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Light on the Path of Devotion

The *Narad Bhakti Sutra* says:

*mahat-saṅgas-tu
durlabho'gamyo'moghaś-ca*

"The association of great souls is rarely attained and recognised, yet it never fails." (*sutra* 39)

The first part of this *sutra*, "The association of great souls is rarely obtained . . . ," can have two meanings.

The first meaning is that great souls are rare in this world. The *Shrimad Bhagwatam* (11.2.29) states, "The human body is difficult to attain, and it can be destroyed at any moment. But it is even rarer to attain the association of great souls."

Shri Vallabhacharya was a spiritual master and the founder of the Pushtimarg school of Vaishnavism. Once, a devotee approached Vallabhacharya and told him that he wanted to feed a hundred Brahmins.

Vallabhacharya replied that the result of feeding one devotee was equal to feeding a hundred Brahmins.

"Then I want to feed a hundred devotees," the devotee replied.

Vallabhacharya said, "If you were to feed one Brahmin devotee, you would get the fruit of feeding a hundred devotees."

"Then I want to feed a hundred Brahmin devotees," the devotee replied.

Vallabhacharya responded, "If you were to feed one devotee who has attained sacred love (*prem*), you would receive blessings equal to feeding a hundred Brahmin devotees."

"Then I want to feed a hundred such accomplished devotees," said the devotee.

Vallabhacharya started to cry and replied, "It is very hard to find a hundred devotees like these."

But at the same time, great souls are not so rare that we should lose all hope of finding them. It is really a question of being able to recognise them. We should not assume that great souls only live in secluded mountains or deep in remote forests. Great souls are everywhere, but this *sutra* is saying their association is rarely attained because it is the nature of sinful men to find sin.

Once a sage took a new spiritual aspirant, who was a photographer by profession, to a lecture on the pastimes of Krishna. When the lecture was over, the sage asked the aspirant what thoughts

came into his mind whilst listening to the lecture. The aspirant replied that throughout the talk, he was trying to think of how he could capture the speaker's beauty. Here, the aspirant was so distracted by his photography that he lost the chance to receive the nectar.

An inclination for devotion to the Lord blossoms only when we associate with the right devotees. There is always a danger that we may take shelter of a spiritual guide who is not suitable. Thus Narad warns aspirants to choose the association of true devotees. Association of great souls gives *sad-gati*, which is translated by Jeev Goswami in the *Bhakti Sandarbh* (section 179): "The word *sad* refers to the sages and *gati* means seeing the Lord within the heart. This means that the Lord manifests wherever sages gather. A liking for devotion is awakened in the people who gather there, because the Lord appears wherever sages are found."

Even though devotee association can give devotion, not all souls receive this benefit due to repeated offences they have committed. Offences block the blessings from good association. Some people repeatedly cause offences, and as a result, they become disrespectful towards devotees or consider them to be ordinary people. Even though the association of devotees has the power to centre people in thoughts of the Lord, this harmful behaviour on the part of the person committing offences needs to be changed first.

Those who divert their minds away from the Lord by repeatedly committing offences are not eligible for the grace of devotees. The *Shrimad Bhagwatam* (3.5.44) mentions those who are under the influence of offences: "The minds of those attracted to material pleasures roam aimlessly in the world. Such people cannot recognise the devotees who have realised your sweetness, thus they remain far from your lotus feet."

In a conversation with Maitreya, Vidur says, "Blessed devotees of Krishn, like you, wander about in the world just to bless people who are sinful and suffering because of lack of devotion to him." (*Shrimad Bhagwatam* 3.5.3)

These two *Shrimad Bhagwatam* verses may seem to contradict each other. One says that the great devotees do not forgive those who offend and the other

states that pure devotees even bless those unfortunate persons who are not devoted to the Lord. But the second verse (3.5.3) speaks of those who don't know they are causing offences, thus they are eligible for second chances. In contrast, the offenders in the first verse (3.5.44) are the ones who know they are offending and continue to do so. These persons do not receive blessings from the great souls.

Association does not necessarily mean physical association. The mere physical association of devotees cannot help anyone. Sages roam everywhere and they can be found residing in the holy places, along with many other great souls. Non-devotees, who also live there, come into contact with these enlightened devotees all the time, but this interaction does not always develop into a real connection with them.



In simple terms, if we feel unwell, we may want to see a good doctor in our city of residence. We may need to see many doctors every day. To treat our disease, we need to take guidance from a good doctor and receive treatment. Sometimes, to speed up our recovery process, we need to change doctors after the treatment has started. The spiritual path is very much like this. We need to overcome idleness and approach an enlightened soul who can guide us, because devotion to the Lord makes the heart healthier and taking refuge of an elevated devotee can guide us directly to Krishn.

A man who continues to sleep after sunrise remains in the darkness of the night until he awakes. Here, the sunrise signifies the association of great souls. In certain cases, this association does not have an immediate effect, and we continue to sleep and remain in the dark, but we cannot remain in this state forever. Once we get the association of great devotees, we will definitely attain their mercy, and in time, by the power of this mercy, we will awaken because this *sutra* says that holy company never fails. (From *Way to Love: A Commentary on the Narad Bhakti Sutra*, by Vaisnavacharya Chandan Goswami)



Mahaprabhu's Grace and the Power of Association



In the *Narad Bhakti Sutra* (39) the association of saints is called *amogh*, which means it never fails. The great power of association with devotees is illustrated in the *Chaitanya Charitamrit* (*Madhya* 15.244-302), by the story of a man whose name was also Amogh.

Once Chaitanya Mahaprabhu went to the home of his devotee, Sarvabhaum Bhattacharya, to take *prasad*. After offering prayers to Mahaprabhu, Sarvabhaum and his wife served him many delicious foods.

Sarvabhaum and his wife loved Mahaprabhu very much. But Sarvabhaum's son-in-law Amogh was very rude, and had a habit of finding faults in others. Knowing this,

Sarvabhaum tried to keep Amogh away from Mahaprabhu. He stood in the doorway of his house with a stick, warning Amogh not to go inside.

But in order to serve food to Mahaprabhu, Sarvabhaum had to leave the door. Taking this chance, Amogh burst into the room and started to criticise Mahaprabhu loudly. He said, "Just see how much this so-called *sannyasi* is eating! "I guess this is enough food for ten or twelve people!"

Filled with anger, Sarvabhaum picked up his stick to beat him, and Amogh ran away as fast as he could. As Sarvabhaum chased him, screaming abuses, Mahaprabhu softly laughed at the scene.

But soon, the situation became serious. Sarvabhaum's wife was so embarrassed by what her son-in-law had said, that she started crying, "May my daughter become a widow!" As she said this, she started beating her head and chest with her hands.

Mahaprabhu calmed Sarvabhaum and his wife down, and asked them to keep serving his meal. When Mahaprabhu finished eating, Sarvabhaum worshipped him with a garland and sandalwood paste. Bowing to Mahaprabhu, he said,

"Please forgive me for what happened today. I wanted to give you honour, not dishonour!"

Mahaprabhu smiled and replied, "Amogh was right, there really was a lot of food on my plate. There was no harm done." Thereafter, Mahaprabhu left for home.

But there was no end to Sarvabhaum's embarrassment and disappointment in his son-in-law. He vowed not to speak to him anymore, and asked his daughter to cut all ties with him. That night, Amogh left the house alone.

By morning, Amogh became extremely ill. It was a case of cholera, so severe that he feared he would die. When Sarvabhaum heard the news, he felt happy and recited the following verse from the *Shrimad Bhagwatam*:

आयुः श्रियं यशो धर्मं लोकान् आशिष एव च
हन्ति श्रेयांसि सर्वाणि पुंसो महदतिक्रमः

āyuh śriyam yaśo dharmam lokān āśiṣa
eva ca
hanti śreyāṁsi sarvāṇi puṁso mahad-
atikramah

If you offend a great soul, all your wealth, fame, relationships, religion, good fortune, all the blessings you've received, and even your life itself will be destroyed." (10.4.46)

But when Mahaprabhu heard of Amogh's illness, he ran to his bedside. Mahaprabhu then placed his lotus hand on Amogh's heart and said:

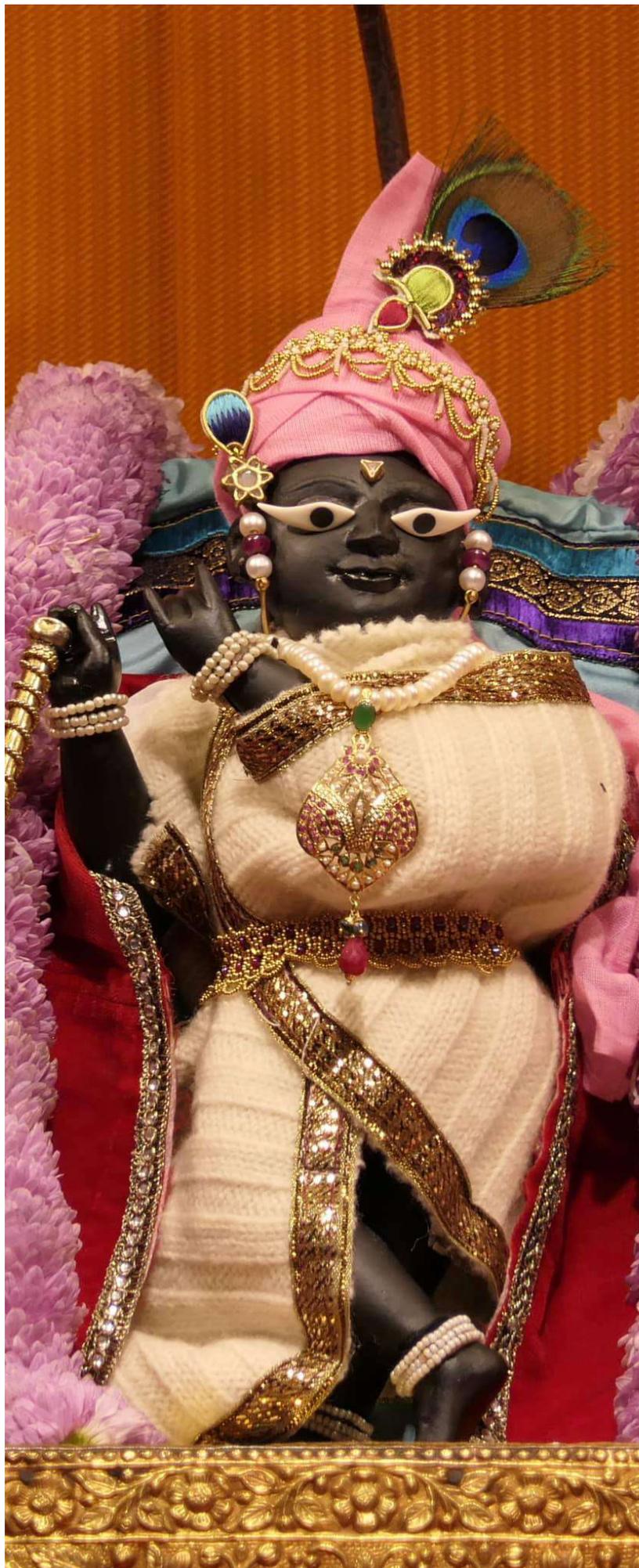
"A Brahmin's heart is naturally a pure *asan* for Krishn to sit upon. But you have let the monster of envy sit on Krishn's seat within, making it dirty."

Mahaprabhu continued, "But now, just because of your relationship with Sarvabhaum, all the dirt in your heart has been washed away. Get up, and chant Harinaam with a clean heart. Krishn will surely have mercy on you."

Suddenly Amogh jumped up and started singing the Holy Name of Krishn. Filled with sacred love he danced as his body trembled and tears of ecstasy rolled down his cheeks. Seeing this, Mahaprabhu started to laugh.

Amogh bowed at Mahaprabhu's feet and said, "I am so sorry for what I've done. Please forgive my offences."

Burning with guilt, he started slapping his own face until it became swollen. One of Mahaprabhu's associates had to grab his hands to stop him.



Then Mahaprabhu softly touched Amogh and said, "You are my loved one, because of your relationship with Sarvabhaum."

"I care deeply for everyone in Sarvabhaum's home," Mahaprabhu continued, "Including his maids, his servants, and even his dog. Just think how much I care for you, his own relative! Now chant Harinaam all the time, and don't commit offences anymore."

Mahaprabhu also spoke to Sarvabhaum on Amogh's behalf, and he gave up all his anger.

Krishndas Kaviraj says,

भक्त सम्बन्धे जाहा क्षमिल अपराध

*bhakt sambandhe yāhā kṣamila
aparādh*

"Mahaprabhu forgave Amogh's offence because of his relationship with a devotee." (*Chaitanya Charitamrit, Madhya 15.300*)

श्रद्धा करि एइ लीला शुने जेइ जन
अचिरात पाय सेइ चैतन्य चरण

*śraddhā kari ei līlā śune jei jan
acirāt pāy sei caitanya caraṇ*

"Whoever listens to this to this *lila* with faith will attain Mahaprabhu's lotus feet very soon." (*Chaitanya Charitamrit, Madhya 15.301*)

Shri Radharaman Premotsav

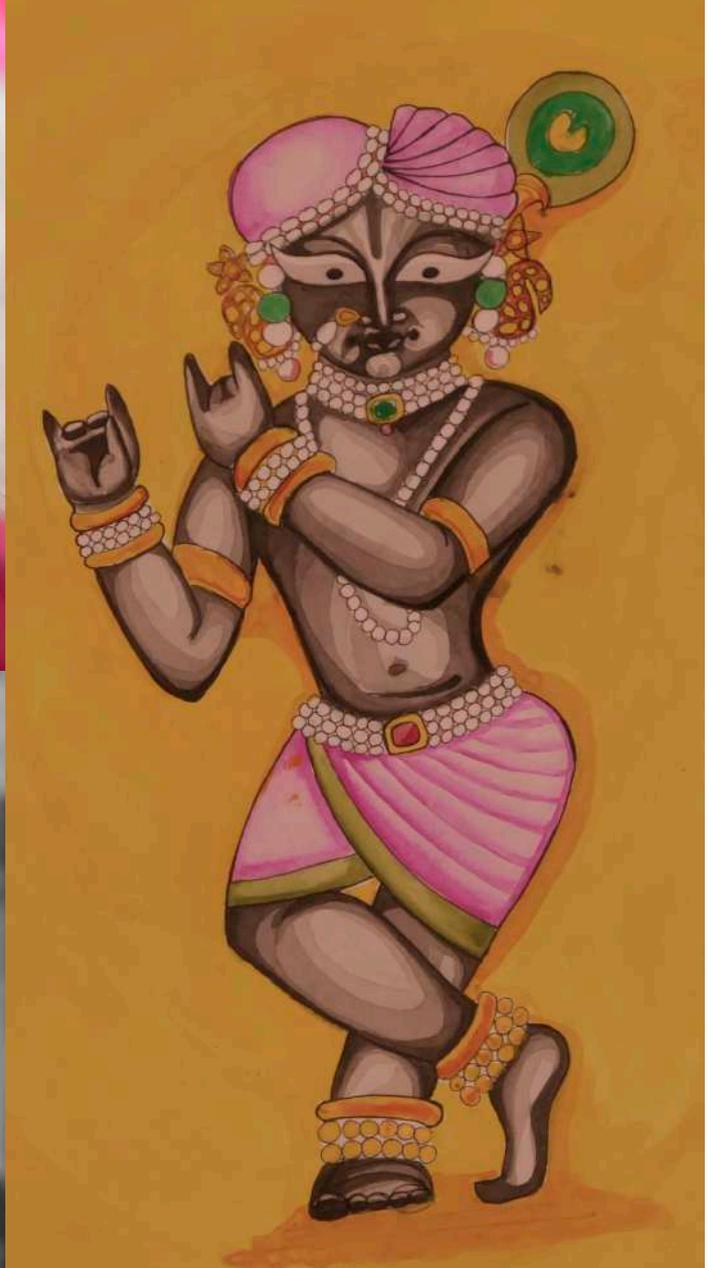
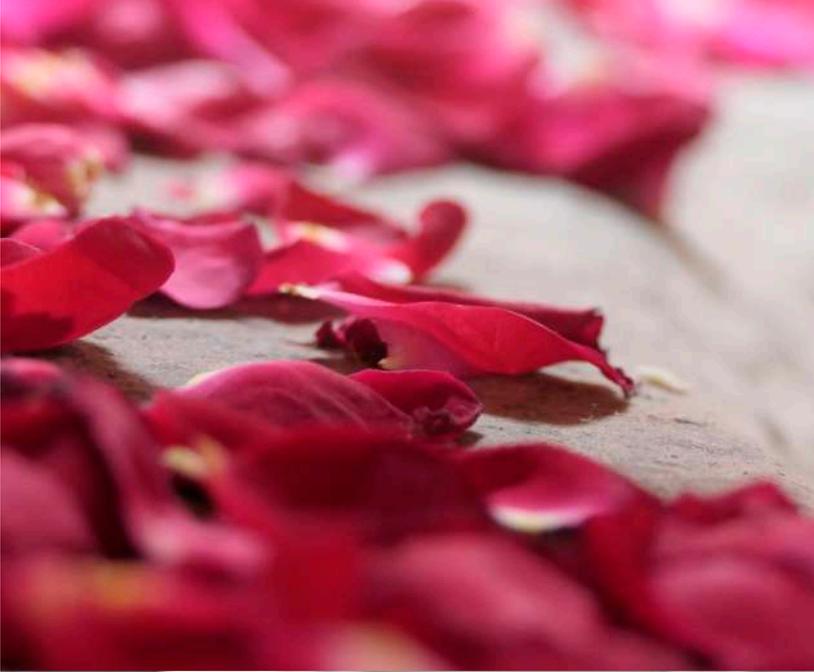


Shri Radharaman Premotsav, a festival of love, could not have been more special this year. The Shri Radharaman Temple hosted many prominent *mahatmas* of Braj and featured two special *kathas*. Many devotees from around the world travelled to Vrindavan to attend.

The festival began with *Shri Radha Ras Sudha Nidhi katha* by the revered saint, Shri Vaishnav Pad Das Babaji of Radha Kund. He emphasised the utmost importance of worshipping the lotus feet of Shri Radha on the path of *bhakti*. The audience were further captivated as Vaisnavacharya Chandan Goswami Maharaj sailed them through the ocean of nectar by imparting the depth of *Raas Panchadhyayi* from the *Shrimad Bhagwatwam*.

Meanwhile, in the nearby Shri Radha-Gokulanand Temple, 108 Brajwasi Brahmins recited the *mool path* of the *Shrimad Bhagwatam* throughout Maharaj ji's *katha*. Many prominent *mahatmas* of Braj such as Shri Achyut Lal Bhatt Goswami, Shri Premdas Shastri, Mahant Shri Phooldol Das Baba, Shri Satyanarayan Das Baba, Shri Shrinivas Das Shastri, and others spoke at the event, as did many *acharyas* of the Shri Radharaman Temple.





The association of such great souls inspired and motivated the devotees to go deeper in their *bhajan*.

Maharajshri's *Raas Panchadhyayi katha* was broadcast internationally on the popular devotional channel Aastha TV for those who were not able to attend in person. In addition, a free two-day medical camp for *sadhus* and *sadhvis* was held at Radharaman ji's Raas Mandal, with Vrindavan's own Dr. Nangia and eye specialist Dr. Chaitanya Das of the UK in *seva*.

In the evenings, artists from all over the world came to offer their love to Shri Radharaman Lal in the form of *raag seva* and *nritya seva*.

Although the *utsav* is over, Premotsav never ends, because it is a celebration of the love that Radha and Krishn have for each other. May we always offer the flowers of our *seva* at their lotus feet as they dance in their festival of love eternally.

