

*In July 2007 Akrura dasa visited Denmark and gave a seminar in Copenhagen about coaching. Editor of the devotee newspaper "News from Hare Krishna" Lalitanatha dasa spoke with Akrura on the 31 July.*

**Lalitanatha dasa:** Akrura Dasa joined ISKCON in 1983 where he moved into the temple in Zagreb, Croatia. Through the years he did service as dishwasher and book distributor as well as bhakta leader and temple president. For 6 years he worked for the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust in doing translations of Srila Prabhupada's books to Serbo-croatian. Since 1999 he has lived in England with his wife and daughter. He serves at ISKCON London, where he serves devotees as a coach. I asked him to tell us what coaching is and why he started doing it.

**Akrura Dasa:** My interest in personal development started in 1992, when Sridhara Swami gave us the book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. That made me aware that the world outside might have knowledge and tools that can help us to become better leaders and in our service in general. I started to read about leadership and published the newsletter Leadership Excellence (It is now available in the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase 2003) which many leaders and other devotees in ISKCON read.

**Ld:** Me included.

**Akrura:** That made me start to study principles of leadership and what I learned I tried to transfer to ISKCON. I helped our leaders and temple presidents in their service in different ways. I saw that education and training was not enough. You can have a fantastic seminar, but people are quick to forget what they have learned. I made some research about what people outside ISKCON do and found out that they don't just educate people, but also follow up with coaching. In coaching, a coach works with his clients to help them clarify and reach their goals. Coaching helps people through obstacles, increases their options, makes them think outside inflexible thought patterns and increases motivation. It makes you responsible for the things that are important to you and helps clarify what is important to you. Coaching especially helps you to take action in ways which bring the results you desire.

Coaching enables a person to think for himself, take responsibility for his life and act responsibly. Few years ago I got myself a coach. It was a young man from Australia. A very intelligent and thoughtful person who had a coaching business by the name Lifestyle Revolution. I immediately liked the name,

because we are also in favor of revolution, especially personal revolution. We became friends via telephone and email and after some time he offered: "I would like to coach you for free" which I accepted with gratitude.

I also met another famous and experienced coach from the USA. His speciality is helping leaders to change their patterns of behavior. I met him in London where he coached me in different ways. First he asked me why I was always in anxiety, or at least sounded like that. He made me see that this is the impression I give.

He also made me stop saying "but" and "no" He says that he gives a fine on \$25 every time a client says "but". He says it's very bad when someone is talking and you say "but". By that you deny or show disrespect towards what the person says. Sometimes people say "no" all the time. It's so deeply imbedded in them that they say "no" even when they mean "yes". He has found out that many leaders are like that. Even though I don't have a leadership position I tend to have the same patterns of being self-righteous, thinking I'm right, saying "no", arguing with people, etc.

After being coached by him I decided to take an education in coaching. It would make me credible if I had a certificate. Besides personal study I studied one and a half year with the Newcastle College and attended the introductory course by The Coaching Academy. All this made me start coaching devotees in a more structured way. I started having regular sessions with several devotees including some of our leaders. That seemed to help them and they liked it.

**Ld:** How? What was the practical result?

**Akrura:** They learned to use their time better. Especially those who had a lot to do. One of the things I teach leaders is to say "no". That's very difficult for them. They think their duty is to say "yes" to everything they're asked to do. Because we're limited we have to say "no". When I succeed to convince them to say "no" they normally become happy. It's a great relief. Coaching also helps in your personal relationships. It can also make one better understand oneself. Many, including our most senior leaders, often want to be like their Godbrothers, so I say: "Why do you have to compete with others? Why don't you compete with yourself? You're already satisfying Prabhupada. Do as much as you can. Why give yourself more stress by comparing yourself with others?"

Coaching also helps with improving sadhana. It helps one get up in the morning and chant attentively. One of my personal goals is to chant 16 rounds in one go every day without interruption. When I succeed my day and my consciousness is fantastic. Last week I succeeded 6 times out of 7. So I also coach myself. It's an ongoing process.

**Ld:** Some criticize the use of worldly knowledge in Krishna consciousness. Prabhupada said he had already given us everything. We don't have to add anything.

**Akrura:** Srila Prabhupada also said that if something works we should use it. *Yukta-vairagya*. It is false renunciation not to use something that can help you in devotional service. Prabhupada said in a conversation with Dr. Stillson Judah that we are not sectarian. We can take knowledge from anywhere. Devotees ask me if sadhana and the fundamental Krishna consciousness process isn't enough. What's the use of this coaching? I answer by asking "Is your sadhana good enough?" Normally they answer "no". Are you satisfied with your self-discipline? They answer that it is not perfect. Then I say: "Is everything alright in your life?" "Is everything as it's supposed to be?" If they're honest the answer is normally "no". Then I say: "Try this and see if it works."

Basically coaching I do helps one to do improve *sravanam* and *kirtanam*, to have better sadhana and reading and better relationships with devotees. Coaching helps one to be a better leader and be a better example. It's a help in practicing Krishna consciousness.

**Ld:** But the point is that coaching is already in our culture and in Prabhupada's books.

**Akrura:** Yes, in a sense. some aspects of it are there. Lord Caitanya listened to Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya for seven days. In coaching you talk less and listen at least 70 percent of the time. Coaching is not giving advice or teaching. Coaching is something else. As a coach you listen to the devotee and help him to think responsibly and independently. When you come for a coaching session I basically help you to have a really good conversation with yourself. A conversation you often tend to avoid. I ask questions, I dig deeply into what you actually think, I help you to make it clear what you want and to be more clear about your understanding and your ideas.

I have especially noted that I have to help devotees to stop sabotaging themselves. Devotees are specialists in self-sabotage. Recently I wrote about 15 "Krishna consciouss" self-limiting beliefs. Yesterday I got two more from the devotees here in Copenhagen during the seminar. We are good at using our philosophy to sabotage ourselves.

**Ld:** What are those beliefs?

**Akrura:** One of them is related to the story of the sage who wasn't able to teach a boy to stop eating sugar before he himself stopped eating sugar. Yesterday a devotee told me that unless he's a perfect example he can't preach to others. I answered that that's a self-imposed limitation. It's just an excuse. You can preach even if you are not perfect. It will also help you to rise to a higher platform. You will be forced to improve because while preaching you're making public statements.

I've got an example of a devotee who couldn't follow all the four regulative principles and therefore he thought he couldn't work on a specific project he wishes to develop. It's a fantastic project that can give big results. He had already begun to get results but because he didn't follow all the four principles he was hesitating in involving other devotees even though some were already interested in helping him.

I asked him to read *Bhagavad-gita* verse (12.10) where Krishna says that if you can't follow the regulative principles you can work for him. By working for Krishna you'll gradually attain the perfect state. "Fantastic," he said "That's just for me." I answered: "Yes, print it out, put it in a frame and hang it over your desk." He did so. He started to work from a different paradigm. And what's happening now? He's starting to get results. What this project is I cannot say right now, but it can turn out to be a great preaching project.

Another devotee limited himself in other ways. He dressed shabby way. And in the name of being humble he appeared as being insecure. I told him: "Dress as a gentleman and practice being self-confident. Do it as if you are already a success. Do a little acting. The others are not better than you. Maybe they know more than you or have more success than you but they are not better than you. If you are too humble they'll trample you over. They'll think you're a wimp. Be a little puffed up. That shouldn't be so difficult. Haha! And then work and engage people in this fantastic project."

He did so and the more sessions we have the more we realize how he's limiting himself. The fantastic thing about this devotee is, however, that he has a burning desire to realize his project. He would rather die than not working on it.

**Ld:** When you see devotees you must have an idea that they have much more potential than they realize.

**Akrura:** Yes, *Bhagavad-gita* says that the soul is amazing. I try to see this. Not only with devotees but with everyone. Coaching helps to release devotee's potential. Most likely most devotees are using maximum 20-30 percent of their potential.

Nowadays science can measure 7 kinds of intelligence. Some of them are interpersonal, intrapersonal, aesthetic, logical-mathematical and emotional intelligence. If someone tells me that a person is stupid I don't believe it. Maybe he's stupid in one area, but then he's intelligent in another area. To be a coach is like exploring pyramids. You walk around with your flashlight and try to shed light on all the different treasures within people. When I work with devotees I try to see where their strong sides are and which creative skills they have and help them to bring these out and engage them in Krishna's service. This also makes their weaknesses less important because they now have a fundamental strength to build upon. It's very exciting to see what happens. Everything is built on desire.

When devotees try to achieve what they really want, their potential comes out. Sometimes it is as if a volcano eruption happens. In the beginning this creates a certain fear. The fear of success.

**Ld:** I thought the biggest problem was the fear of failure. What is a fear of success?

**Akrura:** It's the fear of the responsibility that success brings. If I succeed my responsibility becomes greater and I have to be a good example for others because others will notice me. To have success means that people will look up to you. But the fear of not succeeding is also a real thing. You know that on book distribution we all get turned down. I was never good at doing books. I couldn't stand to be turned down. But later I learned that after failure you have to get going again fast and go ahead. The more you fail the stronger you get and you learn from it. You learn about yourself and about the world.

Prabhupada said that failure is the pillar of success. All such principles of success are to be found in Srila Prabhupada's books.

**Ld:** ISKCON has changed through the years. What do you think about ISKCON today? Could we have avoided the problems of the past through what you are working with?

**Akrura:** If we had had coaching from the beginning most probably ISKCON could have prevented a lot of problems. It's just common sense. By being intelligent you avoid problems, and coaching helps you be more intelligent. But sometimes you can't avoid problems even if you are very intelligent. You have to experience them and learn from them. Everything that has happened until now was an experience we had to learn from. Important is that intelligent people do not repeat their mistakes. They learn from them and then they don't repeat them. We should learn from the past and move on. One of the important things about coaching is that you don't look so much into the past. You look at the present and into the future.

**Ld:** But you can learn from the past ...

**Akrura:** You can learn from the past but don't get stuck in it. Don't cling to it, don't dwell on it and don't grieve over it. For example, the old way of leadership of command and control doesn't work anymore. Both in spiritual and material organizations you experience the same. You can't lead people as you used to. There has to be a new style, a new type of leadership. I think that right now our leaders are staggering between the old and the new style.

I had a good experience of what I call the new style of leadership in ISKCON. I had a conversation with our GBC secretary about an important question. During the conversation he took notes. When I finished he said: "Let me see if I understood everything correctly." He read his notes for me. He asked a couple of questions to be sure that he had understood everything correctly. You can imagine how I felt. I felt completely understood and very inspired over the fact that this leader was interested in what I had to say. I spoke 95 percent of the time.

In conclusion, although there are problems, there's a lot of positive things in ISKCON and a number of effective leaders. And coaching helps to understand and develop effective leadership.