

# “The great soul can impart knowledge unto you”

A BBT decision  
explained by Jayadvaita Swami  
June 10, 2017

## Summary

In future printings of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, the BBT will revert the translation of Chapter 4, text 34, to the text of the first edition. The revised text was fully justified, but there are good reasons for changing it back. The BBT is aware of the potential dangers of continuing to fix editorial errors in Srila Prabhupada’s books yet at the same time sees the importance of trying to keep the books free from such errors. The BBT is open to suggestions about the best course to follow.

Starting with the next printing of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, the BBT intends to reverse a change made to Chapter 4, text 34.

## What was the change?

The first edition read:

Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire from him submissively and render service unto him. The self-realized soul can impart knowledge unto you because he has seen the truth.

The second edition keeps the first sentence the same but changes the second sentence to the plural:

The self-realized *souls* can impart knowledge unto you because *they have* seen the truth.

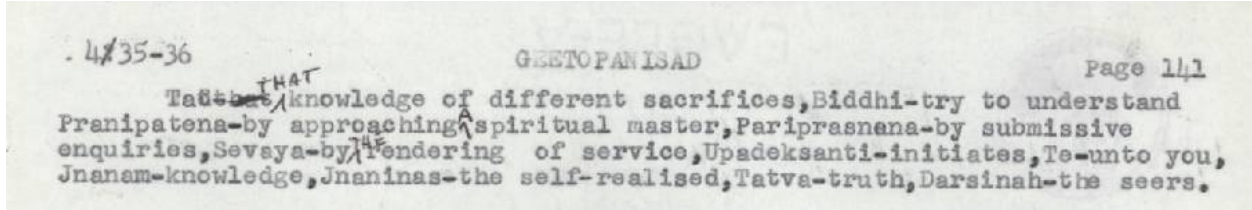
This is the change the BBT is reversing.

Now, this naturally raises several questions: Why was the change made to begin with? Didn’t it distort the philosophy? Wasn’t the change in fact unjustified? What now prompts the BBT to change it back? And what does this whole matter tell us about the revision of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, and of Srila Prabhupada’s other books, after Srila Prabhupada’s departure?

## Why was the change made?

I made the change for the following reasons:

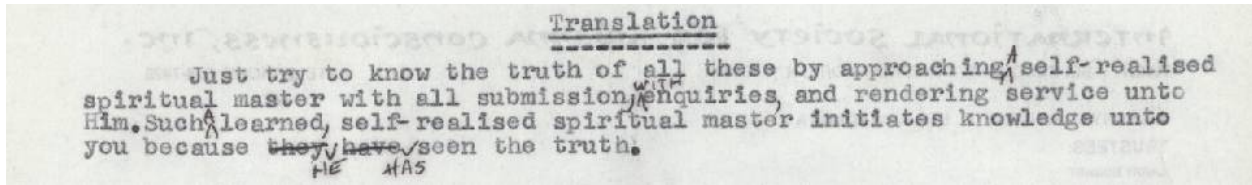
1. The Sanskrit is plural. The words *upadeksyanti*, *jnaninah*, and *tattva-darsinah* are all plural.
2. In the manuscript (typed by Srila Prabhupada himself), the word-for-word meaning for *darsinah* is plural. Although Srila Prabhupada translates *upadeksyanti* as “initiates,” the Sanskrit editor rightly changed this to “initiate,” and Srila Prabhupada translates *darsinah* as “seers” (plural).



3. In the 1972 edition, the word-for-word meanings are plural.

*tat*—that knowledge of different sacrifices; *viddhi*—try to understand; *pranipātena*—by approaching a spiritual master; *pariprasnena*—by submissive inquiries; *sevayā*—by the rendering of service; *upadeksyanti*—initiate; *te*—unto you; *jñānam*—knowledge; *jñāninaḥ*—the self-realized; *tattva*—truth; *darsinaḥ*—the seers.

4. In the original manuscript, the last sentence of the translation begins in the singular but ends in the plural.



An editor changed *they have* to singular, to match *spiritual master* and *initiates*. But he could instead just as easily have changed *spiritual master* and *initiates* to plural, which would have matched the Sanskrit, the word-for-word meanings, and Srila Prabhupada’s original *they have*.

## Wasn't this change unjustified?

For the reasons above, I considered the change justified.

Also, in the years since, I have seen an essay entitled *Interpretations of Bhagavad-gita*, in which Srila Prabhupada, before coming to America, paraphrased the verse this way:

“It is therefore stated in the Bhagavad-gita that one who actually wants to have an access to the essence of Bhagavad-gita must himself engage in the service of a bona fide spiritual master by full surrender. In that position only, one can make bona fide enquiries regarding the Bhagavad-gita, and in that posture only, the self-realized spiritual masters impregnate the submissive disciple with the knowledge of Gita, because they have already seen the Truth of it.”

Here we have the singular “spiritual master” in the first sentence and the plural “spiritual masters” in the second, just as in the revised edition of the *Gita*.

All this, I believe, provides ample grounds to justify the change.

## What now prompts the BBT to change it back?

Quite some time ago, I received a challenging but polite letter from one of my godsisters, Anuttama Devi Dasi, asking me to explain or justify the change, and so I reviewed the matter once again. Thinking about it, I considered these further points:

1. Of all the revisions done for the second edition, this is the one that has raised the most deeply felt objections. However the change may be justified, a fair number of devotees simply find it objectionable. And their spiritual feelings or judgment must be taken into account.
2. The original version was acceptable. The mismatch in grammatical number was not a terrible issue.
3. Although the grammar of the verse is plural, Srila Prabhupada himself used the verse to emphasize surrender to *the* spiritual master, singular. His purport explains the verse that way, and he used the verse the same way in his preaching. And so do his disciples and followers.

All these points argue for reverting to the first published version.

Another thought also came to mind: Even though “spiritual master” is singular, it can still be construed as plural, on the model of a sentence like this:

The Roman soldier was feared throughout southern Europe.

Although the subject here is singular (“the Roman soldier”), we understand that the intended sense is plural, for not just one soldier was feared but all the soldiers in the Roman army.

## Changing the philosophy

Some devotees have asked, “Didn’t the change distort the philosophy? Srila Prabhupada is emphasizing surrender to *the* spiritual master. When you changed *spiritual master* to plural, didn’t you have a political agenda in mind?”

My response is no. As explained in *The Nectar of Devotion*, one has to approach a spiritual master (singular) and be initiated by him, and I certainly understood that. And in fact in verse 35 my revision made the point still more plain.

The 1972 edition said:

And when you have thus learned the truth, you will know that all living beings are but part of Me — and that they are in Me, and are Mine.

Following the manuscript, the second edition says:

Having obtained real knowledge from a self-realized soul, you will never fall again into such illusion, for by this knowledge you will see that all living beings are but part of the Supreme, or, in other words, that they are Mine.

So, rather than hide that one must approach one singular self-realized soul, here the second edition emphasizes it.

## What does this tell us about the entire project of revising Srila Prabhupada’s books after his departure?

Many devotees have expressed fears that a policy of allowing unrestricted editorial changes even after Srila Prabhupada’s departure could result in gross or subtle distortions of Srila Prabhupada’s teachings — and they are right. An editor’s own subjective biases can affect his work, and the published work of the author. And over time, who knows what sort of mischief might occur?

On the other hand, we have this problem: What do we do about the editorial biases — or, more often, simply the honest editorial mistakes — in the books as first published? The mistakes range all the way from simple misspellings of English and Sanskrit, on to errors in grammar and punctuation, further on to transcribed and published mishearings and wrong verses supplied, still further on to passages whose meaning was misunderstood and therefore edited wrong and published wrong, and finally to passages totally left out.

The BBT editors maintain an in-house conference called “Errors in English Books” ([errors.english.books@pamho.net](mailto:errors.english.books@pamho.net)), where devotees can report suspected errors they find in published BBT books. Here are some of the errors devotees have spotted just in the last month:\*

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\* “Last month” means the month before I wrote the first draft of this letter. But such errors regularly continue to be found.

1. In SB 5.1.20, purport, we find:

*kabhu na badhibe tomara visaya-taranga  
punarapi ei thani pabe mora **sange*** [Cc. Madhya 7.129]

But it should be “*pabe more **sanga***” (rhymes with *taranga*).

2. In NOD, chapter 23, we find:

when He is in Goloka Vrndavana His transcendental qualities are exhibited as most perfect, when He is in Dvaraka He exhibits His qualities as very perfect, and when He is in Mathura He exhibits His qualities as perfect.

But that’s wrong. Mathura is higher than Dvaraka, so in Dvaraka His qualities are perfect, in Mathura very perfect. (See Cc. Madhya 20.401.)

3. In SB 1.9.32, the purport says:

For the ordinary man who wants to lord it over material nature, the Lord **not** only sanctions and becomes a witness of activities, but He never gives the nondevotee instructions for going back to Godhead.

But the passage doesn’t make sense. As confirmed by comparison to the original *Bhagavatam* volumes Srila Prabhupada published in India, the “not” shouldn’t be there.

4. In SB 4.29.4 the purport says:

There is always someone who wants to go to a prostitute for illicit sex or to a hotel to eat meat and drink wine. There is always someone who wants to **gamble at nightclubs or enjoy so-called sports**. All these propensities are already within the hearts of the living entities, **but some living entities stop to enjoy these abominable activities** and consequently fall down to a degraded platform.

But the original transcription says:

Somebody wants to go to the prostitute for illicit sex, somebody wants to go to the hotel and restaurant for eating meat and wine, and somebody is **going to the gambling clubs for enjoying so-called sports**. So all these propensities are there (**loke vyavayamisa-madya-seva nitya hi jantor**) within the heart of every living being. **Some of them stop to enjoy such abominable enjoyment**

**of life but some can not check** and therefore come to the platform of degradation.

So the sports are not a separate abomination; they're what people do at the gambling clubs. Additionally, a Sanskrit quotation was left out. And the editor apparently misunderstood "stop to enjoy" to mean "stop and enjoy" rather than "stop enjoying."

And so the text should read:

There is always someone who wants to go to a prostitute for illicit sex, to a hotel to eat meat and drink wine, or **to a gambling club to enjoy so-called sports**. All these propensities are already within the hearts of the living entities (*loke vyavayamisa-madya-seva nitya hi jantor*). **Some living entities can check the desire to enjoy these abominable activities, but others cannot** and consequently fall down to a degraded platform.

Again, all these errors were detected only last month. They're only a sample. And after a while such errors add up.

That's the problem: On one hand, we don't want present or future editors to cause mischief in the books. On the other, the books still have errors that matter enough to deserve fixing.

So what should we do?

The BBT trustees have discussed this many times. In fact, we discuss it at our meetings nearly every year. Every year, we talk about "sealing the books." And every year we decide that newly found errors still deserve fixing.

One approach, of course, is simply to seal the books now: Whatever errors turn up, just leave them.

Or, as I've written before, another approach is to make sure we train the BBT's future editors to be chaste and strict, so that they fix only what needs fixing and leave everything else alone.

A third approach would be to continue to allow such revisions only while Srila Prabhupada's original editors are still present, and then seal the books.

So far, we have leaned toward the second policy. The third is still being considered. And of course the first is also possible.

The matter is still open. As always, your thoughtful and sober comments are welcome. If you have a comment you'd like us at the BBT to consider, please write to [bbt.editorial.decisions@pamho.net](mailto:bbt.editorial.decisions@pamho.net).

Thank you. Hare Krishna.

Respectfully,

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