



—LOKANĀTH SWAMI—

# *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana*

A 30-DAY PARIKRAMĀ EXPERIENCE

## Dedication



This book is dedicated to my beloved spiritual master,  
His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda,  
who revealed the ever blissful abode of Vraja to the whole world;  
to all past, present, and future pilgrims on Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā*;  
to all the Vaiṣṇavas who nourish their love for Vraja and who remain  
interested in this great pilgrimage; and to you, the gentle reader of this book.



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## Introduction

**T**he word *parikramā* means “to circumambulate.” There are different types of *parikramā* – one can circumambulate the Deity or the sacred *tulasī* plant, for example, or one can walk around the holy *dhāmas*, *kuṇḍas*, and *samādhis*. *Parikramā* allows us to offer our respect to and honor the object we are circumambulating. *Parikramā* is listed as one of the sixty-four items of devotional service mentioned in the sixth chapter of *The Nectar of Devotion*:

One must circumambulate the temple building at least three times. (In every temple there is an arrangement to go around the temple at least three times. Some devotees go around more than three times – ten times, fifteen times – according to their vows. The Gosvāmīs used to circumambulate Govardhana Hill). One should also circumambulate the whole Vṇḍāvana area.

Of *parikramās* to the various *dhāmas* around India, the ultimate *parikramā* is of Vraja-maṇḍala, also referred to as *caurāśī-krośa parikramā*. *Caurāśī* means “eighty-four” and one *krośa* equals about two miles, so the total *parikramā* is 168 miles long. ISKCON’s Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramās* are a little longer – this figure does not include the additional distance covered during the localized *parikramās* we perform at certain junctures, such as the Mathurā *parikramā*, the Govardhana *parikramā*, the Kāmyavana *parikramā*, and so on.

### How Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* started in ISKCON

Our yearly Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* program is the natural extension of an instruction Śrīla Prabhupāda gave me in 1976. In the early part of that year, I was serving with the Nītāi-Gaura World Traveling Saṅkīrtana party, which was traveling in two German buses and preaching in North India. Our program had been successful for several months, but unfortunately, because of problems with India’s Vehicle Controls Department, the buses had to leave India.

Around Rādhāṣṭamī that year, our party heard that Śrīla Prabhupāda was in Delhi, so we decided to report to him the loss of our buses and ask for instructions. When I met with him, Śrīla Prabhupāda told me to forget about the buses and instead start a bullock-cart *saṅkīrtana* party. He suggested I travel and preach in the villages of India.

Śrīla Prabhupāda reiterated his instruction in subsequent meetings in Delhi and Vṛndāvana, and he gave me detailed instructions on how to bring *harināma* and book distribution to the villages. This led to the birth of ISKCON's *padayātrā* program.

Not long afterwards, we left with our first bullock cart from Vṛndāvana to Bengal, Odishā, and up to Bhubaneswar. Then, due to unavoidable circumstances, there was a break in the program.

ISKCON Padayātrā had its renaissance in 1984 when Jayapataka Swami proposed the idea of doing a *padayātrā* that retraced Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu's footsteps in honor of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lord Caitanya's appearance. Soon, the proposal was made before the GBC and was passed unanimously, with ISKCON leaders supporting the endeavour with tremendous enthusiasm.

On September 2, 1984 the *padayātrīs* assembled in Dvārakā and began their walk to Māyāpur via Kanyākumārī, the southernmost tip of India. The trip took nineteen months. The party arrived in Śrīdhāma Māyāpur on March 20, 1986, just in time for Lord Caitanya's 500<sup>th</sup> Gaura Pūrṇimā. It was a historic walk – a nearly impossible dream come true.

The *padayātrā* program was meant to end in Māyāpur that Gaura Pūrṇimā, but we had met with such huge success that we could do nothing but carry on! After the Gaura Pūrṇimā celebrations, we decided to complete the *parikramā* circle by returning to Dvārakā.

Our new itinerary would take us north to Badarikāśrama, which was the only *dhāma* of the four the *padayātrā* had yet to visit. (We had visited the other three – Dvārakā, Rāmeśvaram, and Jagannātha Purī – on our way to Māyāpur). Vṛndāvana was more or less on the route to Badarikāśrama, so we decided we would also stop there.

ISKCON Padayātrā arrived in Vṛndāvana just before the 1987 Māyāpur-Vṛndāvana festival. In those days we held a yearly Vṛndāvana festival right after the Gaura Pūrṇimā festival in Māyāpur. Although we came to Vṛndāvana for the festival and to visit our Krishna-Balarām temple before continuing on to Badarikāśrama, the Lord had other plans for us.

My godbrother, Dhruva Mahārāja Prabhu, had gone all around Vraja and taken photographs, from which he had put together a slideshow about the twelve forests of Vraja. The *padayātrā* devotees watched this enchanting slideshow, and it occurred to us that we too could circumambulate Vṛndāvana's twelve forests. After all, we were walkers, so why not circumambulate Vraja? Up until that point – and like most ISKCON devotees – we were only familiar with two *parikramās*: the one around the town of Vṛndāvana (*pañca-krośī*) and Govardhana *parikramā*. Now we found ourselves wondering what lay beyond those beaten tracks!

We set out to find out, touring the land of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and establishing ISKCON's first ever Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā*. This was March 1987, close to the Vṛndāvana festival of that year. It was convenient for devotees to join us as they streamed into Vraja from Māyāpur. Dhruva Mahārāja Prabhu accompanied us on that first walk, kindly offering to guide us as he was familiar with the route.

In 1988 we decided to do the Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* during Kārttika.

### **The inspiration for *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana***

The idea to compile a book about Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* emerged when the *parikramā* devotees began asking that we make available in written form the pastime narrations we offer on *parikramā*. Someone even suggested this book could become a guidebook for pilgrims.

In the early days of the *parikramā* I gave most of the talks. One year we recorded and later transcribed all of them. But as I began to meditate, with my team, on what we should offer, it became clear to us that we didn't want to create just another guidebook. We wanted our book to be something more than that; we wanted to talk about the experience of life on *parikramā*.



And so the work on this book began. Praśāntā Dāsī was involved in the initial research and compilation. Because I was busy with the preparations for Śrīla Prabhupāda’s centennial, this book was put on the back burner – where it remained for about ten years! But as the silver jubilee of ISKCON’s Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* approached, Vaikuṇṭhamūrti Dāsa assisted me with further research and compilation work, and we were able to get things moving again.

I have to admit that writing *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana* has been an explorative journey for both of us. Our vision for the book changed a few times. Finally we settled on what you now hold in your hands. One of the main changes is that we replaced the more spontaneous style of spoken narrations that graced this book’s early pages with a style that relies on well-researched references to the Lord’s pastimes with an interweaving of the devotees’ experiences on *parikramā*.

### **What *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana* has to offer you**

*Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana* has thirty chapters, one for each day of the *parikramā*. In this way, it will take you on the month-long journey with the *parikramā* party, giving you a feel for what it’s like to walk – the pace, the sights, the sounds, and the smells of Vraja. You’ll also taste the morning and evening programs and perhaps even the *kīrtanas* and *prasāda*, and you’ll likely feel the pain of blisters – all peppered with realizations from the pilgrims in the field. Furthermore, whenever we reach a pastime place, we will tell you about what happened there, referencing the writings of Śrīla Prabhupāda and the previous ācāryas. And we have included route maps.

In citing a place’s location and the distance between that and another place, we have relied heavily on Jaḍa Bharata Dāsa’s *Vrindavana and Braja Mandala: A Practical Guide*. Our main reference for the historical events and pastimes that took place on the *parikramā* path has been taken from Kuśakratha Prabhu’s translation of *Bhakti-ratnākara*.

### **A timeless heritage**

There is so much nectar to be heard on Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā*! In *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana* we touch on the essential while hoping to arouse your interest

in transcendental events that span the millennia. And we try to deepen your appreciation not just of the Lord's pastimes but of our Gauḍīya *paramparā*'s contribution and service to Vraja-dhāma.

Some places in Vraja have been home to the Lord's pastimes as far back as Satya-yuga. For example, it was during that period that Dhruva Mahārāja had *darśana* of Lord Prṣṇigarbha in Madhuvana. In Tretā-yuga, in that same forest, Śatrughna, Lord Rāmacandra's brother, killed a demon named Lavaṇāsura. In Dvāpara-yuga, Lord Kṛṣṇa roamed throughout Vṛndāvana's enchanting forests and performed sweet pastimes with His intimate associates there – pastimes meant to captivate our hearts. There can be no end to glorifying the attractiveness of those pastimes.

Later, Śrī *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* reveals that Śrīla Mādhavendra Purī, the grand-spiritual master of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, visited Vraja. It's possible that Lord Caitanya's spiritual master, Śrīla Īśvara Purī, also visited Vraja, but we have not yet come across any records that document this.

Then in 1515, on the last day of Kārttika, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu came to Vraja and stayed for two months, during which time He did Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* and performed ecstatic pastimes in many locations. Śrīla Advaita Ācārya and Śrī Nityānanda Prabhu are known to have visited Vraja at different points too, and sometime after the departure of all the members of the Pañca-tattva, Śrī Jāhnavā Mātā, Lord Nityānanda's eternal consort, also traveled to Vṛndāvana.

Next in line were Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu's immediate followers, the Six Gosvāmīs, who came to stay in Vraja on the Lord's order and dedicated their lives to doing *bhajana*, writing books, and excavating forgotten pastime places. Other exalted Vaiṣṇavas in our *paramparā*, such as Lokanātha Gosvāmī and Bhūgarbha Gosvāmī, also lived in Vraja during that period and immediately after. It was around that time that Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī came to stay in Vṛndāvana on Lord Nityānanda's order. He took shelter of Śrīla Raghunātha dāsa Gosvāmī at Rādhā-kuṇḍa.

Perhaps the most well-known Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava ācāryas to be directly associated with Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* are Śrī Rāghava Paṇḍita, Śrīla Narottama dāsa

Ṭhākura, and Śrīnivāsa Ācārya. Narottama and Śrīnivāsa moved to Vṇḍāvana to study under Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī, and one day, Jīva Gosvāmī told his two students that he would like them to tour Vraja. Jīva Gosvāmī wondered who could guide them, and just then, Rāghava Paṇḍita arrived and said he was on his way to circumambulate Vraja. Jīva Gosvāmī then asked Rāghava Paṇḍita to take Narottama and Śrīnivāsa with him, which he happily agreed to do.

During this *parikramā*, Rāghava Paṇḍita, in addition to narrating Kṛṣṇa's pastimes, also described the pastimes Lord Caitanya performed during His Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā*. The fifth chapter of the *Bhakti-ratnākara* provides a detailed account of the emotion-filled *parikramā* performed by these three great personalities.

Another great *ācārya* in our line closely connected with the practice of Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* was Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī. There was a period when the *parikramā* path Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu followed became forgotten and was overgrown with trees. Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī, a disciple of Śrī Kṛṣṇadāsa Brahmācāri in the line of Gadādhara Paṇḍita, is credited with having identified forgotten pastime places and reestablishing the *parikramā* path followed by Lord Caitanya. Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī is also known as Vrajācārya, and he wrote the *Vraja-bhakti-vilāsa*, an extremely detailed guidebook on how to perform Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā*.

Furthermore, in the seventeenth century, Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura came to live at Rādhā-kuṇḍa, doing *bhajana* and writing books on the science of devotional service. Śrīla Jagannātha dāsa Bābājī Mahārāja customarily spent six months a year in Vraja and the other six months in Navadvīpa, and Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura also visited Vraja and had a *bhajana-kuṭīra* at Rādhā-kuṇḍa. Moreover, Śrīla Gaura Kīśora dāsa Bābājī Mahārāja is said to have lived in Vraja for over thirty years in the nineteenth century.

More recently, in 1932, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura led a large *parikramā* party consisting of thousands of pilgrims around Vraja. Our Śrīla Prabhupāda, who was a householder then, traveled from Allahabad to Mathurā and joined that *parikramā* party for a few days. Finally, in 1971, Śrīla Prabhupāda brought his Western disciples to Vṇḍāvana for the first time and took them to visit certain places in Vraja.

So when we ourselves are walking the Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā*, we are walking in the footsteps of our predecessor ācāryas – sometimes quite literally. We do this only by their mercy; it is they who reveal the *dhāma* to us in their teachings and by their blessings. As you step, through the pages of *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana*, onto the *parikramā* path, we humbly offer you the opportunity to remember the lotus feet of Śrīla Prabhupāda and our predecessor ācāryas as we visit places connected with them.

### A note on style

In this book we have attempted to depict *parikramā* life in a bold – and perhaps unusual – style. Some of our veteran pilgrims may notice that although we have chosen to write in the present tense our descriptions of *parikramā* experiences are not specific to the *parikramā* of any particular year. For example, the account of a given day on *parikramā* could include a description of a landscape as it appeared in 2005, a description of a feast served in 1994, and the realizations spoken by a devotee in 2010. We went for the most immediate descriptions to help you be “there” with us. Also, the material we drew on while compiling this book spans years and includes much that is noteworthy. To limit ourselves to actual chronology would have forced us to sacrifice valuable material offered in other years. We hope our presentation will allow you to walk with us.

Note: When quoting realizations devotees shared with us, we decided to use whatever names they had at the time.

### A caveat

Although throughout the book we mention distances between places on the *parikramā* route, this should not be taken as an imposition of material limits on the holy *dhāma*. The *dhāma* is spiritual and therefore transcendental to the constraints of time and space. Indeed, the sixth offense to the holy *dhāma* includes “making an attempt to assess the area of the holy *dhāma*.”

Distances, directions, and other geographical parameters are necessary practical considerations for facilitating the movement of the *parikramā* party. They’re also helpful to readers who may wish to use this book as a guide. But we shouldn’t dwell on them if they encourage us to see the holy *dhāma* with material vision. Śrīla Prabhupāda said that one cannot purchase a plane or train ticket to the holy *dhāma*, implying that entrance into Vṛndāvana requires the proper service mood and vision.

## Our aspiration

Śrīla Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī Ṭhākura writes:

O friend, please control your mind and senses and go and live in Vṛndāvana, which is a mine of nectar, and which is so glorious that even millions of books by the greatest poets and philosophers cannot describe a single ray of light from the host of the jewels of its virtues.

(Śrī Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta, śataka 1, text 35)

The *dhāma* is nondifferent from the Lord, so the *dhāma*'s glories are as unlimited as the Lord's glories. We are unable to do justice to these glories in our insignificant attempt to string together a few words. We beg our readers to kindly overlook the faults in this presentation. Our only wish is to serve the Vaiṣṇavas with this book.

We hope those unable to travel to Vṛndāvana for the Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* will use this book to become connected by mind and heart to the *parikramā* party. *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana* is written like a thirty-day journal, so you can read a chapter a day as part of your Kārttika *sādhana* no matter where you are in the world.

Additionally, if reading this book inspires you to join the *parikramā* one Kārttika, we shall consider our endeavor a resounding success. May this book facilitate your absorption in Vraja-dhāma.

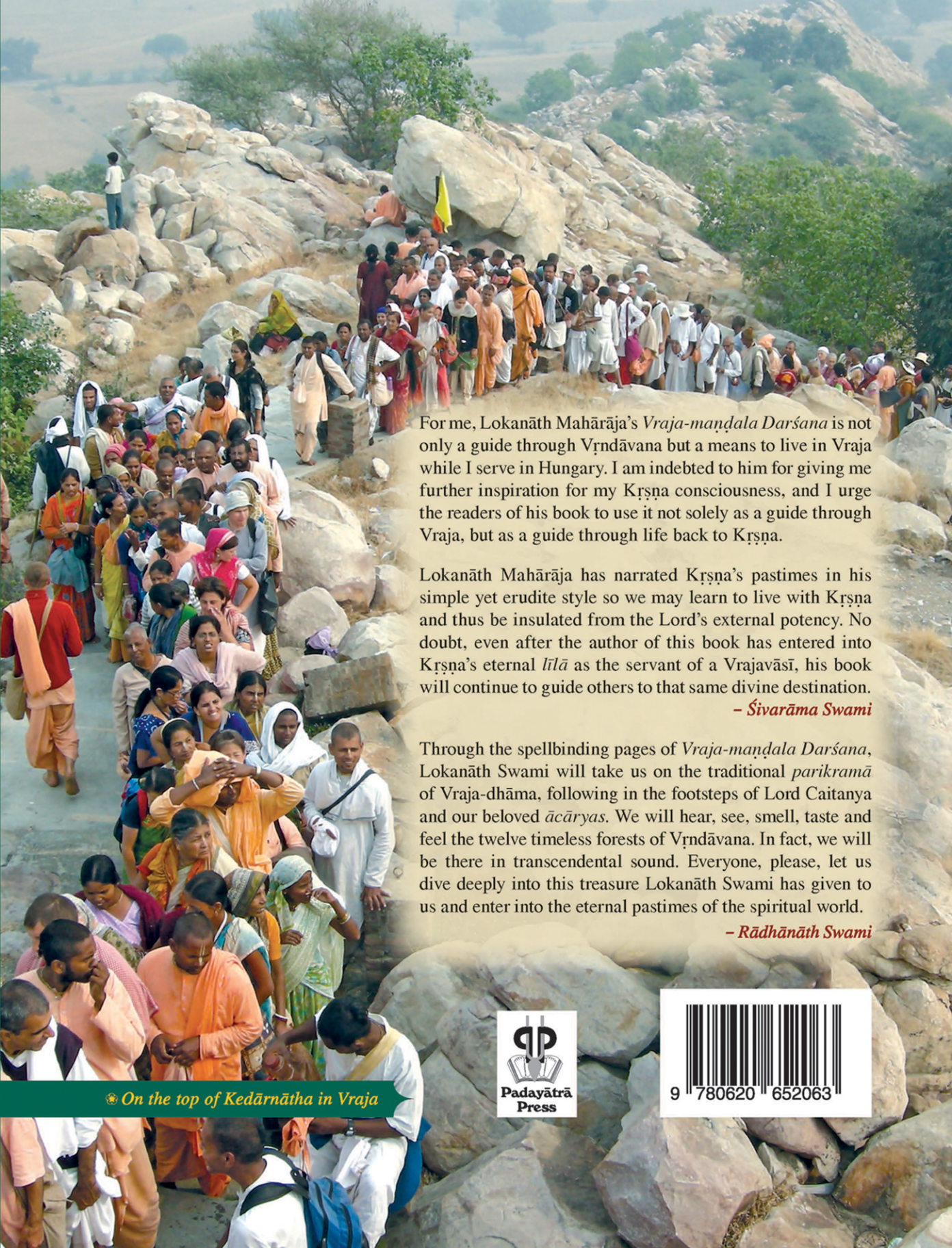
The *jīva* does "*parikramā*" of the entire universe, from Brahmāloka down to the lower planetary systems. Performing Vraja-maṇḍala *parikramā* while immersed in chanting and hearing is a golden opportunity to stop this universal circumambulation and go back home, back to Godhead.

We wish you a fulfilling journey. Happy reading! Hare Kṛṣṇa.

– Lokanāth Swami







For me, Lokanāth Mahārāja's *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana* is not only a guide through Vṇḍāvana but a means to live in Vraja while I serve in Hungary. I am indebted to him for giving me further inspiration for my Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and I urge the readers of his book to use it not solely as a guide through Vraja, but as a guide through life back to Kṛṣṇa.

Lokanāth Mahārāja has narrated Kṛṣṇa's pastimes in his simple yet erudite style so we may learn to live with Kṛṣṇa and thus be insulated from the Lord's external potency. No doubt, even after the author of this book has entered into Kṛṣṇa's eternal *līlā* as the servant of a Vrajavāsī, his book will continue to guide others to that same divine destination.

– Śivarāma Swami

Through the spellbinding pages of *Vraja-maṇḍala Darśana*, Lokanāth Swami will take us on the traditional *parikramā* of Vraja-dhāma, following in the footsteps of Lord Caitanya and our beloved *ācāryas*. We will hear, see, smell, taste and feel the twelve timeless forests of Vṇḍāvana. In fact, we will be there in transcendental sound. Everyone, please, let us dive deeply into this treasure Lokanāth Swami has given to us and enter into the eternal pastimes of the spiritual world.

– Rādhānāth Swami

☀ On the top of Kedārñātha in Vraja

