

What is Sane Vaiṣṇavism?
(Working Draft)

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May 14, 2005

<i>Contents</i>	1
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Contents

1 Propaedeutic to a Sane Vaiṣṇavism	2
2 Modern Processes of Verification	5
3 Propositions of Sane Vaiṣṇavism	10
3.1 Perception is the fundamental source of knowledge	11
3.2 There is no such thing as the Kali=yuga	11
3.3 The Gītā was written around the 3rd century BCE (and was not really spoken by Kṛṣṇa)	11
3.4 The Bhāgavata dates to 7th-9th cents. CE (and is not by Vyāsa) . . .	11
3.5 Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism is not related to the Mādhva tradition	11
3.6 Śaṅkara was a parama Vaiṣṇava, not a māyāvādin	11
3.7 Caitanya Mahāprabhu founded his own sampradāya	11
3.8 The goal of CV is Kṛṣṇa-preman, not Kṛṣṇa-sākṣātkāra	11

1 Propaedeutic to a Sane Vaiṣṇavism

I had a dream. And in this dream I saw a beautiful form of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism that exists nowhere in the world today. A strange, vibrant, new Vaiṣṇavism that, while recognizing its own rich history and deep indebtedness to the great Vaiṣṇavas thinkers and practitioners of the past, was nevertheless thoroughly modern and, strangest thing of all, thoroughly rational.

Well what do you mean by rational, someone might ask. By rational I mean given to reason and sound reasoning, given to perceptual or empirical verification, not willing to accept things at face value or strictly on the basis of some unverified authority, much less on authority that is completely unverifiable. In other words, a rational Vaiṣṇavism is a Vaiṣṇavism that has been cleansed of all outmoded ways of thinking and the silly beliefs and superstitions that have attached themselves to its skin over time like bloodsuckers, draining away its strength and vitality.

Strange isn't it, I say, how there seems to be such a resistance to thinking in the modern Vaiṣṇava tradition. Those who clearly do think (inspite of the supposed prohibition) are sometimes the quickest and perhaps the loudest and most vehement in warning others not to think. Look at how the ancient and quite reasonable prescription of the Upaniṣads for spiritual cultivation has been altered by the Vaiṣṇavas. Don't the Upaniṣads say: *ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsītavyaḥ*.¹ Yājñavalkya says [to Maitreyī]:² "The Self should be seen, should be heard about, should be thought about, should be meditated on." Now most interpreters of this passage take that first injunction (the Self should be seen) as statement of the final goal of the Upaniṣadic path of cultivation, direct vision or immediate experience of the Self, placed in front in order to draw the attention of the aspirant and encourage him or her to proceed. The process itself really begins with "the Self should be heard about." That is the first step in the process of knowing the Self or coming to see the Self. The second step is "thinking about the Self." And finally one should "meditate" on the Self. This seems like a reasonable process, not just for knowing the Self, but for proceeding in just about any area of study. In fact it pretty much describes the process of becoming educated in any subject and the process of coming to scientific discovery. I can easily imagine an Einstein proceeding in this way as he develops the theory of relativity: first hearing what others in the field have said about the problem, then thinking critically about their ideas, and then sinking into deep concentration on the problem which sometimes culminates in a flash of insight (*darśana*) reveals the elements of his own solution. Meditation in this case corresponds to deep, single-pointed concentration.

¹*Bṛhadāraṇya*, 2.4.5: आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यः

²Yes, a woman, Yājñavalkya's wife who refuses his offer of goods and property in favor of receiving liberating knowledge as her husband prepares to face death.

What have the Vaiṣṇavas done to this process, however? Well a similar ordered process is presented in the great Vaiṣṇava text, the *Bhāgavata*, again in the context of education, only it has been altered in a quite telling way. In describing the nine forms of *bhakti* Prahāda is represented as saying:

Hearing about, repeating (reciting, glorifying), remembering, serving at the feet of, offering worship to, praising, acting as a servant of, friendship with, and offering oneself to Viṣṇu: if this ninefold *bhakti*, being offered by someone to Viṣṇu, is performed directly for the Lord, then I think that person the most educated of all.³

This passage, too, can be regarded as a progression, beginning with hearing about Viṣṇu, the least intimate of connections with him, and ending with offering one's very self to him, the most intimate of connections. It also begins much like the Vedānta program of cultivation. Hearing is the opening stage of both process and meditation and remembering are for our purposes essentially the same. But what has happened to thinking (*manana*) which is supposed to sit nicely between them? In the Vaiṣṇava formulation it has been replaced with *kīrtana*. *Kīrtana* has the meanings of "mentioning, repeating, saying, or telling." Apparently, one is meant here to hear about Viṣṇu and then repeat what one has heard. The implication is that one is not supposed to think about what one has heard, merely repeat it. Some people in the Vaiṣṇava community, in fact, make it a point of great pride to claim that they are just repeating what they have heard, not adding or subtracting anything. Is this what Vaiṣṇavism is really about, merely repeating mindlessly? Perhaps Kṛṣṇa suddenly as a big need for some parrots to fill the cages near his bower and the Vaiṣṇavas here on this earth are being trained to fill those cages and to repeat mindlessly, in funny little voices and with funny little accents, whatever they hear. I think not, but it is curious that the Vaiṣṇava formulation has dropped *manana* out of the program.

Perhaps the *manana* has not really been dropped but merely incorporated into the *kīrtana*. In the process, for instance, of "telling," one is also asked to think, either as part of "putting it in one's own words" or in order to determine what of what has been heard is true and indeed should be part of what is retold. Or, perhaps, the *manana* has been absorbed into the hearing. In that case, one's hearing must be trained to hear what is not told. That requires a kind of *manana*, the kind

³Bhāg. 7.5.23-24:

श्रवणं कीर्तनं विष्णोः स्मरणं पादसेवनम् ।
 अर्चनं वन्दनं दास्यं सख्यमात्मनिवेदनम् ॥
 इति पुंसार्पिता विष्णौ भक्तिश्चेन्नवलक्षणा ।
 क्रियते भगवत्यद्वा तन्मन्येऽधीतमुत्तमम् ॥

called *arthāpatti*, postulation. One hears, for instance, that Devadatta is fat and one hears that he does not eat during the day. One concludes that he eats at night. Whatever has happened, the thinking cannot have been dropped.

Someone will certainly say: “You idiot! This is a *religious* tradition. It rests on faith, you know that stuff that sticks to your fingers and melts in your mouth like cotton candy called *śraddhā*, not on reason. If you want reason or critical thinking you should join a philosophical tradition like Nyāya (Logic) or Sāṅkhya (Enumeration). Didn’t the great Christian scholar-saint Tertullian say ‘We believe because it is absurd.’ That is like us. Without faith one can never make any advancement in Vaiṣṇavism. Śrī Rūpa says: *adau śraddhā tataḥ sādhusaṅgaḥ*⁴ ‘First faith and then association with the holy.’”

Well that is not quite true, you see, I reply. Śrī Jīva says in his commentary on that verse and Viśvanātha parrots him, that faith arises through an even earlier *sādhu-saṅga* in which one hears the scriptures. Moreover he glosses that word faith (*śraddhā*) with the phrase “trust in their meanings” (*tadarthaviśvāsaḥ*). Now by hearing scripture in the company of the holy ones one comes to trust scripture. But how is that supposed to happen? If one simply believes what the scriptures say or what the holy ones say about scripture, that is already faith. So association with the holy is itself dependent on faith and in turn faith is dependent on association with the holy. Is there then an even prior association with the holy that produced that prior faith? Doesn’t that prior association depend on an even prior prior faith? This quickly turns into infinite regression and no thinker, Eastern or Western, likes that. It is considered a flaw in reasoning or understanding. It is the logical flaw called *anavasthā*, lack of foundation, in Indian logic.

Now one might say that one gets faith by being blessed by the holy ones. But the holy ones don’t go around indiscriminately giving out their blessings. They give their blessings to those who are deserving and in order to be deserving of their blessings one needs already to have faith in them. We are back to another infinite regression because in order to have faith in them one needs their blessings.

The alternative to these infinite regressions is to try during that first hearing of scripture in the company of the holy ones to verify⁵ the scriptures and the holy ones. That requires careful observation and critical thinking. One has to ask questions like: why should I believe you? What evidence is there that you are what you say you are and that you are worthy of my trust? Now it could be that in the past settling questions like this was much easier, because there were severely limited resources available for verification. But, today we have much vaster resources at our disposal and much more highly developed methods of verification. I suspect it is no longer possible to reach the kind of trust in the meanings of scripture that people were able to reach back in the days of old. Unless, of course, one

⁴*Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*, 1.4.15.

⁵To verify means to determine the truth or falsity of something.

reaches around behind one's head and flips that little switch behind the ear that controls thinking into the auto-pilot position (essentially switching it off). Some of us are not willing to do that. Is all lost for us then? I think not. Verification, which separates truth from falsehood, is an excellent means by which we can come to the point of trusting scripture. We may not be able any more to develop that facile kind of trust in scripture of the days of old,⁶ but we can with the help of some of these wonderful modern tools develop a modern kind of trust. That is the starting point for sane Vaiṣṇavism.

2 Modern Processes of Verification

What are the modern processes of verification then? Modern processes of verification are things like historical research, textual criticism, scientific research and discovery, and logical analysis. Actually these are the same processes that have always been used. They use essentially the same sources of knowledge as before, for the most part, but our understanding of those sources has become more refined. Thus, perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), and authority (*āpta* or *śabda*) are still the foundations of knowledge. A major difference today is that all of these sources of knowledge are recognized as being founded on perception, that is to say they are empirical, founded on experiment or experience. This is also nothing new really. That the sources of knowledge are all based on perception is implied even in the Indic discussions of the *pramāṇa*, the sources of true knowledge. There is no question that perception is empirical. That is what the Sanskrit word means "before one's very eyes," *pratyakṣa*. Inference is based on a knowledge of *vyāpti* or pervasion. This knowledge that one thing pervades another or is invariably connected with another, like fire with smoke, is based on prior experience of the invariable connection of smoke with fire. The source called *āpta*, "trusted authority," too, depends on a knowledge of the existence of prior experience in the person who is trusted as an authority.

The case of *śabda*, "verbal testimony," is kind of a special case. Since verbal testimony is registered through the ears (or eyes if one is reading) it is a special and more complicated case of perception. Verbal testimony, however, is not a case of simple hearing like hearing the sound of a plane overhead and knowing from that that there is a plane overhead. It is dependent on a knowledge of the language involved and knowledge of the language involved is dependent on that whole set of prior experiences that brings about language acquisition. In addition, when one hears from a trusted authority, it also becomes a case of authority. If one hears

⁶One might argue here that that facile trust was certainly good enough for the Vaiṣṇavas of old. They got good results from it. So it should be good enough for us. The problem with this position is that we don't really know what results those Vaiṣṇavas of old got. Nobody does. So we cannot know whether that facile trust was good enough for them or not.

from someone who is an authority because he or she has heard from another prior authority then the importance of hearing and knowledge of language in the process become even greater. Hearing is the link between an authority and the seeker of knowledge no matter how many times it is multiplied. All roads therefore lead ultimately back to perception or experience. It is the Rome of our acquisition of knowledge and our trust in the sources of knowledge. Since the rest of the ten or thirteen sources of knowledge are included in these, there is no need to treat them one by one. They, too, are based on experience.

“You idiot! Don’t you know that perception and inference are full of flaws? We Vaiṣṇavas believe that there are four flaws in those sources of knowledge: error (*bhrama*), negligence or carelessness (*pramāda*), desire to mislead (*vipralipsā*), and inability of the senses (*karaṇāpātava*). These are all flaws associated with being human. The only source of knowledge free of those flaws is verbal testimony, which means revealed scriptures, like the Vedas and Upaniṣads, because those were not written by humans. They were ‘heard’ by the sages, not written by them. The texts that are based on them are also authoritative, texts like the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas, especially the *Bhāgavata*, which is the very verbal incarnation of Kṛṣṇa.”

Well, yes, you have a point there, not a very good point I am afraid. Let’s look at what Śrī Jīva says about the sources of knowledge in his *Tattva-sandarbhā* and then in his own commentary on it called the *Sarva-saṁvādinī*:

Now therefore in order to arrive at the full truth about Śrī Kṛṣṇa who is the subject of the text, the relationship [of this text to its subject], which is that of describer [the text] and described (Kṛṣṇa), the thing to be communicated [in this text] which is worship of him [Kṛṣṇa], and finally the purpose of all this effort, which is the acquisition of love for him [Kṛṣṇa], the evidential sources (*pramāṇa*) must be ascertained. Because they are corrupted by the four human flaws, error, etc., and therefore, because they are incapable of approaching objects that are preternatural and inconceivable, sense perception and the rest are flawed. Therefore, they are not sources of valid knowledge. The Veda, which is characterized by preternatural statements, because it is the repository of all natural and preternatural knowledge coming down in the lineages of all beginninglessly perfected humans, is the only source of knowledge for those of us who wish to know that object whose amazing nature is beyond everything, who is the foundation of all, and who is inconceivable by all. This agrees with statements like “because there is no foundation for argument” (B.s., 2.1.11), “one cannot use argument for things by nature inconceivable” (M.bh., Bhīṣma-parva 5.12), “because of being the source of scripture” (B.s., 1.1.3), “because revelation is the root of verbal testimony” (B.s., 2.1.27)

and “Your Veda, Lord, is the eye of ancestors, gods, and humans. It is superior in matters not perceived and in determining the goal and the means” (Bhāg., 11.20.4).⁷

[*Sarva-saṃvādinī*.] Although, ten sources of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) are known: perception, inference, verbal testimony, testimony of the sages, comparison, postulation, non-cognition, possibility, tradition, and manner of life, nevertheless verbal testimony, which consists of propositions free of error, negligence, desire to mislead, and the inabilities of the senses, is the root source of knowledge. One cannot call the others proper evidence or even semblance of evidence because they are seen to be contradicted due to being full of the flaws of humans like error and so forth. Verbal testimony is free of that. Therefore, like a king with his servants, verbal testimony is root of the others. This is so because though verbal testimony is not dependent on them, sometimes they are able to assist it as much as is possible for them, because it is seen that even without them verbal testimony is effective, because they are not able to contradict the things established by verbal testimony, and finally because verbal testimony is able to establish things that are beyond the reach of the other sources.⁸

In response to Jīva’s claim one must ask: are the other sources of knowledge always impaired by the four flaws or only sometimes impaired? It cannot be the first of these, because even Śrī Jīva himself recognizes that these other sources act

⁷Is., 1-3: अथैव सूचितानां श्रीकृष्णतद्वाच्यवाचकतालक्षणसम्बन्ध-तद्भजनलक्षणविधेयसपर्यायाभिधेय-तत्प्रेमलक्षणप्रयोजनाख्यानामर्थानां निर्णयाय तावत्प्रमाणं निर्णयते। तत्र पुरुषस्य भ्रमादिदोषचतुष्टयदुष्टत्वात्सुतरामलौकिकाचिन्त्यस्वभाववस्तुस्पर्शयोग्यत्वाच्च तत्प्रत्यक्षादीन्यपि सदोषाणि। ततस्तानि न प्रमाणानीत्यनादिसिद्धसर्वपुरुषपरम्परासु सर्वलौकिकालौकिकज्ञाननिदानत्वादप्राकृतवचनलक्षणो वेद एवास्माकं सर्वातीतसर्वाश्रयसर्वाचिन्त्याश्चर्यस्वभावं वस्तु विविदिषतां प्रमाणम्। तच्चानुमतं (ब्र. सू., २.१.११) तर्काप्रतिष्ठानादित्यादौ, (म. भा., भीष्मपर्वणि ५.१२) अचिन्त्याः खलु ये भावा न तांस्तर्केण योजयेदित्यादौ, (ब्र. सू., १.१.३) शास्त्रयोणित्वादित्यादा, (ब्र. सू., २.१.२७) श्रुतेस्तु शब्दमूलत्वादित्यादौ, (भा., ११.२०.४)

पितृदेवमनुष्याणां वेदश्चक्षुस्तवेश्वर।

श्रेयस्त्वनुपलब्धेऽर्थे साध्यसाधनयोरपि ॥

⁸*Sarvasaṃvādinī*, p. 4: यदापि प्रत्यक्षानुमानशब्दार्थोपमानार्थापत्त्यभावसम्भवैतिहाचेष्टाख्यानि दश प्रमाणानि विदितानि तथापि भ्रमप्रमादविप्रलिप्साकरणापाटवदोषरहितवचनातमकः शब्द एव मूलं प्रमाणम्। अन्येषां प्रायः पुरुषभ्रमादिदोषमयतयान्यथाप्रतीतिदर्शनेन प्रमाणं वा तदाभासो वेति पुरुषैर्निर्णेतुमशक्यत्वात्। तस्य तु अभावात्। अतो राज्ञा भृत्यानामिव तेनैवान्येषां बद्धमूलत्वात्, तस्य तु नैरपेक्ष्यात्, यथाशक्ति क्वचिदेव तस्य तैः साचिव्यकरणात्, स्वाधीनस्य तस्य त्वं तान्यपमर्दापि प्रवृत्तिदर्शनात्, तेन प्रतिपादिते वस्तुनि तैः विरोद्धमशक्यत्वात्, तेषां शक्तिभिरशपश्यं वस्तुनि तस्यैव तु साधकत्वात्।

as “assistants” (*saciva*) to the king verbal testimony. They must therefore sometimes be free of the flaws. This we all know from our common experience as well. Though sometimes our perceptions and inferences are wrong, they are not always so, nor even mostly so. Rather, they are mostly correct. Their being wrong is the more uncommon of the possibilities. If this were not so, we would not live even as long as we do. We depend on these other sources to keep us alive. Thus, when they are free of the flaws, they, too, must be valid sources of knowledge and fit providers of evidence. Why should they be excluded from being considered valid sources of knowledge just because they are sometimes flawed? This would be the proverbial throwing the baby out with the bath water. Instead one needs to take steps to test for and insure the validity of or to verify the knowledge produced by these other sources of knowledge. One must test and retest the results of those sources of knowledge, especially perception and inference. When the knowledge produced turns out to be unfalsified (*abādhita*) by these independent tests it can be considered verified knowledge. If one thinks, for instance, that one sees a snake, one needs to test that perception with other perceptions to see if what one sees is really a snake or just a rope. If on further observation, one may determine that one does indeed see a snake, appropriate action can be taken then. Used in this way, the other sources can indeed be regarded as indeed sources of valid knowledge. But, are they valid in the cases Śrī Jīva specifies? This is where the second half of Jīva’s argument comes in. The first half is that the sources are faulty, which we have shown is not always or even mostly true. The second half of his argument is that the objects he specifically wants to study are beyond their reach.

Here we should note clearly the way in which Śrī Jīva carefully delimits the discussion. He is not talking about all objects (*artha*) here, only those four specific objects related to his text: Kṛṣṇa, the relationship, the recommended message, and the purpose. Those are fairly restricted objects. So when Jīva says that the sources, perception, inference, and testimony (that is non-Vedic testimony) are not sources of knowledge he means only in these restricted cases. The primary reason that he feels they are not useful as evidence in these cases is that they are flawed.

Before examining closely this second half of his argument it is worth noting that just as there may be some objects that are beyond the reach of sense perception and the other sources of knowledge and thus that cannot be known by them, so are there countless objects that cannot be touched by verbal testimony, as in the case of the snake and rope just mentioned. One would be a fool to try to consult verbal testimony, the Veda say or the Upaniṣads, to determine whether it is indeed a snake that one sees in front of one or just a rope. Those objects can only be known by means of the other sources of knowledge aided by careful verification, of course. They *are* thus valid sources of knowledge and are in many cases the only sources we have to rely on in our daily lives, verified or unverified.

Now, is it really true that the sources of knowledge like perception and the rest cannot “touch” objects like Kṛṣṇa, his worship, and love for him? If this were

so why would the Upaniṣads say: *ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ*, “the self is to be seen?” Why encourage us to attempt something that cannot be done? This would be an extraordinary display of cruelty and mendacity and one has to assume that such misguidance was not the intention of the texts. Therefore, it must be possible to know Kṛṣṇa through perception and the rest (since all the rest are rooted in perception). The texts themselves, those authoritative verbal testimonies, give numerous examples of people directly perceiving Kṛṣṇa or his various forms. They see him; they hear him; and some touch him. In fact, this personal meeting is regarded the culmination of religious cultivation in the Caitanya tradition. What a disappointment it would be if the only way one had of knowing Kṛṣṇa was through a text.⁹ The texts point beyond themselves, however, to the possibility of direct perceptual encounter. This does not mean that this is easy to do or that it happens all the time. It merely means that it is not impossible. Thus, verbal testimony is really just a pointer that guides us back to the realm of perception.

There is another side to this issue that should be considered. While it may be thought that verbal testimony in the case of revealed scripture, like the Vedas and Upaniṣads and even the *Bhāgavata*, is free of flaws, the transmission of those texts is not guaranteed to be. Whether one thinks that the objects of scripture are preternatural and beyond the other sources or not, one has to recognize that the texts themselves, as collections of words either spoken or written down, are clearly within the horizons of the other sources of knowledge. The transmission of those texts is clearly in the realm of history and sensory perception. In some cases a speaker may have had a stutter; in others the hearer may be partially deaf or inexperienced in the language or unfamiliar with the accent or vocabulary. Some may be inattentive and others may have a desire to add or subtract. Thus there is no guarantee that the text has not been modified, lost, misunderstood, added to, or subtracted from. This reality Śrī Jīva recognizes, later in the *Tattva-sandarbha*, where he notes that much of the Veda has been lost on earth and much of it is difficult to comprehend for the people of his times. And so, as we shall see, he advances his argument for the priority of the *Bhāgavata*. From our standpoint, nearly five hundred years after Śrī Jīva’s time one could make a similar argument about the *Bhāgavata* itself, which is regarded today as one of the most difficult of the Purāṇas to understand. Thus, critical analysis and text criticism are needed to verify even sacrosanct verbal testimony. No matter what status one attributes to verbal testimony, it appeared in history at a particular time and was transmitted down through history by historical people in historical contexts and thus the study of its history is needed to throw light on how it was received, interpreted, and transformed in its movement through history.

But wait! Isn’t there something wrong with this praise of and reliance on the

⁹For some, that is. A strong argument can be made that if one develops *prema* for Kṛṣṇa, it may not matter whether one meets him or not. One with Kṛṣṇa-prema already has everything. Moreover, Kṛṣṇa is present even in his absence, which can be in many ways more overwhelming than his presence.

Veda? Is it not said in the *Gītā*:

त्रैगुण्यविषया वेदा निस्त्रैगुण्यो भवार्जुन।¹⁰

The objects of the Veda are related to the three strands. Be free of those strands, Arjuna.

If the objects of Vedic words are the three *guṇa*, how can they teach us about the preternatural? And those who study them and transmit them are said to be *avipaścitaḥ*, dumb, or as Śaṅkara says “of small intelligence” (*alpa-medhasaḥ*).¹¹ How can they be considered free of flaws? Moreover, everyone knows that the Vedas have little to say about Kṛṣṇa. Well, in fact, they have *nothing* to say about Kṛṣṇa. Viṣṇu is only a minor god in the Vedic hymns, being mentioned in very few hymns. Indra, Agni and Soma are the gods most praised in the hymns. True, the Vedas contain some lovely poetry and a few very mysterious and mystical hymns. Many phrases from the hymn sections later reappear in the final, Upaniṣadic texts and are given a mystical interpretation. By and large, however, the Vedas are rather pedestrian and in many places down right incomprehensible. Their connection with the sacrificial rites, rites which are largely unperformable today, make them particularly useless. Even if the rites could be performed the benefits they promise are primarily mundane (sons, prosperity, cows, and oh yes, heaven) and unattractive to seekers after the absolute. What on earth is Śrī Jīva talking about here, then? Why would he hold up the Veda as the one authentic source of valid knowledge?

[Tune in next time for some answers]

3 Propositions of Sane Vaiṣṇavism

(These will be filled out in the future)

¹⁰Bg., 2.45.

¹¹ibid., 2.42.

- 3.1 Perception is the fundamental source of knowledge
- 3.2 There is no such thing as the Kali=yuga
- 3.3 The Gītā was written around the 3rd century BCE (and was not really spoken by Kṛṣṇa)
- 3.4 The Bhāgavata dates to 7th-9th cents. CE (and is not by Vyāsa)
- 3.5 Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism is not related to the Mādhva tradition
- 3.6 Śāṅkara was a parama Vaiṣṇava, not a māyāvādin
- 3.7 Caitanya Mahāprabhu founded his own sampradāya
- 3.8 The goal of CV is Kṛṣṇa-preman, not Kṛṣṇa-sākṣātkāra