

HIS DIVINE GRACE

A.C. BHAKTIVEDANTA SWAMI PRABHUPADA

WHO FIRST BROUGHT THE TEACHINGS OF
BHAKTI TO THE WESTERN WORLD

His Divine Grace, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977) is widely regarded as the world's pre-eminent exponent of the teachings and practices of bhakti-yoga to the Western world.

Born Abhay Charan De on September 1, 1896, in Calcutta, as a youth he became involved with Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience movement. It was, however, a meeting with a prominent scholar and spiritual leader, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, which proved most influential on young Abhay's future calling. Upon their first meeting Srila Bhaktisiddhanta, who represented an ancient tradition of Bhakti (devotional yoga), asked Abhay to bring the teachings of Krishna to the English-speaking world. From birth, Abhay had been raised in a family devoted to Krishna – the name meaning the all-attentive, all-loving Lord. Deeply moved by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta's devotion and wisdom, Abhay became his disciple and dedicated himself to carrying out his mentor's request. But it wasn't until 1965, at the age of seventy, that he would set off on his mission to the West.

Having since been awarded the honorary title of Bhaktivedanta in recognition of his learning and devotion, and having taken the vows of sannyasa (renunciation), Abhay Charan, now known as Bhaktivedanta Swami, begged free passage and boarded a cargo ship to New York. The journey proved to be treacherous, and the elderly spiritual teacher suffered two heart attacks aboard ship. After 35 days at sea he finally arrived at a lonely Brooklyn pier with just seven dollars in Indian rupees and a crate of his translations of sacred Sanskrit texts.

In New York he faced great hardships without money or a place to live. He began his mission humbly, by giving classes on the Bhagavad-gita in lofts on the Bowery, New York's infamous skid row, and leading kirtan (traditional devotional chants) in Tompkins Square Park. His message of peace and goodwill resonated with many young people, some of whom came forward to become serious students of the Krishna-bhakti tradition. With the help of these students, Bhaktivedanta Swami rented a small storefront on New York's Lower East Side to use as a temple. After months of hardship and struggle, in July of 1966, Bhaktivedanta Swami established the International Society for Krishna Consciousness for the purpose of checking the imbalance of values in the world and working for real unity and peace. He taught that each soul is part and parcel of the quality of God and that one could find true happiness through living a simpler, more natural way of life and dedicating one's energy in the service of God and all living beings.

Having begun initiating his American followers into the Gaudiya Vaishnava lineage, Bhaktivedanta Swami next traveled to San Francisco. Amidst the emerging hippie community in the Haight-Ashbury district, during 1967's "Summer of Love" he taught that the experience of devotion through kirtan was a spiritual "high" superior to any pleasures derived from material sources such as wealth, fame, or intoxication. In the following months many more came forward to assist him. Desiring to address him with the respect due a revered spiritual teacher, his disciples began to call him Srila Prabhupada, meaning "one at whose feet the masters sit".

In the eleven years that followed, Srila Prabhupada circled the globe fourteen times, bringing the teachings of Bhakti to thousands of people on six continents. Men and women from all backgrounds came forward to accept his message. With their help, Srila Prabhupada established centers and projects throughout the world including temples, rural communities, educational institutions, and what would become the world's largest vegetarian food relief program. With the desire to nourish the roots of Krishna-bhakti in its home, Srila Prabhupada returned to India several times, where he sparked a revival in the Bhakti tradition. In India, he opened dozens of temples, including important centers in the holy towns of Vrindavana and Mayapur.

Perhaps Srila Prabhupada's most significant contribution is his books. He authored over seventy volumes on Bhakti-yoga, which are highly respected for their authority, depth, clarity, and fidelity to tradition. His writings have been translated into seventy-six languages. His most prominent works include: Bhagavad-gita As It Is, the thirty-volume Srimad-Bhagavatam, and the seventeen-volume Sri Caitanya-caritamrita.

For millennia the teachings of Bhakti-yoga had been concealed within Sanskrit and Indian vernacular languages, and the rich culture of Bhakti had been hidden behind the borders of India. Today, millions around the globe express their gratitude to Srila Prabhupada for revealing the timeless wisdom of Bhakti to a world immersed in a materialistic and self-destructive ethos.

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada passed away on November 14, 1977, in the holy town of Vrindaban, surrounded by his loving disciples who carry on his mission today.



"The thing that always stays is his saying, "I am the servant of the servant of the servant." I like that. A lot of people say, "I'm it. I'm the divine incarnation. I'm here and let me help you." You know what I mean? But Prabhupada was never like that. I liked Prabhupada's humbleness. I always liked his humility and his simplicity. The servant of the servant of the servant is really what it is, you know. He just made me feel so comfortable. I always felt very relaxed with him, and I felt more like a friend. I felt that he was a good friend. Even though he was at the time seventy-nine years old, working practically all through the night, day after day, with very little sleep, he still didn't come through to me as though he was a very highly educated intellectual being, because he had a sort of childlike simplicity. Which is great, fantastic. Even though he was the greatest Sanskrit scholar and a saint, I appreciated the fact that he never made me feel uncomfortable. In fact, he always went out of his way to make me feel comfortable. I always thought of him as sort of a lovely friend, really, and now he's still a lovely friend...Srila Prabhupada has already had an amazing effect on the world. There's no way of measuring it. One day I just realized, "God, this man is amazing!" He would sit up all night translating Sanskrit into English, putting in glossaries to make sure everyone understands it, and yet he never came off as someone above you."

- GEORGE HARRISON, MUSICIAN