

The Change Disease and Windows to the  
Spiritual Sky

BY: RUPANUGA DAS (ACBSP)

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When Srila Prabhupada signed the final version of the Macmillan contract for his Complete Edition of the *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* published in 1972, it included certain additions he made in the following section of that contract:

Competitive Material

XII. During the term of this agreement the Author shall not publish or permit the publication of any material written in whole or in part by him that is derived from or competitive to the Work or the rights herein granted without the prior written consent of the publisher. [Then Srila Prabhupada added]: except for Back-to-Godhead Magazine, and any present or future works using the Work as reference, as well as the 48 pages of illustrations for which the Author reserves the right to publish for any purpose he may determine.

Srila Prabhupada made other notations also, including his right as Author to translate into foreign languages if the publisher failed to do so within 18 months. He then signed as the Author. The contract was dated March 6, 1972 and countersigned by the ISKCON representative, "Rupanuga das Adhikary".

That new *Gita* was to prove big and heavy and only so many could be crammed into a bookbag, but people were to become immediately attracted to the gorgeous, colorful paintings; besides, where could they find such a book with so many color illustrations, and for how much? It was Srila Prabhupada's transcendent genius to conceive of such a way to reveal to people the deepest philosophy and the highest truths comprehensible to human beings. No other volume of supposed philosophical content could compare to that *Gita*, decorated as it was with paintings allowing a view of the Spiritual Sky. Along with Prasadam, those paintings were Srila Prabhupada's secret weapons.

Srila Prabhupada was very careful to supervise the subject matters of those paintings. There are hundreds of letters from him to the artists answering myriads of questions about color, poses, backgrounds – everything to give Srila Prabhupada what he wanted to see in those paintings. The artists would propose new paintings and Srila Prabhupada, the infallible art critic, would instruct as to what was transcendently acceptable and what was not to be allowed.

By 1975, Srila Prabhupada had created the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT) and moved the ISKCON Press to Los Angeles, his Western World Headquarters. In late 1975 he appointed a new Trustee, Ramesvara das Brahmachari, to oversee the Los Angeles BBT. Ramesvara had been a close assistant to the previous BBT Trustee, Karandhar das. They had done much to facilitate the establishment of new places to distribute books and collection donations. Throughout the 1970's book distribution had progressed from door-to-door to malls, shopping centers, travelling parties, concerts and the airports with their international travellers. Giant book distributors appeared: Buddhimanta, Kesava (Karandhar's brother), Premarnava, et al. Tripurari had discovered the airports. The Christmas Marathon was born and book scores skyrocketed. Book distributors from the West Coast went out to other temples to train devotees in the art. The Los Angeles devotees were the pioneers of book distribution and the waves of enthusiasm spread across the U.S. and Canada and jumped the Atlantic to the British Isles, Europe and down under to Australia. Books were the backbone of the Life Membership program in India.

So by the time Ramesvara assumed his new duties, book distribution had been fully established by Srila Prabhupada as the primary mission of his movement, and Ramesvara's first official meeting with Srila Prabhupada would be to discuss a proposal from the art department. A few years later, in 1978-79, Ramesvara spoke about that meeting, and many others, while being interviewed for an upcoming "biography" of Srila Prabhupada. The many materials gathered worldwide for that project were later reportedly destroyed in a fire at the Gita-nagari farm project, but fortunately Ramesvara's interview transcriptions were still in Los Angeles and ended up in the Archives in North Carolina.

It wasn't until over thirty years later, in 2012, when Ramesvara happened to be visiting the Archives, that he was shown a drawerful of transcripts – his recorded interviews. Subsequently, during a series of telephone conversations he related how he was astonished to discover instructions given him as a BBT Trustee by Srila Prabhupada, instructions he had forgotten about completely. He mentioned how there were some "really heavy" directions regarding changes to the books. Later he showed the transcripts to a senior BBT editor, whose reaction after reviewing them was, "This is trouble", and advised Ramesvara to send copies to the BBT Trustees (which he intended to do anyway). In this connection, Ramesvara related how a year earlier, he had met with the same editor to discuss editorial revisions made to the second chapter of the original 1972 *Gita* when it was published in 1983. After a very lengthy discussion, the editor would not admit any extraneous changes except a few, which he placed in a category of it "Didn't make any difference", or "It really didn't matter". (Of course the question is, then why do it? Since the basic principle is, after all, *arsha-prayoga*.)

After reading articles published on the Net, such as "[Where Angels Fear to Tread](#)", "[It's Your Call](#)", etc., all critical of the current BBT revision policies, and asked his opinion about all the essays, Ramesvara replied, "Great!" There were a number of conversations with Ramesvara prabhu, during which it became clear that he was another constructive critic of the revision policies. The mood of these conversations persisted after he accidentally discovered the transcripts. In fact, he admitted with serious regret that he had failed his responsibility to review the revised *Gita* before it was published in 1983, and that another Trustee at the time had since admitted to him that he hadn't either, and also suspected the same about the other Trustees.

At this point, one may ask why such important directions given by Srila Prabhupada and included in those interviews were not followed or implemented after he disappeared in 1977? How is it they were forgotten about? The answer is that Ramesvara maharaj became embroiled in the chaotic times after Srila Prabhupada's disappearance, a period of ISKCON history rife with quarrel, hypocrisy and strife, affecting all of the devotees one way or another. The weight of four stars on his shoulders' epaulets - sannyasi, GBC, BBT Trustee and guru – proved problematic, as it did for others of similar rank. Nevertheless, Ramesvara's reputation remains as a most consistent emblem of enthusiasm for publishing and distributing Srila Prabhupada's books and he was certainly an inspiration for many devotees.

Yet another question may be asked: "Why should the transcriptions of Ramesvara das' interview be accepted as authentic or authoritative? Because Ramesvara kept copious notes, a diary, and a list of questions for his meetings with Srila Prabhupada, which were frequent. Srila Prabhupada spent time in Los Angeles, his Western Headquarters and primary location of the BBT. When Ramesvara das joined the Movement he had been a lifetime celibate, with a sharp memory, quick intellect and unbounded energy and enthusiasm, all of which Srila Prabhupada expertly dovetailed to the maximum.

Recorded a few years later, in 1978-79, Ramesvara's interviews were not based on memories of thirty years earlier, when hindsight is often 20-20 vision, sanitized, or inaccurate. In addition to a good memory and quick mind, he kept those good records, all inextricably bound up with his service to Srila Prabhupada, a service which he considered his lifetime engagement. So there are

many good reasons for accepting Ramesvara's contribution as both authentic and authoritative. In this connection, it is clear that these unequivocal instructions were intended for future BBT Trustees as well. There is a long list of Trustees who have come and gone, including Harikesa, Bhagavan, Karandhar, Bali Mardan, Hansadutta, et al. A BBT Trustee was created by Srila Prabhupada to be "fiduciary", defined in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* as "a person to whom property or power is entrusted for the benefit of another". In other words, entrusted with the duty to carry out Srila Prabhupada's instructions and act for his benefit and for those designated by him, not for the Trustees' personal interests.

As mentioned before, one of Ramesvara Brahmachari's first duties after taking over as a BBT Trustee was to approach Srila Prabhupada with new proposals from the artists. Srila Prabhupada had been pleased with their work and they knew that the artwork accompanying his books presented his movement as an educational, cultural movement, the post-graduate study of religion. Yet, this transcendental strategy of Srila Prabhupada's was beginning to encounter the American infatuations with creating something new, innovative, up-to-date, modern, cutting-edge, avant-garde, popular, etc., all symptoms of the "change disease", as Srila Prabhupada called it – a pervasive phenomenon always ready to blossom in his ISKCON at an opportune moment. Indeed, if there be one consistent danger Srila Prabhupada had to guard against throughout his manifest presence, the change disease was it.

Ramesvara das didn't realize it then, but it is now clear that he and his associates were getting infected with it. This becomes evident when in 1975, a proposal was mailed to Srila Prabhupada with a copy of a new cover picture for the *Isopanisad*. Srila Prabhupada replied, "Don't you dare change the picture on my book. I have deliberately chosen the picture of Visnu because I want this book to be attracting the Mayavadis and impersonalists."

Again, in 1975, Radhaballabha, the BBT production manager, the artists, and Ramesvara wanted to "update" the paintings in the *Krsna Book* about to be reprinted. The thinking was that the paintings were done back in 1968-69 and the artists had gotten much better. So they all got together to discuss what paintings to take out and Ramesvara went to discuss the changes with Srila Prabhupada. At that meeting, before bringing up the *Krsna Book*, Ramesvara had shown him twenty-four line drawings which had taken the artist a year to finish and were intended for a new printing of the *Teachings of Lord Caitanya*. As he went through drawing after drawing Srila Prabhupada was becoming more and more angry, describing how they were misrepresentations. "If you put anything bogus in my book – this is my greatest fear – that you will ruin my book and the whole book will be ruined because of you."

Ramesvara then tried to show Srila Prabhupada, page by page, which paintings they wanted to take out and which ones they wanted to put in *Krsna Book*. Srila Prabhupada pounded on his desk and said how they were ruining his books and had no brain. He analyzed each painting, one by one, and rejected them all. Finally, he gave the instruction that if a painting is replaced it had to be the exact same pastime, same scene, but better technically. But to take out an approved painting and replace it was not allowed. Something may be added but there was no question of removing anything.

Srila Prabhupada sent for the other BBT Trustee at the time (Bali Mardan) and explained how everyone was a rascal for daring to touch anything in his books, and that the greatest anxiety he had was that after he's gone, things will be added to his books that are bogus, changes made that are not bona fide. He said books and the plan for the next 10,000 years could be spoiled because of the tendency to change.

Srila Prabhupada said that to do things differently was a disease so inherent in the Americans, that just for the sake of doing it differently they would walk on their hands rather than their feet. At this point in his interview, Ramesvara emphasized how this was just the first of many

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experiences when Srila Prabhupada intensely trained him how he would never be allowed to change anything in his books, even when the changes "made sense" to Ramesvara. Of course, that was the point the devotees were missing. Such changes couldn't make sense for Srila Prabhupada's purpose, but they would be sensible to those infected with change disease. That's the nature of illusion, maya. And the change disease was considered by Srila Prabhupada to be the biggest maya, a threat to his books.

During the Mayapur Festival in 1976, there was a meeting with His Divine Grace regarding the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. A color board had been prepared illustrating what the color of each volume would be for all the reprints. He approved of the color scheme for all of them, but warned the devotees that it must be the very last change that is ever made to the *Srimad Bhagavatam*.

The incidents described herein confirm the previous assertion that Srila Prabhupada had to be constantly on guard against the change disease infecting the BBT staff and his books. In fact, the change disease was always in danger of infecting every aspect of his Society, both from without and within, and he expected the GBC and BBT to be vigilant. Since the time of Srila Prabhupada's manifest presence the change disease has become most prominent in his Society, and it's instructive to note how it has affected the use of his paintings without his being here to watch over them, having left that duty to his disciples.

To reiterate, after examining and rejecting new paintings for the *Krsna Book*, Srila Prabhupada formulated the following instructions for paintings in his books:

1. If a painting is to be replaced it must be the exact same pastime, same scene, but better technically;
2. to take out an approved painting and replace it with a different one was not allowed; and
3. a painting may be added but there is no question of removing anything.

In other words, Srila Prabhupada was explaining that if he were to replace a painting as they were proposing, it would be only with a better painting technically, with the same scene. But once approved by him, a painting could not be replaced; but more, bona fide paintings could be added. The conclusion is that paintings personally approved by Srila Prabhupada were not to be changed or replaced then, or in the future. It's noteworthy that he strongly resisted replacing illustrations or paintings he had previously approved, and often took the time to demonstrate how proposed replacement or additions were misconceived.

To be sure, some other paintings were to escape Srila Prabhupada's scrutiny, like the one on the back cover of the 1977 edition of *Srimad Bhagavatam* 3rd Canto, Part One. Here is portrayed the birth of Lord Brahma on a lotus high above Lord Garbhodakasayi Visnu, Who is looking up from below while resting upon Sesa Naga. Srila Prabhupada instructed that an illustration is never to be done from a perspective above the Lord, which is obviously a conditioned soul's misconception.

Perhaps the most prominent current example of an advanced stage of change disease affecting the care of paintings is found in the 2010 revised BBT version of the *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*. In that volume, only two of the original forty-eight paintings are retained for that printing of 50,000. The forty-six omitted paintings included the Disciplic Succession. The two original paintings retained are accompanied by six new ones, for a total of eight color plates: one color photograph of Srila Prabhupada and seven paintings, a numerical reduction from forty-eight to eight, or 83%.

Of the seven new paintings in the 2010 edition, one stands out in a most startling manner, obviously calculated to rivet the reader's attention. That is plate #6, with the caption, "Animal killers do not know that in the future the animal will have a body suitable to kill them. That is the law of nature (p. 542)." The caption is a quote from the purport, which goes on to describe cow slaughter as the grossest type of ignorance.

However, the painting does not actually match the caption. There is blood on the ground, a chopping block in the background with a butcher's meat-cutter embedded in it. A towering brute of a man with a cow's head is about to cut off the head of a cowering creature (?) with a cow's body and a man's head. These are not the "suitable bodies" referred to in the purport. Rather, they are surrealistic fantasies of the artist with no reference anywhere. Such a grisly, macabre scene has no place in Srila Prabhupada's books. It won't be shown here. In fact, in a letter to Rayarama das, the first editor of the Back To Godhead magazine, Srila Prabhupada wrote:

"Regarding propaganda against animal slaughter in BTG. Please do not print any picture showing how a cow is being murdered in our BTG. This will pollute the whole atmosphere. We are not meant for moving anyone's sentiment against animal slaughter... Our propaganda is different to make people Krsna Conscious, which automatically makes them sympathetic against any kind of animal slaughter... just like we follow 5 principles, say for example illicit sex life, we can publish so many pictures of illicit sex life, but that will not advance our cause. Similarly, we may make propaganda against animal slaughter, but that will not advance our cause."

This letter, dated 11/19/68, is a must read because it puts animal slaughter and pious and impious activities in the right Krsna conscious perspective.

Another painting (plate #1), supposed to be a replacement for the original (approved by Srila Prabhupada) of Sanjaya describing the battlefield scene to Dhrtarastra, portrays a fanciful conception of the vision Sanjaya is having. Actually, Sanjaya is envisioning the scene within, but the artist shows a cloud of vapor coming out of Sanjaya's heart, flowing upwards to form a mist above his head and in the mist is expanded a picture of Lord Krsna and Arjuna charging forth on their chariot. But is it really a technical improvement or a matter of style? The mood, and Sanjaya's expression is entirely different from the original.

The next plate, supposed to show Krsna preaching to Arjuna, appears to be a technical improvement in detail when compared to the original, but Lord Krsna is the one standing, while Arjuna is seated without a sign of intense grief while he is overwhelmed with compassion for his relatives and others. In the original, Arjuna's bow has slipped from his hand and his hand is to his bowed head. In the replacement, Arjuna is sitting down calmly, his right arm loosely draped over his knee. Nice detail on the armor, but the mood of the composition is lost.

The next painting (plate #3), supposedly an improvement over plate #7 in the original *Gita*, is an entirely different scene, a different subject matter. The composition leaves so much to the imagination that it is difficult to decipher, enshrouded as it is with another misty cloud above. And finally, the "changing bodies" plate #4, replacing the original plate #8 as a technical improvement. The original portrays two verses in the 2nd chapter, 13 and 22, but the replacement leaves out 22.

There aren't any more color plates in the book to examine, but it is clear that none of the replacements meet the requirements explained by Srila Prabhupada and noted by Ramesvara das. And above it all, they are replacing paintings originally approved by His Divine Grace for the *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*. And he made it clear that illustrations he certified could not be replaced. In other words, these changes were extraneous, unnecessary products of the change disease as defined by Srila Prabhupada.

Of course, one is tempted to wonder, what was the logic for all the changes in the first place? Was it just a case of giving an artist the chance to put something in a book? Or simply keeping artists engaged? Srila Prabhupada did give permission for the BBT to compose books from his lectures, and they're doing it, so there is plenty of room for new bona fide paintings.

In any case, a prominent characteristic of those infected with the change disease is their expertise for making excuses for doing what they do. But all such rationalizations and word jugglery evaporate in the bright light of the real reason: just for the sake of doing it differently. That's it.

As far as adding new paintings after Srila Prabhupada's manifest lila, it's a matter of mature realization. His Divine Grace's standards were high, the purity of the illustrations had to be consistent with that of the verses and purports they accompanied. And Srila Prabhupada, the transcendent critic, could tell what was what. The meditations of the fortunate artists of the time were guided by Srila Prabhupada, personally.

But now paintings being added to Srila Prabhupada's books or to publications composed of his lectures must be carefully conceived and scrutinized for spiritual content and validity. Only advanced devotees should have final approval of what is to go into books published in Srila Prabhupada's name or the BBT's name. And what was already there at Srila Prabhupada's departure must remain. In this connection, there are many paintings out there now by newer artists portraying figures that are too human-like, that appear to be renditions of posing human beings, composites of photographs, etc., without the lotus-like eyes and other transcendental features or just plain bhakti prevalent in the illustrations composed for Srila Prabhupada. Technique alone is no substitute.

The revised *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* remains a case study on the change disease when it goes unchecked, including the layout and content editing as well as the omitted paintings. Srila Prabhupada so impressed Ramesvara das with his constant concern that in the future no one be allowed to make change in his books, that he called it Srila Prabhupada's "transcendental phobia". According to Ramesvara, Srila Prabhupada believed, beyond any doubt, that the whole movement, all his work and all the devotees' work, would ultimately be lost if his books were changed. That was the unequivocal opinion.

Of course, regarding the paintings, present day BBT editors can say they didn't know any better because all these instructions were not passed on to them, etc. But that doesn't matter. They know now, because Ramesvara sent them all copies of his interviews months ago. And the paintings, at least, can be fixed back the way Srila Prabhupada wanted, in the foreign editions as well – in the next printing – if Srila Prabhupada's wishes are taken seriously. That remains to be seen.

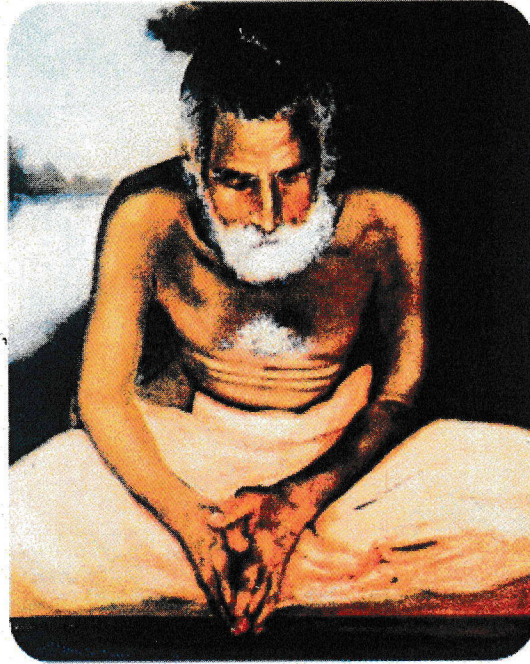
But the conclusion must be that unnecessary changes to Srila Prabhupada's books have created a bad precedent. After all, if the books, Srila Prabhupada-vani – the spear-head of Lord Caitanya's Movement – can be changed, then anything goes. Hence, the change disease in the so-called ISKCON mainstream is reaching pandemic proportions. Just when a member of ISKCON outside the mainstream thinks, "Now I've seen it all", another innovation appears in the ongoing metamorphosis of that mainstream.

Yet the cure for the change disease, the immediate antidote for all of its current various manifestations in Srila Prabhupada's ISKCON, including Deity worship, management, initiations, preaching, etc., is quite possible if one attitude is clearly understood at the outset by all: put simply, we need to let Srila Prabhupada have his way. And there are plenty of Srila Prabhupada's disciples still standing who know very well what that way is, having lived through it. It's not a question of reform, rather one of revival, but a revival of ISKCON Ais., or ISKCON As It Is.

The following is a sampling, twenty-five, of the total forty-six color plates eliminated in the 2010 edition, referred to on the face page as simply the "2nd Edition by His Divine Grace". It's enough of a sampling to reveal just how many windows to the Spiritual Sky the readers of that edition have been missing.



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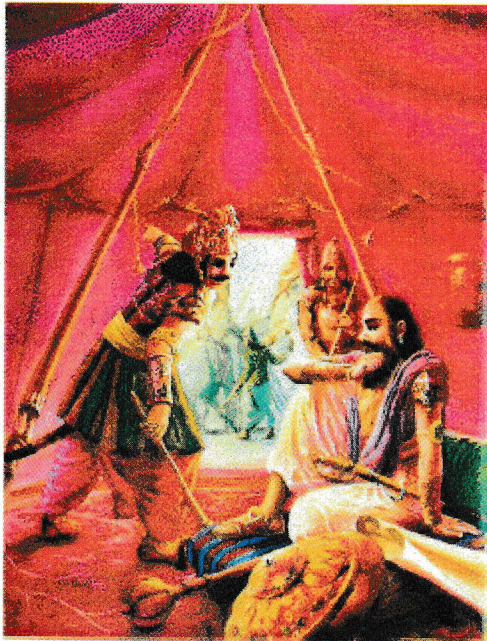


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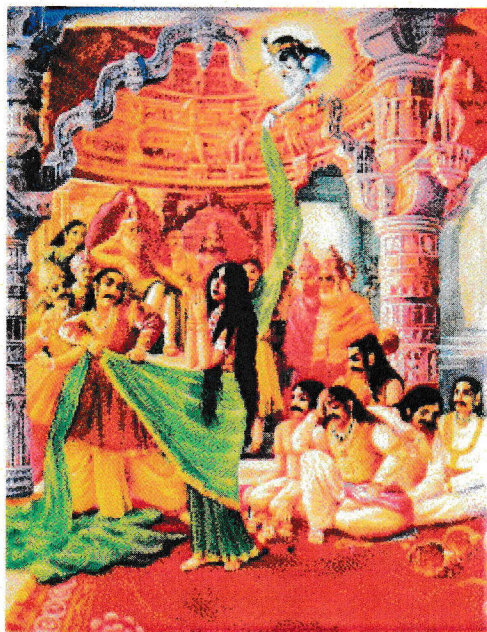


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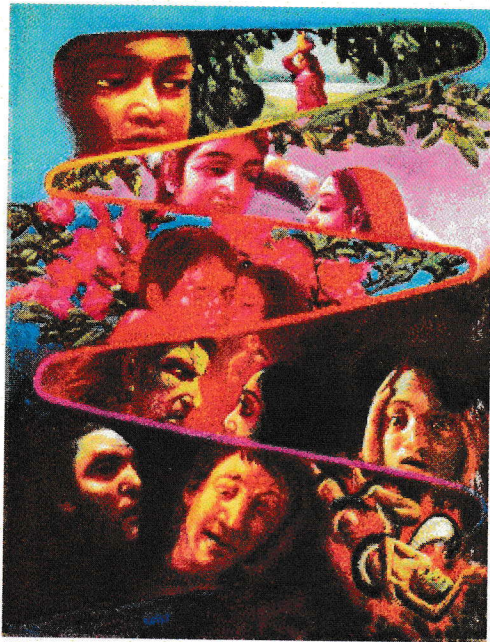


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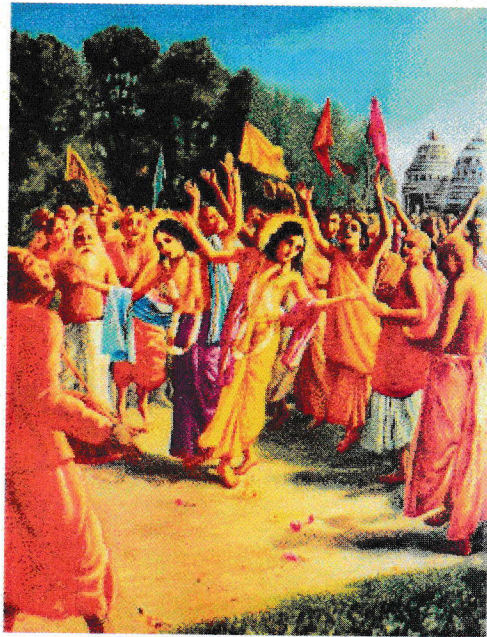


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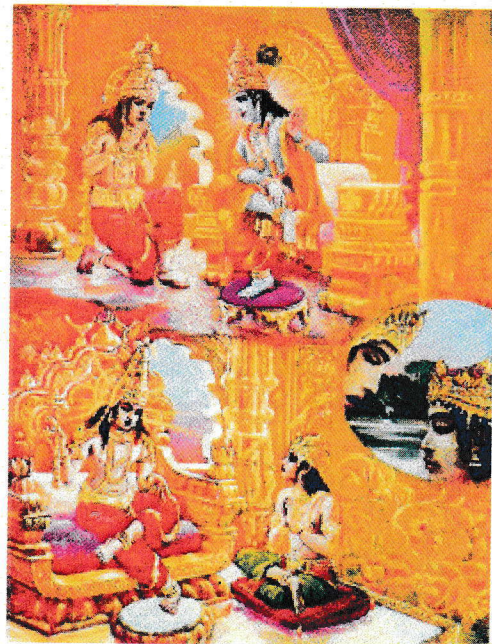


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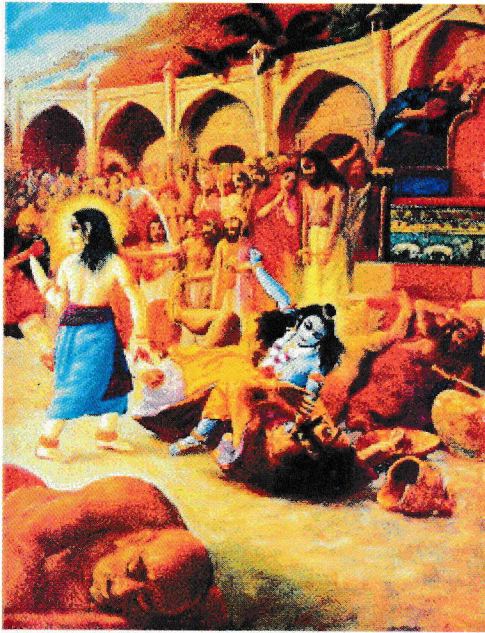


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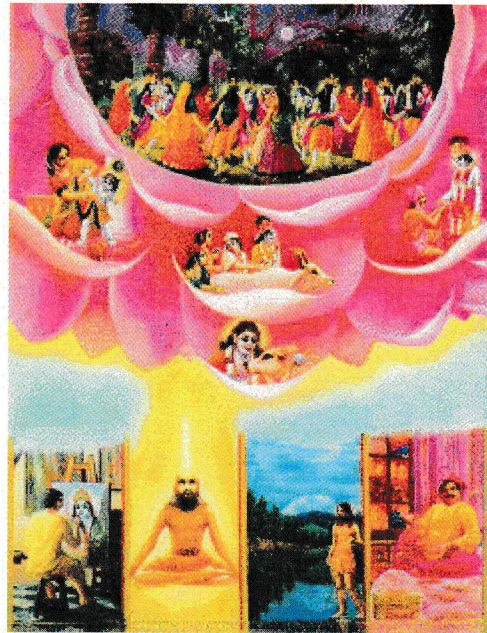


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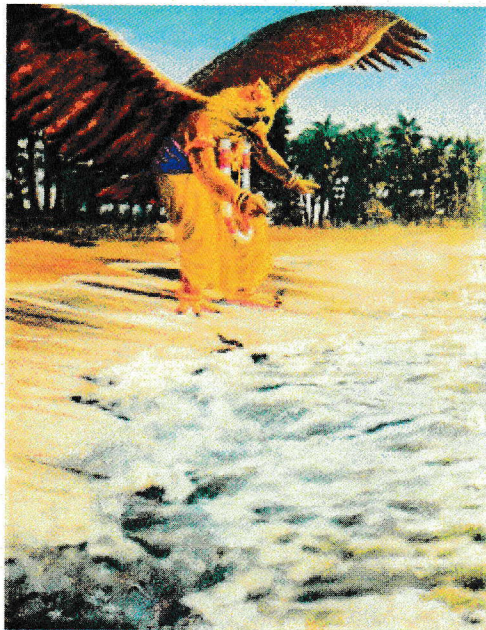


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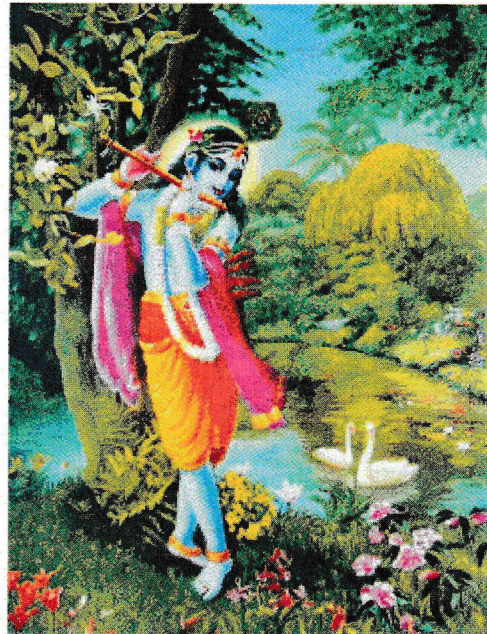


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Plate 26 Deleted (7.15-16)

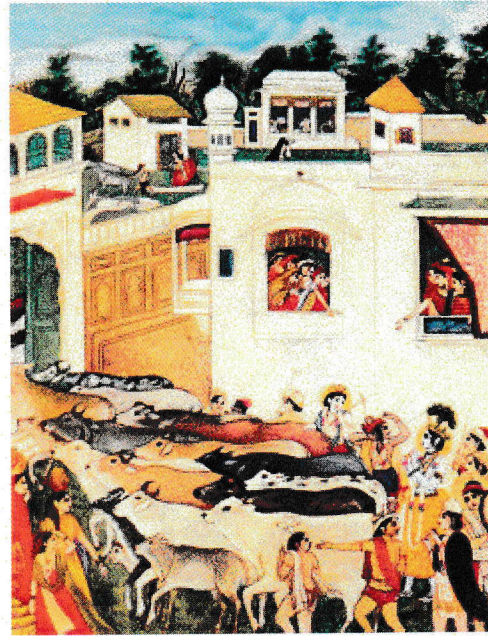


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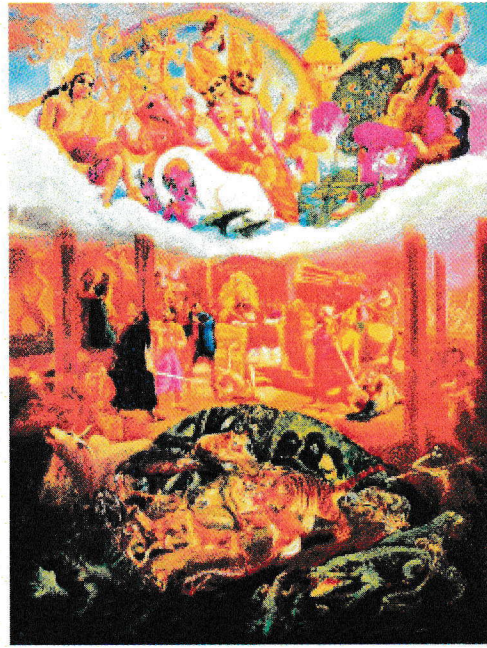


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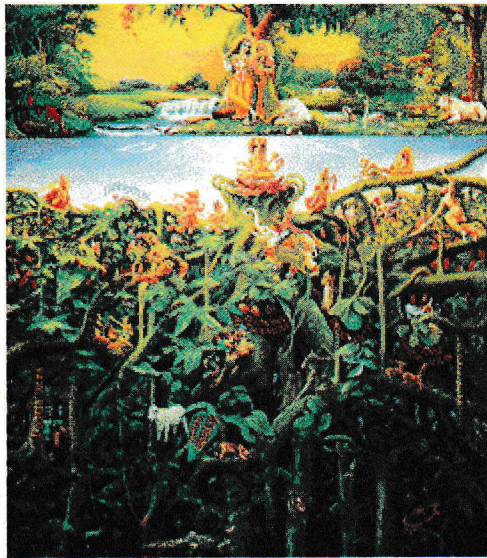


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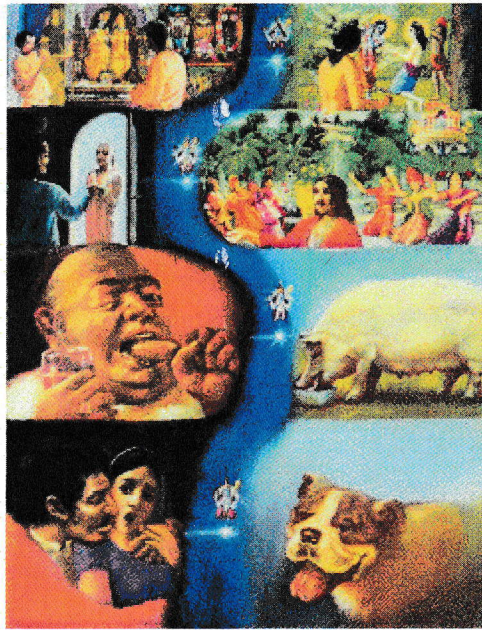


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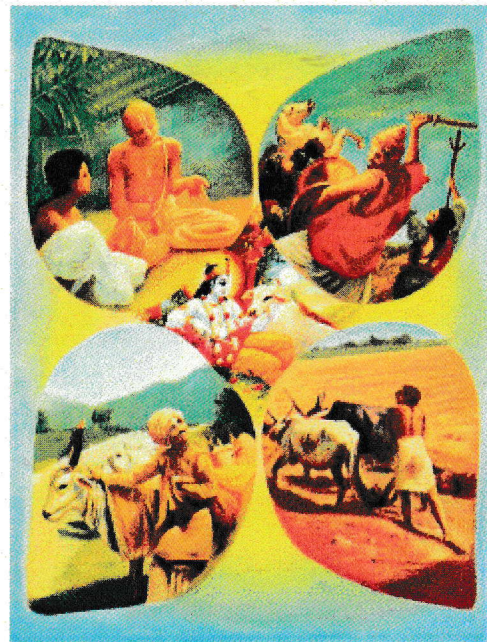


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