounter with devotees? Did you experience the cultural gap?

KKS: The first time I saw devotees was when a grey Bedford van pulled into my town one day. The backdoor flapped open and numerous bald, pink men pour out, one after the other. Too many actually, for the size of the van... I was thinking: Were they really

from this planet, or had they just landed here from outer space? In the years to come, I came to see ‘Hare Kṛṣṇa’ as an extremely outlandish and fanatic religious group and I firmly resolved to stay clear from them.

HVD: What happened to change your mind?

KKS: Life happened. Things like both my parents dramatically dying within three months of one another. With time and more experience of the realities of life, I became more open. It was not that ‘Hare Kṛṣṇa’ particularly reached out to me. They were just simply there, with their uncompromised presentation and their bald heads, singing and dancing on the street. I stayed clear of that, but I did go to one of their restaurants and I read the Bhagavad Gita. When I got severe jaundice in India, I was forced to change my lifestyle to recover my health. My previous life turned out to be a dead-end road, and the other-worldly ‘hare Kṛṣṇa’ lifestyle suddenly looked like a possible, saner alternative. I was already a vegetarian and had outgrown the fashionable culture of taking drugs in abundance. I had seen the complexity of sexuality where one might desire free sex on the one hand, but on the other, be unable to tolerate a partner wanting to do the same. After life brought me to this point, I was ready to abandon all my reservations and move into the temple to try out monastic life - albeit with some fear in my heart.

HVD: That was also a different era, the era when joining the movement meant renouncing everything and moving into a temple.

KKS: Since that time, the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement has gone through many changes. It became more accommodating to human nature, and most members took up a lifestyle of lay-practitioners living and working in the world. Gradually that became the norm. Only a few

lived in asramas with a monastic lifestyle. These days the majority of people getting involved with the movement continue to live in the world, where they always were, and add spiritual teachings and principles at home. The change is less revolutionary or drastic than it was in the sixties or seventies. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why many now search for a presentation of the teachings that is sensitive to the modern lifestyle and values.

HVD: So, in one sense it is the devotees themselves who are now more part of the world that gives rise to the need for a more contemporary presentation. It's also interesting how this is not unique to the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement. As the world becomes more secular and globalized, most religious traditions are struggling to adapt and maintain their identity.

KKS: I was recently reading a Blackwell publication entitled “A Brief History of Spirituality”, which describes spirituality from a Christian perspective, and highlights the challenge of being relevant to a multicultural, modern environment and yet maintain the integrity of one’s own tradition.

“Beyond these general remarks, is it possible to point to likely trajectories for Christian spirituality in the new millennium? I believe that it is possible to highlight a few that are likely to be central. First, we live in a world of global connections through even our everyday realities such as food, clothes, and music. Borrowing from other traditions, or fusions of style, are the order of the day. It seems unlikely that this world of boundless possibilities and inventiveness will disappear. A narrowly local sense of roots is, while not passing away completely, now in creative tension with a sense of wider interconnectedness. Christian spirituality will increasingly have to adapt to a

multicultural, multi-faith context. This implies living with radical pluralism and that Christian spirituality will learn ever more deeply what its uniqueness means from engaging with other faith traditions rather than in opposition to them. Clearly, it will also be important to learn the difference between a creative fusion of styles and practices, including exchanges of gifts with other religious traditions, and the kind of syncretism that involves a loss of integrity.” [Epilogue p.206-207]

Relevance and integrity are thus at the heart of this discussion.

HVD: There is a tension that exists between relevance and integrity, and we can sometimes see that tension also between different people or different projects that focus on one or the other – the classical divide between the “liberals” and the “conservatives.” What is the ideal relationship between bridging projects and traditional projects?

KKS: The two have to work together. When we are building bridges, we must be aware to not stay on the other side or on the bridge, but bring people and ourselves back to pure bhakti. The traditional core has that focus.

HVD: It’s ironic. Because the traditional core is so focussed and uncompromising, it makes it difficult to relate to for a newcomer. But at the same time, it is this uncompromising spirit that gives the traditional core its potency, which is why people join the movement.

KKS: I also think that a traditional core, something timeless and purely adhering to the essence of the doctrine, is required to make spiritual teachings survive over time in an unadulterated form. If there is only bridging and no places where the pure tradition is practiced,

then there is nothing to anchor the bridge to. Our bridge will hang detached from its roots, and only be connected to the material side we are trying to reach.

HVD: We can see many religions that adapt to the world to the point that there is not much of a distinction between them and the average materialist.

KKS: An anonymous saying goes; “The religion that marries the spirit of the age will be a widow tomorrow.” Ultimately relevance to the audience is secondary to relevance to God.

HVD: So, it’s not really a new or unique challenge, but rather something that all traditions face, at all time.

KKS: Definitely. Historically there has always been a gap between the Vaiṣṇavas and common men.

HVD: To us it looks like a case of East vs. West, but that’s a limited perspective then?

KKS: Yes. Even in traditional India, that gap was there. Bhaktivinoda Thakura, in his book “Jaiva Dharma” is in dialogue with all the various outlooks that were part of the Bengali culture of the time in the centuries after Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. He speaks to the materialist, the caste brahmanas, the Shaktas, the Muslims and the other Vaiṣṇava sampradayas. It is not that just now that Kṛṣṇa consciousness has come to the West, that for the first time there is a cultural gap to overcome. At the time of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu, He and His followers encountered plenty of opposition, misunderstanding and prejudice within India, what to speak of the world outside.

Bridging a gap is a fundamental challenge for those on the transcendental platform reaching out to the world.

HVD: It does seem like it's usually the younger generation that is more interested in bridging the gap than the older ones.

KKS: No, not necessarily. It's not that old necessarily means conservative. My grandmother was always eager to play a game of 'bridge', a card game old people played, that I never figured out. She also read about oracles based on hidden messages in the pyramids and was interested in so many things beyond her own time or culture. She certainly was not the conservative type. She was ready to reach out to all kinds of people and help them.

Prabhupāda, even though an aristocratic, elderly gentleman, was not conservative either. When a 1966 New York newspaper called him a more conservative type among the swamis that had arrived from India to the West, Prabhupāda protested; "Conservative? Conservative we are not!"

He was ready to deal with hippies, or anyone else, and somehow attempted to awaken a spark of interest in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and then fan it until it was a blazing fire.

HVD: So that is then the answer to the question we first asked above: why bother at all to reach out beyond the confines of tradition.

KKS: Yes. If we can spark interest, that is great. Why not use innovative means to reach out to others? But there also has to be regular fanning with more Kṛṣṇa consciousness to awaken dormant love for Kṛṣṇa to the fullest extent. Chaitanya Mahāprabhu's mission was, *prema pum'artho mahan*, the ultimate goal of human life is to attain love of God, and we judge everything based on whether it helps or hinders progress in that direction.

3. Bridges Through the Ages

The disparity between the culture of the day and that of pure Vaishnavism is not a modern phenomenon. Each generation faces this challenge and throughout history, the Vaiṣṇavas have done various things to bridge this gap.

As far back as Treta yuga, we find the story of Valmiki Muni. Prior to being a sage, Valmiki was a criminal called Ratnakara. To provide for his family, he used to plunder and rob people passing through the forest. One day, Narada passed through that forest and encountered Ratnakar. Narada asked him, “What about the reactions for all your crimes? Are you not afraid?” Ratnakara shrugged his shoulders and replied: “What can I do? I have to maintain my family.” Narada asked, “O, and do you think that your family is willing to share in the reactions?” Ratnakara said, “Yes, of course!” But Narada pressed him, “Why don’t you go and ask them?”

Ratnakar approached all his family members, and received the same reply, “No way! The sinful reactions to your crimes are all yours!” After this, Ratnakara became detached and went to Narada for further instructions. Narada asked him to chant the name of Rama, but somehow, Ratnakar just couldn’t get himself to chant the name of God. Narada then suggested, “You can chant, “Mara, Mara.” Mara is Sanskrit for death, and the mantra flowed easily of Ratnakara’s tongue. But, with repeated chanting, Ma-ra Ma-ra turns into Ra-ma Ra-ma, and in time, Ratnakara was purified and later became the great sage Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana.

At the start of the Kali Yuga, we have the example of Śrīla Vyāsadeva, who took great efforts in writing down the Vedas, composing many works in order to somehow attract the minds of materialistic people to transcendence. He appealed to all kinds of people – the fruitive workers, the world-renouncers and the mystics – and helped them satisfy their desires in a pious way, that at least connects them to the Veda and with devotional service. At the end of this great literary achievement, he was still unsatisfied, and we see that his work was only completed after directly glorifying Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Bhāgavatam.

Coming down to the middle ages, we enter the era of Lord Chaitanya. Even in medieval India, where the Vedic culture was much more intact than it is today, we see that the interest in pure devotional service was sparse. Advaita Acarya lamented that the people of his day had no interest in devotional service and that they would rather spend their time studying dry books of logic. Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu took some drastic steps to reach out to the people of the age - even to the point of taking Sannyasa in a Mayavada sampradaya.

“Lord Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu, being omniscient, could understand the degradation of these students. Thus, He sat at home, contemplating how to rescue them. I have come to deliver all the fallen souls, but now just the opposite has happened. How can these rogues be delivered? How may they be benefited? I shall accept the sannyasa order of life, for thus people will offer Me their obeisances, thinking of Me as a member of the renounced order.” [CC. A. 17]

Śrīla Prabhodananda Sarasvati, a vastly learned sannyasi from the Śrī Sampradaya who became a devotee of Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu, writes in his Śrī Chaitanya Chandramrita about using flattery as a means to convince people to somehow or other listen to the message of Śrī Chaitanya. Śrīla Prabhupāda explains:

We have to preach... But if we say directly that "You are all mūdhas..." they will be angry... You have to speak the truth very cautiously. Otherwise they will be angry... Therefore, Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī is teaching us how we should present our case... "Sir, I have come to you, taking this grass in my teeth." This is a symbolic representation of becoming very humble in India... "And I am falling down on your feet. And I am flattering you. You are very grand. You are very nice. You are very learned. You are so on, so on... You are a great learned sādhu. My one request is that whatever you have learned, please forget. Whatever nonsense you have learned, please forget. This is my submission." "I have learned so many things, and I have to forget? Then what I have to do?" "You just submit yourself to Chaitanya-candra. Then everything will be perfect." [SB Lecture, 17 Nov 1976]

The Gaudiya movement was revived in modernity by Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Thakur. He was an influential figure in the intellectual circles of his time, and many of the books that flowed from his pen were aimed at building bridges. He wrote at a time when the *bhadraloka*, the Bengali elite, was rethinking their own Hindu identity under the influence of Western ideas. At the same time, the scholars of the Western world had started to intensely study Sanskrit works of literature of India. Bhaktivinoda reached out to both these communities with his literary works:

Kṛṣṇa-Saṁhita published in 1879 was Bhaktivinoda's first major work. Composed in Sanskrit and Bengali, the book was intended as a response to severe criticism of Kṛṣṇa by Christian missionaries, Brahmo Samaj, and westernized bhadrāloka for what they saw as his immoral, licentious behavior incompatible with his divine status in Hinduism. The critics drew upon the perceived moral lapses in Kṛṣṇa's character to further their propaganda against Hinduism and Vaiṣṇavism, challenging their very ethical foundation. In defense of the tenets of Vaiṣṇavism, Bhaktivinoda's Kṛṣṇa-Saṁhita employed the same rational tools of its opponents, complete with contemporary archeological and historical data and theological thought, to establish Kṛṣṇa's pastimes as transcendent (aprakṛita) manifestations of morality. In particular, he applied what he termed *adhunika-vada* ("contemporary thinking") – his methodology of correlating the phenomenal discourse of the scripture with the observable reality. The book evoked an intense and polarized response, with some praising its intellectual novelty and traditionalism while others condemned it for what they saw as deviations from the orthodox Vaiṣṇava hermeneutics.

Unabated by the criticism, Bhaktivinoda saw Kṛṣṇa-Saṁhita as an adequate presentation of the Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava thought even to a Western mind, and in 1880 sent copies of the book to leading intellectuals of Europe and America. Soon Bhaktivinoda received a

favorable response from an eminent Sanskrit scholar in London, Reinhold Rost, and a courteous acknowledgment of the gift from Ralph Waldo Emerson. This became the first foray of Chaitanya's theology into the Western world. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhaktivinoda_Thakur)

Bhaktivinoda also transferred his innovative and dynamic spirit to his son, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur, who set new precedents in reaching out to the public at large. Bhaktisiddhanta's largest program was the Theistic Exhibitions, which combined “secular entertainment” with spiritual substance:

Another immense success, and probably Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī's most popular preaching innovation, was the staging of diorama displays based on scriptural themes. These Theistic Exhibitions (pradarśanīs) required expert organization, months of planning, much hard work, and collection of huge funds. Entrance was free, and the Pradarśanīs became legendary for their beautiful displays coupled with a weighty message. Between 1928 and 1936 a total of ten such exhibitions were held. The exposition was divided into two sections, spiritual and secular, with items collected from every part of India, and the whole extravaganza covered more than one square mile. The secular division demonstrated miscellaneous departments of human endeavor—medical, educational, agricultural, arts and crafts, cattle and livestock, child welfare, athletics, and amusements.

Several provincial governments sent materials to be displayed. Other attractions were performances of athletic feats such as gymnastics, wrestling, boxing, sword and stick play, and jujitsu. There were musical competitions, dramas, film shows, a circus, and in the words of the Harmonist, “other varieties of innocent amusements.” Prizes, medals, and certificates were awarded to deserving exhibitors and performers. [From Śrī Bhaktisiddhanta Vaibhava, Vol 2, Chapter 18: Theistic Exhibitions]

In the field of publications, the Gaudiya Math employed a similar strategy:

Nadia Prakash was launched in March 1926 as a twice-weekly magazine, with both an English and a Bengali edition. From February 1928 it was re-titled Dainik (daily) Nadia Prakash and thereafter ran for sixteen years as a Bengali daily divided into two parts: prākṛta-jana-pāṭhya, suitable reading for materialists, and harijana-pāṭhya, suitable reading for devotees. Mostly it was typeset in two distinct and easily separable sections, of which devotees retained in their files only the harijana-pāṭhya. The mundane portion was meant to attract general readers, and even though it contained devotional views on worldly matters, reading thereof was often discouraged in the purely devotional section. The prākṛta-jana-pāṭhya was advertised in the

Harmonist: It supplies information of every description about agriculture, trade, industry, health, education, religion, society, proceedings of Nadia District and union boards, etc., besides news of the outside world. The masthead bore the anglicized spelling “The Daily Nadia Prakash” along with the Bengali version, and announced itself as *viśve ekmātra dainik pāramarthik patra*: “The only daily spiritual newspaper in the universe.” Serving both as the sole local newspaper for Nadia District and as a unique spiritual broadside, Nadia Prakash was popular among pious and discerning persons throughout Bengal. Each day packs of fresh copies were dispatched to outlying cities and towns. Several brahmacārīs were engaged in delivering it to regular subscribers, offering it to first-time readers, and canvassing for new subscribers. [From Śrī Bhaktisiddhanta Vaibhava Vol 2, Chapter 13: The Great Drum]

Thus, we see that our acaryas have been willing to extend themselves to the people of their time by connecting with their worldly interests and bringing them closer to transcendence. Śrīla Prabhupāda was also willing to work with the interests of his audience. When he first arrived in New York City, some people expressed a desire to learn Sanskrit and Śrīla Prabhupāda promptly started Sanskrit classes. Their desire was short lived and the classes didn’t last long, but Śrīla Prabhupāda was ready to teach them if that helped them make the connection to Kṛṣṇa. In San Francisco, Prabhupāda’s disciples went even further, arranging a charity rock show at

the Avalon Ballroom with the hippest rock bands of the era. The Prabhupāda Līlāmṛta by Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami describes that the devotees from New York were shocked:

Though some of the New York disciples had objected, Śrīla Prabhupāda was still scheduled for the Mantra-Rock Dance at the Avalon Ballroom. It wasn't proper, they had said, for the devotees out in San Francisco to ask their spiritual master to go to such a place. It would mean amplified guitars, pounding drums, wild light shows, and hundreds of drugged hippies. How could his pure message be heard in such a place?

But Prabhupāda was undeterred by their concerns:

Śrīla Prabhupāda knew he would not compromise himself; he would go, chant, and then leave. The important thing was to spread the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa. If thousands of young people gathering to hear rock music could be engaged in hearing and chanting the names of God, then what was the harm? As a preacher, Prabhupāda was prepared to go anywhere to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Allen Ginsberg, a famous poet and social activist, was scheduled to appear with Prabhupāda on stage. He was a controversial person – an advocate of drug use, free sex and other things that were part of the era – but he somehow had some faith in chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and was spreading the chanting in his own way.

With only a few days remaining before the Mantra-Rock Dance, Allen came to an early-morning kīrtana at the temple and later joined Śrīla Prabhupāda upstairs in his room...

The conversation turned to the upcoming program at the Avalon Ballroom. "Don't you think there's a possibility of chanting a tune that would be more appealing to Western ears?" Allen asked.

"Any tune will do," said Prabhupāda. "Melody is not important. What is important is that you will chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. It can be in the tune of your own country. That doesn't matter."

On the evening of the show, thousands of young people attended, and while seated on stage with Allen Ginsburg, Prabhupāda asked him to speak about the mantra and to lead a kirtan. Later Prabhupāda himself also danced and chanted, with the crowd going wild. And after the kirtan ended, Prabhupāda made his exit, and the rock groups took to the stage until the early morning hours.

Allen Ginsberg: We sang Hare Kṛṣṇa all evening. It was absolutely great-an open thing. It was the height of the Haight-Ashbury spiritual enthusiasm. It was the first time that there had been a music scene in San Francisco where everybody could be part of it and participate. Everybody could sing and dance rather than listen to other people sing and dance.

Prabhupāda allowed people to connect to Kṛṣṇa consciousness in their own way. The Līlāmṛta describes the usual kīrtan scene in the San Francisco temple:

After twenty minutes many of the young dancers were leaping, jumping, and perspiring, as Prabhupāda continued to sing, leading the dancers by the beat of his karatālas. His eyes were closed, yet he controlled the entire wild congregation, playing his karatālas loudly. The chanting and dancing continued, and Prabhupāda approved.

The kīrtana of these hippies was different from the chanting of Indian brāhmaṇas, but Prabhupāda didn't mind-his standard was devotion... Even if his young devotees didn't know how to play the harmonium keyboard or the mṛdaṅga, even if they didn't know that congregational kīrtana should be done not in constant unison (as they were doing) but responsively, and even if they didn't know how to honor the guru-still, because they were chanting and dancing, he encouraged them and nodded to them: "Yes."

Śrīla Prabhupāda knew that some aspects of the kīrtana were wrong or below standard, but he accepted the offering-and not awkwardly, but lovingly. He simply wanted these American boys and girls to chant. That they dressed irregularly, jumped too savagely, or had the wrong philosophy did not overconcern him. These boys and girls were chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa; so at least for the

present, they were pure. The hippies knew that, too. And they loved it. (Śrīla Prabhupāda Līlāmṛta)

Śrīla Prabhupāda oftentimes supported his disciples when they were innovative in the preaching field, and was ready to judge a thing by its results. Even as early as the 1970's, one of Śrīla Prabhupāda's disciples, Parivrajakacarya Swami, was teaching Hatha Yoga to the royal family of Tehran and at the same time teaching the principles of Bhakti. Śrīla Prabhupāda considered it very intelligent:

Anyway I know the people of Tehran they like hatha yoga very much. I understand Parivrajakacarya Swami is teaching a course combining both hatha and bhakti yoga to attract the people. This is a very good idea. Somehow or other inject the bhakti yoga. That will save them from the degradations of sense gratification. [Letter to Atreya Rsi, 4 December 1974]

And the Bhaktivedanta Purports describe the innovative preaching of the expert devotee:

“The expert devotees also can discover novel ways and means to convert the non-devotees in terms of particular time and circumstance. Devotional service is dynamic activity, and the expert devotees can find out competent means to inject it into the dull brains of the materialistic population. Such transcendental activities of the devotees for the service of the Lord can bring a new order of life to the foolish society of materialistic men.” [SB 1.5.16]

4. Rebranding Bhakti

Lord Chaitanya's movement, even though lumped in with other religious movements, is something quite unique. It offers a process of spirituality that is transcendental, and at the same time very practical. So practical in fact, that people can take part in the process regardless of their own level of spiritual realization.

Bhāgavatam, kirtan, prasadam and devotee association are the real products that this movement offers to the world. They have universal appeal and are universally accessible. Anyone can participate, and in their own style. Even in very dire cases, where people have no conception of what is true or false, what is right or wrong, the process of devotional service is still accessible:

We have observed in Amsterdam that there are many frustrated young people and they have become very much degraded in their way of life. They will not even listen to philosophy. So it is better to concentrate on the sankirtana and get them to chant with us. If they go on chanting, eventually they will become purified. [Letter to Danavir, 2 August 1972]

If even the dire cases are not excluded, what to speak of the world at large. The world is ready! We are living in a global village, where everyone is interested in exploring the food, music and ideas of different cultures - no longer are people limited to their own ethnic boundaries. The only competition

now is packaging - people have to become attracted to what you have to offer.

Repackaging the Spiritual Message

The modern world is a world of appearance, where books are certainly judged by their covers. If it looks good, it is good. A central question that all businesses face, is the question of branding. What is your brand and how will you package your product? Even if you have a great product, you will struggle to reach people if you don't have it properly packaged.

This then is one of the basic strategies of building bridges - to simply repackage the standard spiritual process in an attractive, or relatable form.

The world is most sorely in need of education in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but due to the ignorance of the age they are not interested in knowledge of the self. So if by labeling the bottle in some way more to attract them we are still able to teach Kṛṣṇa consciousness, let us do it. [Letter to Pancaratna, 2 May 1974]

The Power of a Name

The right name has the potential to become a self-propelling publicity campaign, motivating word of mouth, reputation, recommendations, and press coverage. - Lissa Reidel

Our concern is to invite people to participate in the process of Kṛṣṇa consciousness – singing, dancing, eating and hearing. And there are many ways to package this process to different audiences. Many projects are rebranding to create an image that attracts moderners, especially those who are not interested in traditional, ethnic religion.

A customized name allows a project or a program to direct itself clearly towards a specific target audience, and to create a separate identity for marketing purposes – a website, social media presence and so on.

“I understand that you have started to firmly initiate a campus society, called OSU Yoga Society. It would have been better to name it as Bhakti Yoga Society, otherwise the society may be understood as one of the many yoga societies. Anyway, whatever the name may be, it does not matter. If you are successful in capturing the students for chanting in the auditorium, it will be a great success.”
[Letter to Hayagriva, 8 November 1968]

“What exactly is this place?”

Rebranding does not simply mean a new name - it can also mean a different identity. The first thing people ask themselves when invited for a program is: “What kind of place is it?” And that is an important question to answer. What exactly is your center? Is it a church for a religious congregation? Is it a place for people of a specific ethnic community? Is it a community center that any person can visit? Is it a place of education? Is it

a social club? Is it a yoga studio? Is it a restaurant? Is it the headquarters of a revolutionary spiritual movement?

The traditional identity is a religious one - the temple is a place of worship for a religious community, who abide by the strict standards and culture of that religion, and you visit that place if you are interested in that religion. What bridging projects do, is to create alternative identities to attract people from a wider audience.

Let us look at some examples of the different identities that bridge projects have developed and the different programs they offer.

Yoga

Many bridge programs make use of the yoga identity. It has become a worldwide phenomenon, with millions of practitioners from all walks of life, and as part of the Vedic tradition, forms an easy way to bridge East and West.

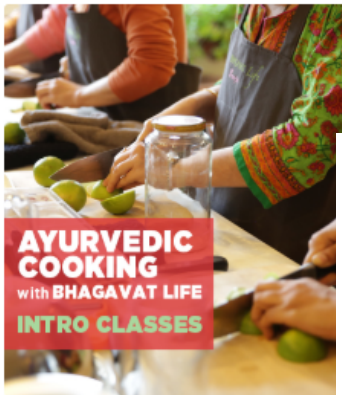
The Bhakti Center

Website link: <http://bhakticenter.org/>

The Bhakti Center is based in Manhattan, NYC. They describe themselves as: “a spiritual cultural center on New York City’s Lower East Side with a talented staff devoted to sharing the experience of

self-transformation through the timeless culture and practices of Bhakti-yoga.”

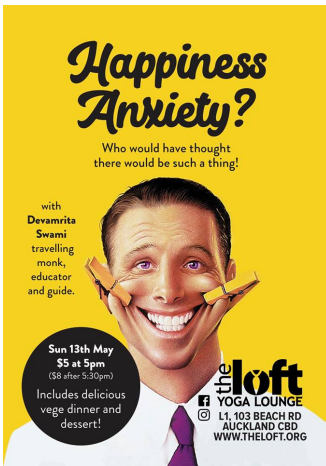
The multi-story building that houses the center includes a yoga studio, classrooms, the temple of Śrī Śrī Radha Muralidhara and an award-winning Ayurvedic restaurant. They present four avenues of growth – Yoga, Meditation, Wisdom and Culture – and present a wide variety of programs and community groups. Their Thursday night kirtan program draws a crowd of diverse and exuberant New Yorkers, chanting with full enthusiasm.



The Loft

Website link: theloft.org.nz

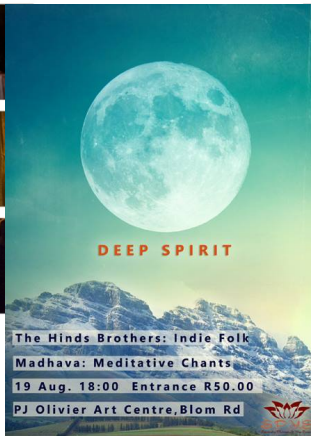
The Loft is a project based in Auckland, New Zealand. It runs regular yoga classes combined with dinner, as well as workshops, cooking classes and a weekly Free Spirit festival on Sunday nights.



The Spirituality Philosophy and Yoga Society

Website link: www.spys.co.za

SPYS is a student yoga society based in Stellenbosch, South Africa. They run weekly yoga classes, kirtans and discussions. They regularly do festivals that pull in the talented musicians and artists from the campus. You can see more of their programs at the website, or facebook.com/spyssu



The Community Center

Instead of styling oneself as a formal house of worship or a temple, one can also develop a community center. Often times these kinds of projects are based on suburban areas and have a very homely atmosphere.

The Harmony Collective

Website link: <https://www.theharmonycollective.org/>

Formally registered as ISKCON Ypsilanti, The Harmony Collective is a community center based in Michigan, USA. They do weekly kirtan events, community dinners and various other programs.



THE HARMONY COLLECTIVE.

learning love through cooperation



Kṛṣṇa Lounge

Website link: <http://www.Krsnalounge.com>



Kṛṣṇa Lounge is a project based in San Diego, USA. They describe themselves as “a community for spiritual revolution based on the six exchanges of love as taught by Śrīla Rupa Goswami, a 16th-century saint.”

They have very good integration between the monastic order and the public, a variety of engaging programs and some very hip graphic designs.

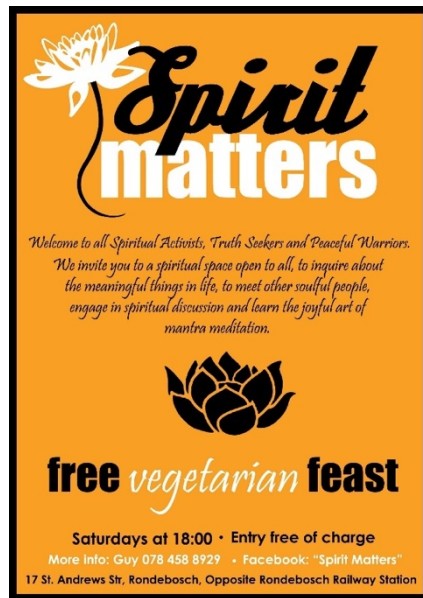


Another project connected with the devotees of San Diego is an innovative magazine project that ran for many years. *16 rounds to Samadhi* was the brainchild of Mahat Tattva das, now known as Ananda Tirtha Swami. It combines beautiful and contemporary graphic design with interesting articles, relevant to any modern person. You can see back issues at <http://www.16rounds.com>



Projects within Temples

Bridging projects can also happen right in the middle of a traditional temple. Many temples are creating spaces within the temples for programs that are directed towards a new audience. Examples below are “The Darshan Room” in Dallas, TX, or “Spirit Matters”, a program happening in Cape Town, South Africa.



Restaurants

Restaurants are arguably the most accessible form of public engagement. And it can be combined with some kind of facility to do programs or lectures, or even just to read books. Śrīla Prabhupāda himself offered it as a “non-sectarian” identity:

From the farms we should get sufficient foodstuffs and these can be sent to be used at our restaurants. Along with the restaurants there can be "Bhaktivedanta Reading Room" where all my books can be kept and people can come and sit comfortably and read. The people will like these restaurants and reading rooms. They will take them as non-sectarian. [Letter to Subhaviṣa, 16 March 1977]

OmNom

Website link: <https://omnom.com/>

An example of the restaurant/event space combination is **OmNom**, a wellness restaurant in London, that is combined with a space for yoga, workshops and events.



Govinda's Restaurant and Cinema

Website link: <https://www.govindas.com.au/>

This Govinda's in Sydney, Australia takes the restaurant-reading room combination to the next level, by combining the restaurant with a cinema, as well as an additional space for kirtan and workshops.



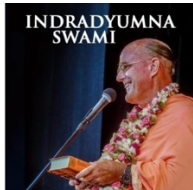
Arts and Culture

The performing arts like music, theatre and dance, can easily cross beyond any cultural boundaries. People can appreciate the music and arts from a different race, culture or even time-period.

Viva Kultura

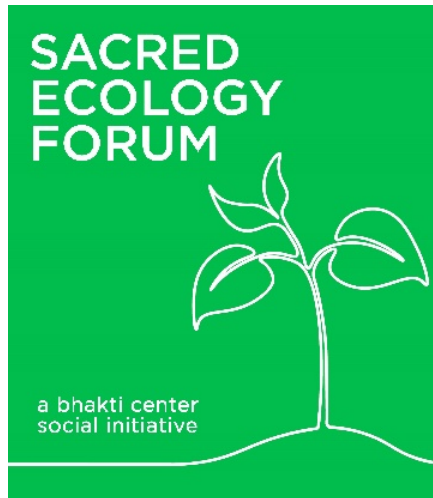
Website link: www.vivakultura.com

One of the most well-known performance groups in the devotee world is the festival tour organized by HH Indradyumna Swami. They have done performances in Poland, India and also America.



Ecology

Beside the yoga identity or the community center, there is another avenue for outreach that is very close to home: the realm of ecology. The ecological crisis is one of the most pressing contemporary issues, and worldwide people are tuning into the need to live more sustainably and more in harmony with nature. Ecology and a natural living lie at the very heart of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. The village of Vrindavana shows us not only the epitome of spiritual development but a complete way of living, in harmony with nature and the divine. From the ecological perspective, it is easy to appreciate the teachings of Kṛṣṇa consciousness – even the regulative principles make sense as something that can curb the greed that lies at the root of the ecological crises.



The Vedic Way

Website link: www.thevedicway.org

A devotee farm project from Veracruz, Mexico. They have a very successful YouTube channel, educating people on the various aspects of self-sustainable living from building houses to taking care of cows. Some of their videos have over 3 million hits!

The Kṛṣṇa Village in Australia

Website link: <https://Krsnavillage-retreat.com/>

The New Govardhana farm in Australia runs a program called the Kṛṣṇa Village, where volunteers can stay and work in a peaceful environment and engage with Kṛṣṇa consciousness at their own pace. They also offer yoga retreats and yoga teacher training. Here is a link to a review from a popular travel website that gives an idea of the impression it can make:

<https://www.thecaviarspoon.com/travel/Krsna-village-australia>

The Govardhana Eco Village

Website link: <https://www.ecovillage.org.in/>

The Govardhana Eco Village, situated a few hours drive outside of Mumbai, is the farming project of ISKCON Chowpatty. It is a premium retreat destination for both people from Mumbai, as well as yoga groups and pilgrims from the West. In addition to facilities like

a yoga school and an Ayurvedic retreat center, it also has a 10 acre replica of Vrindavana Forest.

These projects are examples of what can be done with a fully developed farming community. However, the ecological agenda is not limited to those who are on farms. Urban agriculture is also a growing trend, and many people are interested in growing food in small spaces. The Bhakti Center runs a Sacred Ecology Forum, combining ecology and theology for interesting discussions. A community garden can be started on the rooftop of an inner city building. By starting a community garden project, one will give the ecologically minded individuals an opportunity to render practical service and at the same time learn more about the consciousness that makes sustainable living possible. Śrīla Prabhupāda's contribution as an ecological activist is something that will surely become more widely known in the future, as devotees develop his vision into a bountiful reality.



5. A Palatable Presentation

“It is my desire that every American boy and girl receive a Kṛṣṇa conscious education, so your program in the Buffalo area schools is very encouraging to me. Young people especially are eager to receive our philosophy and this must be presented very palatably. [Letter to Rupanuga, 4 November 1970]

Regardless of what kind of project one is running, the process of sharing Kṛṣṇa consciousness usually includes education. In traditional temples, we have the standard format of kirtan and class that is based on a culture of submission and respect. The speaker sits on an elevated seat as a representative of Vyasadeva, while the audience sits on the floor, giving submissive aural reception to the transcendental message. It is conducted in a formal way, with the accompanying rituals like invocation prayers and recitation of Sanskrit slokas.

While the traditional format of education forms a core part of temple life, it can also be challenging for newcomers to immediately relate to it or even understand it. But, apart from the traditional class format, there are also other ways that people can become absorbed in philosophy or spiritual ideas.

The art of education is to spark the interest of the audience. Without that interest, it is difficult for people to concentrate and absorb what is being said. Śrīla Prabhupāda used the term “palatable”. One of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s disciples developed a presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness to appeal to a scientifically minded audience and wrote to Śrīla Prabhupāda to seek his blessings for such an innovative presentation. Prabhupāda responded by emphasizing that our first priority always remains speaking the truth, but that a palatable presentation is also important:

“The idea is if we speak the truth, those will hear who are intended to hear by being qualified or prepared. It is not that we should compromise to attract the mass, we are after the class. Still it was my method to make Kṛṣṇa consciousness palatable to you Western boys and girls, how else could I attract you to give up your habits of sense gratification? Kṛṣṇa philosophy can be approached from every angle because it is the Complete Whole, purnam. So if your scientific explanation, beginning from the point that sound vibration is the root cause of everything and leading to the understanding that Kṛṣṇa is the cause of the sound vibration is having good effect, why not continue in this way? Only thing is to remain true to the authorities like Kṛṣṇa, the great saints and acaryas, and everything you say will come out nicely. People are of different natures so we have to use our talents how to convince people in different circumstances, that's all.” [Letter to Lalita Kumara, 15 November 1971]

Relevant Issues

One strategy is to do talks or presentations on contemporary issues that people have an interest in, like sociology or politics, and bring that toward a spiritual conclusion. More people are interested in sociology and politics than in transcendence, but it requires “expert handling” to channel that interest to the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa. Śrīla Prabhupāda offers an interesting story in this regard:

“I understand that you are trying to get more lectures at colleges, also in sociology and political classes and philosophy classes. You should not give political or social discussions, while speaking on Kṛṣṇa consciousness philosophy from the Bhagavad-

Gita and Shrimad-Bhāgavatam, you can simply touch on some socio-political implications. Kṛṣṇa consciousness is so broad and all-inclusive that naturally when speaking in Kṛṣṇa consciousness we get so many opportunities to deal in politics although that is not our subject matter. To do so requires expert handling. You can take part in such classes and present the subject matter in such a way that it may at first appear like socio-political-philosophical affairs, but actually introduce our Kṛṣṇa consciousness philosophy. That requires tactful handling. You can give it a political, etc., headline and then end it with our philosophy. This is visokumbham payomukhan. That means to give somebody a jar of poison with a label of nectarine or milk preparation on it.

So we have to become politician in this way, just like in old politics there was presentation of visokanya. This visokanya is a poison beautiful girl. The idea was that a baby girl was from the very beginning administered little doses of poison every day, which she could tolerate. And gradually increasing the doses, culminating in large doses when she was youth. Such girls were engaged in killing enemies. The enemy will be received as a guest, and this girl will be engaged for looking after his comfort, and when they are friendly, as soon as the enemy will kiss the girl on the mouth, the poisonous effect will immediately affect because with the tongue the poison is very quickly effective. And the enemy would die. Similarly, we have to introduce Kṛṣṇa consciousness in such a way that through politics and sociology they will be injected and become Kṛṣṇa conscious. But instead of being a victim, they will be immortalized. That is the difference.” [Letter to Satsvarupa, 14 November 1968]

Dialogue



Another way to build bridges is by entering into dialogue with other thinkers or philosophies. A challenge when presenting Bhagavad Gita or Bhāgavatam in other cultures is that people are entirely unfamiliar with it. They don't know the Mahabharata, the different histories, the names, etc. But when entering into dialogue with other cultures, one can start on some familiar ground, making it easier for people to relate or understand, and show how the Vaiṣṇava tradition deals with similar themes.

If you require assistance for preaching to the student class, I think Revatinandana can come there and preach very nicely to the scholarly class in their own language. Now in our philosophy classes, each day I am discussing one of your Western philosophies and so far we have discussed many, many philosophers like Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Marx, like that, and now we are discussing Darwin and other scientists from your Western countries. [Letter to Tribhuvanatha, 16 June 1972]

Interactive Education

One can also use other educational environments that are more participatory. The traditional environment means giving respect and submission to the speaker - but many people are not interested in giving respect, what to speak of being submissive. This is especially, and ironically, the case with a more educated audience. But even if someone is not very respectful or submissive according to the Vedic standards, many people are still interested in the truth. If you give them the right environment, they might still listen to what you have to say. Discussion groups or reading groups create an environment where others can also participate. One may argue that this goes against the Bhāgavatam culture, but Śrīla Prabhupāda himself suggests that

patience and a willingness to also listen will help when dealing with certain audiences:

Now I want that we shall recruit more and more our men amongst the intelligent class of men. Because they are a little educated or they have got some wealth or fame or ability, so they will be sometimes little puffed-up, but that is all right, they deserve it. Now we shall have to learn the art how to approach such higher-class of men and attract them to apply themselves to this Kṛṣṇa consciousness process of self-realization. That requires much tact, and we shall have to expect to meet all challenges by sharp minds. But if we remain always absorbed in remembering Lord Chaitanya, how He converted so many intelligent men, even sitting for three days and nights to hear them speak without Himself speaking anything, and if we remember how Kṛṣṇa was so much patient to explain everything to Arjuna, even Arjuna was speaking like a fool—in this way, being always tolerant of others and appreciating their points of view, it will be easy matter for us to convince them gradually to join us. [Letter to Balavanta, 13 Dec 1972]

Another point is that many people are also too shy to ask a question in the traditional temple environment. It is too public, and in a foreign environment with a culture they don't understand. They can be afraid of making a fool of themselves. In smaller groups, it is easier for people to participate and ask questions, making the philosophy more accessible.

When it comes to applying different educational models, the best is to learn from devotees who have practical experience in using these methods.

6. Being Expert

Śrutakīrti, as he moved to massage Prabhupāda's side, asked, "Prabhupāda, how can we tell the difference between making an adjustment and changing a principle?"

Prabhupāda's eyes closed and Śrutakīrti continued to massage. After a few moments, Prabhupāda opened his eyes and said, "That takes a little intelligence." [*My Glorious Master*, Bhurijana Das].

Building bridges to a contemporary audience has two aspects to it – active and passive. So far, we have looked mostly at the active part of building bridges. The active part means connecting with a broader range of interests, or in other words, putting more things in. The other aspect is the passive one, which means leaving some things out.

In putting things in, one has to be careful. But in leaving things out, one arguably has to be even more careful. Śrīla Prabhupāda allowed that for the sake of preaching, one can sometimes leave out some aspects of the tradition. An aspect of the traditional culture often left out is devotional clothes, for a variety of reasons:

For paramahamsas, or sannyāsīs in the Vaiṣṇava order, preaching is the first duty. To preach, such sannyāsīs may accept the symbols of sannyāsa, such as the daṇḍa and kamaṇḍalu, or sometimes they may not... Such a sannyāsī is free to accept or reject the marks of sannyāsa. His only thought is "Where is there an opportunity to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness?" Sometimes the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness

movement sends its representative sannyāsīs to foreign countries where the daṇḍa and kamaṇḍalu are not very much appreciated. We send out preachers in ordinary dress to introduce our books and philosophy. Our only concern is to attract people to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. We may do this in the dress of sannyāsīs or in the regular dress of gentlemen. Our only concern is to spread interest in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. [SB 7.13.9]

Sometimes members of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa consciousness—especially in the Western countries—find it difficult to approach people to distribute books because people are unfamiliar with the traditional saffron robes of the devotees. The devotees have therefore inquired whether they can wear European and American dress before the general public. From the instructions given to King Pratāparudra by Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya, we can understand that we may change our dress in any way to facilitate our service. When our members change their dress to meet the public or to introduce our books, they are not breaking the devotional principles. The real principle is to spread this Kṛṣṇa Consciousness movement, and if one has to change into regular Western dress for this purpose, there should be no objection. [CC. M 14.5]

Another aspect that people can find intimidating is Deity worship. Most bridging programs happen in a more neutral environment than a temple, where all the formalities and rituals

like bowing when entering etc. are not required. When his disciples wanted to take Deities into the classrooms while doing university programs, Śrīla Prabhupāda gave the following advice:

“Gaura Nitai Deities should not be taken into university classrooms. The professors and students will think we are fanatics. It is better to keep a big picture of Gaura Nitai which can be seen by everyone, rather than taking Deities into a classroom.” [Letter to Satsvarupa, 5 January 1976]

The guiding principles remain an intelligent sensitivity toward the audience.

“There are different climates and situations in different parts of the world, and if one has to discharge his duties to preach the message of the Lord, he must be expert in adjusting things in terms of the time and place.” [SB 1.9.9]

As with most things in life, some expertise is required to avoid complications. Here are a few thoughts:

1) Bridges within borders

Many things that are popular are also sinful. If we open a bar in Govinda’s we will surely attract more customers - but at what cost? When trying to connect to trendy movements, the four regulative principles give us an immediate guideline as to how far we can go. But even then, if we go too far away from what we really are, bridge programs can be seen as deceptive.

If we present ourselves as something we are not, then it becomes difficult to come out with the real picture without losing face. In many of the projects above, we saw bridge programs connected to a bigger program with different aspects, organized around a strong transcendental core that keeps everything together.

2) Know where you are going

Bridge programs aim to bring people from point A to B. But what exactly is point B? Most often bridge preaching is aimed at bringing people to a point where they are comfortable in the ISKCON temple environment and everything that goes with it, including elements of Vedic culture like dress, separation of the sexes and temple etiquette, based on understanding and faith in the process of devotional service as taught by Śrīla Prabhupāda.

Other projects could aim for something else, perhaps creating an alternative kind of society that does not have so many of the ethnic aspects of the traditional ISKCON temple. But in all cases, a level of integration with the greater devotee community is a healthy place to be.

3) Two-Way Traffic

Bridges can lead to two-way traffic. Because bridge preaching often involves a downplay of certain aspects of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, it can cause confusion or doubt in devotees whose faith is not so strong. One might start developing doubts about the aspects of Kṛṣṇa consciousness that are not so

politically correct or start feeling resistant to some of the cultural norms that are different in the society of the devotees. Therefore, it is best for experienced devotees to be involved in bridge outreach or at least be there for leadership and support. It requires great tact to know when to emphasize something or put it aside. The immature can either be too fanatic, or too lax and in the process confuse themselves.

4) Purity remains the force

In his book, Bhurijana Prabhu tells of his experience as a preacher in Hong Kong in the early '70s. Prabhupāda allowed them to adjust the presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness by wearing civilian clothes and having a more oriental presentation - to which the Chinese people responded well. But unfortunately, Bhurijana also started to slacken in his own practices, which led to serious complications.

“With Prabhupāda’s permission, I grew my hair and wore nondevotee clothes. Prabhupāda, however, insisted we wear tilaka, “even if applied thin.” We moved our temple room to a smaller room in our flat and converted the temple room into a typical living room with couches and chairs. We began cooking prasādam according to Chinese vegetarian tastes and held kīrtanas with mṛdaṅga, karatālas, and guitar. Gradually, Chinese people began responding to our Back to Godhead distribution and weekly “yoga” meetings at the Hong Kong City Hall. Guests began attending our Sunday Feast and kīrtanas. At times we would gather up a group and ferry from crowded Hong Kong to Dai Long Waan, a secluded nearby island beach, take prasādam, and chant

Hare Kṛṣṇa as the ocean waves rolled in. Chinese people were becoming devotees.

But along with adapting our preaching techniques, we also slackened our Kṛṣṇa conscious practices—we began neglecting to hold maṅgala-ārati and would just awaken and chant our rounds. I became “too busy” to study Prabhupāda’s books. Gradually the weed of material enjoyment began to attach itself around my tender devotional creeper, and going to the beach to chant and wearing nondevotee clothes were beginning to assume other dimensions than a preaching tactic. I imagined that Prabhupāda understood and was offering sanction due to our increased preaching success.” [My Glorious Master, Bhurijana Das]

Whilst making many arrangements to attract people with an interesting and engaging presentation, it is always wise to keep in mind that there can be no real transformation without spiritual purity.



7. Taking the Leap

This book was written for those who have taken up the task of sharing Kṛṣṇa with others. All of us have to find our own space, our niche within this movement and it will be different for each of us. Some find themselves on the forefront of innovative outreach, and others find themselves tasked with the responsibility to preserve and protect the traditional core. Regardless of our position, we are all faced with the same momentous task of carrying forward the mission of Lord Chaitanya, as inherited from Śrīla Prabhupāda.

While we can and should do our best to make Kṛṣṇa consciousness easy for others, there is an important reality that should always be kept in mind: regardless of one's presentation or style, preaching is difficult. Not that it is *only* that – it is also enlivening, nourishing and at times absolutely ecstatic – but nevertheless, it is difficult.

“Preaching can be a difficult, thankless task, but a preacher must follow the orders of the Supreme Lord and be unafraid of materialistic persons.” SB 6.5.39

The difficulty is not due to an Eastern culture going to the West, but due to a transcendental culture being manifested in the material world:

“The first concern of a nondevotee is how to enjoy his personal sense gratification at once, whereas the devotee's first concern is to satisfy the Lord. This is the

distinction between the nondevotee and the devotee... The members of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement must be alert in regard to this point, and then their preaching of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement will be successful.” [SB 8.8.38]

“So, it is a different type of civilization, a different style of life. If you want to introduce they will accuse you, so many, like madmen. And still we have to do. That is preaching. You cannot expect very smooth life in preaching.” [Conversation, 26 Jan 1977]

In building bridges to the modern world, we try to make it as easy as possible for people to come to Kṛṣṇa. But, “as easy as possible” doesn’t always mean easy. No amount of presentation or innovation can get around the reality that the change of heart required to come to pure devotional service will not be without struggle.

To highlight this point is not at all meant as a discouragement. Quite the opposite - it is meant to be invigorating. When we take up a challenge, in full knowledge that it will require some struggle, the best of us comes to the forefront. We have to dig deep within ourselves, and also take firm hold of the mercy available to us, to successfully execute our task. Many aspects of the tradition that we might find challenging in the beginning, are things that help and protect us once we understand and appreciate them. By accepting the difficulty of the task at hand, we sidestep a pitfall that leads to deviation – thinking that we can be Kṛṣṇa conscious, or spread it to others, without paying the price.

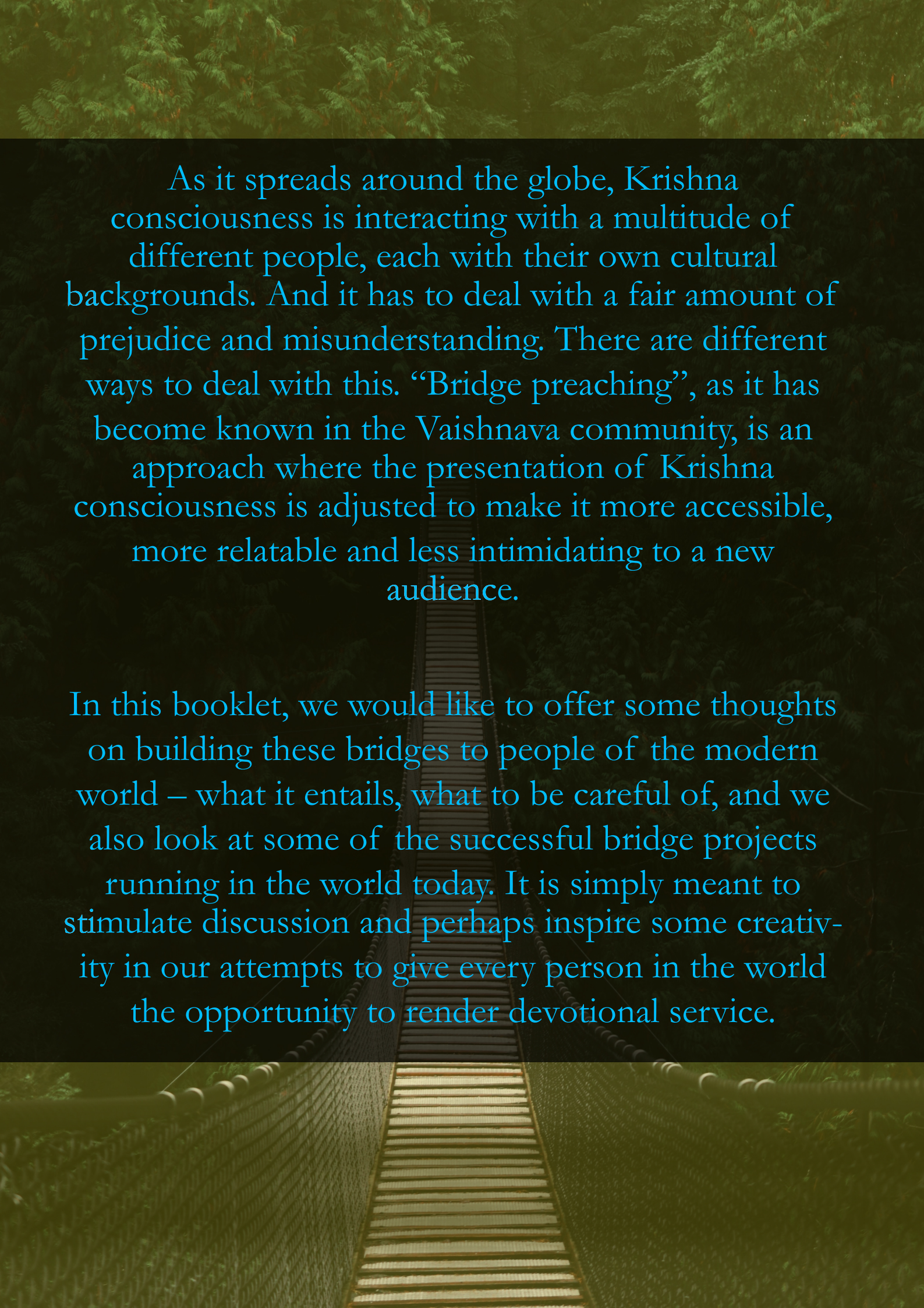
Character building is the groundwork for seating Kṛṣṇa consciousness... And because we are a little bit strict in this matter, we have not a very large number of followers, neither do we want any large number of nonsense followers. We want only one moon at night, and we do not care for millions of stars. [Letter to Jai Mazo, 18 January 1968]

It is this mood with which Śrīla Prabhupāda started this movement, and in this mood that he empowered his disciples with the divine responsibility to carry it forward. And whether we are innovators, traditionalists, or a mix of both, may we always strive to become moons ourselves, and thus be empowered to help others do the same.

After all, it is the age of Lord Chaitanya. Why settle for anything less?

I offer my respectful obeisances unto Lord Śrī Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. He is an ocean of transcendental mercy, and although the subject matter of bhakti-yoga is very confidential, He has nonetheless manifested it so nicely, even in this Age of Kali, the age of quarrel. [CC Madhya 22.1]





As it spreads around the globe, Krishna consciousness is interacting with a multitude of different people, each with their own cultural backgrounds. And it has to deal with a fair amount of prejudice and misunderstanding. There are different ways to deal with this. “Bridge preaching”, as it has become known in the Vaishnava community, is an approach where the presentation of Krishna consciousness is adjusted to make it more accessible, more relatable and less intimidating to a new audience.

In this booklet, we would like to offer some thoughts on building these bridges to people of the modern world – what it entails, what to be careful of, and we also look at some of the successful bridge projects running in the world today. It is simply meant to stimulate discussion and perhaps inspire some creativity in our attempts to give every person in the world the opportunity to render devotional service.