

**On Conceiving the Inconceivable:
Some Principles in Understanding the Origin of the Conditioned Soul**

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We conditioned souls are originally Kṛṣṇa conscious living entities, but owing to a desire to be independent of God and to be the Supreme ourselves, we have fallen from our original position and become covered by māyā (illusion), who provides us with false identities of gross and subtle matter. By the grace of Kṛṣṇa and His pure devotees we fallen souls can regain our original Kṛṣṇa consciousness and in so doing go back to Godhead.

This simple dramatic narrative tells the story of who we are, where we came from, how we fell, and how we can be restored. Śrīla Prabhupāda tells us this story, and so do the previous ācāryas and the scriptures. This story is the profoundest truth about ourselves, and there is no fault in it.

Yet the story becomes complicated when we discover (from the identical infallible sources) that the souls in the spiritual world are nitya-siddha, eternally or perpetually liberated souls, and that no one falls from the spiritual world. Further, the souls in the material world are nitya-baddha, eternally or perpetually conditioned, and we learn that their conditioned state is anādi, or without any beginning. These statements, also, are true without a doubt.

How can these facts be reconciled with the story of fall and redemption?

It is necessary to recognize that the seemingly straightforward linear narrative is more complicated than it appears because the narrative's scope of action spans two "worlds," one eternal and the other temporal.

We can get some sense of the relation between these two worlds if we recollect the temporal structure of the material universe as presented in Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam. As one ascends from Martya-loka (our level or plane), through Svarga-loka (the plane of the enjoying and administrating demigods, or devas), and further through Mahar-loka and so on (the planes of the austere sages) to Satya-loka (the plane of Lord Brahmā), time progressively dilates. Thus, as 360 years go by here in Martya-loka, only a year passes for the devas in Svarga-loka. And 300 billion years have to come and go down here for a single year to transpire in Satya-loka for Lord Brahmā.

Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam mentions that when Brahmā, on earth, kidnapped the cowherd boys and calves from Kṛṣṇa, the victims were gone a complete year by human experience, but for Brahmā, operating on Satya-loka time, only a moment (a truṭi) had passed. A truṭi lasts exactly 8/13,500 of a second.

On another occasion Mahārāja Kakudmi, seeking a husband for his daughter Revatī, took her to Satya-loka to ask Lord Brahmā to arrange the match. Brahmā kept them waiting until he had finished hearing a recital by Gandharva musicians. When Kakudmi finally presented his

request, Brahmā burst out laughing. Everyone Kakudmi would have wanted for his daughter was long gone, for twenty-seven yuga cycles had passed (about 160 million years) while the supplicant and his daughter cooled their heels in the anteroom.

A live television broadcast on Satya-loka of events on Martya-loka would disclose everything moving with dizzying speed, a blur of mountains rising up and dissolving away, oceans swelling and shrinking, peoples and civilizations rushing on and off the earth. By the same token, a live broadcast on Martya-loka of current events on Satya-loka would transmit motion so slow as to be undetectable by normal human vision. Only time-lapse photography, snapping the shutter every thousand years or so, would disclose activity.

Keeping all this in mind, imagine the temporal structure of the universe depicted in the form of an equilateral triangle, with the base representing Martya-loka. Its width at the base stands for the duration of the universe in our years—that is, 311 trillion 40 billion years. As we go up, the triangle narrows, so that at the level of Brahmā the duration of the universe (still depicted as the width of the triangle) is 100 of his years.

Now continue up the universe, past Satya-loka. The unit-measure of duration continues to dilate, time slows more and more, and finally, at the point where the material realm borders the spiritual, time has its stop. Here, at the apex of the triangle, we reach the point of translation between material and spiritual worlds, between time and eternity.

This is the “now moment of eternity,” an everlasting instant without past or future. We have seen how, when we go up the universe, a unit-measure of time includes more and more of our years. What then happens when we take that process to the limit, as we do when we reach the apex? That single climactic moment embodies time without beginning and end. From this point of view, the lifetimes of a trillion, trillion Brahmās are over as soon as they begin. Who can even express such inconceivable things?

It remains to be mentioned, for the sake of thoroughness, that the apex of our triangle marks the limit of the ascent to the Absolute by mystical speculation. According to mystic speculators, the everlasting moment of eternity is necessarily spent in stasis, immobility. Vaiṣṇavas, however, pure devotees of the Lord, know of transcendental variegatedness and activities. Although eternity is described as having no past or future, there is still sequence (for there are *līlās*, pastimes); and knowledge, bliss, and beauty eternally increase.

If we were to continue with our figure of a triangle, we would have to envision the two lines of its sides extending through the apex to form a second, inverted triangle. Let this triangle, with its base up and its apex down, signify the spiritual realm of transcendental variegatedness as it expands beyond the zero point of *nirvāṇa*. The figure of the two triangles, apex to apex, is simply another representation of what the *Bhagavad-gītā* signifies by the metaphor of an inverted tree, a reflection of the original tree standing on the water’s bank.

Our minds boggle even at the “now moment of eternity” of the impersonal speculators. Even further from our conceptions is a realm in which transcendental time, which has neither past

nor future, allows for activities—pastimes—and ever-increasing qualities of beauty, joy, and knowledge.

Now to consider the issue before us, we must not only contemplate that inconceivable eternal realm, but we must think about it in relationship with our world of past, passing, and to come. Let us proceed to do so.

As we have seen, the transcendental realm is eternal present, an everlasting instant. Every soul in that realm must accordingly be characterized as *nitya-mukta*, eternally liberated. This includes the souls that come from the material world. For if a soul enters that realm from the material world, can we ask, “When did that soul arrive?” The question does not apply. Once the soul gets there, that soul can only be *nitya-mukta*. He has, necessarily, always been there. This is the logic of eternity.

Now let us go to a matter equally inconceivable. Let us say, for the purposes of discussion, that a soul “falls” from eternity and sojourns in the material world. When did he enter the material world? We can only say that the fall is a non-temporal act that renders the conditioned soul bound from all time. The history of his incarceration in time has no beginning. The conditioned soul has always been conditioned. Strictly speaking, the question of when does not apply. Although bondage is not the soul’s original condition, the state of bondage is necessarily described as *anādi*, or beginningless, and the conditioned soul himself is characterized as *nitya-baddha*—eternally bound or conditioned. There was no time when he was not bound.

Yet such souls can attain release and enter the spiritual realm. Let us say that the soul who has fallen from that realm into beginningless bondage now returns. The duration of that bondage spans time without limit, as we have seen. Yet now, if we inquire, from the perspective of eternity, “How long has that fallen and restored soul been absent?” the answer is “He never left.” Or, alternatively, “The question does not apply.” For the logic of eternity dictates that no one falls from eternity—even if he does so.

The logic of eternity also dictates that no conditioned soul can begin his eternal life—even though he does so. In considering both falling from and returning to transcendence, we must accept the logic of eternity to be true to what is real.

Thus we see that while it is true that no one falls from the spiritual world, we in fact have done so, and yet there is no contradiction.

The dramatic narration of a life with God, a fall from that life, a sojourn in the alien world of illusion, and a final restoration to God is not a fiction. It is a profound truth. It need not be rejected on the mistaken notion that it conflicts with other, equally true, statements of authorities.

For our better understanding, however, we need to be aware of one simplification that takes place—quite naturally—in the telling of the narrative of fall and redemption. This is the

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representation of all the events in the story as though they take place on a single temporal continuum. For example, we habitually characterize our entry into time as though it were itself a temporal occasion, a dateable event. However, as we have seen, once we become conditioned, we have always been conditioned.

Similarly, we think of our rebellion against God as a distant, aboriginal event, one that took place long ago and far away, in that world. In truth, that single act of rebellion is perpetual; that very same aboriginal event is taking place right now. We have only to look into our hearts to confirm this.

Furthermore, when we “return” to the spiritual world, it will only be to discover that indeed we never left, and “there” has always been right “here.” We are right now with Kṛṣṇa, for Kṛṣṇa consciousness is our svarūpa, our eternal identity. We need only wake up and see where we are.

All this is known to Śrīla Prabhupāda and to the ācāryas, previous teachers. They know how one can fall from a place no one falls from, enter into an ignorance that has always been, and return to a place one never actually left. Because such matters are inconceivable to mundane minds, when teachers speak of such things their words may seem contradictory. But in one way or another they all tell the whole truth.