

“The Art of War” In ISKCON

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1 “The Art of War” In ISKCON

1.1 What Is the “Art of War?”

The Art of War was written in China by Sun tzu about 512 BC. For over two thousand years it has remained the most important military treatise in Asia. About 200 years ago it was introduced to the Western world by a French missionary and since then it has been studied by generals, philosophers, statesmen, businessmen, ambassadors, arbitrators and professional negotiators. Devotees can think of Sun tzu as a ksatriya version of the wise Brahmin we revere as Chanakya Pandit.

1.2 How The Art Of War Applies To Us

The principles expressed in the Art of War are based on timeless truths that are self evident. Many are as simple as “Don’t pick a fight with someone bigger than you.” Yet as obvious as one would think these instructions are the way we are fighting over the Guru/RtVik issue seems to indicate that the members of ISKCON have absolutely no regard for them. Because of that the supporters of both sides end up pursuing strategies that are causing great difficulties and couldn’t possibly produce the results either side is struggling so hard to achieve.

One may legitimately claim that we are not students of Sun tzu so how could we be expected to know what his advice is... what to speak of follow it? It is for that very reason I am presenting it here for those willing to consider what this wise military strategist of ancient China might have to say regarding the way we are handling our own ongoing internal conflict. This is not intended to be a comprehensive study nor do I consider myself to be a scholar on this subject. I am simply presenting some of the parts that I felt are relevant to us.

There will certainly be some who frown upon this endeavor because it reaches out beyond the realm of our Vaishnava literature. To those individuals I remind you that Srila Prabhupada taught us to utilize

everything in the service of Krishna. It is in that spirit that I present the following analysis.

The references for this article were taken from:

*The Art Of War, Copyright 1994 by Ralph D. Sawyer. Published by Barnes & Nobel Inc.
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2 Lessons from the Art of War

2.1 When at War Preserve What You Can!

“Preserving the enemy’s state capital, army, battalions, companies, and squads is best, destroying them is second best.” (Chapter 3 “Planning Offenses” p.177)

Lesson: There are two points to be learned here. The worst way to fight for something is to have a full on blood bath. If the enemy can be subjugated without a confrontation you conserve military resources on both sides. By avoiding a full-scale attack you also preserve the enemies grains, buildings, talent, weapons, and military intelligence which the victor then claims as spoils of war and uses to strengthen his army even more.

Observation: It seems that ISKCON is determined to exterminate the RtViks and visa versa. As long as this attitude prevails a full out war is inevitable and the price of that war will be, lost temples, countless devotee tragedies, huge legal bills, and serious damage to ISKCON’s public image. On top of all those losses are the costs related to the thousands of work-hours spent by both sides arguing, writing papers and flying to special meetings all over the world only to expedite even a worse situation!

At a certain point the final outcome becomes inauspicious regardless of what happens because it is contrary to Srila Prabhupada’s instruction that the devotees should *stop fighting and work together*. Krishna Consciousness is not dependent on a title, a diploma, a pedigree, or certificate of authenticity. It is literally a state of consciousness and how one gets initiated has little to do with it. If we destroy that which we claim to love how can we expect anyone to take us seriously?

Everyone must understand the scope of what is at stake and not be naive in regards to how our fighting today will influence what we have left tomorrow. A full scale un-civil war will set back the preaching movement for decades, maybe even much longer. All of us will be responsible for that because we couldn’t find a way to settle our differences and co-operate as Srila Prabhupada instructed us to do so.

To negotiate an amiable solution that honors both systems will not only protect all the current assets in ISKCON but it would dramatically improve them. A treaty would not only preserve the best resources from both camps but it will focus them all on the same goal, which is what everyone wants!

“Those who are on this path are resolute in purpose, and their aim is one. O beloved child of the Kurus, the intelligence of those who are irresolute is many-branched.” Bg- 2.41

2.2 Keep War as Short As Possible

“No country has every profited from protracted warfare. Those who do not thoroughly comprehend the dangers inherent in employing the army are incapable of truly knowing the potential advantages of military actions.” - (Chapter 2 “Waging War” p.173)

Lesson: The first part of this is clear. A long drawn-out battle will simply exhaust the king's resources and

should be avoided. The second part indicates that war itself is very dangerous and those who do not fully comprehend the reality of it are also probably not very clear about what they are fighting to achieve.

Observation: This instruction should make the GBC run to the negotiating tables. Time is on the side of the RtVik rebels. The longer ISKCON is at war with the RtVik's the more ISKCON's resources will be depleted and their leadership worn down. Already there are casualties and turncoats.

This quote also provides an explanation for why ISKCON has been attempting to EXTERMINATE any sign of RtVik influence. Generally speaking when there is an infection it makes sense to root it out immediately. But there are a few problems applying this part of Sun Tzu's advice to the devotees of the Lord.

As the corporate brahmin, the GBC does not have the liberty to act like an autonomous ksatria. Therefore the possibility of just ruthlessly crushing any disciples of His Divine Grace, regardless of their opinions regarding initiation, can never really be an option. When we see how there was really no other way for these events to have unfolded, it becomes apparent that Krishna has been orchestrating this dilemma right from the very beginning.

Some people are starting to realize how much the future of ISKCON is in jeopardy because of the Guru/RtVik controversy. Unfortunately, just like Sun Tzu says, those who are in the position to steer us around these difficulties do not seem to perceive what is at stake.

The only possible hope ISKCON has of defeating the RtViks is for it to have a tremendous surge in attracting new devotees. This is what is required to offset those who leave ISKCON and defect to any of the several reform groups. At the moment the largest reform group is the RtVik camp. Unless there is a dramatic change in the public response to ISKCON's preaching efforts, it's inevitable that the RtViks will prevail based simply on the mathematics of attrition. The leaders of ISKCON can persist in NOT recognizing the ever-increasing turnover of "temple class" devotees, but soon they will outnumber the members of ISKCON and then what will happen?

Sun Tzu has suggested that those who do not understand the dangers of war are also the ones who are unclear regarding what is really at stake. The ISKCON Guru's insist that they ARE focusing their disciples towards the worship of Srila Prabhupada. Then why is there so much resistance to the idea of allowing people to honor Srila Prabhupada directly? *This is THE pivotal question* because the option of both systems is a very rational alternative to a war that Srila Prabhupada has said over and over: *"...will destroy everything!"*.

If renunciation, humility and simplicity are the corner stones to advancement in Krishna Consciousness, then why is there so much fighting over the terms used to describe who does the initiation ceremony? It really seems like a small minority of individuals are willing to wager the continuity of ISKCON over a very minor technical aspect of an esoteric religious ceremony. How can anyone expect an intelligent person to take us seriously under these conditions?

2.3 Don't Back Your Opponent into A Corner.

"Cast (the Soldiers and officers) into positions from which there is nowhere to go and they will die without retreating. If there is no escape from death, the officers and soldiers will fully exhaust their strength. When the soldiers and officers have penetrate deeply into enemy territory, they will cling together. When there is not alternative they will fight."

(Chapter 11 "The Nine Terrain's" p. 221

Lesson: Sun Tzu is referring to the aggressor army here, but the principal applies to the Guru/RtVik debate bilaterally. There are some things that once they are set in motion, there is no turning back. Smashing a glass is one of them... waging war is another.

We are all familiar with the advice: "Don't burn your bridges behind you!" What is being presented

here is the psychology of commitment. There are other ways we have come to think about this concept. We sometime hear; "Give them a chance to Save Face" and "Do not corner a wounded animal." The point is actually quite simple. If your opponent face's only two alternatives, victory or death, then you can expect they will muster up everything they can to win, considering the alternative is certain death. If however you give those you oppose an attractive preference other than fight or die, there is a good chance they may choose that option if victory does not seem possible.

Observation: This instruction applies to any extremist who believes there is: "*only one way*" of pleasing Srila Prabhupada. The leaders of each camp are guilty of escalating the fratricide way beyond a philosophical discussion to a shameless war of name-calling, finger pointing, labeling, blacklisting and in some cases even veiled threats. Each side is racing deeply onto the battlefield of Aparada fearlessly with no consideration for retreat. Burn demm bridges baby cause we ain't gonna turn back!

If we were half as wise as we are foolish, we would see that honoring BOTH systems is the way we can all get back to *working for* Srila Prabhupada instead of *working against each other*. But it requires some sober thinking on both sides. If the RtViks are saying things like "*The GBC isn't following Srila Prabhupada's orders therefore they are rascals and must be replaced.*" then naturally the GBC will want to exterminate the RtViks. Similarly, if the GBC says: "*... the ritvik idea and its supporters have no place in ISKCON... and they should not spread their propaganda within ISKCON.*" The proponents of the RtVik camp will be forced to go deeper underground and the war will rage on.

Touché. Draw your swords gentlemen. We need not insist on following this road to self-destruction. The GBC has the power to end the conflict. As difficulties continue to accrue the leaders of our movement will be more inclined to settle and cut the losses *if the RtViks make a reasonable offer to coexist honorable within ISKCON* out of respect for Srila Prabhupada and his movement. For this to work the RtViks must publicly declare that their mission is not to replace the GBC but to work with them *and the existing Guru System already in place*. This is not only the Vaishnava way to approach the issue, it is also the smartest way to take the fury out of your opponent. In fact the offer can be made very attractive to the first line of Generals in ISKCON if the RtViks went out of their way to remind the temple presidents about the shift in power that can be expected when they are the given the jurisdiction to authorize initiations.

2.4 Know Strengths and Weaknesses

"If you know them (the enemies strengths and weaknesses), and you know yourself (your own armies strengths and weaknesses) you victory will not be imperiled".

(Chapter 10 "Configurations of Terrain" p. 215)

Lesson: This seems so obvious you would think it need not be stated. But now let's see if anyone on either side of this revolutionary war is following this practical advice.

Observation: Both the ISKCON managers and the RtVik guerillas claim that the majority of the devotees support their cause and the opposing side is in the dark! Obviously, they both can't be right. The fact is nobody really knows. At this point both sides are fighting a war of propaganda.

The only way anyone can get close to knowing for sure who is aligned with whom is to conduct some type of confidential survey and even that could be very misleading. The difficulty in doing surveys is phrasing the questions well and reassuring those who respond that their answers will be kept strictly confidential. Even under the most ideal situations the average devotee might be hesitant to express their real interests if there is any possibility that doing so could jeopardize their personal comforts, future opportunities or similar perks.

It seems accurate to say that nobody has any quantitative measurements that would properly identify how the devotees are distributed on each side of the Guru/RtVik battlefield.

Everybody knows who the presiding Generals are in both armies, but the allegiance of the infantry is

unknowable. The RtViks may be overestimating their impact world wide, and the GBC could be completely naive in regards to how effectively the RtViks have already infiltrated the temple shops, kitchens, pujari rooms, and sankirtan offices.

What it gets down to is a whole bunch of people gathering on the outskirts of the battlefield of Aparada ready to fight without anyone knowing who is on which side!

It's like a juvenile Halloween egg throwing free-for-all. Everyone will get hit, all the eggs will get smashed and the end result is one big, huge, sticky, smelly, wasteful mess. The only problem with this colorful analogy is we aren't throwing eggs. We are throwing BBT books, temple deeds, deity clothing and senior devotees all over the street... only to be swept away by the big noisy kali-yuga street cleaning truck in the middle of the night! What we have today will be gone tomorrow because neither side actually knows how strong or weak, they or their opponent is. The only thing that can come from such a mismanaged war is disaster and chaos. This is not a good sign.

2.5 Good Generals Are Not Driven By Ego

“Thus a general who does not advance to seek fame, or fail to retreat to avoid being charged with the capital offense of retreating, but seeks only to preserve the people and gain advantage for the ruler, is the states treasure. “

(Chapter 10. “Configuration of Terrain” p.215)

Lesson: In the opinion of Sun tzu the most valuable general is the one who will advance or retreat based on which activity will preserve the interests of the citizens and be the most advantageous to the king. The question of personal fame, or infamy, has nothing to do with the decision making of a truly great military leader. (Brahmin implied.)

Commentary: This is an appeal to those GBC that are the true leaders. Lord Caitanya also taught that the real devotee is not interested in profit adoration or distinction. Undoubtedly, because of peer pressure, group think, political momentum, and the potential of having allies turn against you, many people shy away from making tough decisions. But the state we are talking about here is ISKCON and what is being advised is that real leaders do the right thing irregardless of the possible personal consequences that they bring.

Undoubtedly this is exactly what the GBC members believe they are doing. They are certainly recognized by all as the ones who have the power to prevent further erosion within ISKCON and “...preserve the people”. What we are all curious to know is will the way they are going about doing it work? Only time will tell if their preference towards heavy handed policies, confidential meetings, ultimatums, self serving dictums, blacklists, and no system of checks and balances will prove to serve Srila Prabhupada better than a genuine attempt to accommodate the convictions of the other mature devotees who are also his disciples.

2.6 Bribe The Opponent Into A Trap

“In order to cause the enemy to come of their own volition, extend some profit. In order to prevent the enemy from coming forth, show them the potential for harm.”

(Chapter 6 “Vacuity and Substance” p. 191)

Lesson: If you want to trap your opponent you must make the bait attractive. If you want to keep your opponent at a distance convince them that the consequences of advancing will result in serious damages.

Observation: Unfortunately, this quote provides a partial explanation for why some of the GBC are not willing to tolerate the RtViks. At this point in time they have not made any type of reasonable proposal based on peaceful co-existence. The GBC is therefore properly suspicious of any good will coming from

the RtVik proponents because they interpret it as a deceitful ploy to find a foothold within ISKCON. Their fear is understandable. They must wrestle with the question of: "If we allow the RtViks a place within ISKCON *will they attempt to take over the whole movement?*"

When this type of conclusion is united with their conviction that the RtViks are philosophically "wrong", it is understandable why the GBC has moved right on to implementing the advice given in the second half of this instruction. Their threat to exterminate *anyone* who demonstrates *any* sympathy towards *any* aspect of RtViks philosophy is the way they "... *show them, (the enemy) the potential for harm.*"

The question remains: Is this the proper course of action for the GBC? According to Sun Tzu it is the right way to proceed as long as there is reasonable evidence to conclude that the RtViks are just trying to set a trap for the purpose of infiltrating and overthrowing the current administration. This presents a real challenge to the RtViks and leaves them with only two choices.

The first is to become so powerful that they permeate every aspect of ISKCON and, when they are confident, they have the allegiance necessary to do so, they stage a coup d'état and literally overthrow the whole GBC. The former corrupt government, as they see it, is then completely removed from all forms of power and replaced with *hopefully* better managers. This is a very aggressive approach to reform, difficult to achieve, and not likely to be as successful as intended. It's also not very Krishna Consciousness.

The alternative is to approach the conflict like Lord Caitanya did when he approached the Chand Kasi for permission to perform Sankirtana. In regards to that effort Srila Prabhupada gives the following purport:

"It is not necessary to commit violence to stop the opposition from hindering a movement, for one can kill their demoniac behavior with reason and argument. Following in the footsteps of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, whenever there are obstacles the Hare Krsna movement should kill the opposition with reason and argument and thus stop their demoniac behavior. If we became violent in every case, it would be difficult for us to manage our affairs. We should therefore follow in the footsteps of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, who disobeyed the order of Chand Kazi but subdued him with reason and argument." - Adi 17.130 Purport

Haridasa Thakura applied this principal on a personal level and set an extraordinary example. His reason was incomprehensible humility and his argument was relentless persistent. He was so committed to his realization that he was nearly beaten to death 22 times before his petition to chant was finally granted by the Mohammedan Magistrate. If the RtViks are so convinced of their position let them request the GBC nicely to practice within ISKCON. If they are refused, they can return again and again. If they are rebuked, they can return yet again, with the same request, each time presented very nicely. The message is we will not go away. You must respect our desire to also serve Srila Prabhupada within his institution. We are not here to disrupt. We want to serve.... like that they campaign endlessly. There will come a time when Krishna will be persuaded to intervene within the hearts of those who are tuned to his wishes and some type of resolution will be forthcoming. Meanwhile we should all be very careful not to offend any devotee of the Lord, regardless of how they think Srila Prabhupada wants initiations to be handled and we should do all we can to preserve ISKCON intact.

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2.7 If We Break ISKCON It Will Never Be the Same!

“Anger can revert to happiness, annoyance can revert to joy, but a vanquished state cannot be revived, the dead cannot be brought back to life.”

(Chapter 12 “Incendiary Attacks” p.131)

Lesson: In any dispute emotions run high and hard feeling develop. All these things are temporary and can change. But with some things there is no turning back. A torn book, a smashed deity, a broken ISKCON, a public disgrace... can never be reversed.

Observation: Each of us has a story to tell about how some devotee or some ISKCON policy harmed, upset or cheated us. Everyone has his or her version of an ISKCON horror story. Even the highest GBC men have given testimonies that confirm that they too have complaints and grievances of being mistreated or not appreciated for what they have endured.

The question now is who is actually ready, willing, able and advanced enough to just put their nightmare behind them and live with the full realization that *“Everything,”* not just the good things, *“...is under Krishna’s control”* ...not ours?

Sun tzu is admonishing each and every one of us here with this warning. It’s self-explanatory and the single most compelling reason why we must put down the weapons of political maneuvering now, before we “Destroy Everything” as Srila Prabhupada warned us, and fully embrace both systems within ISKCON. The strength, opportunities, and benefits that are to be had by doing so genuinely, under the protective umbrella of Srila Prabhupadas love for us, calls all good men on both sides to support this solution. The alternative to keep fighting is just not an option.

The Jews of Israeli and the Arabs of the Middle East have been fighting for generations. In Ireland the Catholics and the Protestants have also been fighting. If we do not make a conscious and intentional effort to work together to end this conflict *it too will also carry on forever.* We will follow the same path and the public will laugh at our stupidity and think no better of our beloved Spiritual Master Srila Prabhupada and that is our offense! We have the most profound philosophy on the face of the earth and yet what use is it if we insist on acting just as silly as all the other so called great religions.

I stand for something much greater than that. To cohesively integrate both systems into one powerful movement will take real dynamic leaders who are very wise, extremely tolerant, and endowed with a broad vision and good hearts. I am not talking about the typical average person. I am talking about real Vaishnavas who understand what the hegemony of Krishna Consciousness in action can really accomplish. I am praying that those great souls will step up to the mark and take on this task.

The other religious institutions do not have the type of leadership capable of resolving their differences and cleaning up the disputes. Their mess has gone on for decades and will continue to embarrass them in the future. Now the challenge is ours. Shall we resign ourselves to the same type of mundane mediocrity, or choose instead to apply what we have been taught and let the historians note that ISKCON is indeed the truly great leadership organization that Srila Prabhupada always wanted it to be?

*“First-class men are great devotees of the Lord, who can guide the administrators and the citizens through their words and practical example.” - The Journey of Self-Discovery
Chapter 6. Material Problems, Spiritual Solutions, Slaughterhouse Civilization*

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3.2 Other Articles By This Author:

(Available on VNN under "USA" Archives)

<i>Guru Crisis</i> – Personal Letter to GBC	(October 15, 1998 - Two Pages)
<i>The Process of Vaishnava Initiation and ISKCON</i>	(October 3, 1998 - 28 pages)
<i>Drop the Bomb and End the War</i>	(December 1, 1998 - 5 Pages)
<i>Whoever Thinks They Can Manage ISKCON is Disqualified</i>	(December 15, 1998 - 4 Pages)
<i>Put the Extremists Where They Belong</i>	(December 27, 98 - 6 Pages)
<i>"The Art of War" in ISKCON</i>	(January 7, 1999 – 7 pages)

(Available on VNN under "WORLD" Archives)

<i>Landmark Education and ISKCON</i>	(January 1, 1998 - 16 Pages)
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