

Arsha Prayoga – Part One

April 26, 2010 by Locanananda Prabhu

For those who saw the Hare Krishna movement spread from city to city and from country to country, it was clear that the original version of Srila Prabhupada's books was full of spiritual potency and did not require to be changed in any way for his words to act upon the hearts of the conditioned souls.

The question as to whether the writings of the acarya may or may not be revised by his disciples after his disappearance is answered by the rule of "arsa prayoga". This principle states that one should not see mistakes in what the spiritual master has written or think that his writings may be changed to make them more effective or politically correct. To preserve his teachings in their originally published form is the way by which the acarya is honored, and to do otherwise is to dishonor him. That is the rule of "arsa prayoga", a principle that devoted followers of a bona fide spiritual master must adhere to without deviation.

The rationale for changing Srila Prabhupada's books was based on a series of false arguments, many of which were defeated by Srila Prabhupada himself as this article will show. To justify their actions, the BBT editors created the illusion that Srila Prabhupada's books were defective and in need of extensive editing even though they knew His Divine Grace had never authorized anyone to revise his books after his disappearance. Subsequent to his departure, they conveniently overlooked the principle of "arsa prayoga" and proceeded to do exactly what vaisnava tradition strictly prohibits.

It was by the distribution of transcendental literature that Srila Prabhupada hoped to introduce Krishna consciousness to people everywhere. For those who saw the movement spread from city to city and from country to country, it was clear that the original version of Srila Prabhupada's books was full of spiritual potency and did not require to be changed in any way for his words to act upon the hearts of the conditioned souls. Srila Prabhupada himself never doubted that his books would bring about a revolution in consciousness and induce people throughout the world to take shelter of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. His transcendental vision was revealed in the following letters, all of which refer to the original version of his books.

"I am glad to learn that you are having nice success in placing my books in the libraries and in schools and colleges.... I am sure that this will revolutionize the thinking of the thoughtful men of your country as well as the students and professors, and the ultimate end will be to save the world from the clutches of material illusory activities which is now causing havoc everywhere." (Letter to Karandhara dated 9-13-70)

"If we introduce these books in all of the bookstores, schools, colleges, libraries and everyone's home, our religion will be the only religion in the world very soon." (Letter to Krishna Bamini dated 1-4-72)

"We have got a great mission to fulfill, and these books and magazines are the torchbearers of Truth which can save the world." (Letter to Ksirodakasayi dated 1-3-72)

Srila Prabhupada's books, then, should be thought of as a permanent legacy to be embraced and shared by devotees everywhere. Their purpose is to establish religious principles and enlighten human society. They were Srila Prabhupada's gift to the world and proof of his empowerment by Krishna. There was no reason, therefore, for His Divine Grace to recommend that his books be further revised. He was of the opinion that another round of editing would not be necessary for his literatures to deliver the world from the darkest regions of ignorance.

Our guideline in Krishna consciousness is that the only duty of the disciple is to faithfully execute the order of the bona fide spiritual master. If a disagreement arises over how to best serve the guru, the issue can generally be resolved by following the course of action chalked out by the spiritual master himself through direct instructions to his followers. In a room conversation that took place in Paris in 1976, Srila Prabhupada elaborated on this point, and his explanation soundly defeats virtually all of the arguments presented in favor of changing his books.

Excerpt from a room conversation taking place in Paris, France on August 5, 1976

Hari-sauri: Sometimes there's some discrepancy, two parties, that may both want to serve but they have different ways, different ideas how to execute the same order, so there may be some disagreement.

Srila Prabhupada: Service means you must take order from the master. Otherwise, it is mental concoction. Actually the servant requests, "How can I serve you?" So when the master orders, "You serve me like this," then you do that, that is service. And if you manufacture your service, that is not service. That is your sense gratification. *Yasya prasada bhagavat-prasada*. You have to see how he is pleased. Now if he wants a glass of water and if you bring a nice glass of milk, you can say, "Milk is better than water. You take it." That is not service. He wants water, you give him water. Don't manufacture better thing.

After Srila Prabhupada's disappearance, and without his consent, the BBT editors took it upon themselves to re-edit his books, making thousands of unnecessary changes in an attempt to improve their wording and style. But, as Srila Prabhupada stated above, without his order, their service was a concoction. They were offering him milk when he had asked for water. He wanted them to follow the rule of "arsa prayoga", but they decided to manufacture a better thing. So, according to the spiritual master, their editing was not service at all, but sense gratification.

In preparing his books for publication, Srila Prabhupada did not want a great deal of time spent on editing work. Neither was Srila Prabhupada very concerned with style. His Divine Grace once said,

"We are not meant for presenting any literary masterpieces."

In the following letter, he carefully instructed his book production staff concerning his priorities:

"We have to do things now very dexterously, simply we have to see that in our book there is no spelling or grammatical mistake. We do not mind for any good style, our style is Hare Krishna, but still, we should not present a shabby thing. Although Krishna literatures are so nice that, even if they are presented in broken and irregular ways, such literatures are welcomed, read and respected by bona fide devotees."

(Letter to Satsvarupa dated 1-9-70)

Unless the BBT trustees felt that Srila Prabhupada's books had been shabbily presented, they had no right to tamper with them. Of course, it is not our philosophy to print errors, but spiritual subject matter is transcendental to all mundane considerations and remains potent despite mistakes in grammar, spelling, etc. Once the presentation of his books had met Srila Prabhupada's standard of approval, he adamantly warned the BBT staff that further changes could not be made. He said they should not even think there were mistakes in his published works.

When it was brought to Srila Prabhupada's attention in 1977 that significant changes had been made in his books without his approval, he instructed the directors of the BBT that the next printing of his books should be again to the original way. The BBT editors knew how averse Srila Prabhupada was to making revisions in his books, especially once they had been published. How, then, despite his specific instructions, could they justify acting against his wishes and dare to change everything shortly after his physical departure?

If Srila Prabhupada ever spoke of making improvements, he was referring to the quality of the printing only and was not suggesting that changes be made in the text of his books. When Srila Prabhupada first examined the 1972 MacMillan Gita, for example, he said it did not meet our vaisnava standard. He was disappointed with the quality of the paper, the binding, the color work and so on. These are the things he wanted improved. As far as the text was concerned, he said that nothing should be added or subtracted.

Arsha Prayoga And Shakespeare (II)

March 19, 2002 by Locanananda-das

Srila Prabhupada's desire was to see his books translated into all of the major languages of the world. By 1970, numerous centers had opened in countries outside of the United States and translation work had begun in Germany, France, Canada, South America and Japan. When the German devotees undertook the translation of the Srimad Bhagavatam, they discovered what they thought were grammatical discrepancies in the original English. The translators reasoned that if their spiritual master could publish his books with flaws included, then their own translation work could also contain mistakes and no harm would be done. In a very strongly-worded letter, Srila Prabhupada chastised his disciples for thinking they could imitate their spiritual master and explained that to avoid this offense, they must follow the principle of "arsa prayoga". One should not see mistakes in the books written by his spiritual master, nor should one think he is able to take the same liberties taken by him. His Divine Grace warned his disciples that only if they were able to spread Krishna consciousness all over the world as he had done could discrepancies in their translation work be overlooked, otherwise not.

"So far your telling me that some devotees consider that because there may be some grammatical discrepancies in my Srimad Bhagavatam, First Canto, then they may also be allowed to translate with errors accepted, that is just like imitating Raslila. When you do all other things like Krishna, then you can do Raslila. So if these other writers can do like me and spread Krishna consciousness all over the world by becoming big Vedic scholars, then they can do.

"If one is too big, there is no mistake. 'Arsa prayoga' means there may be discrepancies but it is all right. Just like Shakespeare, sometimes there are odd usages of language, but he is accepted as authority. I have explained all these things in my preface to First Canto."
(Letter to Mandali Bhadra dated 1-20-72)

Srila Prabhupada wrote, "If one is too big, there is no mistake," so when the BBT decided that his books were full of mistakes and had to be re-edited, they made Srila Prabhupada look very small, and that is their great offense.

Sometimes, the editors try to justify their actions by claiming that scholars would have found fault in our books had they not been revised. The many, many letters Srila Prabhupada received from world-renowned scholars that glorified his phenomenal literary output contradict this false propaganda. The academic community was astounded by the magnitude of his undertaking and showed its appreciation for the exactness with which he translated and the profound devotion he expressed in his Bhaktivedanta purports. We have chosen one such letter which exemplifies to what extent Srila Prabhupada's extraordinary efforts were acknowledged by the educated class of men. We advise the reader to keep in mind that these comments refer to the original BBT printing of his books.

Excerpted from a letter written by Sri R. Subrahmanyam, M.A., Deputy Research Director of the National Parliament of the Central Government of India

“To teach this science of God to people everywhere and to aid them in their progress and development towards the real goal of life, Srimad Bhagavatam is most eminently fitted. In fact, this great ancient work of Vyasa will fill this need of the modern times, for it is a cultural presentation for the respiritualization of the entire human society. His Divine Grace, Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder-acarya of the ISKCON movement, has taken upon himself, in addition to his ceaseless travels and other multifarious activities in the service of the Lord, the stupendous task of translating this Sanskrit work into English in about sixty volumes for the welfare and happiness of mankind.

“So far, eighteen volumes of this most beautiful literature on God have been brought out by ISKCON, and the rest are under preparation. Needless to say that in keeping with the excellence of their other publications, the publishers have seen to it that the printing, get-up, and pictures in these volumes are also of the highest quality, as though to serve as an ornament to the divine contents of the books.

“This is a rare opportunity for people and leaders of every country, race and community in the world to know and understand the glorious science of God and work for their perfection.”

We challenge the BBT managers and their editors to produce a single letter from any recognized scholar agreeing with them that Srila Prabhupada’s original books were full of mistakes and had to be revised for his message to be properly understood. Since their purpose in making these revisions was to impress scholars, we hereby challenge them to come forward and produce evidence that there are indeed scholars who approve of the thousands of changes they made to Srila Prabhupada’s books.

Another argument presented to support the BBT’s questionable editorial policy was that their editors, by dint of their many additional years of experience, had become more qualified than Srila Prabhupada’s earlier staff of editors, and this had supposedly earned them the right to review all of the books after Srila Prabhupada’s disappearance and make whatever changes they thought were necessary. In the late 1960’s, Hayagriva had similarly offered to redo some of Rayarama’s editorial work, thinking himself more academically qualified than his godbrother, but Srila Prabhupada did not approve of his proposal. Although Hayagriva was an accomplished professor of English at Ohio State University, contrary to his opinion (and that of today’s BBT managers), Srila Prabhupada affirmed that academic credentials are not the primary qualification to edit transcendental literature. In his reply to Hayagriva, he wrote:

“Rayarama may not be as qualified as you are, but his one qualification that he is fully surrendered to Krishna and his spiritual master is the first class recommendation for his editing any one of our literatures, because editing of Vedic literatures does not depend on academic education.” (Letter to Hayagriva dated 1-15-68)

It is evident from his letter that Srila Prabhupada considered his early editors to be fully competent because they were depending upon Krishna and the spiritual master to give them the ability to perform their service. His Divine Grace was very satisfied with the quality of their work and, to show his appreciation, he later wrote to Hayagriva, “I want your company always for editing my writings very nicely.” As far as we have been able to ascertain, he never contemplated having anyone redo the work of his earlier editors. It is also a fact that Srila Prabhupada’s involvement in the preparation of his books went far beyond his original dictation, although the BBT’s propaganda would lead one to believe that his participation ended there. The truth is that in order to guarantee a very high standard of presentation, Srila Prabhupada personally supervised all proofreading and editorial work and did not allow any significant changes to be made in the text of his books without his approval. It is customary that once a writer accepts an edited draft of his book, it immediately supersedes an unedited draft. When the BBT editors decided to work again

from Srila Prabhupada's original manuscripts, they were, in effect, rejecting the proofreading and editorial work that Srila Prabhupada himself had overseen. This is not how one shows appreciation for the spiritual master's endeavor to publish his books, or for the service offered to him by others.
(to be continued)

Arsha Prayoga Part (I) – Resistance To Change

May 23, 2000

Let me first offer my prostrated obeisances unto the lotus feet of that supreme swan-like devotee of the Lord, our spiritual master, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, by whose mercy the fallen souls of Kali Yuga may taste the sweetness of the narrations of the pastimes of the Lord and His pure devotees. As the bonafide representative of Sri Vyasadeva, he composed a mountain of transcendental literature to enlighten the entire human society, explaining even the most confidential truths regarding vaisnava philosophy.

His Divine Grace Srila Prabhupada displayed all of the symptoms of an empowered jiva soul, working tirelessly to distribute the transcendental message of love of Godhead throughout the world. It is therefore the duty of his followers to preserve the legacy and protect the honor of such a great spiritual personality whose every moment was dedicated to the spreading of Krishna consciousness.

To guarantee that his teachings would not be forgotten in the oblivion of time, Srila Prabhupada created the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust and, assisted by his disciples, he astounded the academic community with his literary output. What follows is a brief account of Srila Prabhupada's struggle with the BBT staff to keep the final version of his books intact by resisting what he called the "American disease" of always wanting to change things. As will be seen from the letters and conversations cited in this article, Srila Prabhupada would finally insist on an "absolutely no change" policy based on the principle of "arsa prayoga".

That unwanted changes were being made to his books came to his attention as early as 1975, and it quickly became a pressing matter. In a letter to the production manager of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Srila Prabhupada expressed his alarm that changes he had not approved were appearing in print.

"I will have to see personally what are the mistakes in the synonyms and also how you intend to correct them. I was not satisfied with the corrections that were made before. I saw some changes which I did not approve. Nitai may correct whatever mistakes are there, but the corrected material must be sent to me for final approval." (Letter to Radha-vallabha dasa dated 1-5-76)

Srila Prabhupada never gave anyone carte blanche to make revisions in his books. This letter confirms that any changes to his books would require his personal approval before being printed.

A few months later, the issue of change was raised again by Radha-vallabha dasa regarding the text of several volumes of the Srimad Bhagavatam which were soon to be reprinted. Srila Prabhupada advised him, "There is no need for corrections for the First and Second Cantos. Whatever is there is all right." (Letter of 5-4-76) Seeing how persistent his BBT managers were to implement change in the text and presentation of his books, His Divine Grace wrote again to Radha-vallabha dasa in August, 1976, this time more firmly:

"Do not try to change anything without my permission."

Srila Prabhupada consistently stated that he did not want anything to be changed unnecessarily. Any changes they thought would be an improvement in the text would require his written authorization.

The most serious violation of this instruction actually came years later, after Srila Prabhupada's disappearance, when BBT personnel decided to print a new version of the Bhagavad-gita. It is a well known fact that His Divine Grace never authorized anyone to re-edit the Bhagavad-gita As It Is. If Srila Prabhupada ever intended to make changes in the Gita, the ideal opportunity for him to say so came in a room conversation that took place on February 24, 1977 in Mayapur. On that occasion, Radha-vallabha dasa was describing how the upcoming printing of the Bhagavad-gita was going to require so much paper that it would take seventy-six train cars to transport it (1.5 million copies). Srila Prabhupada absolutely did not suggest making any corrections before this largest printing ever of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is. In fact, and to the contrary, in a discussion that took place three days later, he established a definitive "no change" policy that he wanted applied henceforward to all of his books. The tendency to want to make corrections was now a very serious problem, and Srila Prabhupada dealt with it.

The transcribed conversation of February 27, 1977 presented below clearly indicates that Srila Prabhupada would never have approved of anyone changing the final edited version of his writings, even after his disappearance. In this exchange, His Divine Grace states that for a disciple to see mistakes in his production-ready finished manuscripts was a bad habit that had to be given up. Even though the one correction his disciple Jagannatha dasa wanted to propose would not have changed the wording of the verse, Srila Prabhupada warned that to make any change whatsoever was "strictly forbidden". As a servant of his spiritual master, Radha-vallabha dasa was obliged to accept Srila Prabhupada's instruction that the text should be left exactly as is and that making corrections should never be contemplated.

To further enlighten his disciple, Srila Prabhupada explained the rule of "arsa prayoga", that whatever the acharya has given, it should be accepted. The tendency to think oneself sufficiently qualified to correct one's authority is not only a breach of vaisnava etiquette, but is an offense in the service of the spiritual master.

If one continues to see mistakes that he thinks need to be corrected, Srila Prabhupada says, "He is the mistake." Due to his incomplete understanding, Radha-vallabha dasa reasoned, "So if we think there is some mistake, we should just forget about it." Srila Prabhupada corrects him again, saying that one should not even think his authority has made a mistake. His opinion was that since Jagannatha dasa tended to see mistakes in the writings of the acharya, he was an irresponsible man who could not be relied upon. Srila Prabhupada then made his final point, that our true purpose is not served by becoming so-called scholars able to find errors in the books of the spiritual master, but by becoming advanced in devotion to Krishna. Radha-vallabha dasa finally got the point, that Srila Prabhupada was establishing the rule of "no corrections anywhere" once a book was submitted to his department for publication.

Room Conversation of 2-27-77, Mayapura

Radha-vallabha Das: Now Jagannatha had some questions on corrections in the book. In verse twenty-eight it says, "Then he worshiped Sri Krishna, the essence of all Vedas, with this hymn."

Srila Prabhupada: Where it is? Brahma-samhita?

RVD: Yes.

SP: What is that?

RVD: So it says, "Then he worshiped Sri Krishna, the essence of all Vedas, with this hymn."

SP: Where it is?

RVD: It's verse twenty-eight, "Then he worshiped Sri Krishna." So Jagannatha said it should be, "Then he worshiped..."

SP: No, no. Jagannatha cannot correct. That bad habit he must give up.

RVD: So we should just leave it exactly.

SP: Oh yes. You should not be more educated.

RVD: He wasn't changing any of the words. He was just...

SP: Nothing of the.... This should be strictly forbidden.

RVD: So no corrections. That makes it simple.

SP: They can divide the synonyms. That's all.

RVD: Synonyms. So even...

SP: That is his tendency, to correct. That's very bad. He should not do that.

RVD: So I'll just forget this, then.

SP: The system is: whatever authority has done, even there is mistake, it should be accepted.

RVD: Oh.

SP: Arsa prayoga. That is ha... He should not become more learned than the authority. That is very bad habit.

RVD: He was always wondering how he should think. So I'll tell him that. He thinks, "If I think I see a mistake, what should I think?" I'll tell him what you just said.

SP: He cannot see mistake. He is mistake (laughter). That is being done by this rascal. I don't want. And the Hayagriva has..., the Easy Journey, he has changed so many things. That... He is now bad character. You should not maintain him.

Later, in the same conversation

SP: So Jagannatha should be strictly advised not to become very learned to correct authorities. No.

RVD: I think that the instruction you gave will help him very much about even if he thinks there is some mistake, just forget about it.

SP: He is mistake. He should not think his authority mistake.

RVD: He didn't know what he should do. He didn't know...

SP: So why he should be given this business. He's such irresponsible man.

He should not be given any responsible work. Our first business should see how he is advanced in devotion. We don't want so-called scholars.

RVD: Jagannatha was somewhat affected by Nitai, but he's...

SP: I know that.

RVD: I think he understands what the problem was. I think he understands what his problem was, and that's why he won't do anything without asking you.

SP: Don't allow him to do anything.

RVD: Well, now that this system of no corrections anywhere, that makes it very simple. Then he can't do anything. I don't think he wants to either. It makes it more simple for him. It makes him very uncomfortable.

SP: No corrections.

Six weeks later, Srila Prabhupada was listening to the notes and resolutions of a meeting held by the BBT trustees. He was generally pleased with the decisions that had been made, but at one point he interrupted the reading to make a recommendation of his own. He wanted them to include in their list the following admonition:

"And every time Radha-vallabha changes something, that should be stopped. He is very much inclined to change something. This practice should be stopped."

Srila Prabhupada was assigning to the BBT trustees the duty of safeguarding his books from being changed in the slightest by anyone who had not been specifically ordered to do so.

The principle of “arsa prayoga” was again referred to on June 22, 1977 when Srila Prabhupada was in Vrndavana, India. In the middle of a reading of the Srimad Bhagavatam, Srila Prabhupada objected when he heard the synonym that was given for the word “sadhū”. The word-for-word translation said, “it is relevant,” but Srila Prabhupada said, “No. ‘Sadhū’ means ‘devotee’.” The editors had changed his translation, and he found this unacceptable. He spoke as though he had been betrayed by a dangerous element within his movement. His authority was being minimized by his own disciples to whom he had entrusted his most lasting contribution: his books. A number of devotees present voiced their objection to the production staff’s practice of deleting entire sections from certain books, and they mentioned discrepancies they had found in the Sanskrit to English translations. Literally hundreds of changes had already been made in the text of Srila Prabhupada’s books from one printing to the next and the devotees testified that the potency was not the same.

Srila Prabhupada asked for suggestions from his senior men to resolve this dilemma and they offered their advice. After hearing various proposals, Srila Prabhupada’s conclusion was that, “The next printing should be again to the original way.” He then ordered his secretary to contact the GBC man he wanted to entrust this matter to in Los Angeles where the press was located. “So you bring this to Satsvarupa. They cannot change anything.”

Drawing from these letters and conversations, we can gain some insight into Srila Prabhupada’s struggle to keep his books as they were. One should rightly conclude that he would never have approved of the wholesale changes that were made by the BBT editors after his disappearance. He would have expected the BBT trustees to resist on his behalf. The unnecessary and unauthorized changes in the Bhagavad-gita alone number more than seven hundred, so where is Srila Prabhupada’s signed approval for such changes to be made? And where are the rave reviews of the revised edition from scholars and professors praising the editors for having improved the original version of the Gita published by their spiritual master? We do not expect to see any testimonials from these mundane personalities glorifying the “revised and enlarged” edition of the Gita. After all, which scholar would approve of having his own writings altered after his physical demise?

The adulteration of Srila Prabhupada’s Bhagavad-gita As It Is was the first major milestone in the BBT’s refusal to follow the rule of arsa prayoga (the unholy practice of dishonoring the acharya), a program which reached its zenith when they declared in court that Srila Prabhupada was simply a writer hired by ISKCON to compile the Vedic classics. We do not know what kind of apology can be made by the BBT’s editors and trustees at this point, but it is our humble opinion that the best way to make amends for past transgressions would be to accept Srila Prabhupada’s instruction that “the next printing should be again to the original way.”

Arsha Prayoga Part II

By Sriman Locanananda Prabhu

Srila Prabhupada’s desire was to see his books translated into all of the major languages of the world. By 1970, numerous centers had opened in countries outside of the United States and translation work had begun in Germany, France, Canada, South America and Japan. When the German devotees undertook the translation of the Srimad Bhagavatam, they discovered what they thought were grammatical discrepancies in the original English. The translators reasoned that if their spiritual master could publish his books with flaws included, then their own translation work could also contain mistakes and no harm would be done. In a very strongly-worded letter, Srila Prabhupada chastised his disciples for thinking they could imitate their spiritual master and explained that to avoid this offense, they must follow the principle of arsha prayoga.

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“So far your telling me that some devotees consider that because there may be some grammatical discrepancies in my Srimad Bhagavatam, First Canto, then they may also be allowed to translate with errors accepted, that is just like imitating Raslila. When you do all other things like Krishna, then you can do Raslila. So if these other writers can do like me and spread Krishna consciousness all over the world by becoming big Vedic scholars, then they can do.

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Sometimes, the editors try to justify their actions by claiming that scholars would have found fault in our books had they not been revised. The many, many letters Srila Prabhupada received from world-renowned scholars that glorified his phenomenal literary output contradict this false propaganda. The academic community was astounded by the magnitude of his undertaking and showed its appreciation for the exactness with which he translated and the profound devotion he expressed in his Bhaktivedanta purports. We have chosen one such letter which exemplifies to what extent Srila Prabhupada’s extraordinary efforts were acknowledged by the educated class of men. We advise the reader to keep in mind that these comments refer to the original BBT printing of his books.

Excerpted from a letter written by Sri R. Subrahmanyam, M.A., Deputy Research Director of the National Parliament of the Central Government of India:

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"Rayarama may not be as qualified as you are, but his one qualification that he is fully surrendered to Krishna and his spiritual master is the first class recommendation for his editing any one of our literatures, because editing of Vedic literatures not depend on academic education." (Letter to Hayagriva dated 1-15-68)

It is evident from his letter that Srila Prabhupada considered his early editors to be fully competent because they were depending upon Krishna and the spiritual master to give them the ability to perform their service. His Divine Grace was very satisfied with the quality of their work and, to show his appreciation, he later wrote to Hayagriva, "I want your company always for editing my writings very nicely." As far as we have been able to ascertain, he never contemplated having anyone redo the work of his editors.

It is also a fact that Srila Prabhupada's involvement in the preparation of his books went far beyond his original dictation, although the BBT's propaganda would lead one to believe that his participation ended there. The truth is that in order to guarantee a very high standard of presentation, Srila Prabhupada personally supervised all proofreading and editorial work and did not allow any significant changes to be made in the text of his books without his approval. It is customary that once a writer accepts an edited draft of his book, it immediately supersedes an unedited draft. When the BBT editors decided to work again from Srila Prabhupada's original manuscripts, they were, in effect, rejecting the proofreading and editorial work that Srila Prabhupada himself had overseen. This is not how one shows appreciation for the spiritual master's endeavor to publish his books, or for the service offered to him by others.

Arsha-Prayoga Part III – The Case Against Changing Prabhupada's Books

BY LOCANANANDA DAS – 11-01-04

While planning to print the unabridged version of the Bhagavad-gita, Srila Prabhupada often referred to it as the revised and enlarged edition. When the BBT published its unauthorized adulterated Gita years later, they would henceforward refer to the 1972 printing as the original edition while calling theirs the revised and enlarged edition. This appears to be a subtle act of deception meant to validate the irreverent practice of changing Srila Prabhupada's Books.

The remainder of this article will focus mainly on the Bhagavad-gita As It Is, which contains the essence of Vaishnava philosophy. Srila Prabhupada said that the Krishna consciousness movement is genuine, historically authorized, natural and transcendental due to its being based on the Bhagavad-gita As It Is. It was his conviction that the entire human society could embrace one God, Krishna, and live harmoniously by practicing one religion, devotional service to God, by chanting one mantra, the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra, and by following one scripture, the Bhagavad-gita As It Is. Because the Bhagavad-gita is so vitally important to the spreading of Krishna consciousness, the adverse effect of changing its original wording without the approval of the Acharya can hardly be estimated.

Srila Prabhupada's Bhagavad-gita was first published in 1968 by the MacMillan Publishing Company in an abridged format of less than 400 pages. The book sold well in book stores and was well received by the academic community. A very encouraging letter of appreciation was submitted by Dr. Haridasa Chaudhuri, President of the Asiatic Studies Institute of San Francisco, who wrote:

"The Bhagavad-gita As It Is is without doubt the best presentation so far to the western public of the teachings of Lord Krishna from the standpoint of Vaishnava tradition and devotional Hindu mysticism."

Srila Prabhupada took these words as a favorable sign, but he was not happy that to make his book more marketable, MacMillan had omitted many of his important purports, especially from the later chapters of the Gita. The book's popularity warranted two additional printings in 1969 and 1970, but MacMillan was still not ready to print the complete edition. While they procrastinated, Srila Prabhupada grew impatient and decided that his own press would print the unabridged Gita. MacMillan, seeing how the demand for Srila Prabhupada's complete Bhagavad-gita continued to increase, finally agreed to do the printing.

It is interesting to note that while planning to print the unabridged version of the Bhagavad-gita, Srila Prabhupada often referred to it as the "revised and enlarged" edition. Oddly enough, after the BBT published its unauthorized adulterated Gita years later, they would henceforward refer to the 1972 printing as the "original" edition while calling theirs the "revised and enlarged" edition. This appears to be a subtle act of deception meant to validate the irreverent practice of changing Srila Prabhupada's books. It is evident from the following references that it is indeed the 1972 MacMillan printing that should be referred to as the revised and enlarged edition of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is:

"I am thinking of publishing a revised and enlarged edition of Bhagavad-gita As It Is." (Letter to Rayarama dated 3-6-69)

"Our first printing will be this, what is the name? Nectar of Devotion. And then, if possible, Bhagavad-gita As It Is, revised and enlarged." (Conversation of 12-24-69)

"So your next compositions shall be Bhagavad-gita As It Is, revised and enlarged. Please do it nicely." (Letter to Pradyumna dated 2-22-70)

"As soon as this indexing is finished, I shall publish another revised and enlarged edition of Bhagavad-gita As It Is at my own cost." (Letter to Satsvarupa dated 6-27-69)

"Immediately I want \$17,000 for printing Bhagavad-gita As It Is in a new enlarged and revised edition, so try to help in this connection." (Letter to Bali Mardan dated 1-6-71)

A comparison of the two complete editions reveals several important differences between them, besides changes made in the text. Most significantly, the index of the Bhagavad-gita was reduced from eighty pages

in the original to only twenty pages in the current edition, while the number of color plates decreased significantly from forty-eight to sixteen. When the first complete edition came out, it was nearly six hundred pages longer than the abridged edition printed in 1968. But when the BBT published its updated version of the Gita, it had added only a few paragraphs to the text that were accidentally left out of the original. It is obvious, then, that the Bhagavad-gita As It Is published by MacMillan in 1972 was the actual revised and enlarged edition. The Gita that is currently sold by the BBT is the unauthorized, revised and reduced adulteration of Srila Prabhupada's original Gita.

On December 24, 1969, Srila Prabhupada met in Boston with a group of devotees who were working on his publications at ISKCON Press. During the meeting, he gave his disciples guidelines for writing articles for Back to Godhead magazine and then took the opportunity to discuss his plans for publishing the complete Bhagavad-Gita As It Is. Present at that meeting were Satsvarupa, Pradyumna, Hayagriva, Kirtanananda, Jayadvaita and Brahmananda. An excerpt from the transcript of their discussion shown below reveals how Srila Prabhupada reached the decision to use the same verses exactly as they appeared in the abridged MacMillan Gita to produce the complete, revised and enlarged edition of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is.

When the subject of the Bhagavad-gita is raised in the conversation, Hayagriva first notes that the wording of the verses had been touched up by MacMillan's own professional editors to improve their readability. Srila Prabhupada then suggests that to prepare the complete edition of the Bhagavad-gita, they should use the verses just as they appeared in the abridged MacMillan Gita. He clearly does not recommend any further editing of the verses. He and his staff seem to be very satisfied with the translation of the verses already in print. Then, whatever purports had been left out of the abridged edition would be added back, and, to make it complete, Pradyumna, his Sanskrit editor, would add the transliteration of the verses and their word meanings. In a nutshell, this was Srila Prabhupada's plan to assemble and publish the much-awaited complete edition of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is.

Conversation of December 24, 1969 with BTG and Book Production Staff in Boston

HAYAGRIVA: I know the translations themselves, they were somewhat changed in Bhagavad-gita As It Is as it came out in MacMillan (the abridged edition). Did you like those translations?

PRABHUPADA: Whichever is better, you think. That's all. You can follow this MacMillan.

HAYAGRIVA: They're good. I think they're very good.

PRABHUPADA: Yes. You can follow that translation. Simply synonyms he can add, transliterations.

HAYAGRIVA: And we have all the purports. We can include everything. Nothing will be deleted. Everything will be in there.

PRABHUPADA: That's all right.

Having settled the issue, Srila Prabhupada would thereafter never recommend that the verses of the Bhagavad-gita be changed in any way. In fact, when one of the editors from ISKCON Press subsequently submitted a proposal to change the particular wording of a Bhagavad-gita verse and purport, His Divine Grace rejected the idea, stating that whatever had been printed previously should remain "as it is":

"I have dictated the missing purports from Chapter Nine and they are sent enclosed herewith. So far changing the wording of verse or purport of 12:12 discussed before, it may remain as it is." (Letter to Jayadvaita dated 3-17-71)

This letter clearly documents Srila Prabhupada's resistance to having changes made in the wording of the verses and purports of his Bhagavad-gita once it had been published. It also shows how the opinion of his editors was often incorrect regarding the changes they thought needed to be made, and how their opinion was often overruled by His Divine Grace. If, in pursuance of the rule of arsha prayoga, the BBT editors had

seen fit to apply the instruction in the above letter ("It may remain as it is") to the Bhagavad-gita in its entirety, the whole issue of book changes would have been completely resolved long ago.

To guarantee that his writings would always be available to the public, Srila Prabhupada registered the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust as a legal entity separate from ISKCON. When it was discovered that some ISKCON centers were doing their own printing independently, taking the collection and spending it outside of the jurisdiction of the BBT, a memorandum was sent out to the entire society stating that His Divine Grace would not allow the independent printing of his books by third parties because it could cause the financial ruin of the BBT.

Srila Prabhupada formed the BBT to invest in it exclusive rights for the printing of all literature containing his teachings, writings and lectures. In a recent court decision, however, an arrangement was put in place permitting the independent printing and sale of Srila Prabhupada's books by third parties outside of the BBT's direct control. This agreement is in total opposition to Srila Prabhupada's wishes as expressed in the March 14, 1974 memorandum and could one day spell disaster for the BBT. Fortunately, the court ruling did not preclude the BBT from printing Srila Prabhupada's original books. Therefore, instead of ignoring the growing demand for the original edition, a wise business manager would do his best to make them available for distribution. This more liberal policy would enable the BBT to circumvent the ultimate financial collapse that Srila Prabhupada predicted could occur if third parties were allowed to print his books independently.

Once the complete edition of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is was published, favorable reviews from well-known scholars began to pour in. Below we present the words of a Professor of Sanskrit, a Professor of Religion and a Professor of Linguistics in praise of Srila Prabhupada's books. After hearing their comments, why would anyone think that the Bhagavad-gita needed to be re-edited?

"I am impressed with A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's scholarly and authoritative edition of Bhagavad-gita. It is a most valuable work for the scholar as well as for the layman and is of great utility as a reference book as well as a textbook. I promptly recommend this edition to my students. It is a beautifully done book."

Dr. Samuel D. Atkins
Professor of Sanskrit, Princeton University

"I have had the opportunity of examining several volumes published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust and have found them to be of great value for use in college classes on Indian religions. This is particularly true of the BBT edition and translation of the Bhagavad-gita."

Dr. Frederick B. Underwood
Professor of Religion, Columbia University

"It is a deeply felt, powerfully conceived and beautifully explained work. I don't know whether to praise more this translation of the Bhagavad-gita, its daring method of explanation, or the endless fertility of its ideas. I have never seen any other work on the Gita with such an important voice and style.... It will occupy a significant place in the intellectual and ethical life of modern man for a long time to come."

Dr. Shaligram Shukla
Professor of Linguistics, Georgetown University

Sometime after Srila Prabhupada's physical departure from this world, the BBT editors decided to change the original text of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is. They proceeded to send out a list of proposed revisions to more than one hundred ISKCON leaders, seeking their approval. Surprisingly, the mailing did not elicit a single response, either to approve or to object to the changes. The editors then erroneously concluded

from this non-response that their plan to change the Bhagavad-gita had been accepted. Their assumption that they were being given carte blanche to publish the re-edited Bhagavad-gita was based on the principle of “maunam samyati raksanam”. According to this principle, if there is an argument and you remain silent without objecting, then indirectly you have accepted the argument. To conclude that the devotees were supporting their decision to change the Bhagavad-gita simply because they did not reply to this letter was a gross miscalculation on the part of the editors. This error in judgment led to their second mistake which was to ignore Srila Prabhupada’s instruction to follow the principle of arsha prayoga, a rule that strictly forbids changing the words of the Acharya. To preserve the purity and potency of his message and to safeguard the permanence of his legacy, no changes at all should have been made to his books after his disappearance, what to speak of totally re-editing them without his permission.

One noted author and scholar, Dr. Neil Postman, who is the Chairman of the Department of Media Communications at New York University, shared with us his perspective on the issue. He confirmed that if the original trust agreement between Srila Prabhupada and the BBT did not specifically prohibit the BBT from making changes in his books without his formal consent, the trustees may have the legal right to do so at their discretion. However, theologically, it appears that they do not have that right because it violates Srila Prabhupada’s oral instruction to his disciples to follow the age-old tradition of vaisnava etiquette that prohibits making such changes. Dr. Postman further advised that when dealing with sacred texts, an addendum or errata list would be considered more appropriate for making corrections (even of spelling mistakes) or to add explanatory notes than to directly change the body of the text. Because the faith of the followers is directly linked to the wording of their scriptures, he insisted that the utmost care must be taken when contemplating making even the slightest revision. He proposed that the BBT editors study how scriptural writings have been amended in other established religions before making another haphazard attempt to improve the books compiled by their spiritual master.

It would be impractical for us to list here the many significant revisions made in the Bhagavad-gita, but to give the reader an idea of the kind of unwarranted changes that were introduced, we will consider one of the verses most often quoted in preaching the philosophy of Krishna consciousness:

Chapter 2, Verse 13.

Original: “As the embodied soul continually passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. The self-realized soul is not bewildered by such a change.”

Revised: “As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change.”

In the original, the Sanskrit word “dhirah” is translated in the verse as “the self-realized soul” but was changed to “a sober person” in the revised edition. In the purport, Srila Prabhupada describes one who is “dhirah” as “any man who has perfect knowledge of the constitution of the individual soul, the Supersoul, and nature—both material and spiritual.” Is this not also a definition of a self-realized soul? Using the phrase “self-realized soul” adds clarity and force to the verse, which Srila Prabhupada said was the actual purpose of editing. Although the editors say the word “dhirah” can only be correctly translated as “a sober person”, in the Third Canto of the Srimad Bhagavatam, Chapter 11, Verse 17 the word meaning given for the word “dhirah” is “those who are self-realized”. Srila Prabhupada heard this verse read aloud many times and never mentioned that it should be changed to “a sober person”. There was therefore no justification for changing this verse. Even if it appeared in Srila Prabhupada’s original dictation, it was the final edit and not the first dictation that Srila Prabhupada wanted published.

Many hundreds of important changes have been made in the Bhagavad-gita without the author’s permission. This practice has shaken many devotees’ faith in the institution Srila Prabhupada founded. The

present leaders of ISKCON are apparently unable to comprehend the profound long-term implications of their ongoing complicity by silence in this serious deviation. They continue to look the other way while the BBT editors and trustees violate the principle of arsha prayoga by introducing unauthorized changes in Srila Prabhupada's sacred writings.

The leaders of ISKCON think that the books written by our spiritual master were full of mistakes and they now portray Srila Prabhupada and his publishing staff as carelessly imperfect and unprofessional. They are therefore responsible for propagating a most offensive mentality throughout ISKCON that has diminished the stature of the Founder Acharya and undermined his authority within the institution he himself founded. This flagrant disrespect became a matter of public record when a statement was made in court by legal representatives of the BBTI declaring Srila Prabhupada to be nothing more than a writer hired by ISKCON to translate Vedic literature. Whether the institution will survive the reaction to these serious offenses to the spiritual master is beyond the purview of this article, but it is clear that the contaminated consciousness from which such deviations arose must be driven out for the society to grow and prosper.

One might ask whether the BBT editors and managers are aware that their spiritual lives are in jeopardy due to their having committed the offense of dishonoring the Acharya. Do they not fear the rod of chastisement spoken of in the Bhagavad-gita? The answer to this question may lie in the editing of the Bhagavad-gita itself. In Chapter 10, verse 38, the phrase "rod of chastisement" was actually deleted by the editors from both the verse and Srila Prabhupada's purport, so perhaps they now believe they have nothing at all to fear. The reader will also be surprised to learn that one of the BBT's principal editors recently stated that after making all of the so-called improvements to the Bhagavad-gita, he still personally prefers to read Srila Prabhupada's original 1972 edition.

Srila Prabhupada's greatest worry may have been that after he was gone, his disciples would fail to preserve his legacy for the benefit of future generations of devotees by whimsically changing what he had given them. His prophetic words should serve as a warning to anyone who has ever occupied a position of authority in the Hare Krishna movement. He wrote:

"If every time someone feels something they call for changing everything, then all that I have done will very quickly be lost." (Letter to Hamsaduta dated 4-2-72)

This should be our guideline in all of our Krishna conscious activities, from book production to Deity worship, from our regulative principles to the management of our temples. All of our required programs have already been chalked out. We don't need to manufacture anything new. Neither the books Srila Prabhupada wrote nor the priorities he set needed to be changed. The tried and true success formula for spreading Krishna consciousness is what we must follow. Then, by expanding the simple but joyful program of chanting, dancing, philosophizing, worshipping the Deities, glorifying the spiritual master and honoring vaisnavas everywhere, the Krishna consciousness movement will successfully spread throughout the entire world. And by making Srila Prabhupada's original books available for distribution, the expansion of Krishna consciousness will take place that much more quickly.

Key References to the Principle of Arsha Prayoga

1. From a letter to Mandali Bhadra written January 20, 1972

"If one is too big, there is no mistake. 'Arsha prayoga' means that there may be discrepancies but it is all right. Just like Shakespeare, sometimes there are odd usages of language, but he is accepted as authority. I have explained all these things in my preface to First Canto."

2. Room Conversation in Mayapura, February 27, 1976

PRABHUPADA: The system is: Whatever authority has done, even there is mistake, it should be accepted.

RADHA-VALLABHA: Oh.

PRABHUPADA: Arsha prayoga. That is... He should not become more learned than the authority. That is very bad habit.

Regarding Book Changes, see: "Rascal Editors" Conversation of June 22, 1977

PRABHUPADA: So on the whole, these dangerous things are going on. It is very serious situation. You write one letter that "Why you have made so many changes?" And whom to write? Who will care? All rascals are there. Write to Satsvarupa that "This is the position. They are doing anything and everything at their whim. The next printing should be again to the original way."

So you bring this to Satsvarupa. They cannot change anything.

Arsha Prayoga – Part IV

By Sriman Locanananda Prabhu

For those who saw the Hare Krishna movement spread from city to city and from country to country, it was clear that the original version of Srila Prabhupada's books was full of spiritual potency and did not require to be changed in any way for his words to act upon the hearts of the conditioned souls.

The question as to whether the writings of the Acharya may or may not be revised by his disciples after his disappearance is answered by the rule of arsha-prayoga.

This principle states that one should not see mistakes in what the spiritual master has written or think that his writings may be changed to make them more effective or politically correct. To preserve his teachings in their originally published form is the way by which the Acharya is honored, and to do otherwise is to dishonor him. That is the rule of arsha-prayoga, a principle that devoted followers of a bona fide spiritual master must adhere to without deviation.

The rationale for changing Srila Prabhupada's books was based on a series of false arguments, many of which were defeated by Srila Prabhupada himself as this article will show. To justify their actions, the BBT editors created the illusion that Srila Prabhupada's books were defective and in need of extensive editing even though they knew His Divine Grace had never authorized anyone to revise his books after his disappearance. Subsequent to his departure, they conveniently overlooked the principle of arsha-prayoga and proceeded to do exactly what Vaishnava tradition strictly prohibits.

It was by the distribution of transcendental literature that Srila Prabhupada hoped to introduce Krishna consciousness to people everywhere. For those who saw the movement spread from city to city and from country to country, it was clear that the original version of Srila Prabhupada's books was full of spiritual potency and did not require to be changed in any way for his words to act upon the hearts of the conditioned souls. Srila Prabhupada himself never doubted that his books would bring about a revolution in consciousness and induce people throughout the world to take shelter of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. His transcendental vision was revealed in the following letters, all of which refer to the original version of his books.

“I am glad to learn that you are having nice success in placing my books in the libraries and in schools and colleges.... I am sure that this will revolutionize the thinking of the thoughtful men of your country as well as the students and professors, and the ultimate end will be to save the world from the clutches of material illusory activities which is now causing havoc everywhere.” (Letter to Karandhara dated 9-13-70)

“If we introduce these books in all of the bookstores, schools, colleges, libraries and everyone’s home, our religion will be the only religion in the world very soon.” (Letter to Krishna Bamini dated 1-4-72)

“We have got a great mission to fulfill, and these books and magazines are the torchbearers of Truth which can save the world.” (Letter to Ksirodakasayi dated 1-3-72)

Srila Prabhupada’s books, then, should be thought of as a permanent legacy to be embraced and shared by devotees everywhere. Their purpose is to establish religious principles and enlighten human society. They were Srila Prabhupada’s gift to the world and proof of his empowerment by Krishna. There was no reason, therefore, for His Divine Grace to recommend that his books be further revised. He was of the opinion that another round of editing would not be necessary for his literatures to deliver the world from the darkest regions of ignorance.

Our guideline in Krishna consciousness is that the only duty of the disciple is to faithfully execute the order of the bona fide spiritual master. If a disagreement arises over how to best serve the guru, the issue can generally be resolved by following the course of action chalked out by the spiritual master himself through direct instructions to his followers. In a room conversation that took place in Paris in 1976, Srila Prabhupada elaborated on this point, and his explanation soundly defeats virtually all of the arguments presented in favor of changing his books.

Excerpt from a room conversation taking place in Paris, France on August 5, 1976

HARI-SAURI: Sometimes there’s some discrepancy, two parties, that may both want to serve but they have different ways, different ideas how to execute the same order, so there may be some disagreement.

PRABHUPADA: Service means you must take order from the master. Otherwise, it is mental concoction. Actually the servant requests, “How can I serve you?” So when the master orders, “You serve me like this,” then you do that, that is service. And if you manufacture your service, that is not service. That is your sense gratification. *Yasya prasada bhagavat-prasada*. You have to see how he is pleased. Now if he wants a glass of water and if you bring a nice glass of milk, you can say, “Milk is better than water. You take it.” That is not service. He wants water, you give him water. Don’t manufacture better thing.

After Srila Prabhupada’s disappearance, and without his consent, the BBT editors took it upon themselves to re-edit his books, making thousands of unnecessary changes in an attempt to improve their wording and style. But, as Srila Prabhupada stated above, without his order, their service was a concoction. They were offering him milk when he had asked for water. He wanted them to follow the rule of *arsha-prayoga*, but they decided to manufacture a better thing. So, according to the spiritual master, their editing was not service at all, but sense gratification.

In preparing his books for publication, Srila Prabhupada did not want a great deal of time spent on editing work. Neither was Srila Prabhupada very concerned with style. His Divine Grace once said:

“We are not meant for presenting any literary masterpieces.”

In the following letter, he carefully instructed his book production staff concerning his priorities:

“We have to do things now very dexterously, simply we have to see that in our book there is no spelling or grammatical mistake. We do not mind for any good style, our style is Hare Krishna, but still, we should not present a shabby thing. Although Krishna literatures are so nice that, even if they are presented in broken and irregular ways, such literatures are welcomed, read and respected by bona fide devotees.” (Letter to Satsvarupa dated 1-9-70)

Unless the BBT trustees felt that Srila Prabhupada’s books had been shabbily presented, they had no right to tamper with them. Of course, it is not our philosophy to print errors, but spiritual subject matter is transcendental to all mundane considerations and remains potent despite mistakes in grammar, spelling, etc. Once the presentation of his books had met Srila Prabhupada’s standard of approval, he adamantly warned the BBT staff that further changes could not be made. He said they should not even think there were mistakes in his published works.

When it was brought to Srila Prabhupada’s attention in 1977 that significant changes had been made in his books without his approval, he instructed the directors of the BBT that the next printing of his books should be again to the original way. The BBT editors knew how averse Srila Prabhupada was to making revisions in his books, especially once they had been published. How, then, despite his specific instructions, could they justify acting against his wishes and dare to change everything shortly after his physical departure?

If Srila Prabhupada ever spoke of making improvements, he was referring to the quality of the printing only and was not suggesting that changes be made in the text of his books. When Srila Prabhupada first examined the 1972 MacMillan Gita, for example, he said it did not meet our Vaishnava standard. He was disappointed with the quality of the paper, the binding, the color work and so on. These are the things he wanted improved. As far as the text was concerned, he said that nothing should be added or subtracted.