

Śaraṇagatī

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THE INNER WEALTH OF ŚRĪDHARA THE BANANA SELLER

Who is beautiful? He or she is beautiful whose heart is full of gentleness and charm, and who speaks words as sweet as nectar. The devotees of Kṛṣṇa naturally develop gentleness and charm by humbly thinking of themselves lower than a blade of grass. These devotees have Kṛṣṇa in their hearts and therefore they have the quality of forbearance and forgiveness. Even if there is any valid reason to get angry or upset, they nevertheless remain calm and peaceful. Because of their overwhelming love for Lord Hari devotees are interested in him and show amazing disinterest in the affairs of the world. Such devotees don't think that material wealth and prosperity are signs of the Lord's mercy. They feel that the wealth of devotion is the sign that the Lord has given his mercy.

An example of such a devotee is Kolaveca Śrīdhara, or Śrīdhara the banana seller. He lived in a banana-tree orchard and would buy whole banana trees from the owner and then sell the different parts – bananas, leaves, flowers, stems and bark – at the market in Navadvīpa. He was very poor, but as honest as Yudhiṣṭhira, the king of *dharma*. His prices were fair without exception. Whatever little income he made, he would split in two halves. One half he spent on worshiping of Mother Gaṅgā, and the other half he used to maintain himself.

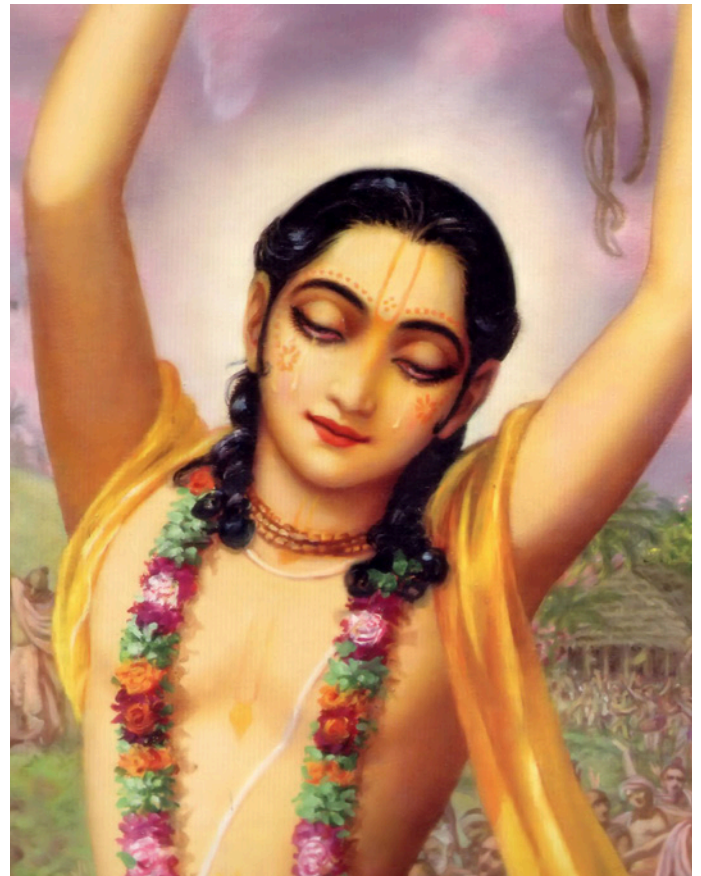
The materialists laughed at Kolaveca Śrīdhara, “He is so poor, why is he spending half of his income on worship?” It is the same today, when materialists laugh at devotees of Kṛṣṇa, “Why do they go to bed so early and get up so early in the morning? Why do they use their money to give charity to people in need? Why do they organize festivals for others?” In the value system of transcendence it is preferred to have less material opulence and to be more conscious in life. The value system of materialism dictates quite the opposite.

But Kṛṣṇa is known as *prema-rasa-jñā*, he who knows (*jñā*) the love (*prema-rasa*) inside the heart of his devotees and relishes their devotional activities. On the other hand Kṛṣṇa does not accept anything from those who are proud of their material wealth, education, aristocracy or activities.

Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu came to Kolaveca Śrīdhara every day. Śrīdhara was in a simple market street with a few banana flowers, bananas and leaf plates. Caitanya Mahāprabhu said, “Kolaveca, your prices are too high. I'll give you half of the money.” “No,” replied Kolaveca, “My prices are very cheap compared to the prices of others.” But Nimāi Paṇḍita (that was the name of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu at that time) said, “You keep your wealth hidden and cheat the public by making an outside show of extreme poverty. One day I will go to your house and I will show everyone how much money you have at home. Give me things for half of the price.” “No, I need the money to worship mother Gaṅgā.” After arguing in this way for two hours, Lord Caitanya threw

a few small conches as payment to Śrīdhara, quickly grabbed some bananas and leaves and ran away. He was very, very naughty.

The next morning Nimāi Paṇḍita came, and said, “Ohhhhhhhh, Kolaveca Śrīdhara, today you should give me everything for half of the price, because do you know who I am?” “Yes”, said Kolaveca Śrīdhara, “you are a very argumentative and temperamental son of a brāhmaṇa.” “No, I'm the origin of mother Gaṅgā, whom you worship with half of your income. This mother, who nourishes all the devotees, comes from my toe. You should therefore give me things for half of the price. Don't be upset, you are worshipping the father of Gaṅgā.” Kolaveca exclaimed, “Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu! Ordinary people become more mature as they grow old, but you are becoming more and more arrogant. What is wrong with you?” Then Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu would argue again and in the end, he would grab some bananas, give half the price and go away. Because, opposite to the materialistic paradigm, when the Lord gives you his special mercy, he makes you materially detached and instead gives you the wealth of *prema*.



The next morning Kolaveca Śrīdhara was trembling – not out of fear, but with eagerness to see that *brāhmaṇa* coming down the path to argue the *prema* quarrel with him. When Lord Caitanya came, Śrīdhara, after some initial arguing, stopped, enchanted by Caitanya Mahāprabhu’s wonderful beauty and said, “I am your surrendered dog, your servant. Forgive me for not asking for the right price. You can have it for half the price.”

The Russian poet Dostoevsky once wrote, “The world will be conquered by beauty.” The beauty of Gaurāṅga Mahāprabhu conquered Kolaveca Śrīdhara’s heart to such a degree that even though he had religious obligations to worship mother Gaṅgā, he was willing to part with his goods for half the price. The Lord would come every day and spend two hours with Kolaveca Śrīdhara. He would eat all his meals only from the leaf plates, which this simple devotee, who was conquered by love, would give him, and not from the golden plates which other devotees offered to him.

In the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* it is said that the Lord does not need our service. When the Lord accepts our offerings, it’s for *our* benefit. The example given is that when you decorate yourself before the mirror, the reflection in the mirror is automatically decorated, too. In the same way, when you worship Kṛṣṇa with love, you are decorated with loving symptoms in your heart. It is in our interest to serve Kṛṣṇa. When we serve Kṛṣṇa, our heart will blossom with love. And this is true wealth. You cannot get this inner wealth by becoming rich or being a good social person. You can only get it if you take care of your spiritual roots – that is to take care of Kṛṣṇa. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to be a nice person. It doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take care of your physical and emotional well-being. You should also take care of all these things, but on the basis of your spiritual roots. Kolaveca Śrīdhara teaches us this.

Once the Lord asked Śrīdhara, “Śrīdhara, why are you so poor? Your roof is leaking. Look at your shirts. They are full of holes. I can’t believe what I am seeing. You are chanting the names of Lord Hari, who is the husband of Lakṣmī, but Lakṣmī does not come to you. On the other hand, those who worship Kālī or Caṇḍī, they have so much. Why don’t you stop your worship of Hari? It’s not working!” Śrīdhara said, “I see it differently. I’m not starving. I have clothes. They are not fine clothes, they are not the right size, but my body is covered. I see that, generally speaking, everyone’s life is almost the same. The king may live in a palace surrounded by opulence and eat fine food, but the birds in the trees, they also have their food, they also have their nests and many times they’re happier than the king, because they are not involved in politics. Personally I prefer a simple life without worries.”

This is the standard of transcendence. When you are rich internally, you don’t need all these external, material things. You don’t need



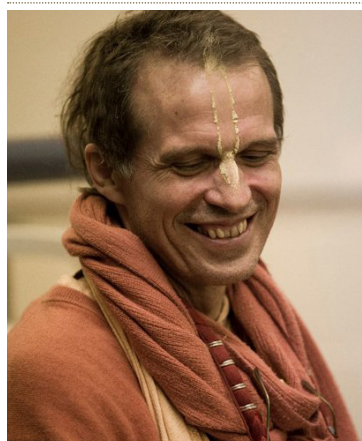
to prove yourself in the world. You are not interested in involving yourself in material projects.

On another occasion Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu wanted to give a boon to each of his devotees, and he asked Śrīdhara to be brought before him. Although Śrīdhara was not educated, he offered wonderful prayers to the Lord at that time. He refused any material boon the Lord wanted to offer to him and instead asked the Lord for continuous devotional service.

Thus Caitanya Mahāprabhu revealed a secret through his devotee: *bhakti* is what counts. *Bhakti* brings knowledge. *Bhakti* brings wealth. *Bhakti* brings you everything. Without *bhakti*, all these things will not be able to fulfill you. But when *bhakti* starts to appear in your heart, even a little bit, then you will truly be happy.

From a lecture by Śacinandana Swami in Kraenzlin, Germany, June 27, 2014.

Photo by Mickey Shah



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upcoming seminars & events:

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Aug. 19-22	Kīrtana Course, Rādhadeśa, Belgium
Sep. 2	Rādhāṣṭamī Festival, Kraenzlin, Germany
Sep. 18 - 28	Holy Name & Tree of Life Retreats, Australia

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