

An Offering of Love

By Urmila Devi Dasi

The students, from the beginners who can barely write to the almost-graduated, look up expectantly.

"Blank paper, everyone! For the next two or three days we're going to write an offering to Srila Prabhupada."

Every year, disciples and followers of Srila Prabhupada celebrate the anniversary of the day he appeared in the world by, among other things, writing letters in which they glorify him, offer him service, and express appreciation for all he did. The letters are offerings of love.

The traditional Vedic school is called the *gurukula*, "the place of the spiritual master." As the founder of ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada is in one sense the spiritual master of all its members, including my students, who will eventually accept initiation from one of Srila Prabhupada's disciples. Today, one of *gurukula's* primary purposes is still to teach the student, from a young age, service to the spiritual master. The yearly writing of an offering to Prabhupada, therefore, is an excellent time for children and adolescents to contemplate that goal of service.

"We should begin our offerings with obeisances to Prabhupada," I start. (The children respond with a chorus of "How do you spell ... ?")

"But let's not just write about how wonderful Prabhupada is or how we are grateful that he brought Krsna consciousness to the world. We can write that, certainly, but let's think about how we can serve him. What will we offer him during the next year and the rest of our lives?"

Soon the students come to my desk with rough drafts done or half done. I try to help them be specific and set attainable goals. For example, it is common for a student to write, "I want to preach all over the world."

"That's wonderful," I comment, "but how do you intend to do that? Will you preach in Argentina? How will you get there? Will you distribute books, or have a group of devotees who chant, or preach through radio ... ?"

Soon the students realize that I'm asking them to make a *real* offering. Gradually they write from the heart. They express a desire to dress the Deity of the Lord, or cook for Krsna, or teach in a *gurukula*, or develop a rural community.

Besides asking them to write about what lifetime service they can offer Srila Prabhupada, I ask them to write what service they can give in the coming year. That service can be related to their long-term goals, if they like. Often, however, their immediate goal of service is something such as chanting an extra round of Hare Krsna on their beads, getting their schoolwork done on time, or improving their friendships with other devotees of Krsna.

It is important for the children to be very specific. If they simply write, "Prabhupada, this year I would like to become more humble," they don't really know how to go about it or when they've achieved it. They need to think of specifics. *How* could they become more humble? Maybe "This year, when my parents or teachers correct me I'll remember to be grateful that they are helping me improve. I'll say 'Thank you' instead of making excuses."

Many managers and educators have noted the positive effects of setting short- and long-term goals. Children are no exception to the principle that all living beings work for some *purpose*. The personal philosophy of Krsna consciousness does not deny goals or plan making but substitutes the spiritual plan for the material. This substitution, which Krsna calls "the art of work," is the secret of yoga. A materialist's enthusiasm to attain goals keeps him bound to the material world and its miseries. A devotee's enthusiasm for spiritual goals leads to liberation.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between materialistic and spiritual goals is that the materialist desires to please himself and the devotee desires to please the spiritual master. But there is another important distinction: for a devotee, the work is more important than the result. Krsna tells Arjuna never to consider himself the cause of the results of his activities. Rather, Arjuna should work toward the goal that Lord Krsna desires and offer the work to Krsna, whether the actual result appears full or meager. After all, the result is up to Krsna.

When my students offer, for example, "I would like to open a temple for you, Srila Prabhupada," they know that their success lies in their sincere attempt to please the Lord, not in the praises of others or in external signs of accomplishment. Prabhupada exemplified this attitude when, upon first coming to America, he wrote an offering to Krsna. Prabhupada prayed that he would do his best to teach the science of devotion, and that it was up to Krsna to make the work a success or failure, as the Lord desired.

The children's offerings, then, surpass in enthusiasm an ordinary man's New Year's resolutions. And while enthusiasm for serving the spiritual master's mission is one of the main principles of success in God-realization, the service attitude itself is the foundation of that success.

By writing and working on a specific, personal offering of service, our children can go beyond the sentimental worshiper who makes a yearly emotional show—"I want to serve you, guru!"—but actually spends his or her time on other concerns. These children come to see that service to the spiritual master is their offering and their life.

Urmila Devi Dasi was initiated in 1973 and has been involved in ISKCON education since 1983. She, her husband, and their three children live at the ISKCON community in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where she runs a school for children aged 5-18. She is the main author/compiler of Vaikuntha Children, a gurukula classroom guidebook.