

ISKCON COMMUNICATIONS ITALY 2013 SEMINAR – Villa Vrindavana, Florence, Italy

His Grace Anuttama prabhu – international ISKCON Communications director and current GBC vice-chairman – with great sensitivity and in his very own humorous way held a long seminar from July 8 to 11 in Villa Vrindavana, one of the finest property of ISKCON in Italy. The seminar was attended by about twenty enthusiastic devotees, some coming from other European nations, too. What follows is a brief description of the event, both interesting and significant for our preaching.

Anuttama prabhu explained how as human beings we are constantly communicating. We do it with pleasure with our friends and family while oftentimes we are forced to communicate in order to survive in this world. As devotees of Krishna, we are called to communicate in so many ways, both in official ways — when dealing with local authorities for permissions to organize festivals or Ratha Yatra and internally we communicate in order to cure the spiritual progress of others, in our relationship as husband and wife, with family and other devotees. As preachers we have to speak with people on the street to distribute Srila Prabhupada's books and philosophy and therefore we should feel the need to learn how to communicate in the best possible way to satisfy Sri Krishna, the founder acarya of our Movement, Srila Prabhupada and our spiritual master. In this contest the first question is:

what was the purpose of Srila Prabhupada in creating the International Society for Krishna Consciousness?

In this regard, Srila Prabhupada did comment slightly differently at different times, but when legally establishing ISKCON in 1966 in New York, he gave his precise directions with the document "The Seven Purposes of ISKCON", namely:

1. to systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world;
2. to propagate a consciousness of Krishna, as it is revealed in the Bhagavad-gita and Srimad Bhagavatam;
3. to bring the members of the Society together with each other and nearer to Krishna, the prime Entity, thus to develop the idea within the members, and humanity at large, that each soul is part and parcel of the quality of Godhead (Krishna);
4. to teach and encourage the Sankirtan movement, congregational chanting of the holy name of God, as revealed in the teachings of Lord Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu;
5. to erect for the members and for society at large a holy place of transcendental pastimes, dedicated to the Personality of Krishna;
6. to bring the members closer together for the purpose of teaching a simpler, more natural way of life;
7. with a view towards achieving the aforementioned purposes, to publish and distribute periodicals, magazines, books and other writings.

How can we achieve these goals?

It is natural to ask ourselves how can we achieve these goals if we are not able to arouse interest in the public. If people do not listen to us or have received wrong information about our Movement, how can we make people appreciate us and our philosophy? There is always talk about the importance of distributing the literature translated and explained by Srila Prabhupada, but in the long term we need also to ensure a proper environment to help people to put into practice the knowledge they bestow. The importance of learning to communicate in the right way then becomes crucial for all ISKCON members. In addition, we should realize how useful could be to train properly the largest number of devotees possible in matters of communications. The idea is to commit the most skilled devotees to specific services thus creating and sustaining a favorable setting for the development of the goals of the Krishna Consciousness Movement – establishing and maintaining confidence and faith in the integrity of the Movement's members and its mission. To reach this goal the ISKCON Communications department — whose members are carefully formed — acts in extremely diverse surroundings and those who are most experienced can teach, too. Therefore the IC project becomes an indispensable tool for the ISKCON Movement.

Principles and base values for good ISKCON Communications

We now start to understand the importance of having a structured group of well trained devotees in ISKCON to properly relate with the media, politicians, local authorities, other religions and the Hindu community. But what happens when on daily bases we have to deal with the neighbors, perhaps confronting us after a negative TV show about the Hare Krishnas or with family members that are not particularly interested in the philosophy that we have been following for years? Or maybe we face the need to meet with the principal or the teachers of our children's school, and so on. The subject matter of ISKCON Communications suddenly becomes of capital importance for each and everyone of us and to be effective we should carefully follow a few basic principles.

1. **Consistency with Srila Prabhupada's Teachings and example.** In this regard, Anuttama prabhu reminded us of the open-mindedness of Srila Prabhupada by giving this good example: in Bhagavad-gita (12.11), Krishna explains to Arjuna how the most perfect man is he whose mind is always fixed on Him and worships Him with great fervor. Then Krishna slowly descends, ending up saying that those who fail to follow the highest principles of *bhakti yoga* or are not able to devote their activities to Him may give up the fruits of their actions and become aware of their spiritual nature. In the purport to this verse, Srila Prabhupada states: "This kind of activity is also recommended here, because giving up the fruits acquired by hard work gradually purifies the mind and prepares man to understand Krishna Consciousness".
2. **Consideration of time, place and circumstance.** Srila Prabhupada on one occasion in India said to devotees not to perform Harinama because people were throwing money at them, considering them as beggars.
3. **Proactivity.** An example comes from Srila Prabhupada himself who in his old age travelled to the United States of America and started there his international spiritual Movement.
4. **Building interdependent relationships** that benefit both parties leaving them happy and safe with the feeling they have gained something (win-win situation).
5. All this can be done only with **exemplary character and behavior**, meaning we keep humble, respectful and behave with integrity and trustworthiness. Srila Prabhupada wanted his followers to be responsible gentlemen and gentlewomen.

Key Audiences

As said, we can be called to relate with many different types of audiences, all equally important. But in accord to the relationships we develop with them, some audiences have the power to harm our Movement while others can help its mission. Some examples are municipal and state officials or the police, the Hindu community, other devotees, other religions, scholars, the media and anti-cult organizations. These are the categories of people that we should pay special attention with. We need carefully study our communication strategies and engage trained devotees in our temples for this service trusting them with the assignment to cultivate

good relationships with such audiences. Also, we need to take into account the fact that we all may find ourselves in situations that require the ability to adequately communicate with sensitive audiences.

Consultation, Cooperation & Coordination

Whenever there is a problem or just an opportunity to improve communication with a certain group of people, both personally and institutionally, we have to identify the person or group who can best take care of the job. They will have to study the problem and / or the situation to be solved. Think carefully about the possible solutions and once the solution of your choice has been carried out, check the result by employing it again the next time. The power of this process will be accentuated if at any stage there is consultation, cooperation and coordination among the trained devotees in charge of communications, temple authorities and when facing major issues also with the heads of ISKCON communications on national or international level.

Needs, Interests and Concerns of the people

Another key issue that Anuttama prabhu pointed out almost every day of the seminar is that we must constantly keep in mind needs, interests and concerns of the people with whom we speak. Even at an official meeting we are talking with people who like most of us have needs, immediate and long-term ones — even if ephemeral and illusory. The interests and concerns of the other party is what we must learn to identify and understand if we want to communicate so that we can arouse interest. It is clear that we need to establish a two-way relationship and be able to listen to people very carefully for long periods of time and make them feel appreciated. We should try to understand what are their immediate needs before we talk about ourselves. Equally important it is to listen to their feedback, to be a mirror, not just a mouthpiece, with the aim of improving our communications skills. Finally, please remember to cultivate people over time. Lets always keep in mind that the art of communications is a process and not a product and often the results are seen only in due time.

An example of the importance of communications

One of the most striking examples of the importance of communications is the Bhaktivedanta Manor. Bhaktivedanta Manor faced a major crisis around 1969 and the fact that it wasn't shut down but instead received a great publicity must be attributed to the excellent relationship between ISKCON and the Hindu community. The key of success was the work done in a long span of time by devotees with great communication skills who worked hard to present our Movement and its authenticity to the general public, local authorities and members of the British government.

Unfortunately in this context I can't go into the fine details of the seminar itself but I can attest it positively helps to learn how to open your mind understanding the sentiment of Srila Prabhupada and his priorities. This seminar stimulates personal growth and helps to overcome difficulties, shyness and mental blocks. During the course we did a lot of practical communications exercises sometimes in pairs, others in teams or as a group. We practiced listening, problem resolution, deep and sincere appreciation of devotees, addressing an audience and speaking in public, dealing with interviews and the media.

I can't emphasize enough how important the art of communications is for all members of our Movement and how much participating to these courses and to be educated in communications can benefit our preaching efforts. Hare Krishna

your servant
Sri Lalita devi dasi

APPENDIX

ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God (Excerpts)

This document serves as the first official statement by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) concerning the Society's relationship with other people of faith in God. It has been developed by the ISKCON Interfaith Commission and authorized by the GBC Executive Committee. The process of development included broad consultation with many respected devotees, eminent scholars and religious representatives.

ISKCON belongs to the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya (denomination or tradition), a monotheistic tradition within Vedic or Hindu culture. Hindu culture is vast, and the term Hinduism encompasses numerous theologies, philosophies, religious traditions and spiritual cultures. Thus, dialogue with Hindu traditions has been difficult for many seeking such dialogue. There are no official representatives of Hinduism, as the term Hinduism does not imply a single spiritual tradition. This statement therefore is representative of Hindu culture and religion as it is in ISKCON, a Vedantic, monotheistic Vaishnava tradition.

In this statement and in the elaboration of this statement, we present our response to the current global need for relationships among world faiths. ISKCON is the first global Vaisnava movement and as such accepts the responsibility to interact with host communities with respect and sensitivity. Consequently this document serves as a statement of purpose to other faith communities and to ISKCON's members.

ISKCON's Statement on Relating with People of Faith in God

- In ISKCON love of a Supreme personal God is considered to be the highest form of religious expression, and we recognize and respect this expression in other theistic traditions. We respect the spiritual worth of paths of genuine self-realisation and search for the Absolute Truth in which the concept of a personal Deity is not explicit. Other communities and organization advocating humanitarian, ethical and moral standards are also valued as being beneficial to society.
- ISKCON views dialogue between its members and people of other faiths as an opportunity to listen to others, to develop mutual understanding and mutual trust, and to share our commitment and faith with others, while respecting their commitment to their own faith.
- ISKCON recognizes that no one religion holds a monopoly on the truth, the revelation of God or our relationship with God.
- ISKCON's members are encouraged to be respectful to people of faith from other traditions and to see the need for people of different faiths to work together for the benefit of society as a whole and for the glorification of God.
- ISKCON affirms the responsibility of each individual to develop his or her relationship with the Supreme Lord.