

DAMSELS IN DISTRESS ASK,  
"WHERE ARE OUR KNIGHTS IN SHINING ARMOUR?"

by

Sita-devi dasi

We are all too well aware of the fact that men and women are different; we each have different contributions to make to society. What these specific differences are can be the source of endless debate and discussion; something that perhaps is helpful at some point. But I feel that overriding whatever those differences may be, the men and women in ISKCON have something far more important in common: Conjointly we make up the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. And this is no small thing.

To have the men and women in our Society emotionally or psychically at war with one another is merely tiring both of us out, perhaps even mortally wounding some of us. We need to put down this sword that divides us in two, and instead tend to our battle scars.

The problem is neither a "women's issue" nor a "men's problem". It is one that we all share. And one that is ultimately going to hurt the greater ISKCON society more than it will hurt any one of us individually. Damaging not only our internal relationships with one another, but the image that we present to the public.

As a contemporary poet, Anne Waldman, has written:

"The problem with you  
Is the problem with me  
The problem thinking we're so different  
The problem is how to perceive..."

I feel that at the root of this gender war, there is actually a problem we all share in relating and communicating on all fronts. It's rare to find a devotee who bloats because they've lost their belief in Srila Prabhupada or Krsna. Most apostates cite that their relationships with other devotees went amiss, discouraging them.

An academic researcher in America recently conducted a survey of many New Religious Movements. He concluded that while ISKCON had the most philosophically sound basis, it sorely lacked personal warmth and closeness in its interpersonal dealings.

This shows in many ways, manifesting as cliquishness. Undoubtedly most of us have experienced it from one side of the fence or the other at some time: Sankirtana devotees are superior to pujaris, sannyasis more advanced than householders, Prabhupada disciples distinct from newer recruits. The list goes on and on of how we divide devotees into hierarchies of good and bad, us and them, right and wrong. This serves to breed suspicion, misperception, contempt and fear. Hardly the basis of love and trust that Srila Prabhupada wanted us to operate from.

Similarly I don't intend this to be a challenge to anyone. My motive here is to help our Society learn from its past mistakes. In fact it is extremely painful to reveal personal experiences, putting myself in a vulnerable position.

Of course in our own groups women can easily gripe about present circumstances, or sometimes even laugh at the ridiculousness of past ones. But if we dare to bring them to the attention of our authorities, we risk being labelled as women's libbers. A few of us have tried this and have found it makes our lives even more unbearable. Since we intend to continue living within this ISKCON society for the rest of our lives, most of us therefore keep quiet to keep the peace.

But I sense that the mood in ISKCON is changing; there are men who are beginning to take us into consideration when making decisions.

By now you may be wondering what I'm even talking about. What problem? Haven't the women had enough to eat over the years? Or places to sleep? Or opportunities to chant Hare Krsna? Or is it that we've been subjected to physical abuse of some kind?

While most of us can't complain about anything like starvation or torture, most of us have, each in very different ways and under different circumstances, received debilitating blows from the men in our Society.

These blows haven't been dealt by any physical weapons. Rather this weapon has been something far more subtle: an attitude that has caused us, over repeated exposure to it, to feel as if we are not wanted within this Society.

Some of you may balk at this. "Of course we want women to become Krsna conscious!" you may say indignantly. And indeed, were I to ask any man in this Movement whether they wanted me to remain in ISKCON or leave, I am certain everyone of them would encourage me to stay.

But yet, an altogether different message comes across in the behaviour patterns of many of these same men.

I went to India to see Srila Prabhupada during a festival in the 1970s, a festival many of you perhaps also attended. Not having many opportunities to be with him, I was looking forward to being able to worship him daily.

Yet I was told that I must cut subjis during my japa and through Guru-puja while the men chanted their rounds and took darshan. I daily finished that task in time to come into class after the Sanksrit had been chanted. In doing so I got a very clear message about how important it is for me to practise sadhana.

During those same pilgrimages I watched all the sannyasis and men board the first buses to go on parikrama, leaving one bus to carry four times the amount of women and children it would hold. And once we'd arrive at the pilgrimage site, the men would already be sitting and listening to someone speak about the holy place while we ladies were still trailing behind. Once we'd breathlessly catch up with them, it would be just in time for them to get up and push on to the next spot. By this I got a message that I'm not really able to appreciate the transcendental nature of the bhamas.

During that festival I heard an announcement after the morning programme that all devotees desiring to take Srila Prabhupada's Bhaktishastri exam should report to a particular room. But when another Goddessister and I were turned away from the door because "everyone understood the exam was only for the men", I got a message that philosophical study was not for me either.

When during a feast I saw that the men who'd transferred the prasadam had forgotten to bring the women five of the preps, while the men all had second and third helpings; and when a hurricane blew the tarpaulin off the roof on which the ladies were staying, blowing our trunks and baggage onto the ground below, and instead of offering us their own rooms to stay in, the men told us ladies to huddle in the prasadam hall that night; and while at the same time severe blockages in the ladies' toilets had all of us wading through flooded stool waters in order to bathe, I got an impression that my material welfare is also not very important.

These are just a few of the messages we have been given, not necessarily deliberately or even consciously, by the men. Yet, I am certain that no one man has diabolically stayed up nights dreaming up schemes to torment the ladies.

And, because most of you do not look to see what the ladies are doing during japa, you probably didn't even know that we weren't given a japa period during the Mayapur festivals. And of course you just did what you were told to do, board your own bus, so how could you know that many of us were left behind? And you most likely were absorbed in studying in preparation for the Bhaktishastri exam, unaware of the drama we were experiencing on being turned away from the door. And since the men were served prasadam in another tent, you had no idea the ladies weren't being fed. So, we are not personally blaming any of you.

As a matter of fact, when something of this nature occurs, there are usually one or two men around who we do complain to. And these men are generally extremely sympathetic. Unfortunately they are inevitably not in any sort of position to effect a change or rectify the mistake. Although it does have to be said that there have been times when men who have been in charge of us have dismissed us, neglecting to hear our pleas for help.

All these things have exerted a powerful psychological effect upon the women in our Society. One, I would say that has convinced us. Convinced us that we are not really wanted around you, but that you are simply tolerating our presence.

Has that been healthy for us? Is it healthy for any of you? As a result of picking up these subtle messages from our brothers, have we developed into the kind of devotees we should be? Into the soft Vaishnavis Srila Prabhupada would want us to be? We are wounded women and we'd like to ask your help so that our wounds may not become infected any more than they already are.

It is evident to me that until our pain has been recognised, until our brothers take compassion on us and ask "What ails thee?" we will not be healed. By sharing our dreams of a future that incorporates values of the heart together we can hopefully perfectly fill in the template of devotional service Srila Prabhupada has given us.

### Equal Rights?

What is it that we want from you? Mostly we just want to be treated like persons. But you may say, are women not already being treated this way? Have we not been given equal treatment to the men? Surely we distributed books side-by-side with them, we cooked feasts just as they did, we worshipped the Deities and attended lectures as they did, and even some places are allowing us to again give classes or lead kirtans.

But this is not what we are talking about here. We are speaking about the unique qualities that woman possesses which we feel are not being valued. Generally we protect something which we consider valuable. Does the fact that we don't feel protected have something to do with the feeling that we're not valued?

Our Society in many subtle ways seems to denigrate feminine qualities. And as a result, a woman is not likely to value herself as woman. She sees herself as somewhat lacking, inferior. She looks around and sees men achieving--men who may not even be as intelligent, creative or as ambitious as perhaps she feels herself to be. This confuses her, but it confirms what she has observed: That women have no intrinsic value of their own--their value comes in relationship to men and to children. She buys into that myth and internalises a feeling of self-loathing.

Her only option for recovering any sense of self-esteem is to identify with masculine values. But this also has a backlash, affecting her concept of herself as a woman, leading her to devalue other women.

As women for the last twenty years we have stood on the sidelines and seen men being rewarded with position and prestige for their intelligence, drive, renunciation and dependability. And to the degree that any women have acted like these men they may be similarly, but not equally, rewarded.

But women will never be men. And it is my contention that most of the women who are trying to be as good as men are doing so at the expense of injuring their feminine nature.

I feel that it is imperative for devotee women to somehow reclaim their femininity as worthwhile. We must recognise our contribution to culture and society as intrinsically valuable. Women, because of our feminine nature, are usually more empathic in relationships; we have a strong aesthetic orientation, and an altruistic desire to provide care. These are valuable assets for any society.

Women devotees need to understand that each one of us, male or female, has a unique role to play. This is crucial if women are to cease emulating men, or to cease belittling other women for the way they are choosing to adapt.

### Can't We Take a Joke?

It has sometimes seemed to me that women have to deny their femininity in order to be real devotees. But is this necessarily so? Perhaps you might think that I'm extreme in drawing this conclusion. But here's where I got it from:

It's the mid 1970s and a group of sannyasis and brahmacaris are sitting around an office, laughing. A regular enough scene. Especially since they're laughing about a woman who was wearing ankle bells.

"What does she think she is?" one of the men says. "A gopi or something?" Everyone chuckles.

"Doesn't she know she's just a bag of pus and blood and stool?" another adds.

Everyone laughs harder, envisioning the absurdity of this foolish woman who is so deeply enmeshed in her body.

Another sannyasi glances out the window. He points to a devotee woman pushing an infant in a pram, another toddler in her arms. He chants the Caitanya-caritamrta verse where Raghunatha dasa Goswami walked away from his family life just as if it were fresh stool. He repeats, "Fresh stool," for emphasis, drawing roars of guffaws.

Someone else says, "Look at her little piglets. More stool to wallow in." More laughter.

I was among that group of men. It was a common occurrence in the offices in which I happened to be the only woman working for several years.

Did I tell them how offensive I found their behaviour? Did I storm out of the room to register my disgust? Did I say anything in defence of my Godsisters?

No. I laughed alongside them. They were my senior role models. My mentors and spiritual authorities. Advanced devotees. And of course, I wanted to become an advanced devotee as well. To please Srila Prabhupada. Be renounced. Not attached.

And it soon became obvious to me that I couldn't be any of those things if I acted like a woman. Or, as they were often wont to quote, "As long as I believed I was a woman."

So I joked with them. Mocked women who actually cared what colour sari they wore. Ridiculed the waste of Krsna's laksmi spent in purchasing earrings and bangles such women uselessly decorated their bodies with.

I thought it tedious to bother combing my hair, for what purpose did hair serve other than to drag a husband into mundane consciousness? And after all, it was only stool. I certainly wanted to do whatever was necessary to get both me and my husband back to Godhead. So, along with other, more subtle things, I cut my hair off.

I was once in a car with my husband, two sannyasis sat in the front seat. They were speaking about why another couple were not moving to our temple to serve as pujaris. The reason being that, in the words of one sannyasi, the woman's "pujari-ing days were over."

With a curl of his lip he said, "She's pregnant." Then he turned to me, seated a discreet distance of course away from my husband, and said, "You're not pregnant, are you?"

"Of course not," I quickly answered, feeling my husband's piercing glances on me that I better not let it be known that we had ever, ever, even considered trying for a child. So for emphasis I added, "No way I want one of those."

And for all this I was rewarded. I received a letter from my husband just before he took sannyasa saying, "Just think what a disturbance you could have been--like most women. What would have been the question of assistance? It could have been so different, so entangling, so dangerous."

Like a seal who has successfully jumped through a hoop, I was applauded. Clapped and patted on the back for my astute Krsna consciousness. So I learned that to gain that recognition, I had to continue giving up my innate feminine inclinations. Inclinations that needn't have even taken me away from Krsna.

Instead of a husband and children, I gained the association of sannyasis. Became known for being able to do substantial service whereas many of my other Godsisters were wasting their lives caring for stouly babies. I felt elevated as a woman who could even sometimes ask philosophical questions. That is when I wasn't succumbing to my womanly weakness of hankering and lamentation over having lost my husband.

But it wasn't all pats on the back. For not everyone was thrilled that I was becoming a surrogate man. Some men resented a woman speaking out occasionally with the same clarity of perception they had. And some men resented me fighting my own battles.

But I had no husband, and felt that all was fair in love and war. After all, I was only continuing to do as I'd been led to believe I should. So I went on, greedy in my pursuit of Krsna consciousness, stepping on toes, elbowing my way to Prabhupada and Krsna.

I even made myself ill doing this. Being split from my feminine side I learned to override my body's needs, pushing it beyond exhaustion, ignoring my own intuition. In the middle of the day once I left my office to lie down in the ashram for an hour or so since I had my menses and was feeling quite weak. Of course I felt guilty doing something so obviously womanly and selfish, but I physically couldn't stand on my feet just then.

But I'd not been in the ashram for more than ten minutes when I received a message from my sannyasi authority that I was needed in the office. I told the woman bringing me the message that I was unable to move just then and I would be there in an hour or so. The message came back, more persistently this time, that I was not this body and I must be there right now. So dutifully, and not wishing to appear manipulative or wimpy, I overrode that pain to keep up with the men. I made my own body both an object of derision.

### Birds, Seals, Dolphins or Whales?

But then one day I had a shock. I looked in my metaphorical mirror and realised that I was one of those women I so glibly scorned. But, at the same time I didn't have a clue any more what that meant. How did one graciously accept the body Krsna awarded me at birth, without feeling disgust for it, without feeling shamed because its very existence obviously shouted to all and sundry my lust, without feeling hopeless of being able to go back to Godhead with it?

This is what I'm trying to deal with in my life right now. I'm trying to recapture my lost femininity, and trying to figure out how to fit it within the framework of devotional service as I've come to know that. The hair I cut off is growing back. Unfortunately there's other bits of me that aren't so easy to reclaim.

I don't like the fact that I've neutered myself in order to fit into a world that seemed the exclusive domain of those in male bodies. I don't like it because it doesn't feel good and it isn't helping me become Krsna conscious. Contrary to getting me off the bodily platform, it's done exactly the opposite. And it's making it difficult for me to have healthy relationships with other devotees of either sex.

Now if I hear men speaking, even remotely like the conversations I've quoted above, you've undoubtedly seen me turn purple. I'll sometimes speak out inappropriately, or register my protest in other ways. But I'm not sure that many of my Godbrothers or sisters understand just why I'm so upset about it.

I would like to think that my situation was extreme, a one-off freak of our Society. But I'm afraid it wasn't. There are other women who like me went to this extreme. And many, many more who jumped through different hoops of varying sizes.

It might be that no one explicitly told any of us to do any of these things, to adopt this mode of thought. And in some instances that may be right. But whether verbally we were instructed or not, we all got a message that having a woman's body is not an appropriate vehicle for taking up spiritual life. And since in our hearts we felt we were eternal parts and parcels of Krsna, who missed His transcendental association, and who longed

to return to Him, we did whatever we thought we had to attain that. Foolishly, this was my response.

And then there are countless other women who took the shame heaped on them by their spiritual mentors, not even bothering to try to advance, just hoping and praying for a better birth next life.

A few years ago one of my Godsisters, Radha-priya Prabhu, was asked to address an audience about Krsna consciousness. She told me that she felt, "Like a bird who has been kept in a cage for much of her life. Although the cage is reducing the bird's freedom to fly and experience the full pleasure of life, if the owner of the bird suddenly decides to open the cage door, the bird will be too afraid and unaccustomed to freedom to fly out.

"I felt very much like that bird, retreating further and further back into the corner of my cage at the sight of someone's demanding hand entering my door. However, I also felt that if the door were left ajar and I was given the time to become convinced that the people requesting me to come out were actually going to care for me and endeavour to understand me, that I could find the necessary confidence, in time."

But over the last four years, she's lived in a protected environment with her husband and children, and, in her own words, she has changed. "I have seen myself growing in confidence. In that safe environment I have developed creativity in my service and have discovered that I have ideas for preaching which previously I had not realised. This safe environment is created by living with someone who respects me as an individual with thoughts and feelings that matter."

Radha-priya is one of the lucky ones who's femininity is being respected by her husband. But very few of us know what it actually feels like to be comfortable being a woman as well as a devotee.

I've been told that if a woman has ignored her emotions while serving the needs of her family or community, there may come a point where she slowly begins to reclaim how she feels as a woman. At that time the mysteries of the feminine realm appear in her dreams; in synchronistic events; in her poetry, art and dance.

I think it therefore significant that a few days ago I had a dream that a woman was serving prasadam to the men. She sprinkled wheat germ over each of their bowls to give them extra energy. I could understand that women are able to give men energy by their feminine association in the same way that we as women are benefited and strengthened by male association. But when I opened my jar of wheat germ, I had a problem. The jar had been unused for so long that the grains were clinging to the sides of it with the webs tiny bugs had spun. I was unable to use it. Unable to add its energy and nourishment to my life, or to anyone else's.

This is how I feel about my femininity. I've shoved it so far back on the shelf so long ago that now when I want it, it's practically unusable.

Was I being Vedic or adharmic? What would a "Vedic woman" have done had she been faced with these same circumstances in her life? I sincerely doubt it would have been anything like what I did.

What I would like to see is a new hoop for us to aspire to jump through. One that encourages us to become Krsna conscious as we develop those soft qualities of Vaishnava women. We need the strength we possess in our femininity to be rewarded, not our hardness. We need guidance and nurturing as we make our practice jumps, and allowances for us our initial failures. I'd like to be given constructive feedback occasionally from the men to let me know how I'm doing.

Better yet, however attractive they are, do we still want the hoops at all? And what about dropping the hoops that are also being held up for men to jump through? Wouldn't it be preferable to just let all the seals swim freely in the ocean of devotional service that Srila Prabhupada introduced us all to? Let them swim alongside the dolphins and whales; let them bask on the shore alongside the penguins and sea-gulls. After all, Srila Prabhupada did build a house the whole world could live in. He wasn't interested in any of us becoming circus performers. He wanted us to become pure devotees.

### Fairy Godmothers or Nasty Stepmothers?

At present many, many women are ambiguous about their identities within this Movement. You may feel inclined to say that our role is clear, you let us know what it is when you call us "matajis".

But some of us have come to disdain that very word. At times we even hear it spoken to us as if it were a swear word, part of a phrase from the sixties, "Up against the wall mother." But why is this?

We've learnt from Srila Prabhupada that all women other than a wife should be seen as "mother, mata". But the way our "sons" have treated us over the years has not made us feel cherished. Instead it's made many of us devalue ourselves.

Would we honestly relegate our mothers to positions in the temple room where they were unable to see the Deities? Have them chant their japa in the corridors or up and down staircases?

This is supposed to be the sankirtana movement, with harinama a major celebration of the holy name. How many of you have ever gone out on a harinama party--staying at the back? Apart from the dangers of being accosted by drunks and hecklers, you can't hear the kirtana, and end up feeling just like a useless appendage dragging at the back. Doesn't make you feel too protected or respected.

One of my godsisters, Govardhana Prabhu, is also a mother. She told me of a time she visited Bhaktivedanta Manor for a feast day. All the devotees were being served from a central serving table which you had to queue in line. The queue itself was quite long, with the brahmacaris and grhastha men at the front, the women with their children at the back. She said, "We were standing there with our children who were pulling on our saris crying, 'We're hungry.' We were just standing there watching all the men going first to get served.

"On this particular occasion, I was still standing in the queue while some of the brahmacaris had finished taking prasadam. They came up and got back in the line again, ahead of the ladies. They were taking seconds.

"Although I knew with my intelligence that this was Krsna's temple and I wanted to be a devotee, and all that, with my heart I wanted to run a million miles. I just felt so sad that no one cared."

To my mind the saddest part about this is that it was most likely seen as a completely normal occurrence. It's something that we've grown up with in Krsna consciousness, quite normal. But I don't see it as fitting in with what we're supposedly being told. What's the use of calling us mataji if you don't treat us like mataji?

Govardhana Prabhu also recounted, "At Rathayatra last year only one cent had been booked for the Bhaktivedanta Players and anyone else who was on stage to use for changing into costumes. And guess who it was who had to get changed behind the stage in full view of anyone who happened to pass



by? It wasn't the Bhaktivedanta Players. It was me. Was that how to show respect for a woman?"

On a morning walk in Mauritius Prabhupada highlighted the difficulty we have with this concept:

Devotee: Srila Prabhupada, should we call all the women "mother"?

Prabhupada: Yes. And treat it like mother. Not only call, but treat it like mother.

Harikesa: Actually we have not even any idea how to treat mother.

Prabhupada: Learn it.

Perhaps an examination of just how we feel about our own mothers may give us some insight into why this is so.

Mothers embody limitless nurturance. They provide sustenance for us while we are in their womb as well as offering us protection. At the same time many of us have also had the experience of how our mothers could almost be suffocating in their over-protectiveness.

According to present day psychologists, if a child sees his mother as the source of nurturance and support, he will experience her as a positive force. If she is perceived as neglectful or smothering, the child will experience her as destructive.

It's also been demonstrated that most adults respond to their own mothers in terms of the terrible destructive side. We fail to see her life in the context of the historical period in which she lived, her family background, and the opportunities available to women at that time. Many of our mothers were manipulated, contained and suppressed with the assistance of advertising, girdles and valium. Yet, we often find it difficult to accept that our mothers did the best they could for us with the handicaps they had.

Many of us find it even difficult to forgive our mothers for the imagined and real hurts she inflicted upon us. And we carry this resentment and fear over to the whole issue of female power in general.

We take our mother's nurturance for granted. This is evident in how we use, abuse and dominate even the Mother Earth every time we get the chance. The holes in her ozone and the forests we destroy demonstrate our enormous arrogance and disregard for her. In contemporary society because we subconsciously fear the power of mother, we do everything we can to denigrate and destroy it.

### Is It Vedic?

And just because we're attempting to become Vaishnavas does not wipe out this conflict. As women we're often admonished to behave "Vedically", often used in the context of not acting assertively, etc. But let's compare how Indian society treats women.

Govardhana Prabhu has something to say on this point. "I've noticed that Indian people, who you might say have some vestiges of Vedic culture left in them, treat their women differently. Very often when Indian ladies come to have darshan they are very beautifully dressed and made up. They are not at all denying their femininity. And they're confident. They walk right up to the Deities, make their offerings and offer their obeisances. They're not ashamed of themselves. Whereas if I walk into the temple I'm immediately thinking, 'Where is it safe for me to be where I'll not disturb any man?' I'm always conscious of my body."

Govardhana's own story is interesting. She'd put off ever visiting India for fifteen years because she felt that India, being the seat of Vedic culture, would accentuate this denigration of women even more than she'd experienced in the West. To her surprise, she was served prasadam by Bengali brahmacaris and passed the ghee lamp by them--things that had never happened to her in a Western ISKCON temple. "I was astounded," she said. "I felt my heart just melt. They were treating me like mataji. All of a sudden it was okay to be a mataji. That made me feel tremendous. For I don't want to be a man. I feel that whatever body I've landed with this time I'd rather do what I have to do with it. I don't want to imitate men."

She also described a time she participated in a function in a Hindu temple in Nottingham. Their prasadam room wasn't big enough to seat everyone at once. So the Indian men all stood at the side and chatted while the women and children took prasadam. They were taking pride in protecting their families, not having to prove that they were stronger or more important than the women.

Govardhana said about that incident, "We hear about women being simple, well, that little thing was enough to make those women so happy. And I have to say that just seeing that did more for me than listening to a hundred Bhagavatam lectures. It was living Krsna consciousness."

#### We're Just Conditioned Souls After All

So if this attitude is not Vedic in origin, there where does it come from? Could it possibly stem from influences we've assimilated from within our families of birth?

Virginia Woolf once wrote, "Everyone is partly their ancestors; just as everyone is partly man and partly woman." This is very much the case. As much as most of us would like to distance ourselves from our family of birth, adopting Lord Caitanya's Movement as our new family, we cannot deny that we continue to be influenced by attitudes and habits learned early in our lives.

Unfortunately not all those habits are life-affirming. As women are taking more of a role in the world, the hearth of the family is becoming left unattended. Perhaps our own mothers were not there for us as much as we would have liked them to be. Perhaps we only had one parent in our family. Perhaps we may have even been abused by one of them. Perhaps Mum or Dad had behavioural problems that affected the tranquility within the family.

All these things contribute to a deterioration of a nurturing connection with our parents.

In our own lives no doubt we can feel the pangs of this. But what of our own children? Will they not have a better go at it, having been born into families of loving Vaishnavas?

Spiritually most certainly. But not necessarily emotionally. For if a devotee mother has been blocked from her own self-development and growth, she may ignore or devalue her own daughter's competence. Or she may do the opposite and encourage her daughter to be a 'special' or 'gifted' child whose successes the mother will vicariously enjoy. Neither of these responses is especially healthy for either mother or daughter.

If husband and wife have not been able to reconcile their own sexuality in terms of Krsna consciousness, how are they possibly going to be able to communicate healthy attitudes and values to their children?

It's been proven that when an adolescent notices that his or her parents are uncomfortable with the outer signs of their emerging sexuality, they may reject their own changing body. They may use food to numb feelings of inadequacy, or alcohol, sex or drugs to alleviate the confusion and pain of being unacceptable. As they lose the ability to recognise the body's limitations, pain and illness amass as the split between body, mind and spirit grows.

On the other hand, psychologists who study motivation have found that many successful women had fathers who nurtured their talent and made them feel attractive and loved at an early age. Women are more likely to be self-determining when their fathers treat them as if they are interesting people, worthy and deserving of respect and encouragement. Women treated in this way don't feel their femininity is endangered by the development of talent.

### No Such Thing as Love in this Material World

Is our own problem in reconciling spiritual principles within the context of a relationship having an adverse affect on our children in the ways catalogued above? What our society's continued devaluation of women will lead to remains to be seen. But has it not already contributed in some way to the large number of unsuccessful marriages we've experienced?

Children need lots and lots of love. Srila Prabhupada mentions love in Gurukula letters and conversations. "Discipline with love," he says, and "induce through happy, loving spirit." "The teacher must be expert in representing Krsna's loving compassionate nature," and "Everything should be done on the basis of love."

But love isn't a word very many devotees are comfortable using. We don't have the wide range of choice from prema to kama that exist in Sanskrit. For us one word is supposed to cover the feelings we have for God as well as for ice cream. As devotees, rather than use the same word we use for feelings we're attempting to cultivate for Krsna, we've adopted a perjorative term for the feelings one might have for their spouse and children: attachment.

And we use the word with the same tone of voice we often use the word "mataji", spitting it off our tongues. Attached is not something we wish to be, attachment is not something we actively cultivate.

This dilemma severely handicaps us when we attempt to be emotionally present for our children. For if "love" is something reserved only for the Supreme Lord, then what do we give our children?

Many parents solve this by interacting with our children and spouses as the perfect devotees we think we should be, and consequently, expect them to be perfect in return. But what does this impersonal relating do for the child? He's expected at times to be someone other than who he feels himself to be. As he grows up he may rebel against this devotee business altogether or he may turn around and put his own undigested, unexpressed shame on his own children.

Shame on You!

It's not only that children need to feel loved, they need to see loved modelled between their parents as well. But this is difficult when we overlay renunciation on what are supposed to be affectionate relationships.

How many of us know couples where the husband is so wound up by inappropriate renunciation he cannot even touch his wife's hand because he would immediately want her in bed? A good many of us I suspect, if it doesn't describe our own situations.

Such a husband ends up resenting his wife's womanly qualities, and she in turn feels shamed by her own natural femininity. And even though it is mentioned in the Vedas that it is in a woman's nature to dress nicely for her husband, how many of our husbands compliment or encourage their wives in that way?

One of my Godsisters, Jaya Radhe Prabhu, is also concerned about the absence of love in our marriages. She told me, "It is easy for a man to 'renounce' family life and its nitty gritty responsibilities when love is absent. But is this renunciation--or merely a reaction to frustrated senses? I am sure that if there were more subtleties, more refinements, in the way a devotee man related with his wife, just little giving ways, and gentle behaviour, he would not need to eventually explode into gross sense gratification. Or explode right out of the marriage. The all or nothing syndrome, bhoga-tyaga."

#### At What Price Submission?

If what Jaya Radhe and Govardhana Prabhus say is true, that women need to be able to feel feminine and appreciated within their relationships, then why don't more women stand up and just demand it from their husbands? Perhaps the title of a lecture that the Analytical Psychology Club of LA offered on the masculine principle might help us here. It was titled, 'Knight in Shining Armour Seeks Damsel in Distress: Object Matrimony.' It highlights how a man's sense of self is very often enhanced by rescuing a woman.

But at what expense does the man gain this sense of strength? Is it that in order for a husband to be strong his wife must be weak?

Many of us have internalised this logic, deducing that if we somehow diminish ourself then our partner can be successful. And if he is successful then we can ride the crest of his spiritual attributes and thus go back to Godhead.

But then, in order for our relationships to survive in any way we must adopt a passive dependent stance. We do not speak out on needs we might have, most of us don't even let ourselves get as far as even acknowledging that we even have any that are unmet. In doing this our unconscious motivation is to bolster and protect our husband's fragile ego.

And women who do dare to exercise their capacity for independent thinking and action, defining the terms of their own lives, are frequently accused of diminishing men. Even of hurting children, or in some way being destructive to others. And this, of course, ladles heaps of guilt upon them.

So generally women put on masks to the men in their lives. They learn now to be compliant. They speak in polite tones of voice as they agree to practically anything a man proposes. But all the while such a woman may be seething underneath. She may be hiding daggers of rage about time sacrificed, confusion about betrayals left unaddressed, sadness for having abandoned herself for so long, and helplessness about taking the next step.

### Superwomen?

It seems to me that we have to become some sort of pure devotee superwomen in order to fit into the conception that the men in our movement have outlined for us. And personally, this is much too heavy a burden for me to live with anymore.

Marge Piercy, a poet, has written a poem entitled "For Strong Women". Part of it says,

"A strong woman is a woman at work  
cleaning out the cesspool of the ages,  
and while she shovels,  
she talks about how much she doesn't mind crying,  
it opens the ducts of the eyes,  
and throwing up develops the stomach muscles,  
and she goes on shovelling  
with tears in her nose."

That describes the sort of strong women that many of us have become in order not to make any waves in this society. But we're not happy; we're more like martyrs. Is this indeed the only thing that marriage is supposed to be bringing to us? I don't believe that any of us have a very clear definition of what marriage in Krsna consciousness actually means. My own biased opinion is that marriage is an opportunity for everyone, both men and women, to mature and grow both emotionally and spiritually. But in order for there to be growth in a union, much more must be brought to it than mere conquest of the woman by the man.

### Marriage: Renunciation or Revelation?

Marriage requires patience, giving without thought to keeping accounts. When one partner says, "I gave this and so I am owed that," the marriage has not yet begun. Real sharing rests in a balanced recognition of oneness and difference; a discovery of balances and equalities.

Marriage is a relationship, a contract, a promise to help each other. It's not selfishness, that when the man feels satisfied (or just plain frustrated), he says, "Now I can renounce", not taking into account the other half of the marriage, and her needs. Or the children's needs. Our philosophy is all about loving exchanges, and yet in our daily lives we seem to take those natural exchanges out of our primary relationships.

Any intimate relationship must be founded on the ability to be completely honest with our partner. But false renunciation of any sort is a form of dishonesty. How can love--whether for Krsna, Srila Prabhupada, one's wife and children, or the other devotees--flourish in an atmosphere of pretence? And where is there a chance of arriving at the Absolute Truth through a dishonest process?

Srila Prabhupada has described that if a snake sheds his skin naturally there will be no pain, but if you use a knife to skin him it will kill him. The standard of renunciation is not something which can be judged by one person--it has to be arrived at cooperatively by all members. We're all at different levels so what's too much for one person may not be enough for another.

Within the Catholic Church there was a polemic along similar lines in the early 1960s. Everyone will be familiar that Catholics firmly believe that the primary purpose of sex within a marriage was for procreation. A concept we also embrace. They had also institutionalised the ideal of

celibacy, tending to emphasise the disruptive nature of sexuality both for the individual and for society at large.

As a result their marriages were often dominated by rules and regulations. The Jesuits will be remembered as teaching that marriage was "the salvation of the weak" and that it was better to marry than burn in hell.

But dissatisfaction with this attitude towards marriage kept building up among the Catholic lay community, many of whom were experimenting with different attitudes. And when Pope John XXIII came along he listened to the laity as no other Pope had done before.

As a result, after Vatican II the Catholic Church changed its official stand. They now teach school children and counsel couples about to be married that each person should be recognised as being at different stages of development, and that marriage and the family are bedrocks of society, not something just for those who fail at celibacy. They've come to realise that feelings of shame or guilt are destructive. And that in order to love God and our neighbours (as the Bible admonishes), we must first love ourselves, have a strong sense of self-esteem and value what we are doing.

On the difficult issue of sexual "fall-downs" within a marriage, the Catholics have concluded that as a gift from God, the purpose of sexuality is the fostering of love. Following on from that they have come to recognise that the couple's mutual support is just as important as the function of procreation.

They have come to define that each individual should be encouraged to exercise their own personal conscience in the matter of how they express their sexuality within the confines of their marriage, and that this should be mutually agreeable to both partners. According to a Catholic ecclesiastical tract, "A human being's dignity requires them to act out of conscious and free choice as moved and drawn in a personal way from within and not by blind impulses or mere external restraint."

I think that we could learn much from the Catholic Church's history in respect to making our relationships more whole and holy. Things that will allow us to grow spiritually within our relationships with our spouses.

Our own scriptures tell us that intimate association with devotees is elevating. But just how many of our husbands actually see their wife's association as elevating? Does this mean that they perhaps are seeing them not so much as a devotee, but rather an object for their senses?

Should we not also be actively propagating marriage as the respectable, responsible, spiritually dynamic, and yes, loving, institution that it really should be. The ashram that it is purported to be, not the second-rate solution for those too weak to be celibate.

### Surrender versus Selfishness

A typical trait women possess is that we don't like to disappoint others. As a consequence we often give our assent to situations with little thought about how they will affect our own lives. This may even include agreeing to marry someone their authority has asked them to, agreeing not to marry but to continue with book distribution instead, agreeing not to have children, agreeing to have children, or any number of other similar major decisions.

Yet, if a woman braves her own feelings of selfishness and dares to ask to have a need met, she is often not only perceived by others as being demanding, needy and ungrateful, but shames herself to see herself that way as well.

This, coupled with our cultural background of seeing women--and in particular, a woman's body--as a seductress, the cause of man's "original sin", has led us to many problems.

My Godsister, Madhavi Prabhu, has some thoughts on this problem. "If a woman feels loved--and physical affection is part and parcel of what makes her feel loved--she will usually be happy and content. She will remain 'chaste' to her husband, and the children will be brought up in a healthy environment which is conducive for developing Krsna consciousness. Thus she and her children will feel protected. I don't mean to oversimplify, but this is an important aspect of our problems.

"On the other hand, if a woman receives no affection, but her husband uses her for sex--when he 'falls down', she lives in a hellish environment. Far from feeling protected and happy, she feels used and abused. And an ordinary woman can only take so much. Women by nature are very soft and vulnerable. And many of the women who join this Movement are exceptionally submissive and devoted to serving their husbands. So if he simply gives her the protective love she needs, everyone ends up happier. Society would not be a hellish condition, but rather a fertile ground for developing Krsna consciousness.

"A further extreme can result in out and out violent abuse of the woman, who is seen by the husband as the external cause of his 'falldown'. Because he wants to enjoy her, but can't touch her--he must hate her. And of course, if it wasn't for her presence, he could live a simple spiritual life, not have any sex desire, and even gain some prestige in society for his great capacity for renunciation.

"This situation of hating the object of desire can become so extreme (and indeed does) that only a pure devotee woman or a masochist could continue to tolerate it indefinitely. But many of us have tried for years--for the sake of 'chastity'.

"We, as women, need to have real relationships with the members of this society. It is not that we should walk around feeling like objects, and that we must protect the men from becoming attracted to us, when we're supposed to be the ones who are protected."

On this topic, Govardhana Prabhu adds, "If this antagonism towards women is coming from agitation due to our past backgrounds, can we not be honest? Can we not call it that? Can we stop calling it Vedic?"

### Lessons Learned

Despite the obviously noxious elements in my relationships with men, I must admit that I did gain confidence in my own intelligence and abilities through the support of my Godbrothers. I gained a degree of freedom from traditional female roles by imagining a core of self that transcended femaleness. I truly believed that ultimately we are all spirit souls, eternal parts and parcels of Krsna.

Because we share a common spiritual goal, defined by our love for devotional service and our interest in the philosophy of Krsna consciousness, we are alike. But I foolishly extrapolated this to mean that I could become like my God-brothers.

I felt flattered to be occasionally told that I thought like a man. At the same time I experienced contempt for women who were satisfied living out traditional women's roles. I felt special, favoured. But I realised that this has led to a betrayal of myself as a female.

I had a superior attitude toward other women, I wanted to think like a man; but of course I hated myself as a woman. I closed off large areas of myself in my quest to identify with men.

I realise now that in rejecting the feminine I've inhibited my growth as a woman and denied many inherent skills. I've also made lots of Vaishnava aparadha towards many of my sincere Godsisters. That is what is motivating me to speak out now.

I would hope that none of the younger women who are joining us, who perhaps have been lured by the propaganda in the material world that women can and should equal men, will attempt to emulate the path I trod. Neither do I hope that the only other alternative is to sheepishly trail behind the so-called "submissive" women who are silently smouldering within.

In putting forward some of these feelings and concepts, and in pushing for reforms in various places within our society, my Godsisters and I have become labelled as "heavy" or some other denigratory term. We've heard devotees from other countries say that they know all about us and our lack of submission, our lack of chastity.

But the truth of the matter is that we are more than happy to take the role of women. More than happy to submit to the protection offered to us by our Godbrothers. We welcome it, we beg for it. Please give it to us. So far we have not experienced it in any substantial way in our lives.

We do not claim to speak on behalf of all women within our society. But neither are we isolated cases. Each one of us knows enough women with similar stories and experiences to justify the fact that we are not unique. Each of our stories vary slightly, the circumstances and our reactions to it differ as much as we each differ as individuals. But there is a common thread running all each of us: That we want to be devotees whatever the price, but up to now that price has been that we must flounder without protection from our Godbrothers and continue to deny our intrinsic femininity.

#### But Not All Ladies Agree with You

Surprisingly much of the criticism levelled at me, or at women who are vocal like me, comes from other women. There are several causes for this as far as I can determine.

One is that we have successfully, over the last fifteen years at least, taught the newer ladies joining our Movement that being Krsna conscious is commensurate with renouncing your self-worth; that intrinsically men and their needs are more important in this spiritual society; that women are more simple than men, and can participate in the movement, but not to the same degree as men; that certain activities are the exclusive domain of those in male bodies and that this concept is coming from India and therefore Vedic; that marriage is a step-down from the advancement one was making in brahmachari/brahmcharini life; that there is not much benefit to be gained from being married other than to legally extinguish material desires; that in order to warrant begin given protection by the men in our Society, a woman is required first to act in a chaste manner; that it is the woman's responsibility to ensure that no man in this movement feels any tinge of sexual feelings towards her.



And many of these ladies unfortunately have bought that, lock, stock and barrel. So when we now tell them that this is not what we understand Krsna consciousness to be, they rightfully protest that we are "changing things".

Perhaps we are. But we feel that the present status quo is not what Srila Prabhupada intended it to be, that somewhere along the line, either due to our own dysfunctional backgrounds, or our misinterpretation of his instructions, or the inappropriateness of superimposing Vedic culture without adjustments on graduates of Western civilisation, we have gone skew.

Being feminine is being both compassionate and instructive. Through it we can understand how to take care of ourselves. But all of us must avoid getting caught up in petty fights and the desire to dominate.

Another reason for the alarm of our Godsisters can perhaps be understood in psychological terms. Many women who have had angry or emotional mothers are themselves afraid of their own anger and feelings. If they give these sentiments free reign they may be seen as being destructive or castrating. This repression of anger often prevents such women from seeing inequities in a male-defined system.

And when a woman is abused by a male in authority she numbs herself to forget the humiliating pain associated with the trauma. She may even block remembrance of it from her conscious memory. But the pain does not disappear with its immediate cause. Nor does it go away if we somehow manage to "forget it". It merely becomes armour for the woman's wounded body, anaesthetising her to her own instincts and intuition.

For centuries women have been told not to be "hysterical". If they felt strongly about something they were not lauded for their commitment and passion, but told that they were being unreasonable. If they expressed a grievance with anger, they were told they were out of control. Most of us have learned to adjust our reactions to fit within this stereotype. But feelings that are not acknowledged don't go away, they go underground and bind us to the past.

Perhaps it is precisely because my Godsisters and I have allowed ourselves to feel angry that we have been able to paint the pictures we've just given you. We know that anger is not an end in itself. It allows us to release some emotions that while buried ate away at us. But it does nothing for bringing about constructive change. For that reason we are approaching you, our Godbrothers, our co-gardeners in Lord Caitanya's garden.

When we feel heard, it's easier for us to accept our pain as it is, as part of life's natural process. When we feel heard, it doesn't eradicate the pain and humiliation, but in expressing our feelings to a receptive audience we can begin to heal our wounds. We then don't have to blame anyone; we can simply be with the suffering and thus heal naturally. Being permitted to just be with the pain, to go through a grieving process, helps us to move through it.

We understand that it's important for us not to merely focus blame on others for this sorrow, but to deeply examine its causes and take responsibility for self-healing. Out of our own sadness we are beginning to develop compassion for those who have hurt us. Just the fact that you are taking the time to read this is a healing experience for us.

Another factor one must take into consideration when hearing women who protest that the issues this article focuses on does not reflect their opinions, is to look at who those women are. I would venture a guess that most of these women have been in a relationship for the bulk of their life in Krsna consciousness. They are very fortunate.

Women like me have had different experiences and have had to learn how to juggle various elements in order to stay on keel emotionally. We have had traumas with which we are trying to reconcile ourselves, such as raising orphaned children on our own, or understanding how Krsna allowed the abuse we suffered to go on. Our arguments should not be dismissed just because we are not in the majority. Our Society should be very happy if that is indeed the fact--that women such as us are the minority. But even if only one woman has had this experience, it is still relevant and should be taken into account.

### It's All History

You may be tempted to dismiss everything I've presented here on the grounds that many of our predicaments happened over a decade ago, and now things are much different. Perhaps you might be assuaged to think that any of the men we might have made reference to are no longer practising devotees. But we are unable to honestly assure you that the 'offenders' and their 'offences' have been long rooted-out of ISKCON.

It is undeniably true that things are changing. Were they not we would not feel safe enough to come forward with these testimonies. But change is a slow and gradual process, one in which progress is measured in baby steps, not quantum leaps. We beg you not to turn a deaf ear on us. I have purposefully chose not to dwell on a litany of current infringements of our womanhood. Rather, I wanted you to see something of the colour of our background experiences so that in their light you might begin to understand who we are now. And perhaps derive a glimmer of a vision of how we can cooperatively move forward into the future.

The ability to preserve life is a feminine quality. This makes women ideal instigators for bringing a community together to work for our common good. Women are networkers, desiring to feel affiliated, part of a larger family. Over the ages women have been the ones demanding protection for the young and less fortunate. So we are actually acting within our feminine role by trying to bring this to your attention.

On our own we can do some thing to help heal these wounds; but better yet is if our Godbrothers support us. If with compassion and strength they help us to heal, we may learn how to reclaim our deep feminine spiritual wisdom. This will be a source of great wealth not only for the women, but for the men. For it is not only ourselves who are battle weary, the men must also be suffering as well.

### A Fairy Tale?

I'd like to conclude with an English tale from the 14th Century. It's called "Gawain and Lady Ragnell". I feel that it can be instructive to our light.

One day King Arthur told his nephew, Gawain, that while out hunting alone he'd been accosted by a fearsome knight. This knight spared Arthur on the promise that he return in one year at the same spot. He was to return armed with the answer to the question, "What is it that women most desire, above all else?" If he had the correct answer, his life would be spared.

During the next twelve months Arthur and his nephew collected answers from one corner of the kingdom to the other. But Arthur was worried that none of them had the ring of truth.

A few days before he was to meet the knight, Arthur rode out alone into an oak grove. A huge, grotesque woman stopped him. She was almost as wide as she was high, her skin was mottled green and spikes of weed-like hair covered her head. Her face seemed more animal than human. She was Lady Ragnell. She told Arthur that she knew the correct answer, which she would give him if Gawain would become her husband.

Arthur was shocked and insisted that he could not give her his nephew. But she said that she had not asked him to give her the knight. Her condition was only if Gawain himself agreed to marry her would she help Arthur.

When Gawain came to hear of this, he was delighted to be able to spare his uncle's life. But King Arthur was despondent that his nephew was having to marry this supremely ugly woman on his account. Yet Gawain insisted that it was his decision.

So when King Arthur finally met the fearsome knight he first tried all his other answers, so that Gawain might be spared from marrying Lady Ragnell. But just as the knight lifted his sword to cleave Arthur in two, he said, "I have one more answer. What a woman desires above all else is the power of sovereignty, the right to exercise her own will." And thus he was spared, for that was indeed the correct answer.

Gawain's wedding to Lady Ragnell was held in a shocked and uneasy silence by the lords and ladies of the court. When in their own chambers, Lady Ragnell asked Gawain to kiss her, he did so without reservation. And there, true to all fairy tales, stood before him a slender young woman with gray eyes and a serene, smiling face. She told him that she had been cursed by her brother, the fearsome knight Arthur had met in the forest. She was only to be released from being a monstrous creature if the greatest knight in Britain willingly chose her for his bride.

Gawain asked her why her brother hated her so much, and she told him, "He thought me bold and unwomanly because I defied him. I refused his commands both for my property and my person."

Then she added that the spell was only partially broken. "You have a choice, my dear Gawain, which way I will be. Would you have me in this, my own shape, at night and my former ugly shape by day? Or would you have me grotesque at night in our chamber, and my own shape in the castle by day? Think carefully before you choose."

Gawain thought for a moment, finally telling her that it was a choice he could not make because it was her choice only to make. He told her that whatever she chose he would willingly support.

Ragnell was radiant, for his answer broke the evil spell completely. "My brother said that if my husband freely gave me the power of choice, the power to exercise my own free will, the wicked enchantment would be broken forever."

So Lady Ragnell and Gawain were united in a sacred marriage of two equals who had made a free and conscious choice to come together. She had been bewitched by her wicked brother for asserting her will and protecting her sexuality. Compassionate Gawain gave her the freedom to transform her disfigurement. She had the ability to save the king, and Gawain had the wisdom to recognise the sovereignty of the feminine. Together they found healing love.

If we want it to, this can be the story of our Society. Up to now you may have only been seeing our grotesque and frightening side. But if you shower us with compassion, we will freely change for you. You will be able to perceive our beauty and our gifts. And we will be grateful to have been saved from the wicked spell that this material world has kept us under for so long.

I am grateful to my Godsisters for their solace and support in this work, as well as to their comments and advice. In particular, I'd like to thank Amekala-devi, Bhogini-devi, Govardhana-devi, Jagatam-devi, Jaya Radhe-devi, Madhavi-devi, Radha-priya-devi, Sri Kama-devi and the many Godbrothers who have been honest enough and brave enough to lovingly validate and encourage me.