



SWAMI IN A STRANGE LAND Q & A WITH AUTHOR JOSHUA GREENE

- 1) You have been practicing and teaching Bhakti Yoga, devotional yoga, for nearly 50 years. The subject of your biography, Swami Prabhupada, was the leading voice of Bhakti until he passed away in 1977. What is the message of Bhakti? What is its relevance in the larger world?**

All wisdom traditions teach one basic idea: reality is deeper than what we perceive. The unique contribution of Bhakti or devotional yoga is a tried-and-true, practical method for seeing that deeper reality, through chanting of sacred mantras, a healthy lifestyle, and the cultivating of a yogic way of life. What is the relevance of that message? Imagine living in full awareness of yourself as an immortal, invincible being. You are no longer the sum-total of your life's traumas. They no longer define you. That awareness of ourselves as spirit-souls is energizing, exciting, liberating. It means going from doubts and uncertainty to self-confidence and action.

- 2) Chanting the names of Krishna is central to Bhakti Yoga practice. Has the Krishna chanting had an influence on the music world?**

Prabhupada started chanting Hare Krishna in public in 1965 when he arrived from India at age 70. The consciousness-expanding influence of that chanting inspired many renowned artists to include it in their compositions. John Coltrane dedicated his final three albums to chanting and yoga. John Lennon included the mantra in "Give Peace a Chance." Stevie Wonder has the chant on his album "Songs in the Key of Life." The list is quite long. George Harrison popularized the Hare Krishna mantra around the world in his post-Beatles music. Most recently, an entire category of music—"Kirtan"—has emerged, and the more informed chanters acknowledge their debt to Prabhupada for having set the stage a half-century ago with the Krishna chanting.

- 3) You write that Prabhupada saw the confluence of science and spirituality as critical to humanity's future. How so? Aren't these two very different areas of interest?**

Science and spirituality share a common goal: to reveal the mysteries of creation. Most sciences qualify their research by eliminating transcendent causes—in other words, no reference to souls or gods or anything that cannot be proven through research and experiment. Prabhupada saw that as a mistake. Sometimes he even called it dishonest and dangerous. He also understood why science is so intolerant of spirituality: it triggers emotional antipathy toward exploitative religion and blind faith. Real spiritual inquiry is



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not religion. That was his point. Real spiritual inquiry is science with the limitations removed.

4) Prabhupada is known as the founder of the Hare Krishna movement, which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. Does the Krishna movement exercise an influence on American life today? If so, how?

In the mid-1960s, when Prabhupada first arrived in New York, there were very few yoga studios, vegetarianism was considered weird, and mantra chanting and meditation were viewed as practices for people on the margins of society. Now, these things are standard in progressive health and wellness regimens. Back then, Krishna devotees were viewed as lost souls. Today, they are professors teaching Hinduism in universities, credentialed representatives in areas of conflict resolution, environmental reform, and spokespeople for enlightened business. The influence of Krishna consciousness on American life is quite profound. From a single storefront in New York's Lower East Side, the movement has expanded to more than 100 temples, a dozen farm communities, vegetarian restaurants, and community service organizations nationwide.

5) You are better known for your books on Holocaust history. What led you to write this book? What was its genesis?

People always ask me how I can reconcile my spiritual beliefs with what happened in Europe less than 80 years ago, I didn't have a very good answer. It's a real challenge justifying the purposeful vision of creation outlined in the Sanskrit texts with the reality of how people treat one another. Prabhupada was born in 1896. He lived through two world wars. I wanted to write a book that would convey how he was able to resolve that contradiction—so not just a book about the chronology of his life but about his teachings. It is, I believe, the same compulsion we feel to reconciling the smooth, predictable universe of Einstein with the chaotic, unpredictable world of quantum physics. There is a strong correlation between those two quests.

6) As a seasoned writer, do you believe books can change people? If so, what kind of change would you want this book to create in readers?

Books alone cannot change people. Black ink on a page is just that. But ideas, captured in a book and then explored in good company—what the Bhakti tradition calls *sangha*—



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that's a powerful combination. From the outset, I had four goals for *Swami in a Strange Land*. I wanted readers to understand that 1) We are not our body but the consciousness that animates the body, 2) The source of creation is also conscious, 3) Prabhupada demonstrated what a real guru or teacher is, and 4) I'd like to find a *sangha* group to explore these ideas further.

7) In interviews, you draw attention to the David-and-Goliath narrative in Prabhupada's life: an unknown, impoverished teacher, 70 years old, with no contacts or resources, who comes to America with pennies and passes away twelve years later with a worldwide following and an organization worth more than a billion dollars. Will readers discover how to do that for themselves?

I hope not. The sacrifices Prabhupada went through to do what he did—the years of struggle, of derision, of rejection by family and acquaintances, the dire conditions he endured, basically every reason to give up his journey—I wouldn't want anyone to think they have to go through that to achieve enlightenment. But clearly sacrifice is needed. You can't go to yoga class, then go out smoking and drinking, and think you're going to get anywhere. In the words of Joe Campbell, we have to give up the life we want so as to embrace the one we are meant to lead. It starts with daily chanting of Hare Krishna, a simple prayer. Everything flows from that.

8) A number of the people in this story are dynamic personalities in their own right. How important was that, do you think, in Prabhupada's success?

Very important. There is no question, for example, that George Harrison's allegiance to Prabhupada as a teacher and George's recordings of the Krishna mantra popularized mantra chanting in a powerful way. But was Prabhupada's mission dependent on that kind of celebrity affiliation? Not at all. How many celebrities have come and gone over time? Yet the chanting is still there—not still there, growing constantly! We can say that thoughtful people—famous or not—see the power of Prabhupada's teachings. He always said he had not invented anything. He was passing along wisdom that has been embedded in ancient texts from before recorded history. That humility was a big part of his appeal.