

## **"A Deliberation on the Methodology of Sadhu-sanga" by HDG Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakur, originally published in Sri Sajjana-toshani, 1917.**

### **Association is the basis of one's nature**

A person's nature is shaped by the company he keeps. In other words, a person develops a nature similar to that of whomever he associates with. The jiva's association with the fruitive activities he performed in his past life moulds his nature, and this nature is transformed by the company he keeps in his current life. Thus, association is the root cause in forming a person's character. It has therefore been said:

*yasya yat sangatih pumso  
manivat syat sa tad-gunah*

Sri Hari-bhakti-sudhodaya (quoted in Sri Bhakti-rasamrita-sindhu 1.2.229)

The quartz crystal assumes the colour of any object in its proximity, regardless of the hue of that object. Similarly, a person acquires the qualities of whomever he joins company with.

Sadhu-sanga is the path to liberation Srimad-Bhagavatam (3.23.55) states:

*sango yah samsriter hetur  
asatsu vihito 'dhiya  
sa eva sadhushu krito  
nihsangatvaya kalpate*

By associating with worldly-minded materialists, a person is bound to undergo severe suffering in material existence. He will certainly have to bear the consequences of his association, even if he cannot distinguish between good and bad. By associating with saintly persons, however, a person attains nihsangatva, complete freedom from worldly attachments.

### **Relinquishing unfavourable association is essential**

Regarding bad association, Srimad-Bhagavatam (3.31.33-34) affirms:

*satyam saucam daya maunam  
buddhih srir hrir yasah kshama  
samo damo bhagas ceti  
yat-sangad yati sankshayam  
teshv asanteshu mudheshu  
khanditatmasv asadhushu  
sangam na kuryac chocyeshu  
yoshit-krida-mrigheshu ca*

Worldly association destroys all one's virtues like truthfulness, cleanliness, mercy, gravity, intelligence, shyness, prosperity, reputation, forgiveness, control of the mind, control of the senses, good fortune and opulence. One should utterly reject the company of a person who is not a sadhu, considering such association to be extremely miserable, for such a wicked and restless fool is but a dancing dog in the hands of a woman and is thereby simply bent on annihilating himself.

### **The symptoms of a sadhu, and the necessity of sadhu-sanga**

We do not, however, attain the desired goal merely by renouncing bad association. We must earnestly engage in sadhu-sanga. The symptoms of a genuine sadhu, one whose association must be sought, have been outlined in Srimad-Bhagavatam (3.25.21,23-24):

*titikshavah karunikah  
suhridah sarva-dehinam  
ajata-satravah santah  
sadhavah sadhu-bhushanah  
mad-asrayah katha mrishtah  
srinvarianti kathayanti ca  
tapanti vividhas tapa  
naitan mad-gata-cetasah  
ta ete sadhavah sadhvi  
sarva-sanga-vivarjitah  
sargas teshv atha te prarthayah  
sanga-dosha-hara hi te*

Lord Kapila said, "O Mother, the sublime ornaments of a sadhu are that he is tolerant, merciful and a well wisher and friend to all living entities. He considers no one his enemy, is peaceful and abides by the scriptures. These qualities comprise the nature of all pure devotees.

"Since the minds of such personalities are fully absorbed in Me, they do not perform the arduous endeavours of those lured by the paths of karma, jnana or ashtanga-yoga. Rather, they engage themselves simply in speaking and hearing harikatha, their minds having been easily cleansed by narrations of My pastimes. O virtuous lady, these devotees, who are completely free from all worldly attachments, counteract the harmful effects of a person's material bondage. You should pray for their association."

**A sadhu is very rare and not to be judged by external dress**

We should not identify a sadhu by his external garb. Even if someone has completely given up criticising others and engaging in idle gossip, he must clearly possess the above-mentioned virtues before we can recognise him as a sadhu. In this Age of Kali, knowledge of what makes a real sadhu is vanishing. It is a matter of grave concern that anyone and everyone who dresses himself as a sadhu is acknowledged as one. We should be ever mindful that by associating with such false sadhus we become duplicitous ourselves. There are few genuine sadhus. They are currently so rare that a person would be lucky to discover one after intently searching far and wide for a very long time.

### **Krishna-bhakti influenced by madhurya-rasa is especially uncommon**

Mahadeva (Lord Siva) once said to Devi (Parvati),

"O Bhagavati, among thousands upon thousands of persons desiring salvation, perhaps one exhibits the characteristics of a liberated soul. Among thousands upon thousands of such persons, maybe one actually achieves spiritual realisation and perfection. And among millions and millions of perfected and liberated souls, perhaps one, on the strength of his past virtuous activities (sukriti) and good association (sat-sanga), is devoted to Lord Narayana. Just see, the devotees of Lord Narayana are self-satisfied, and therefore they are extremely rare. But look here. If the pure devotee who serves Lord Narayana in dasyarasa, the mood of servitorship, is so rare, how much more uncommon is he who serves Sri Krishna in madhurya-rasa, the mood of amorous love."

**The devotee of Lord Krishna is the topmost sadhu, and the fruit of associating with him is the highest**

Only Sri Krishna's pure devotee, who possesses all the symptoms mentioned previously, is to be considered the best of sadhus, and his association is highly desirable for us. Sri Brahma describes the benefit we receive from this association:

*tavad ragadayah stenas  
tavat kara-griham griham  
tavan moho 'nghri-nigado  
yavat krishna na te janah*

Srimad-Bhagavatam (10.14.36)

Sri Brahma says, "The attachment and hatred that arise from spontaneous absorption in the objects of sense gratification are robbing us of our true nature. Our homes have become nothing but prison houses and we are constantly bound by the foot-shackles of material affection (moha). What a miserable condition we are in. O Sri Krishna, only when possessiveness (mamata) towards You awakens in my heart by associating with Your pure devotees, shall I be counted among Your associates. From that day, the various propensities of my mind, such as attachment, shall no longer act like thieves but like beloved friends, by allowing me to engage in pure devotional service to You. Only then will my home become transcendental and bestow eternal bliss; only from that day will my power of affection become favourable for devotional service and actually advance the cause of my soul."

Lord Brahma offered further prayers:

*tad astu me natha sa bhuri-bhago  
bhava 'tra vanyatra tu va tirascam  
yenaham eko 'pi bhavaj-jananam  
bhutva nishveve tava pada-pallavam*

Srimad-Bhagavatam (10.14.30)

"O Sri Krishna," he entreated, "my earnest prayer is that in this life as Brahma, or in any other species of life, even as an animal or a bird, I may attain the fortune of being counted as one of Your devotees and engage in devotional service to Your lotus feet." One achieves this exalted position only by associating with a pure devotee of Sri Krishna.

**Sadhu-sanga misconceived**

What activities comprise sadhu-sanga? This is a matter of great importance. Generally people think that sadhu-sanga is performed when one identifies a sadhu and massages his feet, offers obeisances to him, honours his caranamrita, takes his remnants or donates some money to him. It is true that a person honours a sadhu by these activities and thereby derives some benefit, but it is incorrect to deem these activities sadhu-sanga.

### **The methodology of associating with sadhus**

Srimad-Bhagavatam (2.7.46) describes how to engage in sadhu-sanga:

*te vai vidanty atitaranti ca deva-mayam  
stri-sudra-huna-sabara api papa-jivah  
yady adbhuta-krama-parayana-sila-sikshas  
tiryag-jana api kim u sruta-dharana ye*

The word adbhuta-krama denotes Sri Krishna, whose pure devotees are adbhuta-krama-parayana, or dedicated to Him. Only those who make a great endeavour to seek training and instruction from the sila, or nature and spotless character, of such pure devotees can understand the illusory potency of the Lord. They alone become capable of fully crossing the ocean of maya. Even souls who are born as women, sudras, hunas (a hill tribe originating from Eastern Germany and part of Russia ), sabaras (a tribe of hunters who keep and sell pigs )or other sinful kinds of human beings, or as animals and birds, can learn from the



character of a Krishna-bhakta and thereby effortlessly cross the ocean of birth and death. Thus, what doubt can there be that scholars with profuse knowledge of the scriptures will not also easily cross the ocean of material bondage by following the spotless conduct and character of a pure devotee.

In conclusion, one cannot transcend the power of maya even after acquiring knowledge from many scriptures. No great benefit is achieved from birth in a high-class family, and one is unable to cross the material ocean of birth and death even after practicing the dry renunciation enjoined in sastra. Nor can worldly opulence and physical beauty render this favour. One achieves unalloyed, transcendental devotional service to Sri Krishna only by very carefully investigating the nature and character of the pure devotee, who is a true sadhu, and then by honestly following him.

### **The materialist's humility and appeals for mercy are utter hypocrisy**

Materialistic persons offer obeisances to a sadhu and pray to him, "O benevolent one, I am extremely fallen. Please bestow your mercy upon me and explain how my attachments to this world may be removed." But their words are hollow. In the depths of their heart, they are convinced that accumulating wealth is real gain, and amassing objects for sense enjoyment is life's only goal. An infatuation for money burns in their hearts day and night. The materialist hankers to be recognised by the sadhu and fears that the sadhu's curse may destroy his prospects for sensual pleasure. Therefore, he displays false humility and devotion before him. If the sadhu were to bless such a person by saying, "May your desire for sense gratification be extinguished, your opulence destroyed and your relatives taken away", the materialist would at once cry, "O sadhu-maharaja, be kind! Don't bless me like this. Your favour is a curse and definitely harmful for me." Just see! Such behaviour with a sadhu makes a mockery of sadhu-sanga.

## **Duplicity deprives one of the real fruits of sadhu-sanga**

In the course of life, we may encounter many sadhus, but our deceitful natures check us from receiving the real benefit of their association. Our souls will make spiritual advancement if, with simple faith, we carefully and continuously assimilate the spotless character of a genuine sadhu - that is, a mahatma, great soul. Keeping this in mind, we should associate closely with a sadhu. By doing so, we will become conscious of his nature and character and make a focused endeavour to develop such a nature and character ourselves. This, indeed, is the teaching of Srimad-Bhagavatam.

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