

Corona Virus (COVID-19) Advice from ISKCON Deity Worship Ministry

Monday, 23 March 2020

The Srimad-Bhagavatam explains that the material world is a place of constant danger:

padam padam yad vipadam na tesam

... the place where there is danger at every step.

We are constantly confronted with a myriad of challenges in this world and it only worsens as Kali-yuga progresses. The devotee's only shelter is the lotus feet of the Lord. The more we take shelter of the Lord's lotus feet the more we become freed from the effects of the material nature.

Our Vaiṣṇava history is rich with so many examples of great souls taking exclusive shelter of the lotus feet of the Lord and practicing uninterrupted devotional service. And while this is every devotee's aspiration and constant endeavour, it manifests in different ways for different devotees in any given circumstance.

With the current world situation, and the ongoing spread of the COVID-19, governments and other authorities around the world are imposing quarantines and other restrictions on people which may lead to difficulty in maintaining the regular standard or schedule of deity worship in ISKCON centers.

Our initial response may be to push on with our service regardless of the directions of civil authorities. We encourage you to work within the guidelines given by civil authorities.

As a result, there may need to be some practical adjustments to the worship standards and schedule according to time, place and circumstance. As explained in the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 4.8.54, the deity of the Lord is installed and worshipped

“...according to the rules and regulations prescribed by authorities. But this should be done in consideration of place, time, and attendant conveniences and inconveniences.”

As a result, it may happen that there are less devotees available to offer services and therefore the responsibility for maintaining the regular services for the deities will fall on a few. Naturally this will be a rewarding time for those entrusted to care for the deities, but also it is important to be mindful that not all devotees are able to maintain a greatly increased personal service schedule to deity worship for an extended period of time. Therefore, some practical adjustments may need to be made. As far as possible maintain the regular daily schedule of worship, but as stated in the above Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam verse, do so in accordance with due “consideration of place, time, and attendant conveniences and inconveniences.”

Considering the above, please implement the following measures immediately:

Keep your hands thoroughly clean using either soap or a suitable sanitiser. Lathering with soap for at least 20 seconds.

Use a freshly cleaned acamana cup and spoon filled with fresh water each time you do personal acamana.

Clean the altar acamana cup and spoon and fill with fresh water, and if you use a receptacle for offering padya and acamana to the deities, clean it thoroughly and fill with fresh water before each bhoga offering.

Thoroughly rinse all paraphernalia before use.

Don't leave water, bhoga, etc. uncovered.

When preparing bhoga offerings, rinse everything before use. This includes fruit, vegetables and all pots, pans and other utensils used.

Use disposable gloves when preparing offerings or handling bhoga and prasada. Change the gloves regularly. If you touch your face or any of the gates of your body or need to remove the gloves put on fresh ones after thoroughly washing your hands and drying with disposable paper towels.

Anyone involved in cooking or serving prasadam must wash their hands every twenty minutes with hot water and soap for twenty seconds. Servers must wear disposable gloves.

The above are standard practices that as brahmanas we should be already doing. In addition to help limit the spread of germs, etc.:

Do not use the blowing conch. If you feel you must use the conch, then after each use rinse the blowing conch with an antiseptic or a diluted bleach solution. Also thoroughly scrub then clean the conch rinse bowl in a similar manner.

Please do not distribute prasadam items from the altar, e.g. flowers, oil, water, etc.

Do not distribute caranamrta.

If any devotees are showing symptoms of cold or flu, they should not be doing services and must go home and rest.

If members of your deity department are affected by COVID-19 and unable to attend services, you may need to implement some or all of the following suggestions in order to continue with the service to the deities:

Do not offer garlands to the deities or Srila Prabhupada on a regular basis. Save whatever flowers you have for aratis.

Simplify the bhoga offerings. As far as possible continue with the regular bhoga offerings, but the number of preparations may need to be reduced.

Simplified dressings — it would be sufficient to simply undress the deity, wipe with a soft cloth and then put on fresh clothing. No need for any ornamentation.

Minimize backup services. Many temples around the world depend on congregation members for backup services. If the situation arises that these devotees are unable to come for service, then many of the things they do will need to be reduced or stopped.

The sodasopacara puja of the small deities may also be reduced to simply bathing and dressing. Additionally, you may reduce the number of times the deities are polished.

Srila Prabhupada sanctioned ladies who were in their period of contamination doing deity worship if there were no other options.

Encourage older pujari volunteers who are in the high-risk age category and others in a high-risk category to stay at home.

Some ISKCON centers have no resident pujaris. This poses significant challenges to maintaining the worship. Some possible solutions you may consider:

Are any members of the congregation willing and able to reside in the temple for the duration of the event. They could then serve as full-time pujaris.

The brass utsava deities, or silas could be transferred to the home of a steady brahmana who is willing to maintain the daily worship. This may need to be at a reduced standard. The main consideration here would be regular daily worship. At least offering bhoga and arati each day, and morning dressing. Temple standards of cleanliness would be recommended in this situation.

Please be mindful that these reductions to the service would only be short-term adjustments to your existing worship standards, until the emergency has passed.

The worship of the Lord must continue even though the level of worship being offered may need to be adjusted. Also do your best to maintain standards of cleanliness and punctuality.

Temples may find it necessary, following the above guidelines given by Srila Prabhupada in Srimad-Bhagavatam 4.8.54, to introduce further temporary adjustments in the worship or restrictions in the deity department. We encourage you to consult with ISKCON Deity Worship Ministry in this regard. Email addresses of representatives are listed below.

Our prayers are with you all for your continued health and well-being. May the Lord always bless you in your service.

Your servant,

Nrsimha Kavaca dāsa

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