

Godhead is light. Nescience is darkness. Where there is Godhead there is no nescience.



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A Spiritually DEEPENING EXPERIENCE

— *The International Vaiṣṇavī Retreat* —



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A Spiritually Deepening Experience

The International Vaiṣṇavī Retreat

*“I felt grateful, and enriched with wisdom,
realizations, service, association, and inspiration.”*

by Shatakshi Goyal



I RUSHED HOME from my dance practice, grabbed my suitcases, and ran with my mother to catch the bus. Just on time! We sat in the very last seats, sweating from all the rushing. Summer had arrived in Vrindavan, where we live. We were headed to ISKCON's fourth annual Vaiṣṇavi Retreat,* as I was scheduled for a dance performance. The retreat was being held in the village of Jatipura, near Govardhan.

As we got off the bus and picked up our luggage, my mother excitedly burst out, "Oh, we've been here before, Shatakshi!"

I looked through the gate. We were at the Bala-Krishna Bhawan Ashram, where we had come for another retreat last November. Sweet memories invaded my consciousness. A smiling Vaiṣṇavī (female devotee of Kṛṣṇa) greeted us by putting paste of sandalwood and musk on our foreheads. In seconds all my fatigue vanished. The wet sandalwood paste cooled my forehead, and its scent refreshed me. My mother and

*This article is about the retreat held in 2014. By the time this article appears, the 2015 retreat will also have taken place (March 11–16).

At Ter Kadamba near Govardhan Hill, the author depicts tolerance (sahiṣṇunā) during her performance of the Odissi dance she choreographed for Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu's Śikṣāṣṭakam.



VIHE



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Gaurāṅgī Devī Dāstī

I shared a glance in appreciation of the excellent arrangements made to host invitees at the retreat. We truly felt welcomed.

As we reached the reception area, the heat reminded us that we had forgotten to bring our water bottles, but there at the first table two Vaiṣṇavīs were serving fresh lemonade. We quenched our thirst with several glassfuls and shared a second appreciative glance.

Prasāda was delivered to my room as I started dressing in my Odissi dance attire. Ready to perform, I proceeded

to the rooftop. It was lit up perfectly by the sun, which had gone down just enough for the temperature to cool down a bit. Sacred Govardhan Hill stood before me in all His majesty. Awestruck and filled with gratitude on being bestowed this beautiful opportunity for service, I offered Govardhan the first performance of my favorite dance item.

Spontaneous Unity

After a good night's rest, I headed toward the temple hall. Glancing at the



Gaurāṅgī Devī Dāstī



schedule of seminars, I was impressed by the many attractive titles and speakers that filled the page. One in particular caught my attention: “Our Longing for Reciprocation,” by Ūrmilā Devī.

Reciprocation, I thought. *Yes, I long for reciprocation.*

“Shatakshi, come!” my mother called. “It’s time for the morning prayers.”

As we entered the temple hall, I felt I had stepped into the spiritual world. Beautiful goddesses dressed in saris, foreheads marked with fresh, cooling sandalwood paste, moved about the hall, humbly working together to prepare for the early-morning worship of the gorgeously dressed Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa deities. Every Vaiṣṇavī was wonderfully engaged, using her particular talent to serve Their Lordships. I had never before been among a group of devotees working together so humbly and cooperatively.

I thought back to my own hesitation upon hearing the words *Vaiṣṇavī Retreat*. I wondered about the purpose of a program just for female devotees. But here I saw how freely and lovingly all the Vaiṣṇavīs were able to serve the deities together and mingle without holding back. I realized that such spontaneity in association, where every Vaiṣṇavī was given a special, beautiful environment and opportunity to grow, was indeed spiritually healing. This, in action, was the best example I had ever seen of the purpose of Vaiṣṇavī association.

The Alluring Ambience

At the end of the ceremony, we all proceeded to the roof for the first seminar. The beautiful morning sun greeted us warmly as we sat on the clean rectangular mats covered in white cotton

cloth. Red chairs for older devotees surrounded the mats. About a hundred Vaiṣṇavīs had gathered. Praśānta Devī, the director of the Vrindavan Institute for Higher Education and the organizer of the Vaiṣṇavī Retreats, sat in front singing on her tamboura. As I absorbed the ambience, I felt my consciousness float higher. I took a moment to reflect on my surroundings, turning to look at Śrī Govardhan and feel His close presence. I had never seen Govardhan so closely for so long. Chirping parrots flew from one tree to another, and monkeys frolicked all about. Every now and then a peacock cried out.

This is the real Vrindavan, I thought, so peaceful and so beautiful, filled with reservoirs and trees and the river Yamuna offering lotuses to Her beloved Kṛṣṇa. How enchanting must this place have looked when Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma herded Their calves here!

I gazed at the pasture visible from the roof of the ashram and saw two men in the distance herding their cows into the forest.

Praśānta Devī began a dramatic narration of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma performing Their pastime of killing the ass demon Dhenukāsura. She told how the cowherd boys were once playing when the sweet aroma of *tāla* fruit attracted them. The boys expressed their desire to enjoy the fruit. Inside their hearts they actually wanted to offer the fruit to Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, whom they convinced to take them into the forest of Tālavana.

Praśānta Devī was so absorbed in narrating the story that her whole body seemed to emote the mood of the cowherd boys. Knowing that the pastime happened not far from where we sat, I felt a special attraction. Chirping birds, the enchanting vistas, fragrant breezes, and the mild sunshine added special effects to the divine narration and helped us experience the beautiful pastime through all our senses.

After the seminar, it was time for breakfast in the dining hall. The timing was perfect. With a large smile I hurried downstairs, eager to see what there was for breakfast. I was delighted to find all the mats and plates in place and the servers ready, holding their respective buckets. Their service was flawless. Once again I found myself admiring how adept the Vaiṣṇavīs were at serving one another. My consciousness surged with inspiration. The



Sucetani Gopī Devī Dāst

An Initiative for Spiritual Care

THE INTERNATIONAL Vaiṣṇavī Retreat is a fruit of the work of the GBC Devotee Care Committee. The first retreat was organized in 2011 in Govardhan by the Vrindavan Institute for Higher Education (VIHE) to offer spiritual care to the women of ISKCON. It has become a yearly event ever since.

Every devotee needs peer association and intimate relationships on the spiritual platform. Female devotees in ISKCON may find it difficult to have such association in their daily lives. Many live far from a temple, or even if close by, family obligations or other engagements may prevent them from attending the regular programs. Vaiṣṇavī retreats provide inspiration, peer support, and role models to help women sustain their Kṛṣṇa conscious lives in this age of materialism. The retreats celebrate Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mercy on female devotees and serve as a forum for women to develop a taste for active spiritual association.



Gaurāṅgī Devī Dāst

aroma of the rice-and-curry preparation stirred my appetite, and I ate three times my normal amount.

A Discourse on Faith

Nārāyaṇī Devī, a senior ISKCON member, gave the next seminar. She spoke on the progression of our devotion from *śraddhā* (initial faith) to *niṣṭhā* (firm faith) and beyond. She began her three-day seminar with a glimpse into six topics: (1) What is faith? (2) Do I have faith? (3) How to get faith, (4) How to strengthen faith, (5) How to pass the test of faith, and finally, (6) The benefits of faith. Having never before heard such a detailed study on the nature of faith, I was absorbed. Within one and a half hours, she expertly covered all six topics, supporting her points with convincing statements from the Vedic scriptures.

“To have faith, or ‘unflinching trust

in something sublime,’” she said, “one must feel grateful.”

I thought of all the times I had questioned Kṛṣṇa: “Do You really exist?” “Why do You sometimes seem so heartless?” . . .

I realized how my ungratefulness had the power to diminish my faith.

The Example of the Gopīs

The principle of gratefulness grew clearer in my heart during the seminar given by Ūrmilā Devī, another ISKCON veteran. She gave the example of the *gopīs*, who didn’t give up on Kṛṣṇa. With His flute He invited them to the *rāsa* dance. But when they arrived, He told them to return home – even though they had performed severe austerities for millions and millions of years, intensely longing for Kṛṣṇa to reciprocate with their desire for intimate loving exchanges. When the

time finally arrived to meet their dear beloved who had invited them to the *rāsa* dance with His flute song, Kṛṣṇa told them to return home. I looked disapprovingly at my own faith.

I wake up for one early-morning service and chant some rounds, and I wonder, “Why hasn’t Kṛṣṇa reciprocated yet?”

“Kṛṣṇa is not a machine with buttons,” Ūrmilā Devī said with emphasis. “He is a person.”

The “sincerity” of someone offering a few sticks of incense to Kṛṣṇa and demanding His full reciprocation is like the sincerity of a man offering roses to his wife while maintaining a hundred girlfriends. Should the man be surprised and angry when his wife doesn’t reciprocate?

“But it says here in this book that if you bring roses to your wife it will make her happy!” Ūrmilā Devī continued.



Sugatu Gopi Devi Dasi

We left Kṛṣṇa to flirt with *māyā*, she explained. We broke our relationship with Him. We broke the trust, and instead of waiting patiently while working to regain Kṛṣṇa’s trust, we demand that He forgive us. Such an attitude prolongs the process of rebuilding any relationship. However, if we pray to Kṛṣṇa for His help to become the kind of person He would want to reciprocate with, we may be able to gain our lost relationship with Him.

As a soft, sad flute-tune played in the background and a beautiful painting of the forlorn *gopīs* was projected on a screen, Ūrmilā Devī described how the *gopīs* asked Kṛṣṇa to explain the nature of His love and reciprocation.

“We will hear Kṛṣṇa’s answers tomorrow.”

With those words, she concluded the first session of her three-day seminar.

Prabhupāda’s Daughters

By this time, my mother and I were feeling so much bliss that although we had planned to return right after my dance performance the previous day, we decided to stay for just one more seminar: “Learning from Śrīlā Prabhupāda’s Daughters.”

The title confused me, and I wondered for a moment if Śrīlā Prabhupāda’s biological family had been invited. *After all, we are in India.* I chuckled at my random thought.

Kṛṣṇa Nandinī Devī was the first to speak. By the end of her story I realized, *These ladies are truly Śrīlā Prabhupāda’s daughters, and from them we can learn how to love Prabhupāda.*

She told how she was bestowed initiation by Śrīlā Prabhupāda at an early age, along with her mother and several brothers, despite many obstacles. Seeing her gratitude and love for Prabhupāda drip from her eyes in the form of tears, I was so moved that tears helplessly dripped from my own eyes.

Devotional Poetry

We decided to stay for the whole retreat. After spending the night in Vrindavan, we returned to Govardhan just in time for the poetry session of the day: “Uttama Śloka – Poetical Expres-





sions of Devotion.” The facilitator, Vrajalilā Devī, gave a brief introduction to the history of Vaiṣṇava poetry and read the English translation of a Bengali poem written by Śrīla Prabhupāda in which he describes the glorious compassion of a true Vaiṣṇava. Several Vaiṣṇavīs then shared their own poetry written in deep meditation. The session ended with my presentation on the beautiful poetry of Jayadeva Gosvāmī, who is known as *ādi pāda kartā*, or the original Vaiṣṇava poet, because his style of poetry became the standard for many Vaiṣṇava poets for centuries after his departure from the world.

A Childhood Dream Realized

After the scheduled seminars the next day, a special half-day *kīrtana* program was held at Ter Kadamba, where the sixteenth-century devotional poet and scholar Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī lived and wrote many divine books, including *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*. The *kīrtana* started with the *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, the eight instructional verses composed by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. I was given the blessed opportunity to choreograph a dance to it. As I read the verses, I could feel my body freeze in disbelief. From my childhood, Hanumatpreśeka Swami and Rādhānāth Swami encouraged me to dance to Vaiṣṇava songs for the pleasure of the Lord, and here I was, just about to use my training as an Odissi dancer to choreograph and dance to the *Śikṣāṣṭakam*. With as much sincerity as I could muster, I stood there at Ter Kadamba, dressed in my Odissi attire, with folded hands, ready to start performing. Feeling bereft of spiritual intelligence, I cried out, “O Rūpa Gosvāmī, you are described by Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī as *śrī-caitanya-mano-’bhīṣṭam*, one who understands the innermost feelings of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Please give me your blessings today and bestow upon me just a small glimpse into the mood of the *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, so that I can perform my service to the best of my ability and reach the hearts of the Vaiṣṇavīs.”

As Praśānta Devī sang in deep devotion, I slowly gestured along with each phrase of the *Śikṣāṣṭakam*.



I thought, *Such profound meanings are locked in each verse that even after a lifetime of meditative practice of these transcendental instructions, I may taste only one drop of this ever-deepening ocean of poetic nectar. Only by the mercy of Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī, Śrīla Prabhupāda, and his dear disciples can I get any realizations or understanding of these transcendental prayers.*

My dance was followed by many wonderful *kīrtanas* that led into the night. The late evening began with an energetic *kīrtana* led by Ūrmilā Devī, who danced with the enthusiastic gathering of Vaiṣṇavīs. The session ended with the ecstatic singing of a song glorifying Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī: “Śrī Rūpa Mañjarī Pada.” The Vaiṣṇavīs shouted in bliss and danced relentlessly. Finally, the bus took us back to Govardhan.

Praying for Others

On the last day of the retreat, we headed out by foot for Surabhi Kund,

a sacred reservoir on the *parikramā* (circumambulation) path, walking so close to Govardhan Hill that we could touch His stony body. The uniqueness of the soft sand that surrounds Govardhan reminded me of how the loving cows, on hearing that little Kṛṣṇa was going to take them to pasture the next morning, set out to grind the pathway with their hooves until the sand became as soft as a bed of flower petals. When we arrived, Vrajalīlā Devī explained that Surabhi Kund overflows with mercy because at this spot, at the request of the Surabhi cow, Kṛṣṇa delivered Indra from his great offense of trying to drown the residents of Vrindavan. To help us imbibe the mood of praying for others, Vrajalīlā Devī divided us into pairs and distributed small chits, each labeled with a burdensome emotion that hinders progress in recovering one’s loving relationship with the Lord. We each prayed for our partner to shed this negative emotion before leaving Surabhi Kund.

Upon returning from Surabhi Kund,

we shared the jewels we had collected during the retreat. I reflected on each opportunity bestowed on me to help me grow spiritually. I felt grateful, and enriched with wisdom, realizations, service, association, and inspiration. I realized how the retreat was carefully conceived to provide the most conducive environment for the spiritual growth for every Vaiṣṇavī. 🌸

Shatakshi Goyal was born near Haridwar, India, and raised in the ISKCON community of Boise, Idaho, where her parents home-schooled her. She completed her education in electrical and computer engineering from Boise State University at age eighteen. After working for two years as an engineer, she decided to pursue a cherished childhood dream to study the Indian classical arts. She moved to Vrindavan, where she lives with her parents. She often travels around India, organizing dances based on Sanskrit dramas written by the Gauḍīya Gosvāmīs and ācāryas.