

[The Guru of Divine Love](#)

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The Guru of Divine Love

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The residence-turned-ashram of International Society of Divine Love (ISDL) is situated on the hills overlooking the beautiful beaches of Santa Monica in Southern California. As I entered its premises one crisp and sunny August morning, I was greeted by a handful of devotees whose peaceful and loving facial expressions made me think there must be something very special here.

As I walked inside, there was a shrine housing lovely images of Radha/Krishna amidst luscious greenery. The walls were decked with blissful and peaceful portraits of H.D.H. Prakashananda Saraswati, founder of ISDL.

Born into a Brahmin family in Ayodhya, India, in 1929, Swami Prakashananda Saraswati looks much younger than his 61 years. His speaking manner is soft, simple and succinct. He was inclined toward deep devotion and God consciousness from his early childhood. After studying with his guru, Jagadguru Krupalu Swami of Pratapgarh, he took Sannyas at the age of 20 and formally renounced society to begin a long period of spiritual seclusion. Initially, he lived in the Himalayas and forests of central India. Then he traveled to the district of Braj, the place where Lord Krishna lived. In this region, Swamiji remained for over 20 years, constantly absorbed in the Divine Love devotion of Radha-Krishna, until he was inspired to re-enter society to share his knowledge and experience of Raganuga Bhakti (Divine Love consciousness).

Swamiji is a Rasik saint in the tradition of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and his teaching is based mainly on the Gita, parts of the Veda and the Bhagavatam. He has followers in India as well as in the US, Australia and Canada. When asked how many followers he has, he said in his concise manner, "Enough. We believe in

quality, not quantity."

Nan Geller, wife of Barry Geller who is the creator of Karma Kat, a cartoon series for HINDUISM TODAY, has been a devotee of the ISDL Guru for almost five years. "My answers seem to come from a direct experience of an affinity with God. It is a very heart-warming experience. I have gotten out of my head and into my heart. It is a sense of contentment that I feel is complete, and yet it seems to grow. It is wonderful to feel that God is a person, and He loves you."

Karl Esslinger, a computer teacher, has been a devotee of Swami Prakashananda since 1983. Prior to that, he served for 14 years in the Green Beret, an elite branch of US military force handling secret military work. "I visited India for my work in the 1970's. I liked the temples and became curious about the Deities but was not drawn to Hinduism." Yet, when he met Swami Prakashananda in 1981 after attending one of his lectures, he was so impressed by the presence of the Guru that he found himself asking, "How do I become your devotee?" Swamiji told him "Read my book, and I will see you after a year." Karl became a devotee in 1983. He says, "I liked the simple, heartfelt approach. Swamiji told me, 'Give me your heart and live your life normally.'" Karl says he has found profound solace in Swamiji philosophy and teachings.

After extensive study and devotion, three western women have become full time spiritual teachers under the direction of Swami Prakashananda. Meera Devi, Priya Dasi and Hari Dasi are the first westerners to receive sannyas in the Raganuga tradition.

The Teachings of ISDL

Founded in 1972, ISDL aims to reveal the knowledge and experience of Raganuga Bhakti for Radha/Krishna for those sincere souls who are dedicated to experiencing this perfect love. Raganuga Bhakti is a principle tenet of Swami Prakashananda's philosophy. "Raga is the sentiment of love that the gopis and brajawasis (residents of Krishna's town) had for the Lord and other devotees following that deep devotional sentiment called Raganuga Bhakti," he explains. Another key term in his teaching is Bhavavesh, which is the highest form of gopis' love for Krishna. Its intensity is beyond the other terms describing love like prema, sneha and anuraga.

The highest form of divine love is Radha/Krishna love, the culmination of all love, according to Swamiji. He also distinguishes Raganuga Bhakti from Vaidhi Bhakti. The later consists of reaching the God by ritualistic practices such as japa, fasting and spiritual vratas (vows). The Raganuga Bhakti is more on the emotional level. It appeals to the heart.

Swamiji explains that a spark or seed of Divine Love lies dormant in the depths of every human heart. Through devotional meditation and dedication, this seed is enlivened and the bliss of His love, which is the desire of our soul, dawns in the mind, and is gradually enriched. Divine love is attained by internal remembrance and chanting of specific Divine names. The human soul has an affinity and relationship with the Supreme God. Both are essentially the same, just as the ocean and the waves are basically made of the same substance. Only their outward forms are different. The common man in his day to day life does not identify his soul with God, due to material bondage and the limitations of his material mind. But through total surrender and deep devotion, one can become divine-love-conscious and thus attain God's bliss.

"Our soul is a fractional existence of a power of God. Our soul's Divinity is blemished because of its eternal association with maya, but its natural instinct to find Divine Love is still persistent. That is why our soul is always looking for Divine Love and that love is Radha/Krishna," says Swamiji.

The religious instruction is imparted to the devotees at ISDL center through bi-weekly satsangs and lectures which are open to the public. Every year for a three week period Swamiji conducts a special devotional intensive for ISDL life members which is designed to awaken the devotee's experience of Divine Love consciousness.

Intensives last up to 14 hours a day. A day's schedule runs through morning devotions, relaxation by yoga asanas, breathing exercises and chanting. Some time is spent on "opening the heart" (dialogue with Swamiji on God-Realization) and guided meditation. The day ends at 10:30 PM with devotions and instructions on inner sleep preparation.

The Santa Monica location is one of the three US centers of the organization. The

other two are in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Aptos, California. Internationally, ISDL has centers in New Zealand, Canada and Vrindaban, India. This last one is being developed as a large international center.

Swamiji in Action

On August 19, 1990, Swamiji addressed a gathering of Indians in Cerritos, near Los Angeles. He spoke in a simple, conversational manner and dealt with the concerns of Indians settled in the US questing material abundance. "Other religions of the world are just a fraction of our Indian philosophy," he said. "Our descriptions of God and Gods are richer and more specific. There are various ways of reaching God. It is not good to think of God only when you are in trouble. One should always be God-conscious and hold Him in one's heart. As people run after more, better and bigger things, only the discontentment increases. God's Divine Love can give you true contentment. Liberation combined with God's love is the highest liberation, and Radha/Krishna's devotion will help you attain that."

When I asked him about his views on ahimsa, Swamiji said that non-violence is a state of mind, which also involves being non-selfish. Himsa start in the mind. Jealousy and anger lead to Himsa. Himsa or violence can be by one's action or even by one's word. "We should avoid violence by action or even by word by not hurting anybody," he says. About vegetarianism, he maintains that food has a bi-fold effect - physical and mental. The mental effect cannot be measured, but when the mind is purified, one cannot eat meat. A pure mind can reach God.

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