

Atha Sadhu-sanga

By Satyanarayana Dasa

Introduction

Sri Rupa Gosvami says *bhakti* develops from *sadhana* to *bhava* by passing through eight steps (BRS 1.4.15-16). The first step, *sraddha*, leads to the second, *sadhu-sanga*: association with a *sadhu*, a Vaishnava saint. Commenting on these verses, Sri Jiva Gosvami writes that *prior* to attaining *sraddha*, a person has association with a *sadhu* by whose grace one acquires *sraddha*. This is how he interprets the word *adau* (which literally means, “in the beginning”). The first association of a *sadhu* instills trust in the statements of scripture. This trust is called *sraddha*. Because it comes without the conscious effort of the recipient, it is described as the “causeless grace” of a devotee. Often scriptures use the word *yadrccha* for this phenomena which is usually translated as “by chance” or “independent,” and has the connotation of being causeless (e.g. SB 11.20.8, 11).

Sadhu-sanga, which awards *sraddha*, is the greatest blessing for a conditioned being. It brings about a permanent revolution in the heart of a person, which is why it has been glorified in scriptures more than anything else. In *Bhagavat Purana*, Lord Krishna himself speaks about the importance of *sadhu-sanga* (SB 11.12.1-15).

It is rare to acquire a human birth, but *sadhu-sanga* is still more rare:

durlabho mānuṣo deho

dehinām kṣaṇa-bhaṅguraḥ

tatrāpi durlabham manye

vaikuṅṭha-priya-darśanam

“For the conditioned souls, the human body is a rare boon and that too is very transient. But I think that even rarer for those who have achieved human life is the association of devotees, who are dear to the Lord of Vaikuntha.” (SB 11.2.29)

According to King Mucukunda, material existence comes to an end when one has such *sadhu-sanga*:

bhavāpavargo bhramato yadā bhavej

janasya tarhy acyuta sat-samāgamah

sat-saṅgamo yarhi tadaiva sad-gatau

parāvareśe tvayi jāyate matiḥ

"O Lord Acyuta, the living being wanders in the cycle of birth and death. When the time for his release from this cycle approaches, he obtains the association of those established in truth. From the moment he obtains such association, a devotional inclination is awakened towards You, who are the supreme goal of attainments for the sages and the orchestrator of both cause and their effect." (SB 10.51.54)

The Lord arranges the *cause* - the association of sages - which creates the *effect* of liberation from material existence and inclination towards devotion. Although material existence is uprooted by *sadhu-sanga*, Mucukunda shows its efficacy by stating that when one's material bondage has come to an end, one gets the association of a *sadhu*. He thereby places the effect before the cause.

After attaining *sraddha* the recipient makes a conscious effort to seek further *sadhu-sanga*. This is the second of the eight steps. Here the meaning of *sadhu* (literally, a holy person) is guru because *bhajana-kriya* (practicing of devotion) is the third step, and, according to Rupa Gosvami, practice of *uttama-sadhana-bhakti* begins with surrender to a qualified guru (BRS 1.2.74). In other words, when one has proper *sraddha* one seeks a guru.

Dreaming of the Life of a Sadhu

I am fortunate to have met such a qualified guru in my life, although I am now bereft of his physical association. He entered into the eternal *lila* of Sri Sri Radha Govindadeva on 6th October, 2013. In separation, my memories of association with him are surfacing on the screen of my mind. This elevates my consciousness and I write to share my memories with others, so they might also benefit.

How I came to his association and became a recipient of his causeless grace is an interesting journey. Thinking in retrospect I cannot consider it anything but the *yadrccha kripa* of Sri Krishna. It is He who appeared in the form of my guru.

Since my early childhood I had a deep, inner inclination to live the life of a *sadhu*, Thus I never made plans to lead a material life and was quite certain that I would never marry. As a child I used to lie in my bed and contemplate death. By nature I was very reticent and never revealed my plan to become a *sadhu* to anybody, therefore nobody in my family ever suspected that I had such an inclination.

My parents and grandparents were *krishna-bhaktas* associated with the Radha Vallabha-*sampradaya* which was founded by Hit Harivamsa Gosvami. My paternal house was next to the village temple, which housed the deities of Radha Krishna and Lord Shiva's family, so I grew up participating in the temple ceremonies. I also had my personal *puja* room in my house where I used to do some *artik* and offer the food which my mother cooked for the family. I was very fond of reading *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and used to

recite them for the village people. *Sadhus* would sometimes visit the village temple, but they were not very knowledgeable.

After I completed my engineering education I had no desire to take up a job. I was contemplating how to take to spiritual life and was always on the lookout for *sadhu-sanga*. I used to meet *sadhus* whenever I got the opportunity, but never met a *sadhu* who impressed me. There were no *ashramas* or spiritual societies in my village area, so I did not have any definite idea how to take to spiritual life. I had no choice but to take up a job. My parents and other family members had no idea about my personal plans and assumed I would lead a normal life and get married eventually. I was very reserved in my dealings with others and had little interest in mixing with people. When I did engage with them, I acted as if I had no spiritual interests.

After I got a job in my home town, there was a proposal for marriage. I considered that it would completely ruin my plans, so I resigned from my position and found another job in Mumbai - more than 1000 km away from my home town. This was a relief because I knew nobody would pressure me to marry in Mumbai!

In Mumbai, I searched for a spiritual organization. I went to the headquarters of a meditation group at Mount Abu in Rajasthan to attend a three day meditation camp especially for engineers and doctors. I had many questions during the lectures, but they were not answered satisfactorily. So I returned to Mumbai disappointed.

Whenever I returned to my village to visit my family there was a proposal for marriage. I did not think I would be able to convince my parents that I wanted to pursue a *sadhu* life rather than get married. It is ironic that Indian families hold *sadhus* in such high regard, but if one of their own members wants to become one, they protest vehemently. I knew very well that if I joined any *ashram* in India, my family members would track me down and try to convince me to give up my spiritual pursuit because of their strong attachment to me. Consequently, I decided to leave India and go to the West. In January 1979 I moved to the USA - Miami, Florida.

When I landed there, I had a sort of epiphany. I realized the importance of Vedic culture and my resolve to take to spiritual life became much more intense. The American lifestyle did not attract me. I had heard a lot about America and its high standard of living, but to me it all looked very empty inside – a lot of glamour without much substance. At the same time I felt very safe since no one would try to convince me to get married. I had no relatives in the area, and the only communication with my family in India was by letters. It took about a month to get a reply.

At that time there were not many Hindu temples or Hindu organizations in the US. I visited the Krishna Murti Study Center in Miami and the center of Bala Bhagavan, popularly known as Guruji, but was not impressed. Eventually I came to know that there was a temple run by American devotees just a few kilometers away from my residence, so I attended a Sunday evening class. I was unfamiliar with ISKCON up until this point, but

learned more about the organization after visiting. The whole atmosphere appeared very strange to me and I was put off by the devotees' aggressive mood: They seemed mostly interested in selling their books. I have always been fond of buying books, but I refused to make any purchases due to their aggressiveness. I left the temple as quickly as I could and never went back. I remember thinking, "This society is not for me."

Search for a Guru

One day I was in a mall and discovered a sale of old books. "Easy Journey to Other Planets" by Srila Prabhupada was one of the books I picked up. I began reading this small book immediately and found it quite interesting, but didn't realize the connection between the author and ISKCON. I was so impressed by Srila Prabhupada's writing that I would have changed my mind and gone back to the temple had I realized it.

After one year I was transferred to the headquarters of my company in Detroit. There I lived with an Indian friend from IIT Kharagpur who hailed from a pious family in Calcutta. This was the first time in my life that I could speak my heart openly. I had a few Indian friends in Miami, but did not engage in spiritual talks with them. It was thus a pleasant surprise to have a roommate in Detroit who was quite spiritually inclined. We became very good friends and, despite our meager knowledge, were always discussing spiritual topics in our apartment. We used to go to the Municipal Library in downtown Detroit and get books on Hinduism, Yoga, and Spirituality, and planned on eventually giving up our jobs so that we could go back to India and search for a guru. I would lie in bed every night and dream of walking in the Himalayas in search of a self-realized guru. This was also when my friend and I began fasting on weekends because we read in a book on Yoga that fasting gives control over the senses, which is the preliminary step for self-realization.

While in Miami, I had contacts with many of my previous classmates and other students from my Institute. However I considered it a disturbance because all these friends were into material enjoyment and there was not even the remotest chance of talking about spirituality with them. Once I moved to Detroit, I no longer contacted any of them.

ISKCON Temple Detroit

Once I was invited to Lansing, the capital city of Michigan, by one of my senior colleagues from IIT Delhi. He was a nice gentleman and had heard about my spiritual inclination - which was big news to my circle of friends. He informed me that in downtown Detroit there was a very beautiful Radha-Krishna temple and that they had *artik*, lecture, and *prasad* every Sunday evening. When I returned to Detroit, I found out the telephone number of the temple and called them for directions. Because we used to fast on Saturday and Sunday, my roommate and I thought it was a perfect arrangement to

break our fast at the temple since they were giving out *prasad*. As it was, we were not very fond of cooking.

Before we went I did not know it was an ISKCON temple. Given my past experience, I would not have gone had I known. Once we arrived, I was completely captivated by the whole temple surroundings, the deities, and the *prasad*. I was only disturbed by how the devotees interacted with me - but it was different from the Miami ISKCON temple because there were many Indian visitors and devotees. An Indian devotee gave me a copy of "Back to Godhead" magazine. At that time, Prabhupada's *Lilamrita* (biography) was not yet printed, but parts of it were being published in BTG. They were printing chapters from the second volume, "Struggling Alone." This captivated my heart completely. It described Prabhupada's struggle in the Bowery of New York. I was very impressed by his dedication and his efforts to spread *bhakti* in the West. I visited the temple regularly and the devotees always tried to preach to me, which later on I learnt was their duty. I would always end up in arguments with them. After a few visits, the devotees stopped preaching to me. Later on I learned that the temple president, who happened to be alumni of my Institute, heard about me and instructed the *brahmacaris* to leave me alone - he would deal with me personally.

A Guru like Prabhupada

The temple president would meet me and my friend and talk to us very nicely. Being Prabhupada's disciple, he told us his personal experiences with him. After reading Prabhupada's biography, I was already thinking of becoming his disciple, but I soon learned he was no longer present. I then planned on going to India to find some of his godbrothers. I thought that if Prabhupada and his guru were so great, there must be other disciples of Bhaktisiddhanta who were equally great, and that I could accept one of them as guru.

One day when I was talking with my friend about my plan to go back to India and search for a guru amongst Prabhupada's godbrothers, he asked me, "Do you believe in Prabhupada?" I replied, "Of course, otherwise why would I look for his godbrothers?" He pressed, "Do you believe Prabhupada is a pure devotee?" I replied affirmatively. To this he said, "A pure devotee is perfect. He knows everything. Prabhupada is a pure devotee and he has appointed 11 of his disciples who act as gurus. So you should accept *diksa* from one of them." His argument was convincing to me and this is how I joined ISKCON in 1980 at Detroit.

Intense Desire to Study the *Sandarbhas*

Through Prabhupada's books I learned about the *Sat Sandarbhas* of Sri Jiva Gosvami, whom Prabhupada considered the greatest philosopher. An intense desire arose in me to study these *Sandarbhās*. At that time I had no idea how it was possible to fulfill that desire, but I knew it could not happen in the USA - to study the *Sandarbhās*, I would have to return to India. Moreover, devotees in ISKCON were not encouraged to read anything except BBT publications. In the meantime, I started learning Sanskrit through my own effort. I was hoping that one day I would be able to go to India and learn Sanskrit well enough to study the *Sandarbhās*. However, the devotees always spoke negatively about returning to India and said that in Indian ISKCON temples there was hardly any service to do, making it a waste of time to go there when I had important service at the temple in Detroit. Therefore, I had no immediate plan to return to India.

At the same time, I was regularly getting news from my family that they were always worried about me, especially my mother who often cried thinking about me. She thought that since I had become a *sadhu* I would be going around begging food in the USA because she saw the *sadhūs* in India begging from house to house. She wanted me to come back and live in some temple in India so I didn't have to go around begging. Considering my mother's concern and also my situation in ISKCON - which had taken a drastic turn because of the departure of my initiating guru in ISKCON - I decided to return to India in 1983. I visited my family, consoled my mother, and then visited Mayapur and Vrindavan temples.

My desire was to be in ISKCON Vrindavan, but considering that my family lived just two hours outside Vrindavan, I did not think it was a good idea. Thus, I chose to serve in ISKCON Tirupati, where I started learning Sanskrit from a professor. I continued to dream of moving to Vrindavan.

I first visited Vrindavan during the month of Kartika. Being fond of buying books I went to Loi Bazar and happened to find the *Sandarbhās* printed by Guru Maharaja. From these books I got his address and immediately had the desire to visit him. I went there alone in the evening. When I first went to Guru Maharajji's ashram in 1983, it looked much different from what you see now. The tall main front gate was not yet built. There were gardens on both sides. When I entered the temple room, Maharajji was teaching a *sannyasi* in Bengali. Later I learned that the *sannyāsī* was from ISKCON and his name was Venkata Swami. I hardly understood anything from the lecture because I didn't know Bengali. After the class was over, I posed a question to Maharajji about *madhurya rasa*. He gave a long answer in very Sanskritized Hindi. The answer was very lucid and unprecedented - I had never heard anything like it before. It completely captivated me and made a deep impression on my heart. I left, but intensely desired to come back one day and study under him. From then onwards I was always meditating on this. However, I was the co-president of ISKCON Tirupati and we had taken up the project of building a huge temple and guesthouse. I felt very responsible for my service. I used to contemplate that after this project was completed, perhaps in another ten years, I would resign from all my responsibilities and come to Vrindavan. In the meantime, I was visiting Vrindavan every

Kartika and used to go to Maharajji's place to have his *darshan* and buy any new literature he had printed. At that time his press was in full swing and he may have had two or three cows. Every time I met him my desire to study the *Sandarbhas* would become more intense.

Sri Krishna's ways are very mysterious. Some very serious problems arose in the Tirupati center and it became impossible for me to function in my service. In spring of 1987 I left Tirupati and came to Vrindavan. I became a Sanskrit teacher in the Bhaktivedanta Swami International Gurukula and continued my study of Sanskrit. After I settled down, one evening I went to visit Maharajji and requested him to teach me. One could visit him only in the evenings because he used to keep silence till 4 pm. Before he built the present temple, he used to live in the back side where there is a garden at present. There are a few small rooms on the northern side of the building where Maharajji lived with his *gurudeva*. After his *gurudeva's* departure he continued to live there for some years and later on purchased the adjacent piece of land where the present temple and *gosala* are. The front parts of these rooms were demolished when we planted trees and did some renovation work. While living in the old place he was keeping silence till sunset. There was a board outside his old room which said, "Visitors only after sunset" in Hindi. Locally, Maharajji was known as *Mauni Baba* – 'the silent baba'.

When I arrived at his *ashrama* I met Hare Krishna Baba outside the temple. I asked about studying from Maharajji. Baba told me that Maharajji doesn't teach anymore because of the misbehavior of students. This was a shock to me and shattered my dream. I asked Baba if I could have *darshan* of Maharajji. He replied that usually Maharajji comes and sits in the temple room after 5 pm to receive any visitors, but on that particular day he had some other engagement. I left heartbroken. I was waiting for years to study under Maharajji. Now that dream was over.

I approached all the well-known scholars of the Gaudiya *sampradaya* in Vrindavan to see if anybody could teach me the *Sandarbhas* of Jiva Gosvami. To my despair each one of them expressed their inability to teach the *Sandarbhas* and told me that only Maharajji was capable of doing so. I continued my Sanskrit studies and hoped that when I became proficient, I could try to study the *Sandarbhas* myself.

The Most Joyous Moment

A few months passed and again something mysterious happened. One day I was talking with the head *pujari* of Krishna Balaram Temple, Purna Chanda Dasa, about studying the *Sandarbhas*. To my surprise he told me that he knew Maharajji personally and promised to take me to meet him. I took this as a special blessing of Sri Sri Radha Shyamamundara.

One evening I accompanied Purna Chanda to Maharajji's *ashrama*. When we arrived Maharaja was sitting on the roof and supervising the construction of the first part of the *goshala* where there were only four cows and one bull. He came down on a bamboo ladder and stood with his back against the big Papadi tree, which still exists. We paid obeisances to him and Purna Chand introduced me to him. I then requested him to teach me the *Sandarbhas*. He looked at me and was silent for some time. Then he asked, "Why don't you first study *Harinamamrita Vyakarana* (the book on Sanskrit grammar by Jiva Gosvami)?" At that time I was studying Panini's system of Sanskrit grammar from a Vaishnava *sadhu* at Akhandananda Swami Ashram. I replied that it would be difficult to study two grammars simultaneously and that I would surely study *Harinamamrita Vyakarana* after I had completed the Panini system. Maharaja was silent again and then said, "Yes, I will teach you". That was the most joyous moment of my life.

A life according to *shastra*

On the first day of my class I took a garland and some offering to worship him. As soon as I offered the garland, he immediately removed it. This was very striking to me. In ISKCON I used to always see gurus with garlands. From his behavior, I learned what is meant by humility. Although Maharaja was highly learned - the only one who could teach the *Sat Sandarbhas* - he was very simple. He was not sitting on a high seat, but sat on the floor with a small wooden desk in front of him. He did not exude the air of a big scholar or *acharya*. He led his life according to the principles of *shastra* (scripture) and thus was rightly known as *shastri*.

I am very fortunate to have studied all the major Gosvami literature from him. Now when I look back I am amazed how Maharajji found time to teach me so much. He first taught me the *Sat Sandarbhas* of Jiva Gosvami: *Tattva, Bhagavat, Paramatma, Krishna, Bhakti* and *Priti Sandarbhas*. After these he taught me *Sarva-samvadini* and *Harinamamrita-vyakaranam* of Jiva Gosvami, *Laghu Bhagavatamritam, Bhakti-rasamrita-sindhu* and *Ujjavala Nilamani* of Rupa Gosvami, *Brihad Bhagavatamritam* and *Haribhaktivilasa* of Sanatana Gosvami, *Siddhanata Darpana* and *Govinda Bhasya* of Baladeva Vidyabhusana, *Madhurya Kadimbini* of Visvanatha Cakravarti, and *Caitanya Caritamrita* of Krsnadas Kaviraja Gosvami. He not only taught me these books, but their commentaries as well (except, of course, *Govinda Bhasya* and *Sarva-samvadini*, which are commentaries in themselves). Moreover, he taught me *Bhagavad Gita* with the commentaries of Sri Visvanatha Cakravarti and Sri Baladeva Vidyabhusana, and *Srimad Bhagavatam* with the commentaries of Sridhara Svami, Sri Jiva Gosvami and Sri Visvanatha Cakravarti.

My intention was to study all the major Gaudiya Vaisnava literature from Maharaja while studying the *Sad-darshanas*, such as *Nyaya* and *Vaisesika*, from another teacher. My logic was that no one else could teach Gaudiya literature, while others were proficient in the *Sad-darshanas*, so I should not use Maharajji's time to study the latter. Maharajji knew

this, but one day said that he also wanted to teach me the Sad-darshanas. I was happy to hear that. He started teaching me *Sloka-vartika* of Kumarila Bhatta and *Nyaya-siddhanata-muktavali* of Visvanatha Panchanana. The first is a book of Purva-mimamsa and the second of Nyaya. Both are very difficult subjects. Maharajji was a great Naiyayika. Although he had degrees in all *darshanas* he preferred the title Nyayacarya for himself. Usually no one can teach these books without first preparing for the class, unless one is regularly teaching them. Maharajji, however, had no time to prepare. He told me that in his student life he worked very hard and studied under the best teachers in Banaras, therefore, he could teach them without preparation - even after such a long gap.

I learned a lot by observing him. He would do most of the temple services himself, such as sweeping in front of the temple, picking flowers and *tulasi* leaves for worship, and preparing *bhoga* for the deities. He did not take help from anyone in deity worship, he served the cows himself - even grinding wheat for feeding them - and he personally cooked and served all the *ashram* inmates. He himself would only eat one meal a day, at 5 pm; before then he would not even drink a drop of water.

He was a perfect example of a devotee. He was not just giving sermons, sitting on a high throne. He did not do anything just for show or to impress others. He was always in the mood of service. Whatever he did, he did it with full absorption, without any thought of anything else. When he was teaching, he was only absorbed in that, never deviating from the subject.

At first my class would start at 5pm and go until 9 pm without any break. There were rarely any visitors, and if there were any, they had to wait until the class was over. In the summertime, it was terribly hot and the electricity would fail for hours. Maharaja would light up a gas lantern for light, which would make the room even hotter, but he never felt any discomfort while teaching. We would sweat profusely, but the whole class was like *samadhi*. Nothing could disturb us. His presence was awe-inspiring. I felt insignificant in his presence, but was very attentive to all his words and movements – whether in class or the *goshala*.

A Class of His Own

While in the *goshala*, he hardly spoke. Being with him was very intense, like a deep meditation. When he wanted me to do something, he would express it through his hand gestures or by his looks and I had to guess what he wanted. If sometimes I was not able to understand, he would become very upset. The reason was, as I understood, that for him *goseva* was not some ordinary activity. It was service to the cows, the beloved of Lord Krishna. He did not consider them animals, but *ista-devatas*, or worshipable deities. Therefore, he was unable to tolerate even the slightest discrepancy or delay in the service. This was perplexing in the beginning because I was unable to understand his mood. For example, before he came to the *goshala*, we would clean everything, change the water, and

serve the chaff (*bhusa*) for the cows. Then he would come and personally mix flour in the *bhusa*. If he saw even one particle of *bhusa* floating in the water, he would look at me, which meant I should again change the whole water. At first I did not understand this, but then I realized that it is like putting an offering plate in front of the deity - and how can we offer a glass of water to Krishna which has a *bhusa* particle floating in it? I have neither heard nor seen such a mood of service to cows anywhere.

One of his favorite statements was “*Seva to seva hai. Seva kam nahi hai*” (Service is service. Service is not work). There is a difference between *seva* and work. In work the concentration is more on the outcome, one feels relieved and happy when it is over, and there is a sense of satisfaction when it is completed. In *seva* there is happiness from the very outset. There is no urgency to finish it, it is natural and without anxiety, and one is fully absorbed in it. This is what I observed in Maharajji: he was never in a hurry and there was no anxiety to finish the service.

It is said that in the spiritual world, time is flexible: it *facilitates* the Lord’s pastimes. Therefore, the Lord is never in a hurry. I could feel this mood in Maharajji. If I finished something quickly he would remark, “Punjab Mail”, a reference to a train that was supposed to be fast in the olden days.

During the later days when the *goshala* increased in size he engaged in *goseva* until early morning 2am or sometimes even 3am. He was beyond time. Through observing him I could understand the traditional Indian mind.

I felt that Maharajji had two different moods. When he was teaching he seemed a different person, one completely absorbed in scriptures. I could ask him any question and he would give a very elaborate answer. While engaged in *goseva*, however, he was very grave and reticent. He did not like any interruptions from anyone. He was very alert and intolerant of any discrepancy in the service. I have met many *sadhus* in my life, but I have not seen anyone with such a service mood.

I feel that Maharajji was a class of his own: He belonged to the old school. He was probably the last person with the mood of Gosvamis of Vrindavan, learned in all *shastras*, highly renounced, and in a service mood with no concern for his body. I wonder if such a person will walk again on earth in this Kaliyuga.

His exalted character is my good fortune and the good fortune of all others who came in contact with him. Without seeing a living master it is impossible to understand *uttama bhakti* - no matter how much we read and hear about it. This is my experience and firm conviction.

Now that Maharajji has left us, it all appears like a dream. It is hard to accept that he is no longer physically present at Kalidaha. For so many years I went there day after day and always found him. While living in Vrindavan my movements were just from my room to Kalidaha and back. I hardly did any *parikramas* of Vrindavan, Govardhana, or visited

any places in Vraja. I did not think that he would leave so suddenly, I was somehow quite certain that he would be a centenarian. But who can say anything about the Lord and His devotees? I live remembering his words and his personal life which I got to see so closely, and I wonder how Lord Krishna arranged for me to move from Detroit to Maharajji. It can only be *yadrcchaya*.