Understanding Śāstra and Śrīla Prabhupāda

FOUNDATION DOCUMENT

OF

VAIṢṆAVA HERMENEUTICS

in ISKCON

Śāstric Advisory Council

of the

Governing Body Commission

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How do we understand the meaning of statements from *guru-sādhu-śāstra*? Is there a traditional system we can use to promote respectful and unifying discourse in our society?

"It is not blindly accepted, this Kṛṣṇa consciousness. With considerable deliberation, we take the decision."

(Śrīla Prabhupāda Lecture, Bhagavad-gītā 7.1-3, Ahmedabad, 14/12/1972)

Definition of Hermeneutics
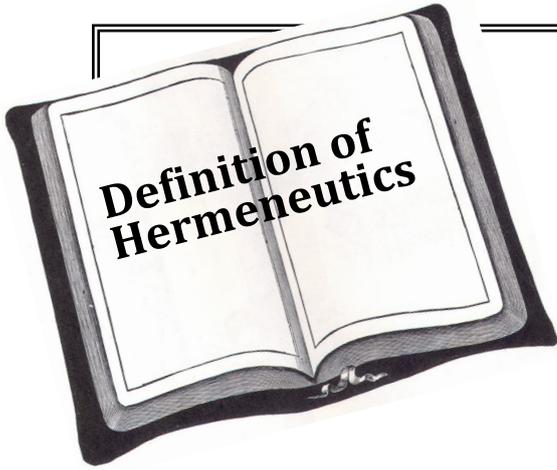
❈ By ISKCON hermeneutics we refer to the discipline and methodology that considers *how* to appropriately study, understand, apply, explain and perpetuate the teachings of *guru-sādhu-śāstra*. Such a discipline comes from the Vaiṣṇava tradition itself.

❈ Hermeneutics embraces theory and method, underpinned by values. For Vaiṣṇavas, proper understanding and teaching are contingent upon character and realization.

For our purposes:

❈ '*Śāstra*' refers to all texts sacred to ISKCON and its broader traditions.

❈ The use of the adjective 'śāstric' embraces *guru-sādhu-śāstra*, unless stated otherwise.

❈ Hermeneutics considers how to appropriately (1) receive a message, (2) understand it, and (3) transmit it. It also helps identify inappropriate understanding or misinterpretation.

The Scope of ISKCON Hermeneutics

✓ The methodology of ISKCON Hermeneutics requires the application of regular Kṛṣṇa conscious practices, *sādhana*. Nonetheless, hermeneutics is also a specialized discipline, most relevant to *śāstric* study and its application to a variety of services.

✓ Scriptural study is relevant to all ISKCON members, and hermeneutics can assist them by focusing on how to study, understand, and explain *śāstra*. However, hermeneutics may be more directly relevant to some devotees, especially those in leadership roles, both educational and administrative.

✓ Hermeneutics provides a method to properly understand *śāstra*, identify improper understandings, and negotiate disagreements. However, it does not offer an immediate panacea for all *śāstric* controversies. Rather, it helps create a culture where respectful, devotional discussion and agreement are the norm.

Purposes of ISKCON Hermeneutical Practice

1. To promote:

- Respectful and constructive *śāstric* conversation
- Authentic understanding and explanation of *śāstric* conclusions
- Resolution of philosophical controversies within ISKCON
- Proficiency in addressing difficult or contentious *śāstric* statements

2. To enhance:

For Individual members: Fulfillment within personal spiritual life

For ISKCON leaders: Unity in diversity within ISKCON

For the general public: Relevance and appreciation of ISKCON

3. To support ISKCON leaders by helping to:

Maintain organizational purpose, ethos and policy congruent with Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings

Prepare the ground for authentic, brahminical dialogue with broader society and within ISKCON

Ensure the dynamic continuity of paramparā, as relevant to contemporary contexts and with fidelity to Śrīla Prabhupāda, the previous *ācāryas* and ISKCON's broader heritage

Character Qualities Essential for Hermeneutics

The table below depicts six qualities expected of an ISKCON devotee using hermeneutic systems, and helps explain those qualities by the inclusion of

(a) secondary or supporting values

(b) examples of attendant conduct

Please see the supplementary materials for evidences and explanations of each of these.

Quality	Supporting Values/Conduct
1. Humility and Service Mood	Avoidance of pointless debate or egotistically trying to win an argument; reflection on personal motives; fulfillment and contentment; exemplary conduct.
2. Fidelity to Text and Tradition	Trust in textual authority; respect for the author; acceptance of sacred authority; freedom from offense; loyalty and gratitude to gurus and tradition.
3. Discerning Search for Truth	Ardent curiosity; logical; linguistically analytical; discriminating; thoughtful; interrogates own understanding.
4. Honest and Authentic Conversation	Respect; patience; willingness to listen; comfort with uncertainty/ambiguity; links *śāstra* to life experience; takes responsibility for and articulates own opinions.
5. Openness to Change & Transformation	Introspective; reflective and reflexive; personally detached; intuitive; sensitive to Lord's guidance; consciously applies *śāstra* in own life; love of virtue.
6. Benevolence and Generosity	Assuming of good intention; kind and merciful; charitable; welcomes alternative opinions; happy with plurality and discourse; sincere in outreach.

Principles: The Bedrock Foundation

Principles are simply listed here and are not explained in any detail. For explanations, please see the supplementary material.

Overarching Principle: Understanding tradition through Śrīla Prabhupāda, accepting Śrīla Prabhupāda as the representative and conveyer of the essence of the tradition and *paramparā*, in the most appropriate way for our understanding and application.

1. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the object, purpose and ultimate goal of all *śāstric* knowledge.[1]

2. *Śabda* is the highest *pramāṇa* (source of evidence).

3. Scripture provides the theory and method for its own understanding.

4. Identifying categories of texts, and categories of statements within texts, illuminates their meaning.

5. Hierarchies are present within *śāstra* and between *śāstras*.

6. Scriptures are consistent and coherent, enabling meaningful dialogue between "part" and "whole."

7. There exist universal truths, applicable in all times, in all places, and to all people.

8. Authentic understanding and exposition of *śāstra* are consistent with *siddhānta*.

9. Summary statements of Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava *siddhānta* are included in śāstric text.

10. *Śāstra* both transcends and addresses context, within which it is revealed.

11. Consideration of context, including historical circumstance, is essential to gaining śāstric insight.

12. Texts are properly understood and explained in terms of the intended reader or audience.

13. Knowledge is not simply a collection of correct objective information but is invariably mediated through the knower. [2]

14. Insight emerges through apt dialogue, and through mediation, resolution, or reconciliation of paradox, apparent contradiction, and multiple views.

15. *Śāstra* mercifully reciprocates with those who study it and compassionately reach out to others.

16. The meaning of *śāstra* is directly revealed to one with full faith in guru, *śāstra*, and Kṛṣṇa.

17. By purifying the senses, bhakti removes the conditioning that clouds and distorts perception.

18. Realization requires virtue, personal transformation, and the assimilation of knowledge by experience.

19. The highest truth aims at the welfare of all.

20. Texts are understood according to the mood and intent of the author/speaker.

21. We understand Śrīla Prabhupāda's statements by his application of them in relation to his mood and mission.

22. Truth is conveyed, with logic, reason, and exemplary character, through the system of *paramparā*.

23. *Paramparā* is perpetuated through discernment of meaning more than mere repetition of words.

24. Education in *śāstra*, delivered by the self-realized teacher (guru), helps preserve disciplic succession.

[1]This refers (in English) to the categories of *sambandha*, *abhidheya* and *prayojana*.

[2]More elaborately, Knowledge (*pramā*) is the result of the knower (*pramātā*) applying the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) to the object of knowledge (*prameya*).

Hermeneutical Tools

Hermeneutical systems often include a "toolbox" for interpreting text. Within ISKCON, the corresponding tools are not mere techniques. Rather, they are designed to be used alongside the regular practices of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, which purify the mind, senses and intelligence, and prepare the practitioner to receive Kṛṣṇa's mercy and guidance.

On the next pages we list 40 hermeneutic tools. Certain tools naturally support particular hermeneutic principles. However, we may observe that a single tool may support a number of principles and certainly should not be inconsistent with any one of them. In the supplementary materials are evidences, explanations, and a description of how to use each of these tools.

Hermeneutical Tools 1-20 out of 40

TOOL 1: How Does it Point Towards Kṛṣṇa?

TOOL 2: Consider *Pramāṇas* (sources of authority)

Tool 3: Seek Guidance from *Śāstra* Itself (through instruction or identifying precedent)

TOOL 4: Direct and Indirect Meanings

TOOL 5: Some Statements in *Śāstra* are Intentionally Delusive or Obscure, While Others are Direct

TOOL 6: Identifying the Genre (e.g. philosophical or a poetic/narrative text)

TOOL 7: Śāstric Statements can be Understood in Terms of *Tattva*, *Rasa*, or both

TOOL 8: Ten Topics of the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*

TOOL 9: Consider Nested Narratives

TOOL 10: Which Text Provides a Higher Level of Authority?

TOOL 11: Madhva's Hierarchy of *Śāstras*

TOOL 12: Give More Authority to Statements and Scriptures that Favor *Sattva-guṇa* Over the Lower Modes

TOOL 13: Look for a Statement of Equal Force or Meaning

TOOL 14: Chronologically later Statements are Often Stronger

TOOL 15: Using Six Stages of Strength to Determine Authority or Applicability

TOOL 16: Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas give Different Levels of Authority to Various Commentators: *Ṭīkā Tāratamya*

TOOL 17: *Śāstras* Often Include a Key Statement That Helps to Understand the Meaning and Purpose of the Entire Text

TOOL 18: Study Holistically and Repeatedly

TOOL 19: Reference *siddhānta*

TOOL 20: Six Criteria to Know the Main Import and Conclusion of a Work of *Śāstra*

Hermeneutical Tools 21-40 out of 40

TOOL 21: Some of Śrīla Prabhupāda's Statements Have Universal Application, Whereas Others are Applicable in a Particular Context

TOOL 22: Look for any Way in Which *Guru-Sādhu-Śāstra* Define Historical or Cultural Context

TOOL 23: Consider One's Own Cultural and Individual Perspectives, Along with One's Life Experiences

TOOL 24: A*nubandha-catuṣṭaya*: Four Traditional Context Questions

TOOL 25: Mediated and Unmediated Knowledge

TOOL 26: We Should Understand *Śāstra* from Many Angles of Vision

TOOL 27: Type of Discussion or Argument: *Vāda* (best category is *samvāda*), *Jalpa,* and *Vitaṇḍā*

TOOL 28: Understanding of *Guru-Sādhu-Śāstra* is Only Possible with *Jīve Dayā*

TOOL 29: Prayer, Surrender, and Waiting for Revelation

TOOL 30: Purification and Immersion (e.g. hearing, meditating, applying, praying)

TOOL 31: Repeated Study for Personal Transformation

TOOL 32: Explain with the Right Motives and Correct Reasons

TOOL 33: Choose the Most Merciful Meaning

TOOL 34: Consider the Mood of the Statement when Understanding the Intention of the Statement

TOOL 35: Practical Intention of the Statement (injunction, praise, etc.)

TOOL 36: Consider how Śrīla Prabhupāda Applied his Statements in his Mission

TOOL 37: Understand a Statement as a Specific Part of an Argument

TOOL 38: Refer to Tradition (*paramparā*)

TOOL 39: Determine the Meaning of a Word or Phrase (among several possible meanings) According to the Author's Intent

TOOL 40: Seek Guidance from those more Experienced in Hermeneutics

Three Types of Śāstric Discourse

According to *nyāya* philosophy there are three types of śāstric discourse, and identifying these types within *śāstra* is a hermeneutic tool. For example, we consider the type of discourse in the cursing at the Dakṣa *yajña* when we understand the meaning of those statements.

Additionally, these categories apply to the types of discourse we have among ourselves when we attempt to understand statements of *guru-sādhu-śāstra.* Only a *vāda* discourse is likely to result in fulfilling the purposes of hermeneutics, even if other principles and tools are used.

1. *Vāda* - civil debate following proper rules of *nyāya,* with the aim of finding truth

2. *Jalpa* - Argument or fight that's an endeavor to prove one's superiority

3. *Vitaṇḍā* - Wrangling or refutative debate aiming just to defeat others without offering anything positive

Note: Within *vāda*, there are gradations. Sometimes in *śāstra*, *vāda* refers to civil discussion in general and is recommended. In other instances, *vāda* refers to a mundane form of civil discussion at the lower end of the spectrum and is discouraged. In such cases, the highest form of *vāda*, namely *samvāda,* is recommended. *Samvāda* ideally involves proper questions and answers between a qualified teacher and student, though it can also be applied to bhakti-infused discussions among equals. In general, when we recommend *vāda* for devotees, we refer to *samvāda.*

Sample Hermeneutical Path

The following is one example of a path (or pathway) that uses qualities, principles, and tools of hermeneutics. It has three main parts, which should be used in the order listed here.

First: In Relation to Oneself

When starting a hermeneutics process to understand statements from *guru-sādhu-śāstra*, first examine the relationship of the statement to oneself, asking oneself the following questions (not necessarily in the same order listed here):

* Do I have good *sādhana*?
* Am I aiming towards a mood of surrender and service to Śrīla Prabhupāda and my spiritual master?
* Do I have sufficient concrete experience of the topic in my personal life?
* Do I have sufficient personal realization of the topic from my experience?
* Am I working towards embracing the principle of "unity in diversity"?
* Do I have sufficient *śraddhā* to accept that the motive behind the statement is pure and benevolent?
* Do I have the humility to adequately acknowledge that I may not understand correctly, or that my understanding is limited?
* Do I strive to be free of offense, especially towards other Vaiṣṇavas?
* Am I doing my best to be a moral person, with integrity?
* Do I live, or strive to live, primarily in the mode of goodness?
* Is my *present* state of mind conducive to understanding the statement?
* How far am I ready for personal transformation?
* Am I willing to apply what I am studying?
* Which personal and cultural biases I am aware of?
* Am I aware of my motives? E.g. Is my goal to find truth or to prove that I am right?
* Do I already have an opinion on the topic, and, if so, am I prepared to change it?
* Do I have the spiritual *adhikāra* (qualification) to be studying this statement? If I am not sure, am I willing to consult with higher authority?
* Have I read all of the major works of Śrīla Prabhupāda? (*Bhagavad-gītā, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Nectar of Devotion*)
* How well do I know the language I am reading or hearing?
* Am I comfortable with uncertainty and paradox if needed?
* Am I willing to pray and wait for understanding to emerge?

Second: In Relation to *Siddhānta*

Having addressed the above introspective questions, one then turns to the statement one is trying to understand and analyzes it in relation to Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava *siddhānta*.

Choose a concise exposition of Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava *siddhānta* that one understands reasonably well. Use this exposition as the foundation against which to compare the statement under consideration from *guru-śāstra-sādhu* (the statement one is trying to understand). The following steps should be used in this order. The order indicates an increasing necessity of using a wide range of hermeneutic principles and tools. In other words, one requires little or no application of hermeneutical tools for the first category of statements, whereas there is often an in-depth need of hermeneutics for statements in categories 3 and 4.

1. If the statement under consideration is a restatement or elucidation of *siddhānta*, ascertain if it belongs in the category of a) *sambandha* such as: "the living entities in this conditioned world are My eternal fragmental parts,"[1] b) *abhidheya* such as: "my dear Arjuna, only by undivided devotional service can I be understood as I am,"[2] or c) *prayojana* such as: "he attains My spiritual nature."[3] One can employ appropriate hermeneutical tools, for example, to understand that "spiritual nature" is not impersonal, and to explore in what ways the statement can be currently applied.

2. If the statement is an application of *siddhānta* that is relevant to a particular context such as: "carrying pure *kuśa* grass in his hand, the *brahmacārī* should dress regularly with a belt of straw and with deerskin garments,"[4] select and apply appropriate hermeneutic tools to, for example, identify the underlying *siddhāntic* tenet(s) and its application in our own context.

3. If the statement supports *siddhānta* in the sense of helping people to practically work towards realization of *siddhānta* such as: "four-legged animals like deer and goats, as well as food grains, are meant to be the food of human beings,"[5] or "when I have killed this diplomatic Viṣṇu, the demigods, for whom Lord Viṣṇu is the life and soul, will lose the source of their life and wither away,"[6] then use appropriate hermeneutic tools to understand in what way the statement relates to *siddhānta* by analyzing speaker, mood, source, varieties of meaning, cultural or historical context, genre, hierarchy, relation to key statements, and so forth.

4. If the statement is opposed to *siddhānta* such as Buddha's atheistic statement or Kṛṣṇa's argument to Nanda that we should worship our work as God,[7] then use appropriate hermeneutic tools to assess the meaning and intention through hierarchies, holistic study, parts of an argument, historical and cultural context, tradition, and so forth.

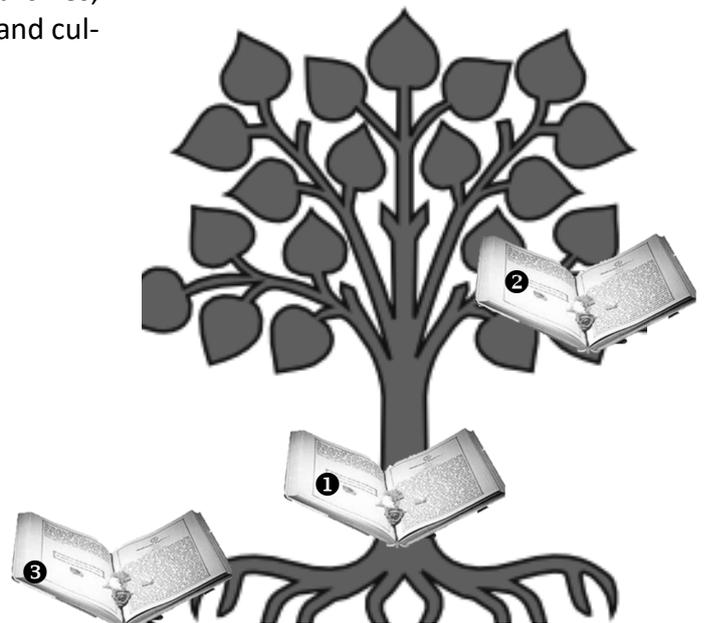[1]*Bhagavad-gītā* 15.7

[2]*Bhagavad-gītā* 11.54

[3]*Bhagavad-gītā* 14.19

[4]*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 7.12.4 as a contextual application of *abhidheya*

[5]*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 6.4.9

[6]*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 7.2.9 points towards *siddhānta* in stating that Viṣṇu is the source of the demigods

[7]*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 10.24.18

Third: Using the Hermeneutical Tools

The following is a summary of the process of using hermeneutic tools and is not intended to substitute for using the full range of those tools:

- ✓ Focus on the meaning of the specific verse, purport, or statement, asking, "What is being said here? What does it mean? How is it relevant to me in terms of achieving final and intermediate goals of devotional service?"

- ✓ Focus on the context of the verse, purport, or statement, asking, "How does this statement fit into the rest of the chapter or book? To whom was it spoken, and in response to what question or problem? When and where was this statement made? What other statements does the *śāstra* or Śrīla Prabhupāda make on this topic?"

- ✓ Ask, "How does this particular *śāstra* (or work of guru or *sādhu*) instruct me to understand itself and its statements?

- ✓ Ask, "What is the place of this chapter, book, conversation, etc. in the hierarchy of *śāstra*, and the works of Śrīla Prabhupāda and the *ācāryas*?" (Or is it outside of those?)

- ✓ Ask, "Is this statement (or the whole section or work of which it is a part) on a beginning, intermediate, or advanced level?"

- ✓ Examine and inquire how the particular *śāstra* (or whole work) is structured. (For example, the chapters which concentrate on bhakti are in the middle of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, and the *Bhāgavatam* has ten subjects)

- ✓ Determine the genre and mood of the work as a whole, as to whether it is primarily philosophical or primarily poetry and/or narrative

- ✓ Use the four traditional context questions: a) who is it for and what are the qualifications of the intended audience? (*adhikāra*) b) what is it about? (*abhidheya or viṣayā*) c) what is it for? (*prayojana* or *phala*) and d) how does it go about teaching what it teaches? (*sambandha*, i.e. what is the relationship between the subject of the text and the text itself)

- ✓ Research as to whether there are ambiguities in the language, such as changes in the use of language over time, and include the historical context where applicable.

- ✓ Go through the statement repeatedly, deepening your understanding each time.

- ✓ Resist taking a statement of *śāstra* or Śrīla Prabhupāda out of context or as isolated from the entire work. Study *śāstra* and the instructions of Śrīla Prabhupāda holistically (the whole *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* and *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*) and thoroughly (striving to become a *bhaktivedānta*, as Śrīla Prabhupāda desired)

- ✓ Consult with the understanding of other *ācāryas* and contemporary Vaiṣṇavas

- ✓ Research Śrīla Prabhupāda's application of the topic under discussion