CHAPTER FIVE

CULTURAL MODELS AND PRABHUPĀDAS CHARISMA

The daily cycle of rituals is an important medium for the transmission of religious conceptions in the movement. It is also the primary medium for interaction with the guru. Not only do most of the disciples encounter the guru in the settings provided by the rituals, the ritual language also provides the disciples with various models and idioms for thinking about the guru. The lectures of the gurus given during daily worship are still the primary means by which potential followers become acquainted with spiritual masters in the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement.

Prabhupāda was certainly treated with the utmost deference by his devotees. Devotees were required to make obeisances every time they entered or left Prabhupāda’s presence. However, one needs to keep in mind that obeisances are due to other devotees as well. Sannyāsīs are to be offered obeisances at least upon first meeting them during the day. Other devotees may also be offered obeisances upon being met for the first time, but this is not considered mandatory (Bhakti Vīkāṣa 1994, 84). Furthermore, other than these points of etiquette and the ritual requirements, Prabhupāda did not put an unsurpassable distance between himself and ordinary devotees. No elaborate screening procedures needed to be undertaken in order to meet and talk with him. Thus, ample opportunities existed for all kinds of chance encounters and casual discussions with him.

Temple worship is thus not the only context for interaction with the guru in ISKCON. In the early days, he was accessible to his followers and even occasional acquaintances almost around the clock (see Satsvarūpa 1993b). One can gain a good picture of the different contexts in which devotees were able to associate with Prabhupāda by looking at his daily schedule, which he followed fairly strictly (Hari Śauri 1992, 52–53):

12:00/1:00–5:00 a.m. translation and writing
5:00–6:00 a.m. light rest or chant japa
6:00–6:30 a.m. wash and medicine
6:30–7:30 a.m. morning walk
7:30–8:30 a.m. deity greeting, guru-pūjā, lecture
9:00–9:30 a.m. breakfast
9:45–11:15 a.m. rest and meetings (by appointment)
11:15–1:15 p.m. massage
1:15–1:45 p.m. bath
1:45–2:30 p.m. lunch
2:30–3:00 p.m. sit in room or chant japa
3:00–4:00 p.m. rest
4:00–5:00 p.m. meetings with specific people or devotees
5:00–6:30 p.m. public darśana (audience)
6:30–9:30 p.m. meeting public, or senior devotees, or just chatting
9:30–12:00 p.m. massage and rest

Certain elements of Prabhupāda's daily routine remained constant throughout his career in the West. He always did his translation and writing during the quiet early morning hours. Then, before the deity greeting, Prabhupāda went for a morning walk, allowing a few people to accompany him. During these walks he would often discuss various philosophical and theological issues with the devotees or friends present. These early morning walks with Prabhupāda were greatly appreciated by the devotees, who would be eager to advance their knowledge. Prabhupāda himself enjoyed arguing against various materialistic views presented to him by devotees. In later years the discussions would invariably be recorded. For the remainder of the day, Prabhupāda would either meet people individually or in public, in addition to regular resting periods, meals and massages. His time would also be filled with various management issues, by meetings with senior devotees responsible for the various areas or by correspondence.

For present purposes, we can note that a few main categories of interaction contexts with the devotees can be distinguished. First, there is the category of guru-pūjā, or ritual worship of the guru. Second are the formal lectures given as part of the temple worship cycles. Third are intimate or semi-casual talks, discussions and interviews on various topics, especially during morning walks or evening meetings. Fourth are management dealings with the devotees he had placed in positions of authority. Fifth are interactions composed of personal service provided by his secretaries, personal assistants, cooks, masseurs, etc.—in other words, with people who took care of practical matters and personal needs.