



Home Deity Worship Course

Offenses in deity worship



ISKCON Deity Worship Ministry

Seva Aparādhā - Offenses to Avoid

In his *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (4.24.59, purport) Śrīla Prabhupāda writes:

The *bhakti-yoga* process must be carried out by avoiding the ten offenses one can commit while chanting the *mahā-mantra* and the sixty-four offenses one can commit while worshiping the Deity. When a devotee strictly follows the rules and regulations, Bhaktidevī becomes very much satisfied with him, and at that time he is never disturbed by anything external. ... When one's heart is purified by the association of devotees and by the avoidance of the offenses committed when chanting and worshiping the Lord, the transcendental name, form, and activities of the Lord are revealed by the Lord.

Offenses Due to Lack of Purity in the Body and Mind

1. One should not enter the temple without having washed one's hands and feet.
2. One should not fail to wash his teeth very carefully every day.
3. One should not enter the deity room or touch the body of the deity after having smeared oil over his body.
4. One should not touch the deity before one has completed taking a bath.
5. One should not touch a woman during her menstrual period.
6. One should not enter the temple directly after sexual intercourse.
7. One should not enter the temple after touching a dead body.
8. One should not enter the temple after seeing a dead body.
9. One should not enter the temple after visiting a crematorium.
10. One should not enter the temple in a contaminated state. ("According to Vedic scripture, if someone dies in the family the whole family becomes contaminated for some time, according to its status. For example, if the family is *brāhmaṇa*, their contamination period is twelve days, for the *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas* it is fifteen days, and for *śūdrās* thirty days.") [Any disturbing or contaminating experience leaves an impression on



the mind for some time. Until such an impression has thoroughly subsided, a person should not come before the deity because he may project this impression toward Him. Offenses 6 to 10 can be understood in this way.]

11. When a devotee is perspiring, he should not engage himself in worshipping the deity. [This refers to worship by the *pūjārī*, in direct proximity to the deity. Of course, if hot weather makes perspiration unavoidable, one should continue worshipping the deity. Worship should not stop.]
12. One should not pass urine or evacuate while engaged in worshipping. [One should be strictly regulated in one's eating habits so that answering the call of nature does not force one to interrupt the worship. If the worship is unavoidably interrupted, the *pūjārī* should mentally beg permission from the Lord to interrupt the worship, and, upon resuming the worship, beg for forgiveness. During the deity's bathing, any interruption should be strictly avoided.]
13. The deities should not be bathed in water that has been touched by the nails or fingers.
14. One should not be angry within the temple. [Of course, if the deities or devotees are being attacked or threatened, we should by all means show anger while doing all in our power to protect the deities and devotees!]

Offenses Due to Lack of Respect

1. One should not belch before the deity. (“So, until one has fully digested his food, he should not enter the temple” [*The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter 8].)
2. One should not enter the temple of the deity in a car or palanquin or with shoes on the feet.
3. One should not avoid bowing down before the deity. [One should offer obeisances twice to both the deity and respectable persons such as the spiritual master and *sannyāsīs*: once from a distance, when one first sees the respected person, and again up close, when the person sees one. Even if one sees the deity from outside the temple building, one should immediately offer obeisances.]



4. One should not bow down on one hand. [When bowing down to someone, one should mentally touch his feet with one's hands. Genuine respect calls for touching both hands to the feet. Thus if one is carrying something, one should first set it down in a proper place and then offer obeisances.]
5. One should not circumambulate in front of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. ("The process of circumambulating the temple is that one should begin circumambulating from the deity's right-hand side of the temple and come round. Such circumambulation should be performed outside the temple structure at least three times daily" [*The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter 8].) [This injunction refers to showing someone special honor by circumambulating him or her in front of the Lord. Following this prohibition, we circumambulate Tulasī-devī with the deity curtain closed. It is not offensive to dance before the deity in circles if it is done for the deity's pleasure-and if the deity is not endangered by wild dancing!]
6. One should not spread his legs before the deity.
7. One should not sit before the deity holding the ankles, elbows, or knees with one's hands. [It is best to sit with crossed legs in lotus position (*padmāsana*) or some variation. A person who cannot do so may use a chair, but he should sit to the side of the temple so as not to disturb other devotees.]
8. One should not lie down before the deity of Kṛṣṇa.
9. One should not accept *prasāda* before the deity. [A small morsel of *mahā-prasāda* distributed by the *pūjārī* from the altar may be respected immediately by eating it-not directly in front of the deity but rather somewhat to the side. One should not eat a meal before the deity.]
10. One should not chew betel before the deity.
11. One should not pass air before the deity.
12. One should not pass air within the temple.
13. One should not sit with his back toward the deity. [One should also not stand with his back toward the deity. Śrīla Prabhupāda was adamant about this on at least one occasion, in Māyāpur. This injunction applies in the temple only when the deity is visible for *darṣana*. As far as possible, *pūjārīs* in the deity room should also try to avoid facing away from the deity while performing services.]



14. One should not be charitable to beggars before the deity. [While giving charity to beggars, a person tends to see himself as the friend of all living entities—a mentality one should not display before the deity.]
15. One should not break the silence while worshipping. [When visiting a public temple, householders should make sure their small children do not disturb other devotees in front of the deities. When one discusses *kṛṣṇa-kathā*, chants *japa*, or performs *kīrtana*, however, the "silence" in the temple is not broken.]
16. One should not talk with others before the deity. [This injunction specifically warns against speaking *prajalpa* while worship is going on.]
17. One should not eulogize or praise anyone else before the deity.
18. One should not talk very loudly before the deity.
19. One should not cry or howl before the deity.
20. One should not speak very harshly to others before the deity.
21. One should not chastise anyone before the deity.
22. One should not speak ill names before the deity.
23. One should not take a vow in the name of God. [Devotees take vows before the deity to observe *vratas*, to follow the order of the spiritual master (as in initiation), or to take responsibility (as in marriage). One should not take a vow to perform some austerity or to increase *sādhana* that one will not be able to keep; nor should one make any vow before the deity by which some material goal or managerially expedient purpose may be achieved.]
24. One should not quarrel or fight before the deity.
25. One should not praise oneself before the deity.
26. One should not wear a fur blanket before the deity.
27. One should not enter the temple wearing garments of red or blue color, or garments that are unwashed.
28. One should not decorate one's forehead with the three-lined *tilaka*.
29. One should not worship the deity before a nondevotee. [When the deity goes on procession, He extends His mercy to all who are present. At that time He is worshiped without



restriction. However, when the Lord is in the temple He is worshiped by the devotees. Guests who come to the temple may see the *ārati* ceremony, but other aspects of worship must be done behind closed curtains.]

Offenses Due to Lack of Endeavor

1. One should not fail to worship the deity according to one's means. [In *Bhagavad-gītā* it is stated that the Lord is satisfied if some devotee offers Him even a leaf or a little water. This formula prescribed by the Lord is universally applicable, even for the poorest man. But that does not mean that one who has sufficient means to worship the Lord very nicely should also adopt this method and try to satisfy the Lord simply by offering water and a leaf. If he has sufficient means, he should offer nice decorations, nice flowers, and nice foodstuffs and observe all ceremonies. It is not that one should try to satisfy the Supreme Lord with a little water and a leaf, and for himself spend all his money on sense gratification" [*The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter 8].)
2. One should not fail to observe the various festivals for the pleasure of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, such as Janmāṣṭamī and Ratha-yātrā.
3. One should not offer incense without offering some flowers. [The general principle is that the *pūjārī* should perform worship with standard paraphernalia. The *pūjārī* may burn incense at any time in the temple, but when he does so during an *ārati*, he should offer flowers as well.]
4. One should not fail to offer fresh fruit and grains to Kṛṣṇa, according to the season.
5. One should not offer obeisances silently to the spiritual master, or in other words, one should recite aloud the prayers to the spiritual master while offering obeisances.
6. One should not fail to offer some praise in the presence of the spiritual master.
7. One should not fail to strictly follow the rules and regulations in worshiping the deity. [To follow the rules and regulations of deity worship one must of course take the trouble to know those



rules and regulations. Also, we must guard against the tendency to become lax in following the rules, especially on the plea of “practicality.”]

8. One should not enter the temple of the deity without first making some sound.
9. One should not touch the deity in a dark room.
10. One should not worship the Lord while sitting on the bare floor; one must have a sitting place or carpet.
11. Useless flowers without any fragrance should not be offered.
12. One should not offer a flower which was kept in an unclean pot.
13. One should not offer foodstuff which is cooked by a non-Vaiṣṇava.
14. One should not offer any foodstuff to the deity which has been seen by dogs or other lower animals.

Offenses Due to Lack of Faith

1. One should not eat anything which is not offered first to Kṛṣṇa.
2. After food has been cooked, no one should be offered any foodstuff unless it is first offered to the deity.
3. One should not deride the demigods before the deity. [See *The Nectar of Devotion*, Chapter 7, "The Demigods.]"
4. One should not show disrespect to a scripture teaching about the supremacy of the Lord. [This injunction is explained in the *Hari-nāma-cintāmaṇi*, by Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura.]
5. One should not introduce any opposing scripture. [In ISKCON, Śrīla Prabhupāda's books are the final authoritative scriptures. If evidence is taken from any other scripture, it should only be introduced as supportive evidence for the teachings of the Founder-Ācārya of ISKCON, Śrīla Prabhupāda.]
6. One should not smoke marijuana, or *gañjā*.
7. One should not take opium or similar intoxicants.

Although we sometimes distinguish between "degrees of mercifulness" of various deities (for example, we might hear that



Gaura-Nitāi are "more merciful" than Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa), one should not think these differences give one carte blanche to commit offenses. All deities of the Lord are equally worshipable—and therefore equally deserving of proper treatment.

Counteracting Offenses in Deity Worship

Śrīla Prabhupāda writes:

That is the test of standard service. If we see the Deities in very pleasing mood, that will certify our service unto the Lord. So everywhere we shall see the Deities in such pleasing mood. As soon as we see the Deities in a different mood, we must immediately understand our discrepancies. [letter from Śrīla Prabhupāda, 27 May 1970]

If a person inadvertently offends the deities, he should sincerely pray to Them for forgiveness and resolve to avoid committing the offense in the future. The following verse illustrates the proper mood:

aparādha-sahasrāṇi kriyante 'har-niśam mayā

dāso 'ham iti mām matvā kṣamasva madhusūdana

I commit thousands of offenses day and night, O Madhusūdana. But please think of me as Your servant and kindly forgive them.

The *śāstras* recommend certain acts of *prāyaścitta* (atonement) to release a person from offenses in worship: one may read a chapter of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, chant the *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma-stotram*, offer prayers to Tulasī-devī, or plant a *tulasī* seed. Another way to be relieved of offenses in deity worship is to worship the *śālagrāma-śilā*. The essential point of such activities is to remember that one is a servant of the Lord.

