

# the devotee



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# The Devotee

By

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## Who is a devotee?

A devotee is one who has devotion for God.

Srila Rupa Goswâmpâd has written – “The one whose innermost mind is full of Sri Krishna is a ‘Krishna-devotee’.”

Krishna-devotees are of two types –

- *Sâdhak* (a practicing devotee)
- *Siddha* ( a devotee who has attained success in devotion)

“A *sâdhak* is one who has *rati* for Sri Krishna, yet all his *anarthas* are not completely destroyed and he is worthy of meeting Sri Krishna.” – (B.R.S.2.1.276)

“A *siddha* is one who does not have any ignorance and illusion (no *anartha*), he is always engaged in activities pertaining only to Sri Krishna and he enjoys the bliss of Sri Krishna-*prem* uninterruptedly.” – (B.R.S.2.1.280)

According to the characteristics of a devotee we can classify them also as –

- Best
- Medium
- Junior

Srimad-Bhâgavatam describes them further in the 11<sup>th</sup> *skandha* in the conversation with Nimi Yogindra.

## **Best Devotee**

“The one who sees his beloved Sri *Bhagavân* in all conscious and non-conscious objects and feels the power of the love that he has for Sri *Bhagavân* in all elements is the best amongst the devotees.”

– (Krama-Sandarbha purport of Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd to S.B.11.2.45)

The best devotee is in different stages of devotion. When his love for Sri *Bhagavân* becomes very deep then he cannot differentiate between objects. All he can see is Sri *Bhagavân*. When his love is not so deep then although he can distinguish between various objects he sees the presence of Sri *Bhagavân* in them.

Srimad-Bhâgavatam cites some characteristics of the best devotee – let us mention some of them. Although this devotee senses beauty, taste etc. he sees the entire universe as full of Sri *Bhagavân* and hence he never feels stress and anxiety. He is the best of devotees. The one who does not feel miserable in birth, death, hunger, thirst, fearful situations and hard labor because he remembers Sri *Bhagavân* is also the best of devotees. The one who does not wish to commit *karma* and Sri Vâsudev is his only support – he is the best of devotees. The one who does not discriminate between his property and others’, considers everyone equal, is impartial to all elements and he is calm – he alone is the best of devotees.

Bhakti-Sandarbha has classified the best devotees who have attained divine love into three types –

1. *murchhita kashây* – the one whose *kashây* (desire) has become *murchhita* (very faint) – e.g. King Bharat, Nârâd Muni in the birth as a maid-servant’s son.
2. *nirdhuta kashây* – the one who does not have the least desire – e.g. Shukadev Goswâmi
3. The one who has got the body of Sri *Bhagavân*’s associate – e.g. Nârâd Muni.

Again we may classify the best devotees into two types depending on their *prem*

1. ***Swarup-âdhikya*** (depends on which form of Sri *Bhagavân* he worships) - Sri Krishna is the origin of all other divine forms; therefore when a devotee loves Sri Krishna he is superior to the devotees who love any other divine form. On the basis of this classification, although Sri Bilwamangal Thâkur is in the *murchhita kashây* stage (this means, he still has some faint material desires) is greater than Sri Hanumân and Pundarik who have no material desire whatsoever.

The devotees of sweet *ras* are greater than the one worshipping in parental mood, and he is superior to the devotee in friendly mood that is greater than the devotee adoring Sri *Bhagavân* in the servile mood. Although a devotee in the sweet mood may be in *murchhita kashây* stage he is superior to the one who has become Sri *Bhagavân*’s associate in the servile, friendly or parental mood.

“The deeper the mood closer he is to Sri *Bhagavân*”  
– (B.S.187)

The devotees status also depends on where he is serving. The servant of Dwârakâ has more love than the one in Vaikuntha. The servant of Mathurâ is greater than that, the one in Vrindâvan is greater, the one in Govardhan is still greater and the loving devotee of Râdhâkund is the best.

2. ***Parimân-âdhikya*** (depends on the amount of love) – *Prem* increases from *sneha*, *mân*, *pranay*, *râg*, *anurâg* up to *mahâbhâv*. Therefore the one who has reached the stage of *pranay -prem-bhakti* is superior to the one who has attained *sneha-prem-bhakti*. The devotees who have gain *mahâbhâv* are the greatest since their *prem* is maximum. *Mahâbhâv* does not exist anywhere else other than Vraja dhâm. Only the Gopis who are immersed in sweet *ras* have *mahâbhâv*. They have monopoly over this treasure. Using this analysis we conclude that the maidservants who are sheltered at the feet of Sri Vrishabhânu-Nandini (the daughter of King Vrishabhânu) – Srimati Râdhârâni – are the greatest loving devotees.

Sri-Brihad-Bhâgavatâmritam has classified devotees in 5 types depending on their *bhâv* in ascending order of status (the next one is greater than the previous one)–

1. *gyân-bhakta* – e.g. Bharat
2. *shuddha-bhakta* – (pure devotee) – e.g. Ambarish
3. *prem-bhakta* – (loving devotee) – e.g. Hanumân
4. *prem-para-bhakta* – (very loving devotee) – e.g. Arjun and the Pandavs
5. *prem-âtur-bhakta* (loving and anxious devotee) – e.g. Uddhav and the other Yâdavs

Sri Brihad-Bhâgavatâmr̥itam has categorically proved that each is superior to the previous. Sri Uddhav, who is the greatest of all devotees, has begged to be born as a grass or moss in Vrajabhumi because he is craving for a speck of dust from the feet of the gopikâs. Sri Uddhav himself admits in Srimad-Bhâgavatam. When we get *bhakti* then certain special qualities arise in our body and mind – we should recognize them as the characteristics of a Vaishnav.

“A Vaishnav’s body and mind have all good qualities since Sri Krishna’s excellences get transmitted inside His devotee. We call these as the characteristics of a Vaishnav – they are so innumerable that we cannot count them.” – (C.C.)

We should remember that not even one quality of Sri Krishna can get transmitted to anyone to the fullest extent. The devotee gets drops of these eminent qualities. Only Sri Krishna has them completely.

“A Vaishnav has the following qualities –

- Compassionate
- Is not inimical to anyone
- Truthful
- Impartial
- Faultless
- Magnanimous
- Soft-spoken
- Clean
- Without material possession
- Helpful
- Calm
- Sri Krishna is his only shelter
- Free of material desires
- Harmless
- Steadfast
- Has conquered the six enemies such as lust, anger etc.
- Eats less
- Not agitated
- Respectful to others
- Does not expect respect from others
- Serious
- Merciful
- Friendly
- Wise
- Expert
- Silent.” – (C.C.)

A Vaishnav is also ‘*sâdhavo’dosha-darshinâh’* – does not see faults in others – this is also a great quality of the Vaishnav. This is possible for one who has become magnanimous by practicing the path of *bhakti*. This is the only characteristic that lets us distinguish between the great, greater, greatest and the perfect Vaishnav. Let us understand this with some examples.

A **great** devotee or ‘*sâdhu’* is one who does not see another’s fault; rather he considers it a good quality. E.g. someone is harsh-spoken. A great devotee

will consider it medicinal like *Neem*-juice. He will think that the harsh words are good for him since they help him to improve.

A **greater** devotee is one who cannot even realize that another person has any fault. He only sees the good qualities. E.g. a greater devotee saw a businessman entertaining his clients (to advance his business for his selfish purpose) and thought – “How this man loves guests and treat them well!”

The **greatest** devotee is one who never sees faults in others, but takes a small good quality as an excellence. E.g. a thief equipped with arms stole devotees clothes off his body. He thought – “This man is suffering from cold, so he has stolen my clothes. However he is very compassionate, since, in spite of being armed he has not shown violence. He is indeed blessed!”

A **perfect** Vaishnav is one who sees a good quality when there is none. He thinks, “There is no evil in this world at all, everything is good.”

Sriman-Mahâprabhu has called him the best devotee who can transmit *bhakti* in us just if we take his *darshan*.

The Lord said – “You are the best of mahâbhâgavats, since just by your *darshan* everyone’s heart is purified.” – (C.C.)

How does the best devotee feel?

“*Prem* makes the devotee laugh, cry and sing. He dances in delirium and runs helter-skelter. He sweats, shivers and is covered in goose flesh. His voice is choked and he turns pale. *Prem* makes a devotee dance in this manner and makes him float in the nectarine blissful ocean of Sri Krishna.”

– (C.C.)

## **Medium Devotee**

In his Krama-Sandarbha purport of S.B.11.2.46, Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd has cited the characteristics of a medium devotee as follows –

“He loves the Supreme Being, is passionate towards Him (has *rati*), is friendly towards all who are subjugated to Sri *Bhagavân*, is compassionate to the ones who do not practice *bhakti*, yet he is not envious towards Sri *Bhagavân* or his devotees and ignores the ones who are envious of him, of the devotees and of Sri *Bhagavân*.”

These devotees are extremely merciful to the ignorant people – we can see from Sri Prahlâd Mahârâj’s prayer to Lord Nrisimha (s.B.7.9) –

Sri Prahlâd Mahâshay told Lord Nrisimha – “My dear Lord, I grieve for the foolish people who are turned away from Your nectarine talks and are carrying the burden of materialism by giving in to sense gratification.”

Hence we find that the medium devotee is compassionate to the foolish people who are disinterested in *Bhagavad-kathâ*, yet are not envious of Sri *Bhagavân* and His devotees. He ignores those who are jealous of him, since they do not agitate him. Rather because he is kind by nature, he considers

him ignorant and shows him mercy. How compassionate was Prahlâd Mahâshay to Hiranyakashipu although the latter tried to kill him! However the medium devotee never shows kindness to the ones who are envious of Sri *Bhagavân* and His devotees, since they agitate him. "The 'envious' also includes the ones who slander" – (B.S.)

The difference between medium and best devotee is that, the medium devotee feels compassionate towards the ignorant, while the best devotee is so full of divine love that he feels much friendlier towards the ignorant. The medium devotee is not interested in those who are envious towards the devotees and Sri *Bhagavân*, while the best devotee feels malevolence for such envious people. E.g. Sri Shukadev Goswâmi is calling Kamsa '*bhojânâm kulapâmshana*' (S.B.10.1.35), meaning, "Kamsa is a blot on the fair name of the Bhoj family." Thus we find that even pure devotees such as Shukadev Goswâmi feel inimical towards those who are against the devotees and Sri *Bhagavân*.

You may ask, then how come we are saying that the great devotees see the divine being everywhere? The Mahâjan answers –

"When the pure devotees see such envious people they get a *sphurti* of Sri *Bhagavân* as the One Who disciplines the wicked. Therefore we see pure devotees such as Sri Uddhav paying obeisance to people like Duryodhan. Here they are saluting their beloved Sri *Bhagavân* Who is in the form of the 'Punisher of the evil-doer'. We should realize that they are not paying obeisance to Duryodhan as such."

– (Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd in Krama-Sandarbha)

**Earlier we have stated the pure devotees consider the faults in others as good qualities; however they do not do so in the case of those who are against the Vaishnavs and Sri *Bhagavân*.**

## Junior devotee

"The one, who worships Sri Hari's Deity with devotion, however does not adore His devotees, he is an ordinary devotee and we should realize that he has recently stepped into the realm of *bhajan*." – (S.B.11.2.47)

Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd has explained the above statement in his Krama-Sandarbha purport as follows – "Although such devotees worship Sri *Bhagavân* faithfully, they do not love Him, and hence they do not know the importance of His devotees. They do not even know that Sri Hari resides in each and every devotee and are not aware that it is the characteristic of a devotee to respect every element. Actually their faith is not scriptural, since the Bhakti-scriptures do not instruct us only to worship to Sri *Bhagavân*, but that we should adore His devotees and respect every living being, knowing that Sri *Bhagavân* is present in it. Sri Krishna has told in the verse '*yayâtma-buddhih kunape*' (S.B.10.84.13) that – 'The one who considers this material body as his own, his wife and children as his dear ones, worships a Deity transformed from material elements, water bodies as holy places, yet does not feel nearness, love, adoration for the devotees – he is as stupid as cows and donkeys.' This is why such people are disinterested in worshipping the

devotee and it is verily impossible for them to adore all living beings. Even the scriptures say that the one who worships Sri Govinda, yet does not worship His devotee is not a devotee at all, he is only arrogant.' He is like a devotee, not really a devotee."

Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd has defined a real junior devotee as follows –

"A junior devotee is a *sâdhak* who has scriptural faith, yet does not have passion for Sri *Bhagavân*". This signifies that, since this devotee has scriptural faith he has the desire and courage to behave according to the Bhakti-scriptures. Sriman-Mahâprabhu has stated the characteristics of a Vaishnav, medium Vaishnav and a best Vaishnav as follows –

Who is a real junior devotee?

"Then Râmânanda Roy and Satyarâj Khân requested the Lord humbly – 'I am but a materialistic householder, please instruct me how to practice *bhakti*. I shall be grateful if You give some command with Your holy lips.'

The Lord said – 'Serve Sri Krishna and the Vaishnavs and constantly chant the Holy Name.'

Satyarâj asked – 'How shall I recognize a Vaishnav? Please tell me the common characteristics of a Vaishnav.'

The Lord answered, 'When we hear the Holy Name of Sri Krishna even once from someone's mouth – we should worship him for he is the greatest of all.'

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The villagers of Kulin requested as they had previously done – 'Dear Lord, please order us how we should execute devotional practice?'

The Lord answered, 'Serve the Vaishnavs and chant the Holy Name – simply do these two things and you will attain the lotus feet of Sri Krishna very soon.'

They asked, 'Who is a Vaishnav? What are his characteristics?'

The Lord laughed for He understood what they wanted to say; He replied – 'the one who always chants the Holy Name of Sri Krishna is the best of Vaishnavs; always worship his feet.' After a year when they repeated the question the Lord taught them how to distinguish between Vaishnavs. He said – 'when you see a Vaishnav and the Holy Name automatically appears on your lips – know him to be the best of Vaishnavs. In this manner the Lord expressed the characteristics of a Vaishnav and distinguished between ordinary, medium and the best Vaishnav.'

– (C.C.)

Sri Krishna told Sri Arjun in the Holy Gitâ –

"yo mad-bhaktah sa me priyah"

Meaning - "My devotee alone is dear to me."



This indicates that whoever is dearer to Sri Krishna is a greater devotee – undoubtedly. Sri Krishna has mentioned in verses such as “*adweshatâ sarva-bhutânâm*” (B.G.12.13-19) the qualities of the devotees who are loyal to Him. Then He has stated the result of hearing, reading and pondering on all those qualities as follows –

*“ye tu dharmâmrítam-idam yathoktam paryupâsate,  
shraddadhânâ matparamâ bhaktâste'teeva me priyâh*

(B.G.12.20)

Srila Vishwanâth Chakravartipâd has explained this verse as follows - “O Arjun, I have earlier mentioned various qualities of the different devotees, however those *siddha* devotees have attained perfection in a certain quality, meaning, someone is without any negative disposition towards any element, someone is friendly towards all etc. The *sâdhaks* who desire the qualities of all those devotees and love me with faith and practice the path of *dharma* that I have preached (that is, hear, read, ponder) – they are very much dear to me. Although they are *sâdhaks*, they are greater than the *siddhas* who have perfected in one quality since they desire all the qualities of the *siddhas*. This is what ‘*ateeva*’ in the verse signifies.”

Who is the dearest to Sri Krishna in the universe? The Lord has Himself stated at the end of Sri Gitâ –

“Dear Arjun, The one who instructs this most confidential teaching to my devotees will attain supreme devotion and obtain me. In humankind there is none who was dearer to me, none is dearer now, nor will there be in the future.”  
– (B.G.18.68 – 69)

So now we know that the instructions in the *bhakti-shâstras* are the dearest to Sri *Bhagavân* and no means is higher than hearing them. Those who make us relish the *ras* of the *bhakti-shâstras* to the devotees they are the dearest to Sri *Bhagavân*. They are indeed blessed for they have the most excellent quality. In fact relishing the *ras* of the scriptures is the life-air for a devotee. However we should hear from the ones who are satisfied with what ever they get, selfless, surrendered and behave like a devotee. Although one may peach the *bhakti-shâstras* he can never be dear to Sri *Bhagavân* if he does not possess the good qualities of a devotee – we should realize this fact. Srimad-Bhâgavatam states the characteristics of a *Paramahamsa* devotee as follows –

*“yâtrânuraktâh sahasaiva dheera vyapohya dehâdishu sangamudham,  
vrajanti tatpâramahamsyamantyam yasminnahimsopashamah swadharmâ.”*

- (S.B.1.18.22)

Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd explains this verse in his Krama-Sandarbha as follows –

“The devotee who loves Sri *Bhagavân* deeply forsakes all material attachment and ascends to the status of a Bhâgavat-*Paramahamsa*. When we reach this stage we are devoid of jealousy etc and we become steady fast in Sri *Bhagavân*.”

Sri Krishna has told Sri Uddhav –

"My devotees have true spiritual knowledge, they are entirely detached and do not expect even liberation, definitely not power and position, he shows the characteristics of *bhâv*, transcends the *varnâshram dharma* established in the scriptures. Hence he is beyond the scriptural injunctions."

Srila Vishwanâth Chakravartipâd has explained further –

"Although these devotees transcend scriptural injunctions they are extremely pure-hearted, therefore they never indulge in activities frowned upon by the scriptures – such as, slandering others, harming others, seducing others' wife, stealing, telling lies and jealousy. They do not possess the tendency towards such activities. The devotee who has attained *prem* forsakes the prescribed duties of the particular *âshram* while the devotee who has not attained *prem* continues to follow the rules of the *âshram*, yet within his heart he does not consider himself part of any *âshram* – hence he too is detached from *âshram*."

"A Krishna-devotee forsakes all – even the *varnâshram dharma*; he become free of all possessions and only seeks the refuge of Sri Krishna." – (C.C.)

"A Krishna-devotee forsakes the rules prescribed in the scriptures and adores Sri Krishna's lotus feet. However he never feels like committing the activities forbidden in the scriptures." – (C.C.)

The devotees who analyze good and bad qualities of a person and accept them as such – we call them 'ordinary great devotees'. They can distinguish the good from the bad using the rules prescribed in the scriptures. We can also call them '*sadâchâr* devotees' – (B.s.201). We should associate with such devotees because they are the best for fallen souls such as me. They will pick out and analyze my good and bad qualities, then they will instruct me how to get rid of my faults and if I do not obey them, they will chastise me – this is also their *kripâ*. Those devotees who consider even the fallen souls as excellent and consider themselves as lower than a blade of grass – they are *mahâbhâgavats*. However they do not always feel compassion for sinners such as me. I am unable to understand in which situation and when they feel merciful to the living beings. Therefore it is best to associate with ordinary great devotees.

### **Association with devotees and their *kripâ* are the only means to obtain *bhakti***

All the scriptures unanimously extol the greatness of associating with devotees. Since time infinite we have been bound by illusion. Due to this we have been wandering in 64 lakhs species<sup>1</sup> and materialism is carrying us towards destruction. The only way by which we can be saved from this doom is the association of devotees. It will ultimately reach us to the lotus feet of Sri *Bhagavân*. Association with devotees and their blessing alone can redeem us from this terrible fate.

"There is no way we can get *bhakti* without the mercy of great devotees; forget attaining Sri Krishna, without it we cannot even transcend the material ocean."

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<sup>1</sup> Taking birth in 64 lakhs various forms of life.

- (C.C.)

Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd has proved point by point in his Sri Bhakti-Sandarbha how we cannot turn towards the lotus feet of Sri *Bhagavân* since our heart is wicked since time infinite, it is steeped in material desires and it needs to become clean before it can develop any spiritual interest. He has written -

"Although Sri *Bhagavân's kripâ* is necessary for us to turn to Sri *Bhagavân*, it is not so important. This is because the ones who are turned away from Sri *Bhagavân* are burning in the scorching fire of materialism so much that it is indeed impossible for divine mercy to independently fall on them. Mercy is a characteristic of the heart. When our sorrow touches the heart of a compassionate person, he feels mercy. Sri *Bhagavân* is eternally joyful. He is the embodiment of supreme bliss and *ras*. The sun is so brilliant that darkness can never touch it. Similarly we are suffering from false sorrows arising out of ignorance and illusion - hence our sadness can never touch the heart of ever-blissful Sri Hari. It is just impossible. Therefore although Sri *Bhagavân* is an ocean of mercy and He is capable of everything, the ones who are turned away from Him do not find relief from their suffering. Hence only the great devotees can redeem them, for their mercy is aroused when they see the suffering of the fallen souls. This is the greatest difference between Sri *Bhagavân* and His devotees.

It is true that the great devotees too do not feel the materialistic sorrow arising out of illusion and ignorance, yet one who is awake wishes to wake up a sleeping man who is tossing and turning due to a nightmare, the great devotee has arisen from the sleep of illusion and now he wishes to awaken the materialists who are enduring the agony of the nightmarish material sorrow. Hence we see that the great devotees carry Sri *Bhagavân's kripâ* and transmit it into the living beings - divine mercy does not travel independently." - (B.S.180)

Even ordinary *devatâs* and *devis* do not travel without a vehicle, then how can we expect the crest jewel of all *shaktis* - Bhagavad-*kripâ* - divine mercy to travel without one?<sup>2</sup>

Srila Muchukunda extolled Lord Krishna -

*"bhavâpavargo bhramato sada bhavejjanasya tarhyachyuta-sat-samagamâh,  
satsangamoyarhi tadeva sadgatou parâvareshe twayi jâyate matih."*

Meaning - "My dear Lord, the living being wanders in the cycle of birth and death; when his material condition is about to end, he comes in contact with Your devotees. And then they get interested in You who are the sole refuge of the devotees."

Actually when we keep the company of the devotees our material condition comes to an end - and not the reverse. However King Muchukunda is stating 'material condition is about to end' before 'comes in contact with Your devotees' - this indicates that contact with devotees is so powerful and grants instantaneous result that you cannot make out what happened first - you came

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<sup>2</sup> Divine mercy uses the great devotee's heart as a vehicle or we can say that she rides on a vehicle called '*bhakta-sanga*' and enters in our heart.

in contact with devotees or your material suffering got mitigated. The rhetoricians call this sort of statement as a figure of speech – ‘the fourth type of hyperbole’. They say –

“*chaturthi sâ kâranasya gaditum sheeghra kârya-kâritâm yâ hi kâryasya purvoktih*”.

Meaning – “When one wants to show how fast an action results into a reaction, one states the reaction before the action; we call this the fourth type of hyperbole.”

Here another point to be noted is that destroying the material suffering is not the chief effect of *bhakta-sanga* (association with devotees). Its main consequence is to make us attain *bhakti* at the lotus feet of Sri *Bhagavân*. Ending the material suffering is only a bye-product. The main use of the sun is – it gives us light; that it also mitigates darkness is a secondary consequence. Similarly *bhakta-sanga* transmits *bhakti* in us, while destruction of ignorance and sorrow is the secondary effect.

Sri Krishna told Sri Nal-kuvar and Manigreev – “My devotee is impartial to all and has surrendered his heart unto me; when a living being beholds such a devotee then his material bondage is broken, just as the sunrise annihilates darkness.”

– (S.B.10.10.41)

Therefore, as soon as we associate with a devotee it certain that passion for Sri Hari will arise in us (this is the chief outcome) and along side it will break our material bondage – the secondary effect.

We may question – in most cases why do we not experience such colossal impact of *bhakta-sanga*? We do associate with devotees, and yet why we continue to turn away from Sri *Bhagavân* and we do not realize any passion for Him? Srimad-Bhâgavatam answers this question – this happens only in the case of offensive people. If we are inoffensive, then most certainly this effect will occur. The devotees do not wish to shower mercy on offensive people although they may associate with them –

“O Urugâya, O Paresh, the ones who have dishonest tendency or are offensive – they are turned away from you. Your devotees who are steadfast on Your lotus feet surely do not wish to glance at them.” – (S.B.3.5.44)

This proves that Sri *Bhagavân*’s devotees do not shower *kripâ* on offensive materialists. Here ‘dishonest tendency’ does not refer to materialistic characteristics alone, for until we get the *kripâ* of devotees, all of us are materialists. Hence ‘dishonest tendency’ indicates ‘offensive’ since ordinary materialists attract the devotees’ *kripâ*. For example –

Sri Vidur Mahâshay told Srila Maitreya Rishi – ‘O master, the ones who are turned away from Sri Krishna are suffering immensely since their past *karma* forces them to behave unrighteously. Sri Krishna’s auspicious devotees such as you have appeared on earth to shower mercy on such materialists.”

– (S.B.3.5.3)

Therefore if anybody is inoffensive and has just one fault – that is – he is turned away from Sri *Bhagavân* – then as soon as he associates with devotees, he is rid of that shortcoming and he is interested in Sri *Bhagavân*. If one who is offensive and has turned away from Sri *Bhagavân*, then by merely associating with devotees he will not become interested in Sri *Bhagavân*.

Simply associating with devotees will not make an offensive materialist turn towards Sri Krishna – the great devotee has to feel compassion for him.

However if they can attract the *kripâ* of some very great soul then it is possible that his merciful glance will rid them of offenses and make them worship the lotus feet of Sri Hari. When an inoffensive materialist comes in contact with a great devotee, even though he may not consider him great and the great devotee does not think 'he is fallen, let me take mercy on him' – just the association will make the materialist worship Sri *Bhagavân*. However when a great devotee comes in contact with an offensive person, if he does not consider his offenses and simply showers *kripâ* on him just because he is munificent, then it is possible that he turns to Sri *Bhagavân*.

We can understand this fact better with the example of Sri Nal-kuvar and Manigreev and the ordinary *devatâs*. We see that Sri Nal-kuvar and Manigreev had offended Devarshi Nârad by disregarding him; however the great sage did not consider their offense and in stead cast his merciful glance on them. The result was that they got to live in Vrindâvan inoffensively with the memory of their past life intact, got *darshan* of Sri Bâl-Gopâl and attained steadfast *bhakti* at His lotus feet. On the other hand we find that the *devatâs* who do not have respect for great devotees see Devarshi Nârad repeatedly yet do not get devotion for Sri Hari. They do pray to Sri Krishna from time to time – however it is in their self-interest. If Sri Krishna does anything that is not in their material interest then they do not lose the chance to turn against Him. We know very well what Indra did when Sri Krishna stopped the Vrajavâsis from worshiping him – this incident in Srimad-Bhâgavatam is a burning testimony of this fact.

Still we have one doubt regarding this principle that – in his prayer Sri Prahâlâd Mahâshay told Lord Nrisimha -

"*naitân vihâya kripanân vimumukshu eko nânayam twadasya sharanam bhramato'nupashye*"

Meaning - "My dear Lord, the living beings are suffering in the cycle of birth and death in this material ocean – I do not wish to forsake them and desire liberation for myself. These materialists are without any shelter and I see no compassionate person other than You who is capable of protecting them."

Then although Sri Prahâlâd is so merciful towards all living beings how come they are continuing to suffer?

The answer is that, living beings are innumerable and Sri Prahâd Mahâshay did not consider all of them. He has prayed to Lord Nrisimha about those whose suffering he has seen or heard, and it is certain they have been delivered. Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd who is a friend of all *jivas* (living beings) is positive about this.

Brahmarshi Bharat has clearly declared to King Rahugan that there is no other way to gain divine knowledge without serving (consuming, revering) the dust of the holy feet of the great devotees –

“O Mahârâj Rahugan, unless and until we bathe in the dust of the holy feet of the great devotees – we cannot gain knowledge about the divine truth by any other means, such as – austerity, Vedic rituals, food-distribution, building shelter for refugees, Vedic study, worshiping the water, fire or the sun.”

– (S.B.5.12.12)

Srila Prahâd Mahâshay too has prescribed worshiping the dust of the holy feet of the great devotees as the ‘sure-shot’ means to turn towards Sri *Bhagavân* -

“Unless and until we bathe in the dust of the feet of the devotees who are free of material desire our mind cannot touch the lotus feet of Sri *Bhagavân*. When we turn towards Sri Krishna all our bad qualities get destroyed.” – (S.B.7.5.2)

*“bhakta-pada-dhooli âr bhakta-pada-jal,  
bhakta-bhukta-abashesh – tin mohâbol.”*

Meaning - “The dust of the devotee’s feet, the foot-wash of the devotee and the remnants of the devotee’s *prasâdam* - these three are enormously invigorating.” – (C.C.)

Sri Chaitanya-Charitâmrita continues –

“These three grant us Sri Krishna-*prem*. All the scriptures cry out repeatedly and hence I am telling you again and again – Hear O devotees! worship these three with full confidence and you will experience the ecstasy of Sri Krishna-*nâm* and Sri Krishna-*prem*. Devotee Kâlîdâs is an evidence of the miracle of Sri Krishna-*prasâdam*.” – (C.C.)

Srila Kâlîdâs Roy had immense faith in the *charanâmrita*<sup>3</sup> and *adharâmrita*<sup>4</sup> of the devotees. He was a rare fortunate soul who gained Srîman-Mahâprabhu’s *kripâ* in Neelâchal.<sup>5</sup> Srila Narottam dâs Thâkur Mahâshay has said –

“baishnaber pada-jal                      krishna-bhakti dite bol,  
âr keho nohe balabanta.”

Meaning - “No one is as powerful as to give the mighty Sri Krishna-*prem* other than the foot wash of the Vaishnav.”

“baishnaber uchchhishta,                      tâhe mor mon nishthâ,  
baishnaber nâmete ullâs.”

<sup>3</sup> The nectarine foot wash

<sup>4</sup> The nectarine remnant of the *prasâdam*

<sup>5</sup> Please read the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of C.C. Antya Leelâ.

Meaning - "My heart is faithfully absorbed in the remnant of the food partaken by the Vaishnav and I am ecstatic to hear and glorify the Holy Name of the Vaishnavs."

*"bhagavad-bhakta-pâdâbja-pâdukâbhyo namo'stu me,  
yat-sangamah sâdhanancha sâdhyanchâkhilam-uttamam."*

Meaning - "Association of the devotees is the topmost achievable goal and also the means to achieve the goal - I pay obeisance to the lotus feet and even to the shoes of such devotees of Sri *Bhagavân*."

## **Associating with one devotee = Innumerable lifetime achievements**

Association with devotees  
results in the annihilation of all  
inauspicious qualities and we  
gain all that is auspicious.

Srimad-Bhâgavatam says -

"Lord Agni (the fire-god) shatters  
darkness, cold and fear; likewise  
the shelter of devotees destroy the  
outcomes of *karma*, fear of  
material bondage, and the  
obstacles on the path of *bhajan*."

- (S.B.11.26.31)

Srila Vishwanâth Chakravartipâd has explained this verse as follows -

"When we light the fire for cooking, the natural outcome (though we do not intend it - the real intention of lighting the fire is to cook) is that it dissipates darkness, fear and cold. Similarly if we associate with devotees to do better *bhajan* or to gain *prem* - we naturally break the bondage of *karma*, dispel worldly fear and obstacles in *bhajan*."

The association of devotees is  
more glorious than all the  
Holy places put together.

"The one who associates with  
devotees is greater than the one who  
bathes with reverence in the Gangâ."  
- (Padma Purân)

Associating with devotees is  
greater than all pious  
activities.

"When you have bathed in the  
peaceful, serene, Gangâ-like  
association of the devotees, why do  
you need to perform charity, visit Holy  
places, *tapasyâ* and sacrifice?" -  
(Padma Purân)

*Bhakta-sanga* brings supreme  
joy and adds meaning to life  
during difficult times.

"When we are separated from friends  
our heart and home is empty, wise  
devotees make our lives meaningful,

death attains immortality<sup>6</sup> and hard times appear like great bounty.”

-(Vashishtha Purân)

*Bhakta-sanga* makes us forget  
the body and its pleasures.

“Dear Kamal-nâbh<sup>7</sup>, the devotees’ hearts are extremely tempted by the fragrance of Your lotus feet; the ones who associate with such devotees do not remember this body which is otherwise so precious for worldly men and they never think of objects related to the body either, such as, home, property, friends, children and spouse.”

- (S.B.4.9.12)

*Bhakta-sanga* makes the  
universe happy.

“The shelter of Vaishnavs is like the moonlight that is supremely blissful. It destroys all type of illness and suffering. Whom does it not please?”

- (Padma Purân)

*Bhakta-sanga* is the essence of  
everything.

“O son of Brahmâ, nothing in this world has any meaning; however for the ones who wish to perform Sri Hari-*bhakti* – for them *bhakta-sanga* alone is meaningful (the best

*sâdhanâ*).” – (Brihan-Nâradiya Purân)

*Bhakta-sanga* is the only  
reason why we should drink  
the nectar of divine  
discourses.

Sage Nârad told King Prâchinbarhi – “O King, when serene and pure devotees of Sri *Bhagavân* gather eagerly to hear His excellences, in that august association, the glory of Lord Madhusudan flows like condensed *Amritam* from the lips of the great devotees. Those who listen

attentively to that nectarine divine talk in a mood devoid of material desires, no material suffering – such as – hunger, thirst, fear, sorrow and illusion can pose an obstacle in their path.”

- (S.B.4.29.40-41)

Srila Sanâtan Goswâmpâd has explained this verse from Srimad-Bhâgavatam as follows –

“If we try to hear Sri Hari-*kathâ* alone then we feel bored and lazy. We lack the quality of being absorbed in *ras* and hence we are easily overwhelmed by hunger and thirst. However when we hear the nectarine divine discourses in the association of the devotees, *bhakti* comes naturally to us.”

*Bhakta-sanga* naturally  
arouses *bhakti*.

Brihan-Nâradiya Purân says –

<sup>6</sup> If so, death attains the lotus feet of Sri *Bhagavân*.  
<sup>7</sup> The one whose hands are shaped like a lotus petals, Sri *Bhagavân*.



"The association of the devotees arouses *bhakti* in us; the one who has past *sukriti* alone has the good fortune of *bhakta-sanga*."

*Bhakta-sanga* verily  
subjugates Sri *Bhagavân*.

Sri *Bhagavân* told Sri Uddhav – "O scion of the Yadu clan, hear this most confidential truth. Since you are my servant, well-wisher and friend, I shall reveal the topmost

secret to you. *Ashtânga yog, sânkhya, non-violence, varnâshram-dharma, Vedic study, austerity, renunciation, sacrifices such as Agnishtom, welfare activities such as digging wells, alms-giving, vows such as Ekâdashi, worshiping the devatâs, chanting the secret mantras, serving the Holy places, controlling the internal and external senses* – nothing can subjugate me like *bhakta-sanga*, for it breaks all material attachments."

– (S.B.11.12.1-2)

The association of  
devotees is the  
supreme goal.

The sages such as Shounak told Sri Suta – "Dear Suta, we do not compare the heaven and not even *moksha* with a trace of *bhakta-sanga*, hence what to speak of worldly treasures desired by ordinary mortals?"

–(S.B.1.18.13)

This is why Srimad-Bhâgavatam says – "The association of devotees is the greatest blessing to mankind." – (S.B.12.10.7)

The scriptures and mahâjans conclude that *prem* and Sri *Bhagavân's sevâ* are the greatest achievements of human life. The association of devotees is the means to achieve that topmost goal – *prem*. Then why are we calling *bhakta-sanga* the topmost goal? Valid question. The answer is that – the association of devotees results in *bhakti*, associating with devotees is synonymous with practicing *bhakti* and the result of *bhakti* is also the association of devotees. *Prem* alone can make Sri Krishna subordinate to us and the Lord is saying that associating with devotees can subjugate Him – this means that *prem* is equal to *bhakta-sanga*.

If we associate carefully  
and nicely with devotees,  
we can easily attain *prem*  
for Sri *Bhagavân's* lotus  
feet and become blessed.

Lord Sri Kapildev told His mother Devahuti – "Dear mother, true association of devotee's results in the discussion of my glory that is extremely pleasurable to the ear and the heart. If one hears and ponders upon such talk with love then it mitigates all his material suffering and gradually arouses respect, passion and *prem* for me."

– (S.B.3.25.24)

Here 'true' association indicates complete surrender to the devotees - with body, mind and speech. This means we should serve the devotees with our body, with mind we should have faith in them and their instructions and by speech we should glorify them. We should follow their ideal and perform *bhajan* according to their instructions. This is 'true' *bhakta-sanga* – it is not enough simply to approach them and live in their proximity.

Even after gaining *bhakti bhakta-sanga* is necessary to relish *ras*. Srimati Râdhârâni has written in Sri Bhakti-Rasâmrita-Sindhu -

“We should relish the *ras* of divine talks in the company of the devotees who are in the same mood as we, they should be serene, on higher level of *bhakti* than we are and they should be connoisseurs of *ras*.” – (B.R.S. 1.2.91)

Devotional practice has many classifications; hence it is necessary we keep the company of only *sajâtiya*<sup>8</sup> devotees. Also we must associate with only those devotees who are higher in *bhakti* than we are and he should be compassionate and serene. Srila Rupa Goswâmpâd has mentioned ‘*sajâtiyâshay*’ to signify that the devotee whose company we keep should be of the same mood as we are, so that we can relish *ras* nicely, and the word ‘*swato vara*’ indicates that the company of such great devotees arouses *bhakti-ras* in us. When we take *darshan* of such great souls, touch them, speak to them and discuss Sri *Bhagavân* with them, then the passion in us is quickly transformed into *ras* and it becomes highly enjoyable.

## **Importance of serving the devotees**

All the *shâstras* and saints loudly proclaim with the accompaniment of kettle-drums the great glory of serving the devotees. Sri Vidur Mahâshay has told Maitreya Muni in Srimad-Bhâgavatam -

“O sage, by serving the devotees we get the highly delectable love for the lotus feet of Lord Madhusudan that is eternal and saves us from material sufferings.” – (S.B.3.7.19)

Srimat Jiva Goswâmpâd has explained this statement in Bhakti-Sandarbha (2.44) as follows -

“*Sevâ* is of two types -

- *Paricharyâ* – to please a Vaishnav by offering money, food and massaging the feet.
- *Prasangâ* – to make a Vaishnav hear Sri Hari-*kathâ* and *Harinâm*.

Of the two *sevâ*, *paricharyâ* is greater since we can quickly attain divine *prem* by resorting to this *sevâ*. Sri *Bhagavân* has told Uddhav - ‘*mad-bhakta-pujâbhy-adhikâ*’ - I am more pleased when you worship my devotee. When we worship the Vaishnav we should do so considering him or her as an appearance of Lord Vishnu. Beware! Even though the Vaishnav may belong to

When we serve - we should not consider the community, race and nature of a Vaishnav - however when we associate then we should make certain that we keep the company of only *sadâchâri* and good Vaishnavs. The scriptures instruct us not to associate with ill-natured Vaishnavs.

<sup>8</sup> Devotee  
Manjari

mood,

a lower class or of ill nature, he is worthy of our adoration. Under no circumstance must we ever disregard a Vaishnav who adorns *tilak* and *Tulsi*, for it is an offence.

Sri Rishabhdev instructed his sons in Srimad-Bhâgavatam –

“The association of great devotees is the door to gain *prem-bhakti*, while the company of womanizers is the gateway of hell.”

We see in Padma Purân –

Lord Mahâdev said – “Dear *devi*, worshipping Sri Vishnu is greater than worshipping all *devatâs*, but worshipping the Vaishnav is even greater than that.”

*“tasmâd-vishnu-prasâdâya vaishnavân paritoshayet”*

Meaning - “If we wish to please Lord Vishnu we have to please the Vaishnavs in all respect.” – (Itihâs-samuchchay)

Sri Chaitanya-Bhâgabat says –

*“krishna-sebâ hoite baishnab-sebâ bodo,  
bhâgabat âdi sob shâstre koilo dadha.  
eteko baishnab-sebâ parom upây,  
bhakta-sebâ hoite shobâi krishna pay.”*

Meaning - “Serving the Vaishnav is greater than serving Sri Krishna - this is the firm conclusion of Srimad-Bhâgavatam and other scriptures. Hence serving the Vaishnav is the best way to please Sri Krishna and everyone can attain Sri Krishna by resorting to Vaishnav-sevâ.”

*krishna-bhojibâr jâr âchhe abhilâsh,  
se bhojuk krishner mangal nija dâs.  
shobâre shikhây gourchandra-bhagabâne,  
baishnaber sebâ prabhu koriyâ âpone.”*

Meaning - “Whoever wishes to worship Sri Krishna should worship his devotees who are auspicious. *Bhagavân* Sri Gourchandra teaches everyone by serving the Vaishnavs with His own hands.” – (Sri Chaitanya-Bhâgabat)

In spite of being *Swayam Bhagavân*, Sriman-Mahâprabhu has instructed all humankind the wonderful outcome of *bhakta-sevâ* by serving His devotees Himself. Srila Vrindâvan dâs Thâkur says –

*“ningâroye bastra kâro koriyâ jotone,  
dhuti-bastra tuli kâro den to âpone.  
kush, gangâ-mrittikâ kâhâro den kore,  
sâji bohi konodin chole kâro ghare.”*

*sakal baishnabgon hây hây kore,  
ki koro ki koro ! tobu kore bishwambhare."*

Meaning - "The Lord either squeezed someone's clothes (after they were washed) or picked up and gave another's dhoti and shirt. Sometimes He would place *kush* (a type of grass used for worshipping) and the earth of Gangâ and at other times He would carry a devotee's flower-casket to his room. All the Vaishnavs would protest and lament - Alas! Alas! What are You doing? - They would ask. Yet Lord Vishwambhar (Sriman-Mahâprabhu) would not listen and continue to serve the devotees." - (C.B.)

The Lord has clarified why He was serving His devotees -

*"tomrâ se pâro krishna-bhajan dibâre,  
dâsere sebile krishna anugraha kore."*

Meaning - "You are devotees - so you can give me Sri Krishna-*bhajan*. When one serves Sri Krishna's servant then He shows mercy on one."

*"tomâ sobâ sebile se krishna-bhakti pâi."*

Meaning - "By serving all of you I can get Sri Krishna-*bhakti*."

Srila Rupa Goswâmpâd has written in Sri Bhakti-Rasâmrita-Sindhu -

"We have described here some topics of Bhagavad-*bhakti*; however the wise know that majority of them pertain to worshipping the devotees."

- (B.R.S. 1.2.219)

We may ask - "The scriptures and saints are instructing us to serve the Vaishnavs - how shall we execute this order? We can worship Sri *Bhagavân* by hearing, glorifying etc. But how will we express adoration for the Vaishnavs?"

Srila Rupa Goswâmpâd replies to this question -

"We have stated that hearing, glorifying, meditating etc. are means of worshipping Sri *Bhagavân*; majority of them are the means to adore Vaishnavs as well. For example, hearing the names and excellences of the Vaishnavs, glorifying them, performing *archanam*, praying to them, taking their *darshan*, paying obeisance and doing *parikramâ* with faith and reverence. This is because when we express devotion for the Vaishnavs we are showing our love for Sri Krishna. Sri Nârada-Pancharâtra says - "*vaishnavânâm parâbhakti*" - practice supreme devotion to the Vaishnavs."