

# Japa Walks, Japa Talks

Satsvarūpa dāsa  
Goswami

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# Introduction

When devotees ask me if I'd like to go on a *japa* walk with them, I think, "You say *japa* walk, but you mean *japa* talk." Their proposal is that we will walk together, preferably in a scenic, peaceful place, and both chant on our beads. What usually happens, though, is that as soon as we enter the wooded path or start our circumambulation of the temple building—we start to talk.

Is that wrong? Does it ruin the *japa* walk? I don't want to say that talking is bad, as long as it is not *prajalpa*. Friends help each other in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, share their realizations, and inspire each other with *kṛṣṇa-kathā* when they speak confidentially. It's good to break our isolated silences.

But what about *japa*? The walk-and-talk should not be a substitute for thoughtful, concentrated utterances of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra: Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare. And especially if we have not completed our minimum quota of sixteen rounds, we should be careful that even constructive talk doesn't keep us from our most important duty. "Of all the regulative principles, the spiritual master's order to chant at least sixteen rounds is most essential" (Cc., *Madhya* 22.113, purport).

A *japa* walk should be disciplined—some time for uninterrupted *japa* (or why call it a *japa* walk?) and some time to talk.

This book is a collection of *japa* walks and talks between myself and my friends. I took these *japa* walks in County Wicklow, Ireland. I was alone, but I was always thinking of my devotee-friends. I walked past some of their houses and occasionally saw them and waved to them, but I wanted the time alone so that I could relish the freedom of concentrated, uninterrupted *japa*. I was trying to focus on fulfilling Śrīla Prabhupāda's instruction to "just hear."

At the same time, I wanted to speak, so I chanted exclusively for an hour, then returned to Uddhava's cottage and gave vent to my urge to speak—by writing down the thoughts and feelings that built up in me during the purifying *japa* session in which I struggled to surrender my mind, tongue, and ears in Kṛṣṇa's service. I also answered questions the devotees asked about chanting.

I hope the effect of reading these little outpourings will be like going together for a *japa* walk. If you would like to come, please read on. I'd like to make a condition, however, although I know I can't actually demand it: I chanted most of my rounds before I started talking. Maybe you would like to chant some of your rounds before reading.

# Part One

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## July 21

I just chanted an hour's worth of rounds. Shall I admit that it's sometimes a grind, or shall I take a positive point of view and say that there was a motor running, like the purring in a cat's body? That was a sign of auspiciousness. I mean, of course, the motor of repeated mantras: Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.

From the positive point of view, shouldn't I be happy about that? It doesn't matter if the road I walk on is eroded and full of potholes, as long as the road I am traveling takes me where I want to go. Ay, there's the rub. Is this bumpy road taking me where I want to go in the fastest and best way?

Certainly the road of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa is the best way to attain love of God. All the scriptures confirm that point. But that's not exactly my point. My point is that my lack of taste indicates I still chant with offenses. Therefore, am I going to take many, many lives to change this offensive chanting into chanting with attachment and taste?

These are rhetorical questions. I don't have answers. I do know I have no alternative but to go on with this very best process and practice it as best I can, even if my best is not very good.

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This is the first time I have been out on a walk in Wicklow this year. I wore too many clothes for July—a T-shirt, *kūrta*, sweater, sweatshirt, and coat. I thought I needed all those layers because it seemed so cold indoors and it was raining out. Next time, I'll leave the sweater behind. I also have to figure out better how to carry both my stick and my umbrella in one hand while carrying my beadbag in the other.

Aside from these mechanics, I noticed I didn't feel the same *joie de vivre* and youthfulness I often associate with walks in the country. I'm just saying that for the record. I'm actually happy to be here and to have seen the milkweed and the foxgloves. I walked over the little bridge where I used to meditate on Prabhupāda.

The chanting is like a moan, like a drone from the bottom of my heart. Sometimes I feel myself entering a kind of dullness. I



don't like that. By the roadside, I passed a fat, ugly, white ox behind iron bars. Again, no feeling. You can't afford to feel too much for such beasts. After I passed him, I had a passing sensation that maybe I was on the wrong road, but how could that be? There's only one road here.

Irish vegetation always looks wet and lush and green. There's so much rain here. The weeds are tall-stalked with stout stems at this time of year—big, fat milkweed, red and white varieties of clover, daisies, puff balls, yellow ragwort, a lot of thorny weeds, and, of course, the famous stinging nettles. Big beads of water on the grasses, and the feather tops of the couch grass looking like the soaked fur of an animal.

That much I can do, talk about nature. When I talk about nature, my brain functions, and I'm inspired to note my inner and outer states. But when I chant, I go under. Oh well, I'm bound to improve. I can only go up from here.

Anyway, as I was saying, I really overdid it on this first day with my clothes and my just-scoot-out-the-door-and-go-get-'em attitude. For the first half of the walk, I cruised along. I even kept track of my rounds with a stopwatch. Then I had to drag myself back with a sore foot and general fatigue from the exertion.



I realize I can take either a negative or a positive viewpoint when I assess my *japa*, but that's not an arbitrary choice, is it? I mean, there has to be a factual basis to the assessment. If I take fifteen minutes to chant a round because I keep falling asleep, how can I say that my chanting is nice? Of course, that's an extreme example. The ordinary state is subtle and hard to ascertain. Anyway, since I do have some choice about how to look at things, I prefer to be hopeful. Hopeful doesn't mean leading myself along a primrose path of unreality, thinking that I have no problems in chanting at all.

I have already written two books about *japa* and openly admitted in them the grimmer side of things. I have a reputation among some devotees as one who is willing to admit problems. Therefore, they submit their problems to me. They generously think that I might be exaggerating my difficulties in order to speak for all strugglers.

Nārada dāsa, echoing my own laments, asked me whether Kṛṣṇa is even present when he chants. "When I chant inattentively, my mind wandering, etc., is Kṛṣṇa present or only His shadow? If it is only His shadow, will I ever actually reach a breakthrough point?"

Dear Nārada dāsa, all I know is what I read in the *śāstra*. I can repeat it to you along with whatever experience I have had. Your question hints of despair, but don't despair. Don't abandon the ship. We have a good captain, Śrīla Prabhupāda, and the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra is the most favorable weather because this is Kali-yuga, a time of stormy inauspiciousness. *Harināma*, the most general and liberal form of God consciousness, is our only hope. It allows for us to be inattentive rascals, but it still gives so much benefit. Even when we chant offensively, we get relief from our miseries and sins. Therefore, don't be depressed. After all, you are in the shelter of the holy name, and you are chanting. Kṛṣṇa will not fully appear in the holy name until we chant purely and with attention.

As to how long it will take or when you will break through, I can't say. Prabhupāda said it could happen in a minute or fail to happen in millions of births. My only advice now is to please take it seriously. Don't imagine that you are suffering from a terminal

disease, but take it seriously, as a positive engagement in your life. Give it priority in a practical way in your daily schedule. You know your daily rhythms, so when you have strength and peace of mind, devote it to the holy name. Always be sure to chant your quota without fail and in a peaceful place. If you do all that and still can't control your mind, then just keep chanting and praying to Kṛṣṇa. You'll break through one day or another. In fact, you are already breaking through bit by bit. As the *harer nāma* verse says, there is no other way. Take that verse personally. There is no other way but to keep striving, and in that striving, you can feel a kind of righteousness. You are performing the *yuga-dharma*. Give it your best.

Nārada's wife, Bhaktin Sioban, said she identifies with the predicament I shared in the opening paragraphs of *Japa Reform Notebook*. I remember how I chanted in Śrīla Prabhupāda's presence and in my apartment on First Street in New York City—"clearly and intently." But over the years, my *japa* became less distinct. "More and more my attention would wander." Sioban asked if I could expand on how we can recapture the initial enthusiasm and the sincere effort to chant with attention.

I don't think we can go back in time and imagine that a fifty-four-year-old man is twenty-six and is holding his red beads in his hands for the first time, yet we still have that spirit in us. It has just become covered. That wonder of the early days was an awakening, but it only happened once. In many ways, it wasn't internalized or deep. It was a hint of everything good that was to come, a special kind of beginner's ecstasy.

We can't judge our present state by its ecstasy content. We're deeper now than we were then, and we're more committed. We'll never give up chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa; we have years of practice to prove it. We're sincere. The inattentiveness and loss of fervor was inevitable in a way. We just have to come to grips with it.

I feel confident in saying these things to Nārada and his wife. It's Kṛṣṇa's mercy on me. When we preach, He makes us turn our face away from self-contemplation toward helping others. Then we take a firmer hold on things and don't allow ourselves to wallow in lamentation and helplessness.

Maybe I'm also feeling more positive today because the weather is so nice. Yesterday was dismal—the lid was on with the clouds



only ten feet off the ground, closing in the world. I couldn't even see the hills. Today there were clouds, but there was also a beautiful view. The cows and bulls were bellowing in the fields, and the streams were running full and strong. I didn't feel old or worn out today either. I walked slower.

I saw a white calf nursing from a black cow, and amusing things like a road sign: "Loose Chippings, 20 mph." The blackberry bushes were in bloom with their white-petaled flowers. Eventually the berries will form and ripen—bright colors in a bright world. I remembered myself. My immediate neighbors are practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness. I have a responsibility to them.

Bhaktin Sioban referred to trying to "win a losing battle" when she tries to control her mind during *japa*. I think until we're liberated, it's always going to feel like that. It's not realistic to expect to quiet the mind completely. We have to learn to dovetail some of our mental flow. Or ignore it. Or tolerate it. *Tṛṇād api sunīcena*. Be tolerant. Tolerance means tolerating all the mind's chatter. For example, we can't control the world and make everyone nice, peaceful devotees. Rather, the nondevotees are always doing things to disturb us. Similarly, our mind is filled with nondevotee subpersons and voices and lack of control and indulgence in nonsense, and we can do nothing but tolerate them. Don't take them so seriously. Don't invest energy in them. And don't become disturbed or disheartened by the fact that the mind is "running wild."

Bhaktin Sioban said, "I think I have developed a dangerously defeatist attitude where I have come to the conclusion that it is 'mission impossible.'" That's exactly what we shouldn't do. Don't be defeated. It's simply a choice we can make—are we going to be knocked out by a fatalistic attitude, or are we going to scramble and fight to win back territory from our *cañcalā* minds? Don't give up the ship. Persist and win.

"But shamefully," Sioban continued, "my strongest desire in relation to my *japa* is to get my sixteen rounds over with. How can I overcome this?"

Should I give some advice I can't follow myself? I would rather say something we both could follow. It's good that you know you must chant your sixteen rounds and "get them over with" before you go on with the rest of your day, but when you finish those six-

teen obligatory rounds, continue to chant. That's the real answer. If I don't follow it myself, if I too am intent on *finishing* my rounds, then I'm in the same boat she is. But I relish the counting. I love moving my counter beads and seeing the rounds progress from zero to four, from four to eight, seeing how much time they take, and becoming an efficient chanter. Then nine and ten. If you get interrupted, then making sure throughout your day that there's time to complete those last ones before the hour is too late. It's not bad that everything revolves around "getting them done." It's a sign of responsibility and health. "Now I'm on ten and the morning is growing older. Better hurry along. There's that more full feeling at eleven, then into the homestretch at twelve. I'm not afraid because I know I'll get them done—there's only four left!" Then a brave thirteen. When you do fourteen, it's like the nectar of accomplishment, a feeling of completion. There's no way you'll fail now. Fifteen, you're almost done. Sixteen, a perfection of the minimum quota.

Why not do an extra one or two—or don't even count how many—but keep going? Yes, I can say this to Bhaktin Sioban, just as I say it to myself.



## July 23

The moon was unusually bright and full last night. It was still beaming away at 5 A.M. when I started on my walk. Dawn was approaching by then, too, so the whole sky was bright and clear, and a breeze was up. The underbrush is so thick by now, the end of July. The evergreens seem to stay the same all year, but the small roads get smaller as weeds, bushes, and treelets converge in the middle and overtake them. The same is true of the meadows, except the ones where farmers graze their livestock or mow them down for hay.

I have been timing my walk and my rounds. I'm not sure why, exactly. It's just part of my methodical nature. I wish I could do something more to help the actual quality of the rounds, but it's not something manageable like that. Surrender to chanting is wild and unlimited and also simple, like surrender of the heart. In the end, though, it's Kṛṣṇa's causeless mercy. Nothing I can control with a wristwatch and stopwatch combined.

Bahulāśva dāsa said, "I have been chanting sixteen rounds for thirteen years. It seems the main things I have attained are bad habits." Again I ask, "Does he pick up this 'down' attitude from me?" No, I didn't invent it. It's the natural humility and honesty of devotees who admit their minds are uncontrolled.

Bahulāśva gave me a rundown of his *anarthas*. He said the main problem is inattention and that he can "identify the less esoteric reasons for this."

He has let his inattention enter into the physical realm, something I don't do. He confessed to chanting his sixteen rounds while watering the garden, driving the car, and holding the baby. He has no set time for *japa*, but gets them done whenever he can.

Once again I'm faced with the alternative of taking this as grave defects in a person's *sādhana*, or to smile and say that we all live with these problems. It would be easiest for me to take a "holier-than-thou" attitude as a *sannyāsī* and as a nondriver.

We can smile and tolerate our defects, and then we can still turn to the *śāstra*'s descriptions of the holy name. But there's danger of complacency. We'll be no different than the pseudo-religionists Prabhupāda criticizes so strongly. The would-be Chris-

tians say that they can commit sins because Lord Jesus has absolved their sins by his death. Are we much different if we say Lord Kṛṣṇa has guaranteed to appear fully in His name, so even if we don't chant attentively, we can still go back to Godhead? (In the most recent issue of *Back to Godhead*, a young writer strongly asserts that many *śāstras* prove that even if we chant the holy name accidentally or inattentively at the time of death, we are guaranteed to go to the eternal spiritual world.)

I myself don't care for devotees who assume dark looks and crusading attitudes and say that ISKCON has gone to hell because of something like inattentive chanting. If someone feels that way about it, that offenseless chanting is sorely lacking in ISKCON's members, then the best thing is to reform his or her own *japa sādhana*. That's mainly what I have to say to Bahulāśva. He should take his *japa* seriously. He has household duties, but that doesn't mean he should chant his rounds while driving. The day should be structured around priority for *japa*.





I just read a purport by Prabhupāda where he says a spiritual master never advises a disciple to do anything the spiritual master doesn't do himself. I have a tiny edge of righteousness when it comes to chanting. I can tell someone to chant at a prescribed time and not to chant while driving because I follow that advice. If I step beyond that, however, I'm tongue-tied. My advice becomes theoretical.

Bahulāśva asked, "Why do we say the chanting is so easy when it actually seems difficult?" To answer a question like that isn't going to solve an individual's problem of poor *japa* habits.

Chanting is easy compared to *aṣṭāṅga-yoga*. *Aṣṭāṅga-yoga* is impossible for us. Chanting is easy in the sense that anyone can pronounce the mantras, regardless of whether they are sitting or standing. Even mechanical chanting brings great benefit. But it's not easy to *pray* the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra, to chant and cry and fix the mind and hear the holy name.

Yesterday I read in the "*Prīti-lakṣaṇam*" newsletter someone's enthusiastic letter about how we can all improve our chanting. She addresses it to "all those who have trouble paying attention to chanting," and introduces herself as "one who has successfully mastered the art." She advises that we sit down with straight backs and concentrate on the third eye. Then we should meditate with closed eyes on the self (*ātma*) as existing somewhere in the head. She goes on to describe some specific points, none of which are mentioned (as far as I know) in Śrīla Prabhupāda's books.

It seemed ridiculous to me, and I wondered why the editors printed it. I didn't object so much to the stuff about the third eye, but I wanted to ask that devotee how long she has been successfully practicing her method and achieving the results she described. We shouldn't proclaim that we have found "The Way" unless our practices have been giving us good results for at least ten or twenty years. Otherwise, anyone can come up with a scheme that seems to turn everything around for the good.

The article's author says, "Try this method and you'll start having regular dreams of your spiritual master. You will be completely blissful, lose all envy," and so on. I couldn't help but think, "Yes, try it for two weeks and see what happens two months from now." Ask the same person, and she's liable to say, "Well, to tell you the truth, it petered out."

I am not saying this in a negative mood; I am taking solace in the fact that chanting is a long haul, and we just have to be patient. We're doing all right as long as we persist. At least that's one way to look at it.

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The weather is nice, the trees are full, the lanes are completely solitary for my *japa* walks, and the devotees hope that I can give them something other than negativity and hopelessness. Surely something good is coming from all this chanting. But we can do a lot better.

I wonder why there was such a bright moon last night. I know there is probably some meteorological explanation which I am not aware of, something about the time of year perhaps, or the climatic conditions, low and high pressure areas, etc. Then it occurred to me that a *bhakta* could give the simple answer that last night's moon was the benediction moon spreading its rays, as in Lord Caitanya's *Śikṣāṣṭakam* verse. One could say with cynical ease, "Oh yeah? Well, my moon seems to be waning. If that was the waxing moon, then how come so many devotees still talk about inattentive chanting and bad habits being so hard to break?"

O moon of Lord Caitanya, please see Your devotees struggling to be devotees of the holy name. Give us the impetus to improve so that we can speak honestly to others about the work we are doing to reform ourselves and the necessity for good chanting habits. We don't want to deteriorate into a bogus movement which, although calling itself the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, has few chanters among its ranks who actually relish and spread the nectar of Your holy names.



## July 24

It rained on my walk this morning. I decided to leave my walking stick behind because I can't juggle so many things at once—the umbrella, my bead bag, and the walking stick tucked under my arm. Often, when I start out in rain, it stops halfway through the walk, but this morning it was totally overcast and the tinkle-tinkle sound on the skylight was steady. This morning was so different from yesterday's luminous moon. Isn't this similar to the moods we go through from one day to the next in our chanting? What to make of it? Our chanting will be full of light one day, then plunged under a cover of cloud and rain the next. Attentive, then inattentive. Bordering on earnest prayer, then becoming a forgetful, mechanical act.

Remuṇā dāśī said, “*Japa* has developed into a big chore. I know that's a terrible attitude. I would so love to enjoy and want to chant. When I was given my first set of chanting beads in the temple, I remember being so excited. I couldn't wait to try them out. I was still living at home with my parents at the time and casually used to tell my mother I was going out for a walk, inwardly excited about the prospect of chanting. This feeling was heightened, I suppose, by the element of secrecy involved. I also remember after I received *harināma* initiation: I had soaked my new initiation beads in oil and they were hanging up to dry. I remember looking at them with a great feeling of anticipation: ‘These are the beads I will chant on for the rest of my life.’

“I would love to have these feelings again. I have such difficulty even doing the chanting, never mind concentrating on the holy name. I would like to look forward to the day's chanting.”

I feel more prepared to answer this. The days of wonder are not over. When I think back to my own romance with my new red beads, how I used to hold them in my hands and pass them through my fingers—what a feeling of luxury! I was twenty-six years old, but imagined myself an old *sādhū* in India. It's almost unreal to me now, that early excitement.

I wouldn't trade it for what I have now. I didn't know then all the obstacles I would have to face. My excitement was also full of naïveté. I continue to go through naïve periods when I think I have become a man of prayer. But yes, there is something won-

derful about that excitement to chant and, yes, we want to recapture it. I think we *can* recapture it. I haven't given up hope. What can I advise someone who feels chanting is a chore and feels so hopeless?

When Remuṇā started chanting, she was unmarried. Now she has a husband and three children to cook for and a house to maintain. "No time to chant." No fresh feeling of surrendering to the Lord through His holy names.

One reason we let ourselves lapse like this—and this lapse can last a lifetime—is the sinking feeling that maybe the chanting doesn't work after all. Most devotees are probably above this doubt, but it may crop up in subtle ways. We have to fight those doubts. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, "This ignorance has come upon you and has produced a doubt. Now rise, Arjuna, and armed with the weapon of yoga, stand and fight." Our weapon is the Kṛṣṇa conscious life itself. Chanting itself is the weapon against these doubts. Chanting and hearing and service. As we hear from Prabhupāda, we realize that chanting must remain an important part of our lives. It's not dependent on our growing older or on whether our original sweet taste seems to fade over the years. Maybe it gets grim, maybe it gets stark, but we push on anyway.

Have you ever read about Teresa of Avila? She writes in her autobiography that for the first twenty years of her constant practice of prayer, she felt she made no progress at all. It was all dry, all distraction, and it produced no real symptoms of the increased virtue in her life that she expected. She says she felt her life was beset with frivolity and the tendency to socialize, even while living in a convent. Then after twenty years, things started to change. Kṛṣṇa gave her mercy.

If a mystical saint can go through long periods of dryness, why should we complain that the wonder of our *bhaktin* days is no longer the same?

Remuṇā dāśī's complaint has an opposite effect on me. It encourages me. I don't want to exploit her confession for my own benefit, and I would like to give her solace, so it's good that we share feelings and pass positive energy back and forth. We can help each other find hope. That in itself will be infectious. Remuṇā shouldn't see her chanting as a dreadful chore. She has to



put it into its rightful place. Chanting is as important as taking care of the garden or her husband and children.

Remuṇā, be a little rebellious toward your present priorities. Don't accept everything other people expect of you. You describe how exciting it was when you went on your secret *japa* walks. Your parents would have been shocked had they known why you were going out, like a *gopī*, to be with Kṛṣṇa and chant His holy names. Why don't you still save a place for some "*parakīya*" feelings—"I belong to Kṛṣṇa"—with the same abandon and excitement of your early days in Kṛṣṇa consciousness? Why don't you go off on your own? Take a walk and tell your husband and children that you *have* to go. Think to yourself that Kṛṣṇa is actually your true husband and Lord. You have to save yourself and not neglect your chanting.

Your beads are not just oiled for the first time and waiting for you to begin your lifetime of chanting. They are worn down by over a decade of effort. That's not something to be sorry about. Take out your chanting beads now and look at them in your hands. You may not feel the same rush of spiritual adrenaline, but you can feel something deep, something soft and very dear. That is, that you are keeping true to that promise you made to dedicate your life to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. You are a Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee, so you chant.

Since your letter has given me encouragement, why shouldn't it work that way for you too? Just think about it; turn the switch from off to on. I'm looking at my red beads now. You look at yours. Take them up again in earnest.

I walked the last half mile down a narrow, downhill road. The roadside wild flowers grow up along with weeds three, four, even five feet tall. Some of the foxgloves grow up to seven feet tall. I heard rain on the umbrella. When I approached the distant line of pines, I knew the cottage where I am staying was hidden behind them. I don't take this for granted, but pray to feel its dearness. In the same way, the dearness of chanting is with me. It's part of my life—chanting and walking—and *japa* talking too.

Sure, we wish we were better chanters. That goes without saying, although we say it again and again anyway. I mean, we don't forget that we are poor chanters. We regret it, but we try to turn that energy into constant and patient attempts. I am grateful for that.







The man who would answer questions about chanting goes out and chants his own rounds. Using a stopwatch this morning, I noticed that the first round took a little over ten minutes. Too slow, but that's not really a big problem. One of my Godbrothers takes ten minutes a round, and he has been chanting like that for over twenty years. He just accepts it. The main thing is to pay attention and to hear.

I heard my chanting and didn't notice other sounds—birds, small chirpy sounds, and then always behind those noises, the sound of the running creek. In the distance, a dog was barking. The air was delicious, but I didn't notice that much either. I didn't gauge the breeze by the movement of branches—I just chanted *japa*.

It's pleasant to walk in these hills on the tarmac road. Of course, the real blessing is that I have the whole thing to myself. It's summer, so it gets light before 5 A.M. Nobody's up to bother me.

Devī dāsī asked a question about faith in the holy name. She started out by quoting *Bhāgavatam* 6.2.19: "If a person unaware of the effective potency of a certain medicine takes that medicine or is forced to take it, it will act even without his knowledge because its potency does not depend on the patient's understanding. Similarly, even though one does not know the value of chanting the holy name of the Lord, if one chants knowingly or unknowingly, the chanting will be very effective."

But after quoting this, she asked, "Since it's hard to see the effect of chanting, how can we keep faith that the medicine (chanting) is actually working?"

The simplest answer is to say that she has given the evidence herself with this *Bhāgavatam* verse. I can't come up with anything better than that. *Śāstra* is axiomatic. If the *Bhāgavatam* says that the chanting is effective, then that's good enough for us. What is the point in asking, "How can we have faith?"

Still, it's good to think about faith and to try to feel it more. We have to learn to count on faith. If we do, we won't be doubtful or depressed about our chanting. After all, it's only the skeptic or the atheist who thinks there has to be an immediately perceivable cause and effect. Even he (if he wants to look) will see that there is

such evidence. We didn't give up illicit sex and intoxication by accident. Those were deep habits and difficult to break. How did they suddenly dissolve? We chanted the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra, as given to us by Śrīla Prabhupāda, and that gave us the strength immediately to clean our hearts.

Therefore, we live by the *śāstra*, not just by our feelings, which may go up and down. When I admitted in a *BTG* article that I didn't feel blissful when I chanted, one reader was outraged. He said I spoke like an anti-cult deprogrammer, debunking the effects of chanting. How dare I admit that I don't taste the nectar of the holy name? In the article, I offered Vedic evidence about the power of the holy name, and I acknowledged that despite my lack of feeling, the *śāstra* says that the chanting is working to deliver me from the bodily conception and bringing me into appreciation of Kṛṣṇa. Faith is proved by experience, but it is tested before we have experience. Our faith is to follow the *śāstric* injunctions. We don't look for separate conclusions. Our own research or sense perception does not disprove *śāstra*. Therefore, chanting is effective, whether we can sense it or not.

Devī dāsī also asked me a personal question. She thinks I put a lot of effort into chanting—apparently because I make a big fuss about it. “So I would like to ask you, what inspires you?”

I don't know if I can call it inspiration, but I have a drive which comes from *śāstra* itself, that doesn't let me forget the importance of chanting. I find chanting easy. I can't do everything in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. For example, I find it difficult to live in close association with other people, to manage their problems or their money. I also find it difficult to confront nondevotees in certain preaching situations. But chanting is easy. Even a child can chant.

What inspires me? Lord Caitanya's mercy inspires me. He has given us such easy access to Him through the holy names. I don't want to turn down the opportunity, even though I don't get immediate good results. I am inspired to put at least some effort into my chanting and remind myself of its prime importance.

Also, chanting appeals to me in an aesthetic sense. Maybe I was a monk in my last life—at least I aspired to be a man of prayer. It's so beautiful—Prabhupāda and the *ācāryas* have given us the chance to take up our beads in hand and to repeat again and again the *japa* of the holy name. Similarly, the congregational singing



of *kīrtana* appeals to me. It's so disarming and wonderful of Kṛṣṇa to think of such a process! This chanting movement is such a nice movement, and it's so easily introduced. Therefore, although I don't get the results I hanker for, whenever I think of chanting, it always appeals to me. It's always available to me and easy enough to keep trying. No matter how many times I fail, I never think of abandoning the attempt. I am always ready to try again.

Devī dāśī quoted another Sixth Canto verse (6.2.18) where the holy name is described as burning to ashes without fail all reactions to one's sinful activities. This is the result whether you chant knowingly or unknowingly. It's compared to a fire burning dry grass to ashes. Her question was whether this statement contradicts the statement that it's offensive to commit sins on the strength of chanting. She also cited the story of the wedding party, where the boatman rowed all night but made no progress because he didn't pull up the anchor. The anchor is sense gratification, and if we attempt Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but don't give up material indulgence, we cannot make progress.

My understanding of these statements is that even casual chanting can liberate a person, but then in the next instant, he can unliberate himself by his sinful acts. It sounds weird, but it's we who are the weird actors. The mercy of the holy name stays constant, but we have the free will to douse the holy fire with the water of our sinful acts. If we keep dousing the fire and then chanting again, our progress will be sporadic at best. Still, the holy names are always ready to liberate us at any moment. The case of Ajāmila is proof.

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On the homestretch of the walk today, I paused and looked at an open field. It was an unused pasture. The gate was open and the grass was overgrown. Then, in the distance, I saw more patches of bordered land, low hills, and clouds that looked like layers of hills. I stopped and thought about the possibility of all nature chanting. There's an intriguing statement in *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* about the *kīrtana* of the nonmoving living entities. Haridāsa Ṭhākura says that when you chant in a forest and there's an echo, it's not actually an echo, but the chanting of the dumb living



entities. I take it that Haridāsa Ṭhākura is not just saying something poetic, but neither do I know what that inanimate chanting is. Maybe some of the mystics sensed it, although they couldn't really express it. Some poets have expressed it in impersonal or vague ways. Wordsworth talks of stopping on the Westminster bridge and seeing London in the morning before the city awakens. It seems to him that a Great Being is breathing there. He senses the spiritual oneness, a divine movement behind all things. For a devotee, that can be brought to a higher level and be thought of as chanting. The mourning dove coo-coos, but those syllables can be taken as "Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa." In fact, in Goloka, the birds do chant like that in Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*. Some creatures chant Kṛṣṇa's name, and some chant Rādhā's name, some celebrate the union of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and some celebrate Their separation. Can't there be a reflection of that in the material world?

At least it can be dreamed of by an aspiring devotee. Why not see everyone and everything appreciating Kṛṣṇa and celebrating His presence? After all, Kṛṣṇa is behind all things. If there is a





rosy tint in the morning clouds, that's Kṛṣṇa. The material enjoyers cannot understand it, but what is Kṛṣṇa's is always Kṛṣṇa's. If a devotee walks in a scenic and solitary place and savors the silence, it's not an ordinary silence. It's not a vacuum. It's not an absence of sound. A devotee listens for the chanting. He hears a breeze in the pines and appreciates that no people are up and that nothing seems to be stirring. He looks around in anticipation finally to hear the chanting. Is the bubbling creek chanting? Are the delicate weed tassels dancing in *kīrtana*? Certainly the blue sky is Kṛṣṇa blue.

I should probably keep these thoughts to myself, but I would rather think like this than condemn myself as a nature lover, as if it's doomed to be mundane. Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.

## July 26

I was out before 5 A.M. this morning. The gray was slowly lifting off the land. In the field, I saw a young lamb looking for its mother. The blackberries and raspberries were still blooming, and the creek rushed in my ears. Little, sparrow-like birds looked like mice on the road until I got close and they flew a few feet away. They didn't seem to want to fly much. It's probably the time they spend running, jumping, and hopping around.

What about me? Chanted mechanically, considered, mulled . . . Why is it I don't want to do better? Is it that I don't want to pay the price saints pay? It's as if I'm maintaining a thick wall, as thick as these wooded hills, between me and real Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Someday I may see what it is. Then would I actually admit, "I don't want the advanced state"? How could I be so foolish? Yet, I might have to admit, "I can't pay the price." Such a swallowing of pride, such humiliation.

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Gopa-vṛndā dāsa quoted to me from the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Madhya* 22.107): "When the heart is purified by hearing and chanting, the living entity naturally awakens." He admitted that he chants his prescribed rounds while driving and at other times when he's not attentive. "But I am thinking I can chant this way until the financial pressure eases off. Then in my old years, I can dedicate more time to chanting properly." He asked me if I would advise him to change his priorities and immediately begin chanting as he knows best, "whatever the cost, based on your own experience, that time is too precious to postpone until a later date."

I wish I had that experience. Or I wish I could learn from it. Prabhupāda said that even if we live for a million years, it will soon come to an end. We read a sentence like that in our brief life duration of seventy or eighty years. In any case, it's gone all too soon.

Depend on Kṛṣṇa. Money comes to us by our karma. It may seem impossible for us to reorder our priorities, but that's a mental block. You don't have to chant your rounds in the car. It's not

impossible to do them properly. You just have to put first things first. I am not saying you don't have to worry about money or your family or your mortgage and all that—those are real worries, at least for the time being—but those worries are not really stopping you from chanting your rounds nicely. Just sit down with a clean piece of paper and plan a day that starts with sixteen rounds. *Then* plan to drive into town. You won't starve to death. Somehow or other it will work. If you worry so much about money that you conclude beforehand that you can't chant in the morning, then you are making a big mistake.

I guess I am in a position to give advice like that because I at least accomplish that much. Or rather, I shouldn't say that I've accomplished it. Kṛṣṇa has been kind and given me a life in which I have time to chant my rounds. I know just having time to chant my rounds is not perfection, but if a person doesn't even give himself time to chant properly, then he's not even as far along as I am.

I have to encourage devotees with this problem to not stay in that syndrome. At the same time, someone has to encourage me to get past my own stuckness. Who is that person? Who will I listen to? Just as my advice often falls on deaf ears, so no one can advise me.

We listen to our well intentioned advisors. We shake our heads thoughtfully. We even smile and say, "You have my number. I really ought to do what you say. I think I will, starting tomorrow." Then we don't.

Who can help such a fool? Will it take death himself, or near-death, to grab us by the neck? By then, as Gopa-vṛndā admitted, it may be too late.

He gave me another quote from *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (1.2.17): "Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Personality of Godhead, who is the Paramātmā [Supersoul] in everyone's heart and the benefactor of the truthful devotee, cleanses desire for material enjoyment from the heart of the devotee who has developed the urge to hear His messages, which are in themselves virtuous when properly heard and chanted."

He asked if chanting his rounds in an inattentive way is comparable to breaking the principles (I assume here he means breaking the four regulative principles). His question became unclear when he talked about balancing things. "Which is the lesser of



evils, developing the *urge* and being *truthful* in relation to the *sādhū-saṅga*, or maintaining my *āśrama* . . . Is it justifiable to find a balance or should chanting always be at the forefront?”

A balance is all right. But what did he mean when he asked whether chanting should be in the forefront? Chanting should be enough in the forefront that we don't chant our rounds while driving. It should be enough in the forefront that it gets prime time in the morning. If that's what he meant by forefront, then yes, chanting should be in the forefront.

But it's not either-or—either I spend time to raise money (for Kṛṣṇa conscious purposes), or I spend time being truthful and associating with other devotees. There has to be time for everything. Otherwise, if chanting were the all in all, our movement would advise everyone to become *bābājīs*. Prabhupāda says that *bābājī* life is a liberated state. We can't artificially jump to that position. We have to be balanced.

We are fortunate to find other things in Kṛṣṇa consciousness for which we have some taste. I love to write and read. But chant too. Don't neglect the chanting.

If I were to ask myself this question, “Should chanting always be in the forefront?” I would have to admit that I could always do better. The chanting is so easy to do that we can do it along with other activities. We can chant all the time. Why *not* always put chanting in the forefront of our lives? Prabhupāda told people that they didn't have to give up anything; they should just add the chanting. It doesn't really “take up” time. It doesn't steal interest away from other projects.

We're unfortunate if we take an “efficiency expert” attitude toward our lives and say, “With all respects to the chanting, I shall have to omit it from my life between 10 A.M. and 1 P.M. because at that time I cook lunch, clean up, and eat.” Why can't we chant while doing those things? Let's put chanting always in the forefront. Chanting is the one before all the zeroes.

Put chanting in the front because it's easy and because the *śāstras* and the spiritual master recommend it as most potent. It's also urgent. It's how we pray. We have to have that faith. Even in the absence of faith, chant Hare Kṛṣṇa anyway throughout the day and ask Kṛṣṇa, “Please, please help me turn this grinding chanting into something nice.”

July 27

If it weren't for these questions the devotees are kindly asking me, my *japa* talk would probably be more negative. The devotees give me a chance to defend the faith, to represent the *siddhānta*. I tighten my belt and put aside my own shortcomings to speak against the demons of doubt. A devotee doesn't have to be completely liberated before he can speak on Kṛṣṇa's behalf. He doesn't have to emphasize his own moods or faults, but he can home in on what is perfect and absolute. When we're speaking to others, we want to help them. Kṛṣṇa's representative doesn't speak capriciously. One might say, "Yes, this is very good. Why don't you always speak like that? Why ever be anything *but* a representative of the Absolute Truth?"

In honesty, we have to admit, at least to ourselves, that we don't completely measure up to that standard. Therefore, when we preach, we are actually preaching to ourselves as well as to others. Our selves are divided: the bona fide representative of Kṛṣṇa part gives good advice, and the struggling *sādhaka* side tries to listen.

Karuṇa dāśī asked me, "Is it true that it doesn't make any difference whether you chant out loud or in the mind?" She quoted from the section in *Journal & Poems* where I was very ill, and I said I had to chant silent rounds. Also, a senior devotee, when answering questions at a festival, said that it didn't matter whether one chanted out loud or in the mind. Karuṇa asked, "Then why do we chant out loud? Is it because it's easier and quicker to control the mind?"

Prabhupāda emphasized chanting aloud. In this age, to think of Kṛṣṇa in the mind—which is what silent chanting is—is very difficult. The mind is full of noise. The silently remembered mantra can easily be overcome. It's too easy to put Kṛṣṇa on the back burner while we follow a passive or far away line of thought. It's even easier to turn the chanting motor off completely. The sound vibration of the mantra breaks through other thoughts and wakes us up.

But that doesn't mean that inattentive chanting is allowed. In the absolute sense, silent chanting and out loud chanting are both chanting. In Sanātana Gosvāmī's *Bṛhat-Bhāgavatāmṛta*, Gopakumāra visits different persons in the higher planets and he hears



different versions on this point. Some of the *jñānīs* tell him it's better to think of Kṛṣṇa in the mind, but Sanātana Gosvāmī's conclusion is that it is better to chant out loud.

One of the benefits of out loud chanting is that it helps other living entities because they hear our chanting. Also, Prabhupāda says that out loud chanting engages two senses, the tongue and the ears. When these two senses are focused on the object of Kṛṣṇa's name, then our yoga is complete.

Dīnanātha dāsa asked me about the *ṭṭṇād api* verse, the foundation of our chanting. "One should think oneself lower than the straw in the street, be more tolerant than a tree, and always prepared to give all respects to others." He asked, "While meeting nondevotees at my job, it's difficult to offer respect when it doesn't seem due. Should we adopt this attitude of humility no matter how we are treated?"

Hmmm. There is a different kind of respect offered to a devotee than to a nondevotee. Even among devotees we offer respect according to their level of advancement. Prabhupāda says that when a nondevotee gives us advice or his opinion, we respond with politeness: "Yes sir, what you say, that is all right." We can't take him seriously, especially when his views conflict with Kṛṣṇa consciousness. If he doesn't want to hear about Kṛṣṇa consciousness from us, we show respect by according him his God-given space. We don't commit violence upon him or disturb him, and if he criticizes us, we tolerate it. Why should it be so difficult to offer everyone respect? Everyone is part and parcel of God and should be respected accordingly.

In regard to chanting, we will be less disturbed in mind if we don't try to get respect from others. Neither should we allow nondevotees to disturb us. In that sense, we can say a devotee offers a nondevotee respect as a tactic—by offering respect to others, the devotee will be left alone to chant. Give people their due and be done with it. We are not in competition with the nondevotees.

Respect offered to devotees is outlined in *The Nectar of Instruction*. We offer respect in our minds to those who are favorable to Kṛṣṇa consciousness and who occasionally chant the holy names, even if they don't follow the rules and regulations of *sādhana-bhakti*. We offer sincere obeisances to those who follow the rules



and regulations. We serve the first-class devotees and try to hear from them about Kṛṣṇa.

A crow landing on a fence post and taking off again looked like a human being in front of the school house. Then further down, the six-foot-high milkweed looked like another person to me. I wanted to be alone and to rejoice in the morning feast—the early light before the blazing sun, the sloping green valley ending in pines, the vantage where we can see one valley after another, and hills in the distance, and sky, and clouds. The half moon looked like it had frayed edges. It was lingering even at 6:00 A.M. The mourning doves were imploring. I was out for an hour and hardly noticed the surroundings until the end, partly because it was dark, but mostly because I was chanting and paying attention to the sound. Then I paused and saw the thorny raspberry bushes, the milkweed, the violets, and the button flowers. Keep chanting.



## July 28

All this analyzing, trying to ascertain, “How good or bad is my *japa*?” I imagine a simple Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava villager in India walking and chanting year after year without analyzing his performance. Maybe we Westerners are forced to think like this. If so, let’s put it to good use. How can we improve our chanting?

Part of me wanted to be that villager today, though. I left the house five minutes earlier than usual and saw the sky dark up past the schoolhouse where Prabhupāda dāsa had the light on. I knew he was up chanting. Were those faint raindrops I felt? My walking stick click-clicked, and my fingers worked a softer clicking on my beads as they dropped one by one into my beadbag. Everything was complete in my walking and chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.

Was my performance good or bad? I don’t know and I didn’t ask. I just chanted.

This morning I stood on the little bridge and looked down into the rushing creek. I heard the water over the rocks chanting, and I thought, “Should I really try to answer more questions about *japa*?” I felt reluctant to go to the discursive level, and I was also afraid of presumption. I wanted to stay a simple villager, or even as simple as water running over rocks. I wanted to chant unconsciously, the way water flows down rocks or the way breath goes in and out without conscious effort.

Pitamahā is a challenging kind of person. He has a good mind for a preacher, and he likes to combat the nondevotees’ attitudes. I expected his questions to me would also be challenging. He started out, however, with that searing self-effacement that most devotees seem to have when they talk about their *japa*. He said, “As a general rule, the more you practice something, the more proficient you become at it, but my chanting seems to be the exception to this rule. The more I chant, the worse it gets and the harder it becomes.” I could take this as some kind of gallows humor, but you can’t laugh it off. He’s serious. But when devotees talk like that, they often can’t get a handle on the seriousness themselves. At least that’s how it seems to me. They speak this way in a moment of truth, but do they really feel it? If we really are getting



worse at the most important activity of our lives, shouldn't we do something about it? Isn't it an emergency? Shouldn't something be rearranged? Therefore I say that despite the "black humor," there's a kind of levity. We don't *really* think we're getting worse and worse. We're all headed over the falls without protest. "The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation."

What can I say? "Better do something about it, Prabhu."

Pitamahā confines himself to a stage of permanently offensive chanting. As a member of that group (he particularly cited inattention as his "favorite"), he wanted to know, "How useful is offensive chanting? Am I crediting or debiting my spiritual bank account if I continue the way I'm going?"

Even offensive chanting is valuable. It's certainly better than not chanting at all. At least it gives us a hope that we can move on to the next stage, *nāmābhasa*, or chanting a shadow of the holy name. In the *nāmābhasa* stage, we become free of our sinful reactions, but even offensive chanting saves us from going down into the lower species of life.

We can't dig ourselves into a hole when we chant without improvement. Actually, I don't think we do chant "without improvement." Chanting improves our situation when we show Kṛṣṇa that we won't give up. We're not like one of those quitters who say they tried the chanting and it didn't help. Neither do we twist the logic and say, "I might as well quit because I'm so offensive. My chanting is just a blasphemy to God anyway." There is truth in our chanting; we vowed to chant. There can be no question of ever giving it up. Kṛṣṇa recognizes these virtues, and He doesn't leave us stuck. Don't think you're not going anywhere.

Still, we have to admit that although our inattentive chanting is progressive, it's also slow. Therefore, make a change. Chant without expectation, and don't align yourself as an inattentive, offensive chanter the way someone might align themselves with a particular political party. We don't want to be offensive. We want to improve, despite all other considerations and obstacles. Then make the effort. Show the holy name your love and determination.

I find something put-offish about remarks that are too stark in their self-effacing negativity. On the one hand, they shake us out of our sentimental conceptions of being "good chanters," but

when those remarks declare permanent spiritual bankruptcy, then I can't settle for them. We simply have to do better. Pītamahā can do better and so can I.

If Pītamahā agrees, then he has to think about and let me know—or at least let himself know—what his pragmatic plan is to get out of the lower depths. Where there's a will, there's a way. Submit a plan for improved chanting.

He admitted that he's really not so stark in his estimation of himself, but rather he's covered over with complacency. "My intelligence seems to have surrendered to the situation I find myself in, thinking I'm doing all right; I've got a family who are trying to practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I'm living in a community that is trying to practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness, etc. Yet before I joined the movement, it was very clear I wasn't doing all right. Consequently, the impetus was there for improvement. How can I convince myself that I'm still in a mess and that chanting better *japa* is as essential for me now as it was then?"

At the risk of sounding repetitive, my answer is that he should read *Bhāgavatam*—Prabhupāda's purports—regularly. There he will get the authoritative statements on the importance of chanting. He will also expose himself to the steady scientific knowledge of *śāstra*, that all *jīvas* are in difficulty because they have to face repeated birth and death. Kali-yuga only makes it worse. He doesn't have to rely on the early inspiration he had as a young devotee, or worry about the fading of that inspiration to hear from the Absolute Truth. The *Bhāgavatam* is our daily newspaper, our in-depth study of current events. As we read the news, we'll stay in touch with our needs and our predicament as entangled, permanently bound *jīvas*. And we will also be reminded of the remedy.

"The material miseries of the living entity, which are superfluous to him, can be directly mitigated by the linking process of devotional service. But the mass of people do not know this, and therefore the learned Vyāsadeva compiled this Vedic literature, which is in relation to the Supreme Truth" (*Bhāg.* 1.7.6).

Reading *śāstra* and chanting *japa* go well together. I suspect that Pītamahā, although feeling a little righteous about the work he does to maintain his family and contribute to his community, is not tending to regular reading. The pistons in his devotional en-



gine aren't hitting. Therefore, he can say he's not aware that he's in a mess and that he's not aware of the importance of chanting. Otherwise, such a cool-headed, pragmatic man would do something serious, just as he does when he gets repeated "overdue" notices or sees some other alarming symptom of disorder in his life.

## July 29

*Japa* talk is impulsive; it doesn't want to wait. It bursts into my *japa* on the walk.

I have to give it vent. Sometimes when I'm in my room chanting, I get a brilliant idea (or so it seems at the time). I stop chanting and write it down. Wouldn't it be better to keep chanting? But what if it's really insistent? Make a brief note, then keep going. Chanting is the important thing.

I started out early this morning. It was quite dark because the sky was filled with clouds. I kept seeing frogs and people where there were none. I thought about my romantic notions of prayer and chanting. It seems I always turn these things over in my mind, like the Christian monks of Mount Athos and the Egyptian desert fathers in their cells, praying and writing down what we now find in the *Philokalia*. I don't read those books anymore, but they left an impression on my psyche. Deep prayer, being all alone with God. Those monks were careful not to be tricked by their minds into spiritual sense gratification, pride, speculation, or wrong ideas. They had prayer mapped out.

But for me to think like that, it becomes a romantic notion because I can't really practice it. Neither is it who I really am. Neither can I imitate the highest stages of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. I don't even *try* that. I don't want to imitate anything. Where does that leave me? Just with Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare. When I stay with the holy name alone, even my self-analysis gets left behind. Just chanting and walking and, when I feel the impulse, talking about chanting.

But that's another romance or unreality, to think that I can just chant without other mental associations. I have to live with myself. I'm still riding the *mano-ratha*, the chariot of the mind. I *desire* to ride the Hare Kṛṣṇa train and to devote my best time to that.

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Vaikuṇṭha dāsī wanted a further explanation of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura’s knock-out statement that merely chanting the outward syllables of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra doesn’t mean we are actually chanting the holy name. “For myself, my main meditation in chanting is simply to get my sixteen rounds done. Before I read that quote I thought that there was benefit, even if the *japa* is poor.”

It seems everyone has similar concerns. Of course, even poor chanting is beneficial. We know that because the *śāstras* say it. The *śāstric* statements are not exaggerated. Even chanting in jest or mocking or by accidental combinations of the syllables *kṛṣ-ṇa* or *rā-ma* has tremendous benefit. Ajāmila chanted the names of Nārāyaṇa without thinking of Nārāyaṇa; he was thinking of his son. Still, he got the result. The Viṣṇudūtas came and chased off the Yamadūtas. All the Viṣṇudūtas knew was that their holy master, the Supreme Lord, had been called on by this man. Therefore, he was no longer a fit subject for Yamarāja’s punishment.

But we can’t take away the sting of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura’s statement. We’re only chanting the outer form of the holy name. Even that outer form is beneficial, but the holy name in essence merges the chanter in love of God. Someone experiencing love of Kṛṣṇa is free of material attachment and certainly doesn’t chant only to get the rounds out of the way.

One problem is that we don’t think we’re missing much when we realize we haven’t attained *kṛṣṇa-prema* by our chanting. Instead, we prefer to be assured that the holy name is powerful enough to benefit us even if we chant poorly. We tend to think that the advanced stages are something we don’t need to pursue. Do we think it’s humility not to aspire for tears in the eyes when we chant? After all, we don’t want to become *prakṛta-sahajiyās*, right?

We want to be balanced. Therefore, we should feel good about the holy name’s shelter. We should feel good that our whole lives have been transformed. We should give credit to the spiritual master who gave us the holy name and be grateful to the chanting process itself. Because of the holy name’s mercy, we have given up sinful activities and escaped hell.

But that’s one side of the story. We also have to acknowledge that we have come but a short distance on the road back to God-

head and that we are stuck. *This is our unfortunate position and we should do something about it.*

Get to work! Imagine that a stray cow has entered the front garden and is upsetting our plants and flowers. Now she is consuming the whole season's planting of vegetables! If you saw that happening right before your eyes, you wouldn't sit around and ignore it, would you? Well, time is eating up your precious life while you sit back in mediocrity, chanting (I was almost going to say chewing on) the outer form of the holy name. If the outer form is so beneficial, why not go after the inner form?

Why are we so foolish, so reluctant? Let's *do* something about it. Let's get together and start a *japa* support group, as some devotees do, or talk about chanting among our family members. Whatever we do, we should give chanting its due importance. I want to improve, and if you love me, help me. If you give me a practical suggestion, I'll promise to take it up.

\*

Govardhana dāśī has been in ISKCON since birth. She's almost twenty. Her experience is a little different than the rest of us who came later. She has had a big head start, but she has also had more time for familiarity to set in. Therefore, her problems in chanting are unique.

She asked me a question about something I'm already well acquainted with as my own problem. "The chanting seems so simple to do, my mind feels it doesn't have enough engagement. Therefore, it has to do something else as well. In what ways can I make it feel satisfied by something as peaceful as chanting when it is so active by nature?"

The one flaw in this question is that the questioner assumes to know the length and breadth of the holy name. But we don't. Here is another way to ask that question: "We know that according to scripture, the holy name is important, but our own experience of it is that it is a lifeless lump. It doesn't engage our minds. It's 'too peaceful.'" I'm sure you can see the problem.

The actual holy name, when chanted by a pure devotee, causes him to swell and toss on oceans of conflicting emotions. When Lord Caitanya speaks of the holy name, it sounds like He is in the



middle of a battlefield being torn to pieces. When Kṛṣṇa left the *gopīs* alone in the forest, they chanted His names and cried. They were more than “fully engaged.”

For the time being, we may have to convince ourselves to be satisfied with the nondiscursive nature of the holy name. But don’t forget that the holy name is dynamic. It is packed with all levels of comprehension—intellectual, emotional, and purely spiritual. Thus when we chant we pray that Kṛṣṇa please reveal to us the meanings and nature of His name-form.

So that we don’t fall into a simplistic conception of the holy name, we may also read relevant *sāstras* and talk about the nature of the holy name. We have to be discriminating with our minds. It’s not that everything the mind wants to do is exalted. Often, our mind is engaged only in agitation. Nothing that goes on in the mind is better than chanting. Putting aside the mind’s chatter when we chant doesn’t make us anti-intellectuals; it makes us servants of the pure truth of *harināma*. We’re not trying to stunt our intelligence or become like stone. Chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa will awaken our higher faculties. This is what we have been waiting for and why we want to make our best efforts to enter the province of pure chanting.

All these questions seem to boil down to one: how, how, how can we submit to this gentle, peaceful practice of chanting? How can we, who are so passionate and “active,” allow ourselves to come under the sway of the holy name? Or do we really want to chant after all? What are we asking? “Can you convince me that chanting is really so wonderful and important?”

Yes, I think I can convince you. Prabhupāda says that before a patient can be treated, he has to admit he has a disease and then come to a doctor for direction. Are you willing to chant under the direction of the expert physician, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu? Think it over and let me know. Any time you’re ready, the holy name is there.

\*

Have we been talking *about* chanting when we should have been chanting? Oh well, what can we do? We have these tongues and talking natures. At least we're not talking *prajalpa*. We want to know if, by talking, we can make the chanting easier. Talking helps, especially if we speak to someone potent. But no matter who we talk to, after we think it over, there's only one recourse: back to our *japa*. Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare. Advice and coaching are interludes. Real talking is fervent recitation of the thirty-two syllables. God Himself has arranged these syllables as the best way to talk with Him. We can't invent something better.



## July 30

This morning just before I left for my walk, I wrote an author's note to a book I have been working on. It came in a burst of inspiration after weeks of thinking about it. My *japa* walk started off with my mentally patting myself on the back, thinking over the phrases of my author's note, and finding it all very nice and exciting—creative work.

But what about the Lord's holy names? It was only by Kṛṣṇa's mercy that I was able to write that book or its author's note. Everything, including creative intelligence, comes from Kṛṣṇa. I thought, "Let me get back to chanting. Calm down, and bring the mind back to the lotus feet of *harināma*."

This incident brought me back to Govardhana dāsi's question: "How can we pay attention to the *mahā-mantra* since chanting is such a peaceful process and doesn't engage the mind?" I thought about the natural creativity of the mind. Where does that creativity come from? It comes from a nurturing process, from the Lord in the heart, and from prayerful concentration. This process is true for both the devotee and the nondevotee. By nurturing, I mean we sometimes have to wait and let our creative ideas simmer. As for concentration, the atheist's is not prayerful, not in relation to God. In either case, it is God in the heart who allows or rewards a person with creative results. The atheist-creator is called *duṣkṛtina*, one who is meritorious or brilliant in his work, but whose work is ultimately destructive (an example is the creation of nuclear weapons). Even in psychological terms, we can think of creativity in that way. All creative work will issue forth in a Kṛṣṇa conscious way only to one who sincerely and attentively chants the holy names. That doesn't mean we should chant in a fruitive way, thinking that chanting will generate good ideas. We should pray as one who is completely dependent, who is impoverished, but who wants to serve Kṛṣṇa nicely. Beautiful things, bold and exciting acts, will come from chanting. Therefore, we should pay attention to the peaceful, simple chanting process and remember our constitutional position, not as creators, but as subordinate lovers of the Supreme.

In my early morning *bhajana*, I give the first hour (midnight to 1 A.M.) to writing practice. At that time, I don't stop to look things



up in the *śāstra*, but I write from what I already know, whether śāstric or non-śāstric. Then for the next hour I read *Bhāgavatam* and restrain myself from writing. With a pencil, I underline passages that attract me. Sometimes I close my eyes while reading, review the last few pages I read, and try to invest some feeling into my reading. After reading, I turn to *japa*. I sit before pictures of Prabhupāda, the *paramparā* gurus, the Pañca-tattva, and Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. I light votive candles and listen to Prabhupāda's *japa* through earphones. I sit alert and awake, chanting and chanting.

Perhaps this is the best way for me to work, by dividing the different activities. If I subscribe to the theory of subpersons, I have within me a writer self and a reader self. Therefore, I give them each their time. I find that works better than trying to mix them. Of course, they're not airtight, separate containers, but at least each of them maintains a basic identity and space.

Similarly, I have a self who wants pure chanting—my chanting person. I demand that he get equal time and equal rights. I don't let the other subpersons crowd my chanting person out of his space. If writing ideas pop into my head during *japa*, I try not to





worry about them. They will reappear when it's time to write. I don't demand much more than hearing the "simple," compact word formulas, the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra.

Perhaps of these three activities I mentioned—writing, reading, and chanting—chanting is the hardest and the most subtle. It's also the most recommended of the three. *Harer nāma harer nāma, harer nāmaiva kevalam*: there is no other way, there is no other way, there is no other way for God realization in the age of Kali except to chant the holy names.

Later, I take the chanting man out for a walk. I like to let his senses bathe in the fresh air and the vastness of the sky. The earth here is full of healthy aromas, and the sight of flowers, meadows, and wildlife enlivens his "animal spirits" as he chants. Then talking to companions seen or unseen—*japa* talk.

\*

Govardhana dāsī gave me numerous questions, but they are interrelated. They are what we would call "mental" questions. She said that if she tries to keep bringing the mind back from its wanderings to pay attention to the holy name, then she can't pay attention to the sound of the holy name at the same time. She says she used to find chanting sweet when she was smaller. "I had more simple faith in the sweetness. I think I'm more complicated now and try to realize everything with my senses." Alas, we grow up and get complicated and mental. Christ says we have to become like children in order to enter the kingdom of God.

She also had some nice things to say: "When I'm chanting in a reflective mood, I'll have deep thoughts about my spiritual life. How should I take advantage of this positive energy? It's offensive to *harināma* to interrupt my *japa* and note them down, but I feel if I don't capture these thoughts, they'll flutter away for good."

So write down your thoughts briefly and then let them go. Trust that if they are really good thoughts, they will return. If not, we should be able to recapture some of them from our notes, if Kṛṣṇa desires. Of course, we should be cautious about all these thoughts that come to us while we're supposed to be at prayer. Therefore, after giving them some deference with a small note, let Kṛṣṇa speak in our utterance of the holy names.

Govardhana dāsī remarked that she feels happy she’s keeping her vow to chant sixteen rounds, even though many initiated devotees have given up their vow. But this also has the effect of making her think that there’s no immediate need for improvement. She’s satisfied at least to be chanting. It’s strange how our minds want to stop our progress. If actually we’re happy about something as preliminary as honoring our vow, then how much happier will we be when we improve the quality of that chanting.

This reminds me of the irate mother who came to see Śrīla Prabhupāda in the early days of ISKCON. She was disturbed that her son had become his disciple. Prabhupāda told her that her son was happy to be a devotee, but she took a defensive stance. “He was already happy at home.” Prabhupāda countered, “But now he has become even *happier*.” Why shouldn’t we become happier? Sixteen rounds a day is nothing. It’s only a decent response to the promise we made at the time of initiation. We can offer a lot more than that as *guru-dakṣiṇā*, and we can become happier. Lord Caitanya says *ānandāmbudhi-varḍhanam*: the chanting of the holy names is an ocean of ever-increasing happiness.

What a stingy thought it is to say that I’m all right and don’t need to do more because, unlike so many renegade disciples, I do my bit.

Yes, do your bit, but with real quality.

Furthermore, to keep the status quo, we have to push ourselves on to further achievements. In his purports to the Ajāmila chapters in the Sixth Canto, Prabhupāda mentions that at any moment, a devotee could fall from his exalted position. That happened to Ajāmila in his youth. In Kali-yuga, we are dangerously exposed to illicit sex wherever we turn. Unless we pray with quality while chanting the holy names, we could fall. Where will our complacency be then?

\*

Govardhana dāsī remembers fondly when she was “very small” and a member of the girl’s *āśrama* at the Gītā-nāgarī *guru-kula*. I also remember those days. I used to visit their classroom. I would sit in the rocking chair and chant a round with them. They seemed to seek childish recognition. Prabhupāda said such motivation was not a bad thing in a child. At least it can become a strong motivator for something good.



The teacher used to keep a chart of their daily *japa* performances on the board. The children would get different colored stars according to their chanting. I think gold stars were even pasted on the foreheads of the smaller kids.

We still secretly maintain the desire to achieve gold stars next to our names. Look what I've done! I chanted *more* than sixteen rounds. I stayed awake. I tasted the nectar! Don't tell anyone, Prabhu, but I tasted the tears.

Is there a star for aridity? I don't think there's a star for offensive chanting, is there? Is there a star for just trying?

Yes, yes, all stars, colored stars, red ones, green ones, blue, and gold stars. Now let's get back to chanting: Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.

## July 31

What happens during our *japa* time is our own business. We don't have to admit everything to each other. Neither do we want to hear everything about where someone else's mind was wandering when they were on their own, trying to chant. But when we do talk, it's a relief from our failure to be alone with the holy name. It's almost like we're saying, "I wasn't able to do it, were you?"

Still, another side of us thinks that the period when we weren't talking and when we were chanting is the best part of the day. It seems that there are two parts, like yin and yang, and that we can't do without either of them.

\*

Mathurā dāsa is a sincere devotee who works hard to serve his spiritual master. He was a rock musician and a truck driver before he joined the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. He has aspirations for attaining love of God, but said, "My spiritual life is a constant struggle with inattentive *japa*." He is intelligent in his own way, and his faith is based ultimately on Śrīla Prabhupāda's authority, which initially attracted Mathurā through *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. His intuition tells him that the chanting of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra can reveal all the secrets of love of God, so he is naturally interested and grateful for any impetus to improve.

Mathurā told me how he was attracted to the devotees for the first time. It was when he heard *kīrtana* at a rock festival. Then he decided to take up spiritual life, "Let me try serving God." He took seriously to chanting. "I can still remember the exact spot where I sat on the floor with my eyes half closed, chanting my sixteen rounds straight through." When he recalls those days, it seems that his *japa* was better then. He wasn't thinking of other things, not walking around, not talking between rounds—simply chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra and begging Kṛṣṇa to please engage this sinful fool in His service. "Why can't I chant like that now?"

I already answered that question by saying that the good old days have their own golden aura, but the days that are with us



now are equally good, if not better. Anyway, even if our youths are over, we still have the present. We can't just live on nostalgia, remembering ourselves as sincere seekers finally putting down our burdens of suffering and sense gratification to surrender to Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet. We're twenty years older. We are still plagued by *anarthas* we thought we had long since given up. Better to see the present reality than to stay stuck in the romance of the past. The real question isn't, "Why can't I chant like that now?" but, "*How can I chant today?*"

Or maybe it is worth going back in time and trying to see in essence what made our chanting so special then. We were just coming to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. We knew it was a life or death decision. We made the right decision, and Kṛṣṇa immediately reciprocated. Okay, but Kṛṣṇa is still ready—as ready as He always has been—to help us to go back to Godhead. I think it *is* possible for us to raise our voices once again with sincerity and ask Kṛṣṇa to please let us be engaged in His service. All it takes is sincere desire. Start today in a small way. "Just hear," Prabhupāda says.

Mathurā likes to enter into the "translation" of the *mahā-mantra*: "Please engage me in Your service." He asks himself if he takes it for granted that he is *already* engaged in Kṛṣṇa's service since he has different services to perform for the preaching movement. "Is there more to being engaged in Kṛṣṇa's service than bodily motions? What is devotion? Are there deeper levels of service? Should we aspire for more intimate service to Lord Kṛṣṇa and Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī?"

This reminds me of a question I was asked by a nine-year-old *gurukula* girl. She asked, "Why do we pray, 'Please engage me in Your service?' Aren't we already engaged in service?" I replied that we are fortunate to have any service from Kṛṣṇa, so we should pray to be allowed to continue it. Our service isn't a job we have found by ourselves. Our service is special mercy given to us by Kṛṣṇa. Mathurā takes the question further by wanting to understand the inner meaning of service—service within service.

The essence of service as described in the *Bhagavad-gītā* is devotion. Kṛṣṇa says, "Give Me a leaf, a fruit, a flower," but Prabhupāda informs us that the essence of that offering is *bhakti*. Kṛṣṇa doesn't need any of the paraphernalia we offer Him. He is not hungry for food; He is hungry for devotion. He also hungers to make us

happy, and He knows that we can only be happy by serving Him. Kṛṣṇa wants us to chant successfully.

The secret is to infuse our activities with devotion. The outer service of management—making phone calls, repairing vehicles, or even debating with the nondevotees—all these are also within the spiritual energy, provided we do them with devotion.

Another way to express it is through the word *dharma*. *Paro-dharma* means pure religion performed without separate motivation or interruption. Such religion will give us full satisfaction in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and will lead us to intimate service to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

How to express that devotion in chanting? If we're still struggling to pay attention when we chant, then our offering will be to make the effort to bring the mind back under the control of the higher self. Our chanting should be a calling out to Kṛṣṇa, "exactly like the cry of the child for the mother." Mother Harā will respond to that cry, and the Lord will reveal Himself to His sincere devotee. Prabhupāda says, "There is no other method of





God realization as effective in this age as the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.”

O Lord, O energy of the Lord, please give me that devotion so that I can actually be engaged in the service of chanting Your holy names purely, not mechanically. Please give me one drop of devotion.

\*

Enough questions and answers for now. It's dawn and the sky is streaked with multicolored clouds, some the color of Kṛṣṇa's body (fresh rain clouds) hovering closer to the ground, and some long streaking clouds filled with the rosy color of dawn. And in between, the sky is a beautiful blue. Mourning doves are punctuating my mood this morning with their repeated phrase. The sheep are crying, and the silent cows are moving and chewing grass, tails swishing off the flies.

## August 1

We cannot overestimate the importance of *śāstra* for understanding and entering the nectar of the holy name. Early this morning I read in the Sixth Canto, Chapter Two, “Ajāmila Delivered by the Viṣṇudūtas.” The *śāstra* gives us strength when we read with faith. Our own individual weakness is not a great thing, but the power of the holy name is very great indeed and can overcome our inadequacy.

“. . . Ajāmila unconsciously accumulated the results of *bhakti*. Indeed, even his first utterance of the holy name was sufficient to nullify all the sinful reactions of his life. . . . In the *śāstras* it is said that if one chants the holy name of the Lord even once, the reactions of past, present or future sinful life do not affect him. . . . Similarly, if a devotee chants the holy name even once inoffensively, this protects him eternally. He need only wait for the results of the chanting to mature in due course of time” (*Bhāg.* 6.2.49, purport).

The time of death is a time of bewilderment because bodily functions are in disorder. “At that time, even one who throughout his life has practiced chanting the holy name of the Lord, may not be able to chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra very distinctly. Nevertheless, such a person receives all the benefits of chanting the holy name. While the body is fit, therefore, why should we not chant the holy name of the Lord loudly and distinctly? If one does so, it is quite possible that even at the time of death, he will be properly able to chant the holy name of the Lord with love and faith. In conclusion, one who chants the holy name of the Lord constantly is guaranteed to return home, back to Godhead, without a doubt.”

It is guaranteed. There is no doubt. But we have to chant with faith and love.

\*

I was out the gate this morning before 5 A.M. The metal gate was wet from the rain overnight, and the sky was covered with remnants of last night’s rain clouds.



I'm feeling uneasy because of the little moths who dove into my candlelight while I was chanting *japa*. Now I have decided not to use votive candles in the summer anymore. It should have occurred to me earlier, before all these creatures had to sacrifice their lives. Of course, I can't protect them from dying if it is their time, but I don't have to turn out the lights and invite them into the flames just because I think the candles help me to concentrate. Whatever I gain in concentration, I lose by the unintentional or half-intentional killing of other creatures. When this finally became clear to me, I tried chanting in the mood of seeking forgiveness, remembering how Ajāmila was protected from sin by the holy name.

\*

Mathurā dāsa said that when he first read *Japa Reform Notebook*, he was struck by the sentences introducing my discussion of the ten offenses: "There are ten offenses in chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. They involve not only the time when we sit down to chant *japa*, but our whole devotional life. . . . By the time you sit down to chant, it's already determined by your service attitude—you've either already committed the offenses, or you haven't. Both the offenseless chanting and the following are interdependent."

Mathurā said it made sense that his whole devotional service was interconnected. "How can I be devotional, loving, and humble, a servant of the holy name during *japa*, if I express the opposite of those qualities during the day?" He asked me to speak more on this theme.

The disturbing picture is still in my mind of my sitting to chant, aided by a concentration produced by votive candles, while at the same time, moths dive into the flames. I want to be offenseless in my chanting, but I commit violence to other living beings. So what if they are in a lower form of life and can't chant Hare Kṛṣṇa? They still have a right to live.

Very, very few of us can spend our full time chanting. Prabhupāda says that constant chanting is the activity of a very mature—in fact, liberated—devotee. But we may feel that we're not doing enough with only sixteen or twenty-five rounds. One way to feel better about this is to realize that all our activities can contribute to

good *japa*. Be conscious of it, be deliberate. Understand that if you are cruel to someone, or if you find fault, or overeat, or are a non-sense in one way or another, it's going to affect your *japa*. Everything you do either contributes to or works against your chanting. It makes me think of the athletes who train for years to perform in the Olympics. Their actual performance is over in a few hours, but they train for it and protect themselves from injury twenty-four hours a day. They make sure they get sufficient rest, eat the best foods, and don't do anything that could damage their chances of success. And they think positively.

It's also nice to think about saintliness in a general way. Certainly to intone or sing the holy name of Kṛṣṇa is saintly life at its best. Especially in Kali-yuga, the *saṅkīrtana-yajña* is the life of saints. If we want to become more saintly, we have to behave properly and observe all the rules and regulations of Vaiṣṇava life. Kṛṣṇa consciousness is not something you just switch on and off—it's a full-time occupation.

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“Both the offenseless chanting and the following are interdependent.”

Mathurā dāsa said this line gave him hope of a way to improve his attention in chanting. Without this holistic attitude, *paying attention* almost seemed like a meditator's feat to him. How does one chant sincerely? Is there a certain emotive quality in the way you say the words or the way your face looks? It must be more than that.

“Sometimes it seems a little ethereal,” Mathurā said, “hard to grasp or define, the endeavor for sincere and attentive chanting. But if my *japa* and service are connected, I can try to improve my service, and that will help my *japa*.”

We have to be careful about that and keep the balance. Don't think, “I can't chant nicely, so I'll just concentrate on my service and that will be my 'chanting.'” Following the analogy of the Olympic athlete, despite all her preparation, the ice skater has to go spontaneously onto the ice as if she's doing it for the first time. The practice and rehearsals have helped, but now her performance will have to be strictly improvised. In chanting, there is



plenty of sincere action and attentive work to be done during those two to three hours a day. They themselves are the peak performance of sincere devotional service. That is why we say it's so important to give chanting prime, early morning time. We should be well rested and then chant when the world is not so loud or passionate as it becomes later in the day.

Sincerity is expressed by such simple things as refusing to fall asleep during *japa*. How can you be sincere and yet continue to sit back in a too-comfortable position, inviting drowsiness? Show sincerity by having the guts to sit up with a straight back. If drowsiness comes, spray water on your face or stand up. "My dear Lord, I really want to serve You. Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare."

The very fact that we can't spare more than three hours a day in chanting means that we should make the most of it. Give it your best, sincere effort.

\*

This morning as I was walking, I was conscious of when it was coming to an end. It began in obscurity and ended in clarity, at least in terms of the sky and the land.

I don't advocate devotees chanting most of their rounds outdoors, and certainly not that they miss attendance at the temple *maṅgala-ārati*, but for most of the year, we can observe the dawn either outdoors or through the windows, even while attending the temple program. Dawn usually occurs, in fact, during the period which temples designate as "*japa* time." While we chant, we can witness the spectacular yet gentle transformation known as dawn. The dawn can have a favorable psychological effect on us. Haridāsa Ṭhākura uses dawn as a metaphor to explain *nāmā-bhasa*. He says that at night, we are afraid of robbers and ghosts, but with the first rays of dawn, we lose fear. With the first rays of the chanting of the holy names of Kṛṣṇa, all our sins are destroyed.

Taking the metaphor further, we chant in the darkness of offense and drowsiness, but if we persist and if we *pray* for Kṛṣṇa's mercy as we chant, then everything will grow lighter. With the rising of the sun comes the hope that one day we can chant in

love of God. Day after day we chant during this cosmic transformation, and surely it works to suggest that change within our hearts and souls.

Many poets and thinkers have expressed profound appreciation for the early morning hours, and they sense, sometimes despite their agnosticism, the awakening of God consciousness during that time. In *Walden*, Thoreau tells us how he was ever attentive to observe the dawn. He says he doesn't imagine in any way that he actually assisted the sun to rise; it was enough for him just to attend that glorious function. The nature-lover sees it almost as a liturgy, or morning temple program. Because he hasn't yet come to the stage of being able to appreciate the personal form of Kṛṣṇa as we see in the *arcā-vigraha* in the *mandira*, he goes to greet the Deity in the form of the rising sun and cannot help but feel in awe of God's creation.

It's not required by our Kṛṣṇa conscious practices that devotees observe the dawn, but since so many devotees are inclined to love nature, they needn't feel any conflict. The natural spirit of enlivenment, purity, and well-being that comes when we are sensitive and awake during the early hours can be dovetailed by chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and awakening to the highest truth, even while the earth awakens. Kṛṣṇa's sun sheds light into darkness. *Kṛṣṇa—sūrya-sama; māyā haya andhakāra.*



## August 2

This morning was the darkest morning yet, mostly because it was so overcast. When you walk in the dark, you notice whatever light is there. The big, fat milkweed blossoms looked like snowballs, and the cows lying down in the pastures looked like big white mounds. Some of the roofs were reflecting light from somewhere. At the end of the road, I saw the yellow light in the schoolhouse where Prabhupāda dāsa is up and chanting.

Even the animals felt morning coming on. As I passed a herd of cows, one got up slowly, first on two legs and then on four. Then another did the same, both of them snorting. The wind was audible, and light rain tinkled on me. I had nothing to do but chant on my beads as clearly and attentively as possible while I walked. I knew that I wouldn't be able to pay complete attention, but I also knew that Lord Kṛṣṇa would appreciate my attempt. That is my saving grace.

About fifteen minutes after I started out, I began to notice more light. My beadbag is light-colored, and if an oncoming car were to see me, I think the first thing he would notice is the light-colored bag. But I was noticing the little white blossoms on the raspberry bushes as I walked past them. And puddles of water on the tarmac road mirroring the sky.

\*

More sincere questions asked of me.

Many questions are, of course, analytical. The devotee sees that he's not chanting as well as he should be, and he has a pretty good idea why that's so. He says, "I rationalize," or, "I'm complacent," or, "I'm trying to avoid my responsibility." What more can I add if he has already analyzed his own devious mind and the reluctance of his conditioned soul? If I am to help, I feel like a coach on the sidelines, occasionally clapping my hands and calling out a cheerful remark.







When devotees reveal their own cheating nature, they don't want me to take further advantage of their vulnerability. They do want me to pummel that foolish kind of rationalization that will make us think we can't or don't want to improve our *japa*. One devotee said, "I *should* ardently desire to develop the urge to be truthful to my goal of pure devotional service, but I rationalize that chanting my rounds inattentively is at least better than not chanting them at all."

This kind of downward logic will not get us anywhere. It's the same logic by which devotees ask what they can get away with. Can they drink carbonated soda? Can they buy bread from the stores when they are on traveling *sankīrtana*? What can we get away with?

We really should be asking what we can do to attain perfection. Perfection isn't like a cherry on the cake—something we can do without. It's our whole purpose and goal in life. Or don't call it perfection then. Let's just call it "striving to get beyond offensive chanting." Or call it "making *any* progress at all." Our lives have to be aimed toward improvement. Perfection doesn't necessarily mean being perfect; it means perfecting or improving. Therefore, we always have to work in favor of the goal of love of God and not rationalize our way to a lesser goal. What kind of logic is it that makes us say, "At least I'm chanting, so I shouldn't complain that it's inattentive"?

Some questions are just too big for me, like "How can I be humble?" or, "How can we avoid offending devotees?" Of course, these are deep considerations, but something in me doubts the seriousness of having a question and answer exchange on such profundities. Do the devotees really expect me to give a quick response about things like that? Will they listen to what I say and be able to get a handle on it? From what level will I speak? Will I reach into my mental collection of "Famous Transcendental Quotations?" I'm afraid I'll resort to truisms. To be humble, we should avoid pride. In order to avoid finding fault with devotees, we should realize that devotees are exalted persons.

Today I feel a limit to this question and answer process. Let's walk together and chant. If you have something to say, go ahead and speak, but not until we have chanted for at least half an hour

or so. And if what you say takes the form of a question, don't mind if I just reply in a syllable or nod my head to indicate that I'm listening.

But here's one question I am willing to field. It's from Ātmānandī dāsī. "I was wondering, if a devotee has taste for some devotional activity—Deity worship, gardening, writing, reading, preaching—and they do this with great enthusiasm, but chant their rounds only as duty, how should this be considered?"

We shouldn't indulge ourselves. It's good to go with our enthusiasm, and in terms of hours spent per day, it's obvious that we will give the greatest ratio to that which we love, which is our vocation. But chanting is the bedrock of devotional life. We have to know that. We should be wary of "marathons" in which we go all out in our vocational projects and deliberately neglect our chanting. Our chanting is the most direct method for serving Kṛṣṇa and attaining God consciousness. It's what will save us at the time of death. Even now, although we may not be aware of it, it's only because we have a chanting life that we are able to be enthusiastic in our other services. Because we sometimes chant with the prayer, "O Lord, O energy of the Lord, please engage me in Your service," Kṛṣṇa is therefore giving us things we like to do.

Anyway, why shouldn't we *like* chanting? Let's not leave chanting in the category of a neglected child. I can't think of anything more pleasant and spiritual to do than to take a walk just before dawn and to chant the holy names. I may fail to enter the potential of that rendezvous with the holy name, but I can't fail to understand the holy name's mercy. Just because I have a lot of work to do, I'm not going to forget my *japa* before the altar and—if I'm lucky enough to be in the right time and place—my morning *japa* walk. We who are workaholics, and who mostly associate with others who are similarly immersed in a vocation, might try to get association with devotees who have made chanting the purpose of their lives. Take a walk with one of them, or sit beside them in the temple room while you chant. Don't neglect it. That's my humble advice on a drizzly morning, advice I give to myself as well as others.

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A common theme in the discussion of *japa* is that it's very difficult to break bad habits. Perhaps the most pernicious habit is the habit of "allowing" the mind to wander while chanting. It seems to be beyond our control, and we can hardly even accept it as personal neglect. After all, it's not us, it's the mind. Who am I to attempt to change such a powerful force, even if it works against my own interests?

Kṛṣṇa will appreciate our attempts. To turn the mind into our best friend may not be in our power. Prayer descends as the mercy of God, not by our own endeavor. But let Kṛṣṇa see us up early and taking whatever opportunity comes. Don't resist good opportunities to chant. Show Kṛṣṇa that you're willing to change.

## August 3

The *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* chapter, “Yamarāja Instructs His Messengers,” has many wonderful statements about the potency of the holy name. Prabhupāda states, “There is no need to conduct research into the significance of the chanting of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. The history of Ajāmila is sufficient proof.”

Neither is there a need for any other process. The chanting of the holy names is sufficient. “It is to be concluded that with a strong vow one should chant the holy name of the Lord—Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare—for thus one will certainly be delivered from the clutches of *māyā* by the grace of Kṛṣṇa. . . .

“The chanting of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra is recommended even for persons who commit offenses, because if they continue chanting they will gradually chant offenselessly. By chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra without offenses, one increases his love for Kṛṣṇa. As stated by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, *premā pum-artha mahān*: one’s main concern should be to increase one’s attachment to the Supreme Personality of Godhead and to increase one’s love for Him” (*Bhāg.* 6.3.24, purport).

Prabhupāda writes further, “Even if in the beginning one chants the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra with offenses, one will become free from such offenses by chanting again and again. *Pāpa-kṣayaś ca bhavati smaratām tam ahar-nīśam*: one becomes free from all sinful reactions if one chants day and night, following the recommendation of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu” (*Bhāg.* 6.3.24, purport).

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Again on the walk today I felt quiet. I took advantage of the mood and kept chanting and doing the inner work of bringing my mind back to hearing the sound vibration of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. The work I have to do is clear enough. There doesn’t seem to be anything to talk about.

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During my time here, I have either been alone or with some of the devotees who live here. We have been together long enough that we have quieted down and are mainly concentrating on our individual *japa*. Now a few devotees have come here from America to attend the Ratha-yātrā in Dublin. We haven't seen each other in a while, so our initial mood is more talkative. Both they and I restrained ourselves and chanted for a while, but then it was *japa* walk, *japa* talk.

Indirā dāsī asked, "What does it mean that *nāmābhasa* gives liberation if it gives liberation from sinful reaction but doesn't free us from material desires?"

My understanding is that whatever sins we have committed up until now can be eradicated by *nāmābhasa*, or the shadow of the holy name. We are "liberated," but we again un-liberate ourselves because the seed of material desire has not been removed from the heart. That can only be done by pure Kṛṣṇa consciousness, when all our desires are fully dovetailed in Kṛṣṇa's service.

(I realize that some of the devotees want to go into these questions in more detail, and indeed the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava ācāryas have discussed these points threadbare, but I prefer to keep my answers simple. One reason I like to keep them simple is that I don't know all the details so well. I tend to forget details I read in Viśvanātha Cakravartī's or Jīva Gosvāmī's treatises. What I do remember, however, is what Prabhupāda says, and that's good enough for me. He gives the thrust of what is most necessary for us to remove our unwanted habits and to progress back home, back to Godhead.)

Indirā dāsī's questions came rapid-fire: "How can we develop attachment to chanting?"

If the first question was too detailed, the second question is too big. I wish I were a master of one-liners. I could say something like, "Attachment produces attachment," but that in itself is not so brilliant, is it? Practice produces attachment. Yes, that's good enough. Because love of God is dormant in us, if we practice, then genuine attachment—*āsakti*, the craving for always being with the holy name—will take place. Practice. Ask a few questions, but then get back to chanting.

Another question from the same source: "Is uprooting the offenses even within our power?"

Of course it is, or why would we recite the ten offenses every day and try to avoid them if it was impossible? Prabhupāda says chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa is easy, but we have to remember that he is measuring the chanting against relatively more difficult processes. It's not as easy as pressing a few buttons on your telephone and asking the operator for the correct time or the weather. Other methods, like yoga and *jñāna*, are impossible to follow to perfection in this age. Chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa is easy because it's possible. Prabhupāda says we don't have to research the evidence—Ajāmila is the proof. Further evidence can be found in the case of Jagāi and Mādhāi. Success is sure for the rigid practitioner.

“In *Mādhurya-kādambinī*, it describes that our practice of *sādhana* is not the cause of Kṛṣṇa's mercy upon us, but that there is some connection between them. Can you explain this?”

I discussed it yesterday. We know that the mercy of the holy name comes by the descending process. It's not that we can get it by our own endeavor. In fact, when we chant, we see that our minds disperse onto so many subjects. We can't control our minds, but Kṛṣṇa can. He's called Yogeśvara, the master of yoga.

This explains how our *sādhana* is not the cause of successful *japa*, but why will Kṛṣṇa award His mercy on one devotee and not another? Kṛṣṇa says *samo 'ham sarva-bhūteṣu*, I am equally disposed to everyone. When one becomes a devotee and a friend in Him, then Kṛṣṇa and that devotee have an intimate exchange. Therefore, if Kṛṣṇa is pleased by our endeavor, if He likes, He can award us success in chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. *Sādhana* is therefore not the cause of our success. If it were, then we would be working in a *karma-kāṇḍīya* sense, thinking that Kṛṣṇa is obliged because we chanted a certain number of rounds, were attentive, shed a few tears, etc. We performed the right ritual, so we should get a response from the god. It doesn't work that way, at least not with the Supreme God, and not in the process of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. When one sincerely tries to follow the bona fide spiritual master's order, following the rules and regulations, giving preeminence to the chanting, then he creates a fertile situation in which to receive Kṛṣṇa's mercy. When Kṛṣṇa's independent and causeless mercy falls on his heart, shoots of good chanting sprout, and early symptoms of love of God soon appear.



This principle was taught by Lord Kṛṣṇa when mother Yaśodā tried to bind Him with ropes. No matter how many ropes she collected, they always came out two fingers too short. She could not tie baby Kṛṣṇa. Thus, Kṛṣṇa taught her, “Dear Mother, although I am acting as your dependent son, it is only by My own agreement. If I don’t agree, then you will not be able to tie Me, no matter how many ropes you string together.”

In this pastime, Kṛṣṇa eluded the control of His mother, demonstrating His supreme independence. But when Kṛṣṇa saw His mother perspiring from her exertion, the flowers falling from her hair, and her obvious frustration, He yielded to her desires and allowed her to tie Him, even though He is uncatchable by the most expert mystics and *yogīs*. Both elements are necessary if the pure devotee is going to capture Kṛṣṇa with love or chant Hare Kṛṣṇa in spontaneous devotion. That is, we need to endeavor, and then, independent of that, Kṛṣṇa has to will freely to dance on our tongues in *śuddha-nāma*.

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As I came into the home stretch of my walk today, the air filled with tiny midges. Whenever I stopped, they became bothersome and flew into my eyes and mouth. They bite. At moments like this, I remember Prabhupāda’s instruction that the forest may be in the mode of goodness, but the temple is transcendental. I hurried indoors and chanted before the altar.

## August 4

I don't want to be presumptuous by talking *about harināma*. Maybe I can *just listen* to the holy names. But if talking can be preaching . . . I'm not inclined to say, "Don't bother me, I'm chanting." We don't favor *mauna* over *kṛṣṇa-kathā*.

I felt reticent this morning, even in communing with the plants, hills, and sky. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I knew they couldn't converse with me about chanting. I preferred not to think about the livestock in the pastures at all. I heard them crying out as usual, and it reminded me how they are all waiting to be slaughtered. I just walked along under my two hoods, and prayed to stay under the mental hood of the chanting. There is nothing in the fourteen worlds except the chanting of the holy names.

Halfway through the walk, the sky became lighter, and a wind picked up. When I could finally see the morning weather, I saw a sky filled with heavy, gray clouds. I thought it would rain before I made it back.

Goloka dāsa asked me his questions. He's with the group who came from America. He is excited to be in Ireland for the first time and is looking for personal exchanges with me. I am also enlivened to be with him.

Goloka is no exception to the rule of devotees admitting their chanting is inattentive, but he added, "Sometimes there is focus and some actual happiness derived from chanting." I was more interested in hearing about his happiness than his inattention. Inattention is old stuff around here. We hear about it all the time. It's a heart-breaker to have to speak positively about it—I feel like a hypocrite—"How much qualification is needed or what is the qualification to get the taste?"

Goloka said that he finds the best way to be attentive is to chant in a prayerful mood, "praying for spiritual things like ability to do my service to guru, prayers for taste, prayers to a particular Deity. Should this be cultivated, or is the goal a simple glorification of the holy name?"

All the prayers he mentioned are good. At our neophyte stage, we may not even know what it means to "make simple glorification of the holy name." The most effective prayerful mood is given in Prabhupāda's mini-translation of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra:





“O Lord, O energy of the Lord, please engage me in Your service.” That prayer includes various kinds of services, and it certainly includes the service of glorifying the holy names. We want to serve Kṛṣṇa and His eternal associates in Vṛndāvana, but we know we can’t pray exclusively for that.

First we have to pray to have our *anarthas* removed. Chanting itself will cleanse the dirt accumulated for many lifetimes together (*ceto-darpaṇa-mārjanam*). Therefore, we stress attentive chanting. It’s not that we’re hung up on some technicality called “inattention,” as if it’s just another kind of mental gymnastics. But because we have faith in the holy name, and we know we are fallen, we long to surrender to the *yajña* of hearing the holy names. If only we could pay attention, then everything would be accomplished.

“Sometimes there is nothing but the vow to hold on to,” Goloka said. “At these times, hope for taste is so low and it turns mechanical . . . ” At that time, he puts his beads down and goes and does something else for which he has more immediate taste. Then he goes back to the *japa*. “Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t, and I turn into a bead-pusher.”



It's natural that each of us try different methods to bring about an immediate result. "Let me get a drink of water. Maybe when I come back my chanting will be less mechanical." I try it and it works, or it doesn't. Or it works this week and not next week. Somehow it doesn't seem right to keep trying these different methods. We just have to be ready for a long, persistent endeavor. "*A mui determinado determinacion.*"

I think that we shouldn't even look for immediate improvement, but instead look to make more effort in chanting, to give more devotion in terms of what we know is devotion. Devotion can be expressed by giving money, time, energy, and by sacrificing our interests for the cause. In terms of *japa*, we can give more time and energy to our chanting. When we make that sacrifice, that will be a positive symptom that we are becoming serious. But when we make the sacrifice, we shouldn't immediately expect a result. Just giving time and energy is a symptom that the chanting is working on us.

Goloka said he would like to offer something nice to the Deity or the guru, "but when I think of it, I have nothing nice to offer. Certainly my chanting is not so nice. How can I offer something nice to Kṛṣṇa by my chanting?"

We have to have faith that Kṛṣṇa will accept our babyish, but sincere efforts as something nice. After all, what is nice to Kṛṣṇa? Kṛṣṇa lives on the highest standard of super-excellence; we cannot even imagine His opulence. The nicest thing in this world is an insignificance to Him. But if we can actually cry for Him and beg for the holy name, Kṛṣṇa thinks that's nice. That is the instruction of the *ācāryas*. How sweet that Kṛṣṇa is so unpretentious and sincere, so kind, that He finds something good in our spark of sincerity. And Śrīla Prabhupāda has given us this fortune of sincerity. He came from what he called a comfortable situation at Vṛndāvana's Rādhā-Dāmodara temple and took the risk to bring us Kṛṣṇa consciousness. It's he who has given us the ability to chant sincerely. Let us try to do what he taught us, to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and "just hear." Kṛṣṇa will accept it as nice.

It is nice that Goloka dāsa is thinking like that.

He asked, "How is Kṛṣṇa's mercy given to us through chanting? I have been chanting for fourteen years and still have little or no taste for it. Is Kṛṣṇa's mercy given in other ways than the mere



taste for chanting?” The answer is obvious. We have received the mercy of being spared from the hellish path we were on. We were committing the four sinful activities, and according to the *Bhāgavatam*, we were headed for horrible, painful suffering in the hellish planets. The first installment of mercy by chanting is that we break the chain of sinful reactions. How could we overlook this as mercy coming from the holy name?

The Vaiṣṇava is so exalted, however, that he doesn't regard freedom from sin and reaction as the goal of his chanting. Shadow chanting is enough to remove more sinful reactions that we are able to incur, but as Śrīla Haridāsa Ṭhākura states, that is not the goal of chanting. The goal is taste—to awaken to the fact that Kṛṣṇa is all-attractive, *to love Kṛṣṇa*. To love Kṛṣṇa while chanting and to crave to serve Him in chanting. That craving-chanting will result in service desires in other ways. Kṛṣṇa's mercy will come to us, then, in so many different ways—the desire to preach, and sometimes even in His abruptly breaking our last bonds of attachment to this world.

I am enlivened by answering questions. I feel as if I have woken up. I am not deluding myself that I have achieved perfection in chanting just because I can answer these questions, but answering them makes me feel that I can *do* something. When I say that we have to show Kṛṣṇa our sincerity by our chanting effort, and that wonderful, auspicious things will come from the Lord when we increase our efforts—I feel excited. I start getting the inkling for an idea. Maybe it's another vain idea, that I can attain the summit by increasing my numerical strength of chanting, *or something*. But what is a person supposed to live for, except the hope to improve? The only alternative is to be fatalistic or too passive: “When Kṛṣṇa wants me to improve in chanting, He will do it for me. There's no point in my even trying.”

I was especially struck when I said that we shouldn't expect any results from our chanting except the symptom of witnessing ourselves putting more attention and time into the chanting. Look for good symptoms in your own determined efforts, but don't expect any rewards. I was preaching to myself when I said that. Just thinking about it encourages me to ask Kṛṣṇa to sustain this wave. Let it manifest. Talk should be followed by positive action. *Japa* walk, *japa* talk, *japa* action for the good.

## August 5

The devotees will be leaving for Dublin this afternoon, so this will be my last chance to answer their questions. This morning I observed that it was “impossible” to control the mind. I had to agree with Arjuna’s statement in the *Bhagavad-gītā* that controlling the mind is as difficult as controlling the wind. It also made me think of Lord Brahmā’s prayer, “Unless one is favored by even a drop of Your mercy, my Lord, it’s not possible to understand You, certainly not by speculation or any concocted method.”

We sit in our respective temple rooms or *kuṭīrs*, or we walk outdoors, and we chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. Wherever we are, we’re like *cakora* birds waiting for a drop of Kṛṣṇa’s mercy. If we are going to remember anything while chanting, then we should remember to ask the Lord, “Please bestow a little mercy on me so that I can know You and serve You and love You. I want to give all honor to the process of serving You by *harināma*, so I request You to please allow me to improve by bestowing upon me a little drop of Your mercy.”

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Nitya-līlā dāśī had a series of questions. I appreciate that devotees are honestly trying to practice chanting and that their questions reflect their earnestness. They are not manufacturing questions to look clever. Rather, their honest questions reveal their spiritual poverty, because no one can ask a question unless he or she is open to being humiliated.

Nitya-līlā observed that when we feel destitution in our lives, chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa seems to amplify reality. “If so, should we cultivate a general feeling of misfortune and melancholy at our precarious lives?”

Melancholy? That mood doesn’t sound right to me. We shouldn’t be materially depressed. Melancholy is a disease. One who is not confident of Kṛṣṇa’s presence in his life will be subject to severe ups and downs. Kṛṣṇa is always the rock and the anchor for a devotee. Therefore, devotees do not become suicidal or even melancholic. Even the neophyte conditioned soul should be



cheerful. He should be grateful that the pure devotee has come into his life and that he's chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. The spiritual expression of sadness is something that comes in the advanced stages. That's when we see the "melancholy" of the *gopīs* in separation from Kṛṣṇa.

Prabhupāda recommends that we cultivate feelings of regret. When Ajāmila expresses his regret at his sinful life, Prabhupāda says we should also adopt this mood and always remember the sins we have committed. When Mahārāja Parīkṣit regrets the offense he committed to the meditating sage, Prabhupāda writes in his purport that all sins can be washed away by repentance. Repentance is appropriate when we consider our inattentive chanting and our failures to surrender. We see our inadequacies, some of which may be attributed to the sinful activities we have performed in this life, as well as in our long history of rebellion against God. If these feelings of regret induce a purified and humble state, then we welcome that. That regret and humility is not the same as when a neophyte devotee falls into self-pity and becomes crippled. Such a neophyte stops doing service and feels too unworthy to be a devotee. Then he inevitably falls back into sense gratification and degradation.

In this worst of ages, we are so materially and spiritually fortunate. Therefore, we should be upbeat and cheerful and work hard under the guru's instruction. We are monkeys employed in Lord Rāma's army. Our future is brilliant. Despite our being unfortunate creatures, Kṛṣṇa has given us nice service.

Nitya-līlā asked if Kṛṣṇa will hold it against us that we are offensive chanters even after we come to a more enlivened practice. Kṛṣṇa doesn't hold grudges. He is never angry with us because He is the supreme father and mother of all living beings. He is only sorry that we have forgotten our happy natures. As soon as a living entity turns to Kṛṣṇa, then Kṛṣṇa forgets all his offenses. Kṛṣṇa Himself says, "Give up all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I will take away your sinful reactions. Do not fear."

When Kṛṣṇa says not to fear, it also means we should not fear His wrath. We expect our friends to forgive us if we rectify our offensive behavior. Do we think that Kṛṣṇa will be less magnan-

imous than an ordinary *jīva*? Kṛṣṇa is the kindest person of all, and whatever kindness we see in this world has its origin in Him.

Don't worry needlessly. Kṛṣṇa is not building a grudge toward us over all our lifetimes of rebellion. If we sincerely turn to Him, we don't have to worry that He will pull our file and read the record of our misbehavior.

Another question from Nitya-līlā: "Could you speak on how our *japa-yajña* is intertwined with our personal relationship with guru and Kṛṣṇa?"

*Bhakti* means to develop a favorable relationship with Kṛṣṇa (*anyābhilāṣitā-sūnyam*). Chanting is not merely a subsidiary tool to help us in that relationship. The name is Kṛṣṇa Himself. Our relationship with the name *means* our relationship with Kṛṣṇa. There is no other way to develop that relationship except to chant the holy name, especially in Kali-yuga.

Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura states that one can recognize a Vaiṣṇava by the attachment he has for the holy name and not by any other status symbol or official social standing. If we don't like to chant, how can we develop a favorable relationship with Kṛṣṇa?

We are fighting to regain our relationship with Kṛṣṇa. The spiritual master is helping us. Once we fall into *māyā*, Māyā-devī will shackle us tightly and not let us go until we have been thoroughly tested. It's not easy to win back our original relationship and trust in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, but Kṛṣṇa has made it easy by the simple process of chanting His names. Neglecting the chanting means neglecting our relationship with Kṛṣṇa. The holy name of Kṛṣṇa and the relationship with Kṛṣṇa are certainly intertwined. Our spiritual master charged us with the duty of chanting at least sixteen rounds a day. The honorable relationship with him will depend on our being obedient and true to that vow and to the foundational behaviors of avoiding the four kinds of sinful activity.

"My level of *japa* seems to be only the bare bones of what we are striving for. Therefore, when sparks of realization come and material concerns seem to have no relevance, should we cherish and worship those moments? Should we make an effort not to let them be forgotten? Should we honor these moments as the real gift in our lives?"



The moments of bliss or realization are indications that our chanting is coming to a clearing stage. When Lord Caitanya chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa on the order of His spiritual master, He experienced all the full ecstasies of love of God. Then, when He reported these symptoms to His guru, Īśvara Purī confirmed that His ecstasy was a symptom of love of God.

On the other hand, it's not that those moments of clarity or enlivenment, which are usually rare and isolated, are the only indications that we are making progress. If we start thinking they are the all in all, then we will overlook the benefit of *tapasya*. Nothing good comes without *tapasya*. Mahārāja Rṣabhadeva advised his sons *tapo divyaṁ putrakā yena sattvaṁ, śuddhyed yas-mād brahma-saukhyam tv anantam*: you should perform *tapasya*, and only then can your hearts be cleared. With clear hearts, you can know *brahma-saukhyam tv anantam*, that happiness which is transcendental to material happiness and which lasts forever.

We have been warned not to be too greedy for peak experiences in spiritual life. *Māyā* is tricky; attachment to peak experiences can become another kind of sense gratification. Even the bliss of *brahma-bhūta*, realization of oneness with the Supreme, has been called "the last snare" of *māyā*.

Nitya-līlā, you are fortunate if you have moments of clarity and happiness in chanting. It is good that you cherish them. Certainly that state in which you don't care about material anxieties or pleasures, in which you just want to go on chanting, and in which the whole world seems void without Govinda—that is the state we want to attain and remain in forever. You are right to remember even a glimmer of this state fondly as the best time of your life, and you are also right to live a life that will promote uplifting Kṛṣṇa consciousness. But I'll add a word of warning: don't forget to appreciate the solid work of *tapasya*, which is also a reality of your *japa-yajña*, at least at the present state.

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At the end of my walk today, a deer stepped out onto the road about a hundred yards ahead of me. It didn't catch my scent, so it walked very slowly and attentively across the road from one side of the pine shelter to the other. Before disappearing into the forest,

it paused and nibbled some grass. I had thought earlier on the walk that it would be nice to get a sign from nature, like a greeting or salute. When I saw the deer, I froze in my tracks so as not to startle it.

That moment reminded me of Nitya-lilā's remark about cherishing rare moments. It's too easy to overlook the fact that Kṛṣṇa is giving us many chances every day to get insights into the rare world of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Sometimes the very mercy we are praying for comes, but we overlook it in our dullness. Just as the deer appeared before me, so the chance for attentive chanting can appear, if Kṛṣṇa desires. And when it does, I don't want to be brutishly and loudly trundling down a hill, completely absorbed in false ego and sense gratification, and chase the moment away. O Lord, O energy of the Lord, please engage me in Your service.





# Part Two





## August 6

While reading *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, I came upon a verse of *Śikṣāṣṭakam* quoted by Śrīla Prabhupāda in a purport. It occurred to me how important these prayers are. Prabhupāda calls them “supremely valuable prayers.” One of the devotees here has a word processor that turns out interesting type faces, so I asked her to type me up a copy of the *Śikṣāṣṭakam* that I could keep on my desk. She also made me a small one which I have laminated and now carry in my pocket.

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Let’s take a look at it.

*ceto-darpaṇa-mārjanam bhava-mahā-dāvāgni-nirvāpaṇam  
śreyah-kairava-candrikā-vitaranam vidyā-vadhū-jīvanam  
ānandāmbudhi-varḍhanam prati-padam pūrṇāmṛtāsvādanam  
sarvātma-snapanam param vijayate śrī-kṛṣṇa-saṅkīrtanam*

Glory to the *śrī-kṛṣṇa-saṅkīrtana*, which cleanses the heart of all the dust accumulated for years and extinguishes the fire of conditional life, of repeated birth and death. This *saṅkīrtana* movement is the prime benediction for humanity at large because it spreads the rays of the benediction moon. It is the life of all transcendental knowledge. It increases the ocean of transcendental bliss, and it enables us to fully taste the nectar for which we are always anxious.

That’s Śrīla Prabhupāda’s translation. The chanting gives us a chance to fully taste the nectar for which we are always anxious. We are anxious to taste nectar. Wanting to taste nectar is not the highest thing if it is tinged with any desire for sense gratification. Otherwise, it is the highest taste. “Nectar” means service to Kṛṣṇa. That is how the soul takes pleasure. Kṛṣṇa is so attractive that any contact with Him brings us pleasure. But the less advanced we are, the less pleasure we feel when we contact Kṛṣṇa. Thus we chant with no taste. Why? Because we think something else is nectar-eating. Chanting seems to possess no obvious nectar. Our tongues

move and repeat the same words over and over again. What are we tasting?

One of the devotees told me that when she was a *gurukula* student, the teacher used to preach about how the chanting tasted like nectar. Wanting to please her teacher, the little girl said she began to think that by her trying hard, she was actually tasting something on her tongue. She swore to her teacher one day that it had happened, the chanting tasted like *burfi*. The teacher laughed and encouraged her by saying to the others, “Look, so-and-so *dāsī* has reached a nice stage where the chanting tastes to her like *burfi*.” Other adults also indulged her, “So, the chanting is going nicely?” “Yes, it tastes like *burfi*.”

That was her imagination, but it was created by a strong desire to be seen as a good chanter. When you are a child, any motivation to get you chanting is all right, whether it be gold stars, the taste of *burfi*, or a good reputation as a chanter. As we grow older, however, those things no longer motivate us. We want something real. And we can’t taste the nectar in chanting. In other words, we won’t cheat ourselves, but we don’t taste the nectar.

But that’s not absolutely true. We do taste a kind of nectar, although it may not be so obvious. Perhaps it can be described as hot molasses. As Prabhupāda says, hot molasses is so sweet that you want to drink it, but so hot it makes you want to stop. We have faith that Kṛṣṇa likes us to chant, even when it’s dry for us.

I remember years ago reading a book by a monk of the Orthodox Church about chanting the Jesus Prayer. He said, “When you chant and it’s just struggling and dry, don’t think that that chanting is in vain. It might be even more significant than the chanting in which you feel rapture, because when you get the rapture, then that’s sense gratification, at least in the early stage.” In other words, if we are dependent on “rapture,” then we are chanting only to get the “nectar,” but if our chanting is an act of the will offered to God without reward, then from this monk’s viewpoint, that chanting is better.

It’s a strange situation. Does Kṛṣṇa like us to suffer in dry chanting, or would He prefer us to be happy by chanting with taste? Kṛṣṇa wants genuine feeling from us. It may be that due to our offenses we can’t have blissful chanting right now, but when Kṛṣṇa sees that we persist patiently despite that fact, He will be



pleased with us. Right now, the pleasure of chanting is being withheld from us. Then we have to follow the *śreyas* principle and stick it out. Nectar will come, but first we have to understand what the nectar is.

This reminds me of Dārūka, Kṛṣṇa's chariot driver, who felt that the ecstasies in his body impeded him in his service. Whenever he was around Kṛṣṇa, he felt so much ecstasy that his hand would shake and he couldn't fan the Lord properly. But that's another stage.

In this first verse of *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, tasting the nectar is only one of seven of the great qualities of chanting. The chanting itself is described in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* as *mahā-guṇa*, a great quality in the age of Kali. That one great quality can overcome all the inauspiciousness of this age. If we were to sum up the total qualities of this age and then compare it to past ages, Kali-yuga would come out as the best age because of the ease of the *yuga-dharma*, *harināma-saṅkīrtana*. The demigods want to be born in Bharata-varṣa where they are chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa in Kali-yuga because then they can go back to Godhead.

The chanting itself is a great quality, but when you analyze it, it has many qualities of its own. Chanting cleanses the heart of all the dust accumulated for years and extinguishes the fire of conditioned life. When we chant, we are not interested only in tasting nectar, but in properly situating our lives. There's that expression, "Get right with God." Or, "Prepare to meet your Maker." Getting right with God means to stop rebelling against Him, to stop committing sinful activities, and to stop breaking His law. Although sin and rebellion are dangerous for the living entity, he persists out of ignorance. He thinks that's all that life is.

I heard one psychologist encouraging his clients that the whole purpose of existence is first of all to survive, and then to have a Big Time, to enjoy yourself. Of course, we know that that is not the purpose of life. The purpose of life is to break the cycle of birth and death and go back to Godhead. If that can't be done in one lifetime, then at least we should make progress toward that goal. In order to become free of death, we have to diminish our interest in enjoying material life. The chanting helps to situate us rightly. This is one of its qualities.

We read this verse as axiomatic truth, *śāstra*. We don't look at it and then compare it to our own experience, saying, "Well, I haven't experienced that." Our lack of experience is a symptom of lack of advancement. Our experience is tiny. Therefore, first we should find out the experience of *śāstra*. *Śāstra* will set the standard for us. Later we can discuss how our own experience tallies with *śāstra* and how to bring the two experiences closer together.

The chanting removes dirt from the mirror of the mind. It breaks the cycle of birth and death and puts out the fire of material desire. Therefore, it is the prime benediction, the greatest blessing, for this age. It spreads the rays of Kṛṣṇa's blessings everywhere—in our hearts and throughout the world. Although the images in this verse are poetic, we don't take them as imaginary or fanciful expressions. *Harināma* is potent.

The holy name is the life of all transcendental knowledge. *Jñāna* (discriminating matter from spirit and anything else that's considered Vedic or material knowledge) culminates in *bhakti*. Chanting goes right to *bhakti*. That's the purpose of chanting. It's a call in devotion to Kṛṣṇa. "O Kṛṣṇa! O Rādhā!" It allows us to approach the highest energy.

Chanting the holy name is also the highest education. *Bahūnām janmanām ante, jñānavān māṁ prapadyate/vāsudevaḥ sarvam iti, sa mahātmā su-durlabhaḥ*. One will have to be a *jñānī*, a scholar, a philosophical meditator for many, many lifetimes before he come to this highest education—understanding that Kṛṣṇa is everything.

Another way of saying, "Kṛṣṇa is everything" is to chant, "O Kṛṣṇa, O Rādhā," "Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare." For an advanced devotee, the chanting becomes everything. The chanting is his austerity, his knowledge, his responsibility, his vocation, his prayer, his morning walk, his evening star, his facing of difficulty—everything. It's the life of transcendental knowledge.

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There is a kind of talking or writing which can help you in chanting. Maybe that's the strict sense of what we mean by "japa talk." I was being a little facetious when I coined the title, *Japa*



*Walks, Japa Talks.* My intended pun is that what starts out as a *japa* session turns instead into a talking session. There is something ironic about the phrase “*japa* talk.” *Japa* itself means no talking, only to chant the thirty-two syllables over and over again. However, I think there is something we can properly call *japa* talk. *Japa* talk means glorifying the holy name, describing its qualities, or reading verses about the holy name. We could call the Ajāmila section of the *Bhāgavatam* *japa* talk or talk about *kīrtana* because the holy name is being elaborately praised, and its miraculous potency in saving a sinful person is being described.

Any kind of expression that helps us in our chanting is worthwhile. From the strict Vaiṣṇava point of view, we shouldn’t be talking about other things. All other talk is *prajalpa*.

The first symptom of surrender is to do what is favorable to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The urge to speak (*vāco-vegam*) cannot be controlled by complete silence, but we have to speak those things that impel our Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

The second symptom of surrender is to avoid what is unfavorable to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. This might mean not talking, especially during *japa* time. Restrain yourself from speech. Restrain the tongue. Just chant.

## August 7

It's nice when you wake up and there's a Hare Kṛṣṇa tune going through your head. There's so much great music in the world—classical, jazz, and so on—but beyond all that is the realm of transcendental *kīrtana*. That is the only music that puts us directly in contact with all-blissful Kṛṣṇa *because it's composed of His names*.

I'm beginning to appreciate more the tunes and *kīrtana* artists that circulate around ISKCON. Technically speaking, they may not be the greatest musicians, but somehow they keep the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra on our minds, and that's the most important thing. If only I could pray like that, in a tuneful way, not thinking about it, but constantly (*kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ*). *Japa* is an especially good way to keep Kṛṣṇa on the mind for those who are fortunate enough to pay attention while they chant.

Proper speech in Kṛṣṇa consciousness is an extension of *kīrtana*. Rūpa Gosvāmī says that when we can chant in pure love, then we desire to have many mouths with which to chant. When we speak *kṛṣṇa-kathā*, we can call that chanting. Thus *japa* talking is not an interruption of the chanting.

I want to express my appreciation for the ability and the duty to speak authoritatively in *paramparā*. It's saving my speech from becoming nonsense *prajalpa*. Therefore, despite sometimes feeling inadequate or hypocritical, I should continue speaking the Absolute Truth. Go out and walk and chant. Then come home and speak on *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, both the verses themselves and what I have heard from His Divine Grace.

\*

*nāmnām akāri bahudhā nija-sarva-śaktis  
tatrārpitā niyamitaḥ smarāṇe na kālaḥ  
etādṛśī tava kṛpā bhagavan mamāpi  
durdaivam idṛśam ihājani nānurāgaḥ*

O my Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction to living beings, and thus You have hundreds and millions of names, like Kṛṣṇa and Govinda. In these transcendental names



You have invested all Your transcendental energies. There are not even hard and fast rules for chanting these names. O my Lord, out of kindness You enable us to easily approach You by Your holy names, but I am so unfortunate that I have no attraction for them.

This translation came from Śrīla Prabhupāda's introduction to the First Canto, and it is immortal. I like to use both this early translation and the one that appeared later in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. In the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* translation of this verse, it's more explicit that the reason a devotee does not taste the holy name is because he commits offenses.

People talk about the wonderful eloquence and rhythm of the King James English translation of the Bible. It's especially nice when spiritual words also roll in a melodic way and you can hear their music. There's something earthy and yet transcendental about Prabhupāda's word choices, at least for those who have come close to them, who have been raised on them, and who love them. I like the way this sentence begins: "O my Lord, Your holy name alone can render . . ." Maybe it's something about the recurrence of the letter "l," but whatever it is, it's poetry.

Because only Kṛṣṇa's name can bless us, He kindly appears with many, many names. The best name is Kṛṣṇa, "all-attractive," because it contains all other names. Kṛṣṇa is called Śyāmasundara because of His beautiful bodily hue; He is called Govinda because He is the master and the pleaser of the cows, the senses, and the land. All the concepts and flavors of Śyāmasundara and Govinda are contained in "Kṛṣṇa." That's why Prabhupāda and Lord Caitanya recommend "Kṛṣṇa" as the supreme name. Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare.

Furthermore, Kṛṣṇa is not alone. He is with Rādhā, His dearest devotee. Therefore, we chant Hare (Rādhā) along with Kṛṣṇa's name. Although Kṛṣṇa has many, many names, we are satisfied to chant the few that are contained in the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. Vallabha Bhaṭṭa was proud that he had composed a literary piece containing many, many names of Kṛṣṇa, but when he told Lord Caitanya, the Lord was not impressed. Lord Caitanya listed off three or four names and said that they were sufficient for Him.

Still, this *Śikṣāṣṭakam* verse recognizes that God has many names. From this we can also assume that Kṛṣṇa does not only appear on Indian soil, but around the world. He also appears in various scriptures—the *Vedas*, the Bible, the Koran, and even in the Buddhist texts. Lord Caitanya approved of that chanting, but if we want to follow His personal example in disciplic succession, we should simply chant Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.

The name *Śikṣāṣṭakam* means that these verses give *śikṣā*, instruction, and they do it concisely, quickly. These verses contain the science of *harināma*. They state that Kṛṣṇa has invested all His energies in His name. The name is not different than Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa has therefore been kind to make approach to Him easy by the chanting of His holy name. No one should think that the name is just a way of indicating God; it is directly God Himself. We can penetrate into Kṛṣṇa's presence by the transcendental sound vibration.

Thus, the second verse makes us aware of the Lord's generosity, of the fullness of the name, and of the ease in practicing the chanting. Therefore, it is a surprise that the end of the verse drops us into a mood of disappointment. Although Kṛṣṇa has offered so much facility and kindness through His names, the devotee has to admit that he doesn't have the ability to taste the holy name. Therefore he is unfortunate. How could anyone not avail himself of such an easy process? How could anyone fail to take up the greatest benediction of the age of Kali, which gives him Kṛṣṇa's association? Such a person can only be unfortunate, and the cause of that misfortune is that he commits offenses while chanting.

The purpose of this verse is not to make us lose hope. Lord Caitanya was not trying to drive us away: "If Lord Caitanya doesn't taste the nectar, what hope is there for me?" He was identifying with our plight and at the same time instructing us about the cause of our unfortunate position. We have to free ourselves of offense. It's only possible by Kṛṣṇa's mercy.

One might doubt, "How is it possible for the same person, within a single verse, to appreciate so deeply and glorify the name, and then say He has no taste for it?" This indicates another level of Lord Caitanya's statement, "I cannot taste the nectar of the holy name." This statement is made in extreme humility by one who



actually does appreciate the holy name. He has described the holy name so scientifically and with so much realization. He has prayed and glorified, “O my Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction to living beings . . . You have so kindly made Yourself available by Your holy names . . . ” He has told us that there are no hard and fast rules for chanting. Thus He is the best instructor in *harināma*. Such a person cannot actually be bereft of tasting the nectar of the holy name. He is tasting humility.

As *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* states in the final chapter of *Antya-līlā*, “Where love of God is actually present, its first symptom is that a devotee feels that he does not actually possess a drop of that love.” One who advertises that he is a great chanter and a great lover has missed the point of Lord Caitanya’s mood. Lord Caitanya’s most intimate followers, the six Gosvāmīs of Vṛndāvana, also state in their poems that they are fallen. They cry over this fact. Our lack of taste is something different, but it can make us feel hopeful and even fortunate when we learn about Vaiṣṇava humility in verses like verse two of *Śikṣāṣṭakam*.

Lord Caitanya! I know Your secret. You are not actually bereft of the holy name. You may feel like that in Your heart as You appear in this world to taste the position of the humble Vaiṣṇava. At the same time, You are giving us stern instructions to awaken our own humility and desire for chanting. If we don’t rid ourselves of the contamination of *nāma-aparādha*, we will be outside Your circle. You are warning us not to miss out. Don’t fail the course on *harināma* by remaining an offender. Remove this one major discrepancy, and then the whole kingdom of God will be open to us and we can enter as the servant of Your servants.

We all know it’s difficult to break bad habits, but the *Śikṣāṣṭakam* verse makes us aware that the gain is very, very great, whereas the cost of remaining in *nāma-aparādha* is also very, very great. Therefore, we want to give this *japa* reform the highest priority in our lives.





## August 8

It is God's gift to us conditioned souls that we may go out the gate of a little house and walk up a road in the early morning, seeking His personal presence in the holy name. It's such a perfect time of day, with the first light showing that the sky will be clear, while the farm buildings are still in silhouette. The late summer trees are full and wave their branches in the breeze. It's the same every morning, but it's also new and different. As every minute passes, it becomes a little lighter. I start to notice the fair color of the rye grasses. The first birds chirp, and, one by one, objects start to reveal themselves. It's not just a matter of increasing light, but increasing power of observation. See the little knots of barbed wire on the pasture fence? Do I notice the telephone poles and the single electrical line that is strung from pole to pole? Walk a little further and the scene will be completely different. As yet, I can only see a faint suggestion of hills . . .

By the time I reach the bridge, the creek is holding light from the sky and looks like a dark mirror. The rocks in the creek are still silhouetted, but they are starting to turn gray. Today the wind was up and it was cooler. These days I have just been walking by the creek and not stopping to look in or to meditate, but this morning I remembered how precious the moments before sunrise are, before the sun really starts to make objects plain and colorful. Once this moment is gone, who knows when it will return again? Rather, who knows when *I* will return again to see it?

With the coming of the sun goes the most private and secluded time of day. I always stop and note it and try to stay with it like a prayer. It is not a full-blown prayer fully directed to Kṛṣṇa, but a beginning prayer that leads to the others. Kṛṣṇa knows I am thinking of Him. He knows I wait to come to Him, even while all I seem to do is stare into a creek in the pre-dawn light and hear the water coursing over the rocks.

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Because I lingered at the creek, I fell behind in my tight schedule. To catch up, I quickened the chanting pace. This could be dangerous—it could turn my *japa* into something more mechanical—but speeding up also serves in a good way. Sometimes by chanting faster, I can actually hear the mantras.

Usually I walk half an hour in one direction and then stop and turn back. By the time I return, color has been restored to the world. The foxglove is violet, the clover and raspberry bushes white, the grasses green. It's now light enough to read.

\*

*ṭṛṇād api sunīcena  
taror iva sahiṣṇunā  
amāninā mānadena  
kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ*

One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw on the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige, and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.

It would be hard to choose only one verse of *Śikṣāṣṭakam* as the most important, but if we were hard-pressed, we would probably choose this one. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja calls this verse the thread upon which the holy name is strung. Lord Caitanya informed Rāmānanda Rāya that this verse was the perfection of love of God. No matter what the *rasa*, every pure devotee worships Kṛṣṇa in this mood. It is perhaps the most “practical” of the *Śikṣāṣṭakam* verses. It teaches us how to chant.

Of course, the instruction is not external. This verse doesn't instruct us how to pick up our beads in our right hand and how not to touch them with the index finger. Nevertheless, its instruction is meant for all who sincerely wish to approach the holy name. Even if we can't apply it due to our poor-heartedness, this verse makes it clear to us why we can't chant for any long duration of time. We lack the humility.



Prabhupāda once said that if most people were asked to go on chanting constantly, they would go mad. Constant chanting can only be practiced by an advanced devotee. Here, the advancement is described as thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street. That means giving up the false prestige that comes with the material body. “I have an American body. I have money in the bank. I have gained material education. I have a wife and family and a house.” Or, “I have a *sannyāsi’s* *daṇḍa* and a reputation. I have published some books. I practice austerity.” Give it up when you chant! Stop thinking about the busy world in which you are a manipulator and a mover, an exchanger of money and goods. Stop being puffed up.

But because we spend about twenty-two hours a day being puffed up, it’s hard to switch suddenly and become humble when we pick up our beads. Therefore, this instruction is not just for the *japa* period, but it is the life of the chanter. If we really want to chant, we will have to live with humility. It’s not something that can be affected by an imitative physical posture or a look in the eyes or sound in the voice. It has to come from the heart and from our actions.

Because Lord Caitanya directs us in this way, we can start by thinking over what He means and take it seriously. He doesn’t want puffed up devotees chanting His names. Consider the facts, how you have come to this world out of the misuse of your free will, how you persist in thinking you are this body and that the body’s possessions are yours. Feel how wrong this is. Feel the illusion of it. Then begin the smallness. Small is beautiful—be lower than the straw on the street.

We may look at the words and try to explain them one by one, but that is not the way to enter the spirit of this verse. Of course, analysis has its place, but at some point, we have to stop all analysis, read the verse, and try to *be there*:

“One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige, and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.”

I'll say it to myself: if I want to go on chanting, I have to be humble. If I'm serious about wanting to improve my chanting, then I have to be tolerant—tolerant of interruptions to chanting, tolerant of my low state, tolerant of the fact that I can't make rapid advancement. Tolerant, but always working to improve. I have to tolerate the austerity of that work. And in relationships with others, check yourself from your superiority complex. You are not special. The holy name is special. You are less than ordinary. Lord Caitanya is magnanimous. He is giving you this wonderful opportunity. Why not be intelligent for once in your life and take up the chanting in earnest? That would be a great success in the midst of my many failures.

Of course, I will go on chanting my daily quota of rounds. Now keep this verse on the thread of the holy name. "Raising my hands, I declare, 'Everyone please hear me! String this verse on the thread of the holy name and wear it on your neck for continuous remembrance'" (Cc., *Ādi* 17.32).



## August 9

There was a gusty wind overnight. A few times it sounded so loud, I thought that a car was coming close and that the wind had even pushed open the window. I wondered how it would affect my walk. At ten minutes to 5, I pulled up the shade on the skylight. Each morning it's a little bit darker. Soon I won't be able to walk until later. But since I could still distinguish between the tops of the pines and the sky, I thought it wouldn't be too dark to take my walk.

Uddhava's poly-tunnel shone in the little bit of light coming from the sky. I thought, "I won't be able to judge the wind until I get outside," but it didn't look so violent. Then when I got out on the road, the sky caught my attention. It was a light color, which indicates a clear day, but it was filled with blowing clouds. What was unusual was the speed at which the clouds were moving. They were torn into dark pieces by the wind. It was so fascinating that I could hardly keep my eyes on the road to see where I was going. I even walked off the road once. Then I thought, "I have come out here to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, not to watch speed clouds!" The first stretch of my walk is bordered on both sides by tall pine trees. Once I found the clearing, the force of the wind hit me full blast.

One of the questions the devotees were asking me last week has stayed in my mind. It's a question Ātmānandī dāsī asked. She admitted that she has enthusiasm for her service, which is to edit a children's magazine. She thinks about it all the time. But she is not interested in her chanting. Her question—at least as I remember it and the way it has entered my thinking—is, is it all right to be enthusiastic about our service instead of chanting? Will the Lord take it as a compensation that at least we're devoted to His service, or should we not allow ourselves to neglect the chanting?

I told her that it was good to be encouraged (she shouldn't be discouraged) that she has a service she thinks about day and night. That is her good fortune. But at the same time, it doesn't mean she has to neglect her chanting. There's a danger that that other service may not be pure or that it may not in itself maintain her good consciousness, unless she practices it along with the chanting. I am repeating my reply here just to preach to myself on this

point. My writing gives me joy, and I also get pleasure from walking in nature, but I want to develop a strong liking for the holy name and find joy in chanting. Then the writing and the walk can be permeated by Hare Kṛṣṇa.

One of the wonderful things about chanting is that it makes us small, as mentioned in the *ṭṛṇād api* verse. The chanting isn't *our* show, it's Kṛṣṇa's. I mean, it's Kṛṣṇa's names we are chanting, and we can't really do it for any length of time or with concentration and devotion unless we love Kṛṣṇa. How desirable and how beneficial it is to be attracted to the chanting.

The wind inclined me to walk and chant faster. I liked the walk, but I looked forward to finishing it and getting back to the house. Something ran across the road so fast I couldn't even see what it was—probably a rabbit. A bird was flying so low toward me that I thought it was going to fly into me, and I cried out,





“Kṛṣṇa!” After that, I imagined a moving shadow was an animal following me. All these illusions existed because the sky was only beginning to lighten.

Was I afraid? This morning I read about the Nārāyaṇa-kavaca shield. The *Bhāgavatam* says that when fear comes, we should put these mantras on our bodies like armor. I prefer to chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra in any situation. That’s recommended as more than sufficient. All other protective expansions and agents of God—Garuḍa-deva, Lord Nṛsiṃha, and Lord Nārāyaṇa Himself—are present in the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra.

No lingering at the bridge this morning—the wind was so cold. As I walked the homestretch, I started to see nature’s colors—the yellow ragwort and the tall four and five-foot wildflowers knocked over by the buffeting winds. The wind is stronger than they are.

This morning I didn’t feel reluctant to see the dim, gray world go away; I welcomed light and rosiness. I want to see. I want more light.

\*

*na dhanam na janam na sundarim  
kavitam va jagad-isa kamaye  
mama janmani janmanisvare  
bhavatad bhaktir ahaituki tvayi*

O almighty Lord, I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I desire beautiful women, nor do I want any number of followers. I only want Your causeless devotional service, birth after birth.

This isn’t rhetoric. Although Lord Caitanya has spoken humbly about Himself in the previous verses, calling Himself an offender to the holy name and wanting to be lower than the straw in the street, here He asserts very definitely His feelings of detachment. *I do not want money; I do not want followers, I do not want a beautiful wife always doting on me. Kick all these attachments out.*

Śrīla Prabhupāda calls this verse the last word in prayer. Therefore, we may take it not only as an assertion of detachment, but as a prayer to attain this stage. If we are still attached to followers, money, beautiful poetry, and women, we should offer this prayer to have our attachments broken.

You don't want this and you don't want that? Then what do you want?

I want Your causeless devotional service, birth after birth.

You don't even want liberation?

No, I am already liberated when I engage in perpetual service unto Your lotus feet. Just give me service.

The previous three verses specifically describe *saṅkīrtana*, the many holy names of the Lord which are full with His presence, and the method by which one can constantly chant. This is the first verse in which chanting is not specifically mentioned. It can be assumed, however, that the causeless devotional service the pure devotee wants consists first and foremost of *śravaṇam-kīrtanam viṣṇoḥ smaraṇam*. Therefore we pray to Kṛṣṇa, "Please let me go on chanting life after life. Please give me the taste of the nectar of the holy name. Give me *this* service. I don't want anything else."

It may be that a devotee, by Kṛṣṇa's desire, will have followers or even wealth and a wife. This verse does not mean that literally and externally a devotee cannot touch these things. It means that he doesn't want them for his personal benefit. He doesn't want them at all, but if Kṛṣṇa wants him to use them in service, then he will accept them. All the devotee wants is the service Kṛṣṇa desires him to perform. This is Lord Caitanya's pure prayer: *mama janmani janmanīśvare, bhavatād bhaktir ahaitukī tvayī*.

A devotee is not desireless. Prabhupāda says desire cannot be killed in the living entity. After stating the three big material desires (wealth, women, and followers) and negating them, Lord Caitanya's assertion of a positive desire becomes even stronger. I don't want anything at all in this world. I am saving my natural propensity to desire for just one thing. That I desire with all my heart and concentration. Just give me this one thing and it's all I ask.

This singlemindedness adds force to our prayer. Rather than present a long list of desires, I have boiled them down to one, and I pray that You don't deny me. I only want Your causeless devotional service, life after life. Let me chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and serve the Vaiṣṇavas.



Without sincerely accepting and reciting Lord Caitanya's prayer, we may easily drift into desiring many different things. If we accept this prayer, however—and acceptance of the prayer begins with the practice of reciting it—then we will be fixed in proper consciousness.

We may pray to Lord Kṛṣṇa, "If You receive any prayers from me asking for various desires, please cancel them. This is my last word in prayer. I am praying with Lord Caitanya and His *Śikṣā-ṣṭakam*."

## August 10

It was almost too dark to start this morning at 4:55, but that was my scheduled walking time, so I went out anyway. It was cool out, but there was no wind. It was very quiet. I wanted to go on a no-nonsense walk with no talk, just *japa*, keeping my thoughts at a minimum. I had no particular expectations, and it was too dark to look at the scenery, so I just walked down that ribbon of road and chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare.

After half an hour (at the halfway point), I stopped walking, stopped chanting too, for a few moments, and took some deep breaths. Inhale, hold for the period of a Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra, and slowly exhale—and I listened.

You can't hear clouds. It's surprising that such a big movement takes place in the sky without the slightest noise. I watched them go by silently and thought how the clouds look as if they are ushering in the dawn. It seems as if they are removing the covering. As they went by, I could see a light gray-blue behind them. Words fail to describe the beauty of it. Words may characterize or personify, but the clouds are different from that. For example, if I say the clouds look malevolently dark, that's my supposition. There's nothing malevolent about a cloud, it's just very dark and is probably bringing rain. Still, we like to play with words. Sometimes it's better to put words aside and simply look and listen.

Light blue, lighter than blue, a bit white—it reminded me of Easter. Then I began to wonder as I listened how I could chant better.

At this point, standing quietly, I could see the world grow lighter at almost every moment. I was standing near a tree as a bird started its morning song. The wind was in my ears too. It is always a special moment, communing and standing alone in my boots and coat, but I can't prolong it, either in terms of my morning schedule or in terms of trying to squeeze out the specialness. Eventually, I have to push on and go back.

I want to be honest. Therefore, I question my position in speaking the Absolute Truth, but there's nothing wrong with lifting myself up to speak about perfection. As Prabhupāda used to say, "I





may be imperfect, but my preaching is perfect because I repeat what Kṛṣṇa says.” There’s nothing hypocritical or incongruous about a humble servant admitting that his own life and his own words are in ignorance, but that he may speak the all-knowledgeable words of the Lord. In fact, this is the best way to speak.

\*

*ayi nanda-tanuja kiṅkaraṁ  
patitaṁ mām viṣame bhavāmbudhau  
kṛpayā tava pāda-paṅkaja-  
sthita-dhūli-saḍṛśam vicintaya*

O son of Mahārāja Nanda [Kṛṣṇa], I am Your eternal servitor, yet somehow or other I have fallen into the ocean of birth and death. Please pick me up from this ocean of death and place me as one of the atoms at Your lotus feet.

Now Lord Caitanya’s prayer is more personalized and Kṛṣṇa is called by name. Not only is He referred to by His name, but He is called by His relationship with Mahārāja Nanda. Lord Caitanya’s prayer is, therefore, personal and intimate. He is not calling Kṛṣṇa

Parameśvara or Jagadīśa, “O Lord of the universe,” but, “O son of Mahārāja Nanda.” It is Lord Caitanya’s kindness that He cries as a pure devotee—“ayī!”—and allows us to share His moment of prayer. For us, true prayer means to recite this *śloka* and to try to understand the emotion in which Lord Caitanya spoke it. We don’t pretend to be Lord Caitanya, but the Lord wants us to take up this instruction and say this prayer.

We who make this prayer understand that we are Kṛṣṇa’s eternal servants. At least we will have heard that we are and accepted it on faith. Unfortunately, despite knowledge of our constitutional position, we become overwhelmed by *māyā*. We are unfortunate. O Lord, please pick us up and restore us to our place of worship at Your lotus feet.

This prayer is a petition. One could say it’s a humble prayer—He’s not asking for much, just a tiny corner at the Lord’s lotus feet—yet He is asking for everything. Why doesn’t a devotee take up his rightful position without bothering the Lord about it? Because the devotee feels helpless.

This reminds me of Devahūti’s prayer to Lord Kapiladeva. She says that Lord Kapila, as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, has placed her in the material energy, *māyā*, and He is the only one who can get her out. A devotee is intelligent enough to understand this. Everything is in Kṛṣṇa’s power, so He is the one we have to go to for release from *māyā*. The saying that God helps those who help themselves means that we help ourselves by completely depending on God.

Sometimes devotees think that this verse contradicts the previous verse where the devotee asks for service life after life. This verse seems to imply that the devotee is seeking liberation at the Lord’s lotus feet, but Prabhupāda explains that both these verses are about pure devotional service. True liberation means eternal service, whether in this world, the lower worlds, or the spiritual world. The request for Kṛṣṇa’s causeless devotional service life after life and the request to be placed as an atom at His lotus feet are identical.

Furthermore, this verse glorifies the holy name. How else, especially in the age of Kali, will the Lord pick me up and place me at His lotus feet? He has said that there is no other way in this age to realize Him but to chant the holy names. Therefore, this is a



prayer for good chanting. "Please, Lord, let me chant Your holy name. O Lord, O energy of the Lord, please engage me in Your service. Please place me at Your lotus feet by blessing me with at least a tiny drop of attention and devotion in chanting. Only then will I get out of the ocean of *māyā*. I know the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa is powerful. You have appeared in Your name and invested all Your energies in the chanting. There is no other way for the living beings to be saved in this age. 'O Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction upon the living beings . . .'"

The benediction we seek is to be taken out of the ocean of birth and death and placed as one of the atoms at the Lord's lotus feet.



Finally, as I was coming down the hill, light and shape returned to the world—yellow wildflowers, and purple, green fields, and contours—sloping meadows, pointed evergreens, folds, more distant hills, and the ripple of the mountains. No artist can capture it so freshly—the golden tassels on the tops of the rye grass and the way everything moved and shimmered. The textures—the barbed wire, the poles, the weeds, the road, the birds.

But what has this to do with our “*Śikṣāṣṭakam*” *śloka*? Isn’t this the world of death? Yes, for all its morning beauty, this day is another day leading to death. As a human being, we calculate a gradual, graceful passage which may or may not go as we plan, but these bugs and weeds go out quickly, without ceremony. Many of the tall weeds blown down yesterday don’t look like they are going to revive, and even if they do, for how long? The dandelions are in puff balls.

If we chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, we don’t see death everywhere. We see Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa’s parts and parcels, all eternal souls. “For one who sees Me everywhere, I am never lost and he is never lost to Me.” Somehow it’s compatible. I can’t stop from being quietly amazed at the transformation that comes every morning to this land and sky, but I see it as a fragment of Kṛṣṇa’s glorious energies. My prime business is to chant.



## August 11

Chanting is my friend. Let me not forget that. I could say chanting is my best friend because the chanting is Kṛṣṇa, but I'm referring to *my* chanting, my level of appreciation. Even in a non-theoretical way, I know that chanting is my very good friend. I may sometimes fail to appreciate it because of my foolish desires to have easy access to ecstasy, but even when I misunderstand, chanting remains a good friend. He's always ready for me to take up our relationship in earnest, and already in my life, if I just give a little attention, He reciprocates deeply.

The outdoors this morning was calm and quiet. In the semi-dark, I met a low-flying bat on his way home from the night shift. Just when I was thinking I was alone, I heard the bellow of a cow. It sounded like a man belching. It reminded me that this land is filled with cattle and sheep who spend their nights on the ground. Then one by one, they were getting up and starting to move around. Still, the road was all mine for chanting and hearing.

\*

*nayanam galad-aśru-dhārayā  
vadanam gadgada-ruddhayā girā  
pulkair nicitam vapuḥ kadā  
tava nāma-grahaṇe bhaviṣyati*

O my Lord, when will my eyes be decorated with tears of love flowing constantly when I chant Your holy name? When will my voice choke up, and when will the hairs of my body stand on end at the recitation of Your name?

One could say I have no business commenting on the last three verses of *Śikṣāṣṭakam* because they require advanced realization. At least I want to say that I like these verses and I adore the ultimate goal described in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism.

After two verses in which the chanting of the holy name was not specifically mentioned, Lord Caitanya now focuses again on chanting. He yearns for the state in which He will experience the bodily symptoms of ecstasy. Of course, He's not looking only for

the sensations of ecstasy as sense gratification, but these symptoms are indications of feelings for Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. This is real chanting, and He aspires to experience it. What is the use of chanting if our eyes are not decorated with tears of love falling constantly? If we chant like a machine without emotion and our voice never chokes up, what kind of chanting is that?

In the Second Canto of the *Bhāgavatam*, Sukadeva Gosvāmī says that chanting that is not accompanied by tears in the eyes and throbbing in the heart indicates a steel-framed heart. Let me therefore not shy away from the contents of this *śloka* and think it's only for pure devotees. We have to face it for what it is. These verses describe real chanting. Anyone who doesn't know this chanting or who doesn't even aspire for it is going through the motions in the name of *japa*. It goes without saying that real chanting cannot be imitated, but to admit, "This advanced state of chanting cannot be imitated," does not absolve us from the responsibility to work toward it. Neither does the taboo against imitation forbid us from desiring real ecstasy.

So we go on chanting and walking, never trying to induce wet eyes, but hoping that the day will come when our chanting will become pure. By hearing these last three verses of *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, we can face the fact that our own chanting experience is extremely limited. Knowing of these advanced states, we will hesitate to tell our Godbrothers that we "chanted good rounds today."

*Japa* is my good friend. The feel of the wooden beads in the beadbag is the dearest sense of touch I know. I can feel them in the dark and know what they are. This is my life of prayer, this is what Prabhupāda taught me to do as my foremost practice in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. He chanted on my beads and then gave them to me in my hand.

I treasure what I have and welcome the chance to hear again Lord Caitanya's asking of *when*.

"When, oh when will that day be mine?

When my offenses ceasing, taste for the name increasing,  
when in my heart will Your mercy shine?

When, oh when will that day be mine?"

—Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, "*Kabe Ha'be Bolo*," verse 1



## August 12

This morning had the clearest sky so far—light blue on the horizon with the hills distinct. Hardly a cloud and only a few stars remaining.

I felt like an astronaut who has hundreds of things to notice and take care of in his cockpit. “Are my ears covered with my knit cap? Did I notice that my nose is feeling the cold? Is my heart beating? Well, of course it is! Rhythm of walk okay? Good exercise? Keeping your being intact? Cane click-clicking on the road? Eyes awake, ears hearing sounds? Any animals on the road in front of you? And what about thoughts? Marshal them together. Send them this way and that.”

So many things to think of. Then finally, when I was satisfied that I was underway, I noticed the main purpose of the whole trip: Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare/Hare Rāma Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma Hare Hare. It was coming from my mouth and all around me, and my ears were paying attention.

I say I was paying attention to the chanting, but it was just another item on my astronaut’s check list. I was fingering my beads on round eleven, my counter beads were in the right place . . . the chanting vibration was going out. But one difference is that I have faith that the chanting is absolute. It is much deeper than I can perceive. Even if I treat it as another item in my day, it’s still the outstanding one, by Kṛṣṇa’s grace.

\*

I think of the people, especially the older ones, who live in Vṛndāvana and take morning walks on that strip of asphalt-covered road called Bhaktivedanta Swami Marg. Many of those people have walking sticks, and they all greet each other, “Jaya Rādhe!” Just thinking about it reminds me of all the different sounds—the creaking ox carts, the bothersome motor rickshaws, the taxis—Vṛndāvana.

Just as I like to walk and chant, many people do that in Vṛndāvana as a way of life. As I think how this habit of walking and chanting will eventually lead to old age and death, so it does for each of them. We’re all in the same boat. Of course, all mortals are

in the same boat, but I am referring to devotees of Kṛṣṇa who aspire to Vṛndāvana. They are in a special *harināma* boat. To stay alive is also pleasant in this atmosphere. To live simply, even austere, and to feel the cool air, yet to be detached and to chant and chant . . . I can't speak for everyone, but what I wanted to say is that walking on this road alone reminds me of all those who walk in Vṛndāvana—those who chant the holy names and grow old.

I also wanted to say that the special feature of this walk is that I am alone. Solitude is a great wealth—I don't even know how to spend it, I have so much of it. I can just throw it out to the air and distribute it to the pastures and hills, distribute my thanks and use the facility to chant without interruption. I don't disdain human interaction, but it's a fact that human beings are very distracting entities. They are so big and complicated, and they have so many needs. I know, I'm one of them. But when more than one come together, then there's so much need to pay attention to the other person. When you're alone, however, you can hear your own little, unworthy utterances of Hare Kṛṣṇa and hope that the day can come when you can enter into it much, much deeper than you're doing now.





*yugāyitaṁ nimeṣeṇa  
cakṣuṣā prāvṛṣāyitaṁ  
śūnyāyitaṁ jagat sarvaṁ  
govinda-vīraheṇa me*

O Govinda! Feeling Your separation, I am considering a moment to be like twelve years or more. Tears are flowing from my eyes like torrents of rain, and I am feeling all vacant in the world in Your absence.

Previously, Lord Caitanya called Kṛṣṇa the son of Nanda Mahārāja. Now He calls Him Govinda—sweet, personal names.

This verse is spoken with the words of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī. We cannot put ourselves into this mood, but somehow or other, Lord Caitanya presented it in His “instructions.” We are meant to follow in the *gopīs*’ footsteps. Lord Caitanya said there is no better way of worship than that “invented” by the *gopīs*, and Rādhārāṇī is the chief *gopī*. But here more than anywhere else, is the caution: “Don’t imitate.”

Only a neophyte who is deluded would claim that he considers a moment away from Kṛṣṇa to be like twelve years. The *gopīs* hanker like that for Kṛṣṇa on a daily basis. They see Him in the morning and again in the late afternoon when He returns with His cows and cowherd boyfriends. The dust from the cows’ hooves fills the air and powders Kṛṣṇa’s body, making Him appear very beautiful, and the *gopīs* feel great ecstasy. But when He is out in the pasturing grounds all day, that seems like an eternity.

During the day when they cannot see Kṛṣṇa, they see Him with His flute in their minds. Because He is not externally present, they feel separation. Prabhupāda points out the phrase, “feeling all vacant,” and says that this feeling is an indication of whether we have become Kṛṣṇa conscious. We will not see this world as filled with delightful objects for our senses, and neither will we become involved in its political upheaval. We will see that nothing is going on here. It’s vacant. We want only to be with Kṛṣṇa. This voidism is different than the voidism of the Buddhists. The advanced devotee sees this world as zero, but in an entirely different way than the *nirviśeṣa-śūnyavādī* zero.

These are some of the points in the verse, but I cannot enter it. I am not feeling the world as void. Instead, it is cluttered with my

mental activities and bodily attachments. Those serve to make me body-centered rather than Kṛṣṇa-centered. To me, this verse is a spiritual jewel. There's no question of me attaining this state, but that does not prevent me from beholding the jewel. "O Govinda, feeling separation from You, I am feeling that every minute passes so slowly that it's like eternity. Because I want to be with You and You are not here, tears flow from my eyes like torrents of rain. The world seems to be void without You."

This is the highest stage of God consciousness, as taught by the six Gosvāmīs of Vṛndāvana. It refers specifically to conjugal love for Kṛṣṇa. Because Kṛṣṇa very much wants to enjoy this *rasa*, pure devotees in a similar mood come forward and please Him in this way. Just see the cost of loving Kṛṣṇa too much. It costs you your sleep, your peace of mind, and you cannot contain yourself without crying. The devotees in *ādi-rasa* would have it no other way. I should stop talking about this because I have no qualification.

I think of a verse by Ajāmila after he was saved by the Viṣṇu-dūtas. He said something like this—I am a sinful man who fell from his brahminical position and committed all abominable acts. What am I in comparison to the pure devotees of the Lord? I am like a worm, and infinitesimal—what am I in comparison to the Lord and His holy name?

That too is a kind of ecstasy, sincerely felt and unattainable for me.

For now, let me be satisfied that I can walk and enjoy the cool, fresh air. I'll go back to using my body for walking and chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa.



## August 13

Walking while chanting *japa* is a luxury, an added treat. It's not something I can always afford. Often, I'm in a temple in a city or someplace where a walk isn't feasible. Most of my work on *japa* is done indoors. Even in India, in the great tradition of *japa* chanting, the *ācāryas* sat in one place in a *bhajana-kuṭīr* or even a cave. When you sit before *tulasī* or a picture of Kṛṣṇa, it's better for concentration. You minimize your movements and concentrate on hearing. Even during these *japa* walks that I have been taking during the past couple of weeks, most of my *japa* has been chanted indoors.

I wouldn't want to overlook (or have the reader overlook) the fact that *japa* is better chanted in one place, but we also have been celebrating the added treat of the great outdoors and the great holy name combined on a *japa* walk. Then we have been able to discuss *japa*. Thus we have been combining the solitude in which every chanter chants, even in a temple room filled with devotees, with the need we all have for friendly exchanges. We have been walking together with our solitary *japa*, then sometimes pausing and speaking our minds.

\*

This is the last day before I go back to the city to preach. This morning, the long, sloping line of the hills was pleasing to the eye, just as the chanting sound was pleasing to the ears. It was also pleasing to describe all this with the gift of speech as given to us by Lord Kṛṣṇa.

I have decided not to repeat my complaints about my low level of chanting. It sounds too much like the wife constantly nagging her husband. The nagging doesn't improve his behavior. Better to leave the guy alone and try a more positive approach toward reform. Better to see the good in what he is doing and encourage him to go on with his practices. At the same time, I know I will not forget that my chanting is not in good shape and I will look for ways to improve it. I especially wait for a sign from Kṛṣṇa within,

some flicker of an indication of the direction to take and some enthusiasm for whatever it may be—an increased quota, increased service, a way to better chanting.

\*

I walk as far as I dare in one direction. It takes me about half an hour. I mark my stopping point as a place where there is a particular post and a discarded piece of paper on the roadside. I pause to get my breath before returning. It would be a good place to pray if I knew how. Sometimes you can pray even without words or forming an image in your mind. This takes an innate faith that Kṛṣṇa is everywhere and that you are His devotee. Even if you let yourself go in your feelings, you're not going to become a Māyāvādī or a nonsense *karmī*. *Yasya deve parā bhaktir, yathā-deve tathā gurau/tasyaite kathitā hy arthāḥ, prakāśante mahātmanaḥ*.

All glories to the clear horizon and the first inklings of rosy light. No, it's not rosy yet, it's not even yellow, but the clear outline is remarkable between land and sky. Beautiful sky. Light, and then above it, light blue. Today, above that, some massive, almost granite, blue-gray clouds. This is Kṛṣṇa's picture—stationary, and yet quickly changing. What can be said? All glories to Kṛṣṇa, who even in His so-called insignificant material nature, is incomprehensible, vast, and beautiful—more beautiful than can be portrayed by any artist. We pray for the mercy to be able to feel a drop of His personality in His holy name.

As I turned back from the halfway point, I noticed that all the directions are much darker than that one point on the horizon. Of course, this is natural because the sun rises in the east, but I also took it as a revelation from Kṛṣṇa who opened the sky for me in just one place, giving me hope. Now I have to turn back to what looks like darkness, but with remembrance of Kṛṣṇa's special mercy. In other words, He is telling me *what can be* if I just persist on the path.

\*

*āśliṣya vā pāda-ratāṁ pinaṣtu mām  
adarśanān marma-hatāṁ karotu vā  
yathā tathā vā vidadhātu lampāto  
mat-prāṇa-nāthas tu sa eva nāparaḥ*



I know no one but Kṛṣṇa as my Lord, and He shall remain so even if He handles me roughly by His embrace or makes me broken-hearted by not being present before me. He is completely free to do anything and everything, for He is always my worshipful Lord, unconditionally.

In the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Antya-līlā*, Chapter Twenty, “The *Śikṣāṣṭaka* Prayers,” Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī introduces this eighth verse by informing us definitely that it is spoken by Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī.

“While Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī was thinking in this way, the characteristics of natural love became manifest because of Her pure heart.

“The ecstatic symptoms of envy, great eagerness, humility, zeal and supplication all became manifest at once.

“In that mood, the mind of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī was agitated, and therefore She spoke a verse of advanced devotion to Her *gopī* friends.

“In the same spirit of ecstasy, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu recited that verse, and as soon as He did so, He felt like Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī.

“Let Kṛṣṇa tightly embrace this maidservant, who has fallen at His lotus feet. Let Him trample Me or break My heart by never being visible to Me. He is a debauchee, after all, and can do whatever He likes, but He is still no one other than the worshipable Lord of My heart” (C.c., *Antya* 20.43–7).

Prabhupāda summed up the mood of this verse in one phrase, “There is no business exchange.” Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī’s love is unconditional. She confesses that sometimes Kṛṣṇa is unfaithful, but if that’s how He likes to be in His sporting mood with other *gopīs*, then let Him enjoy to His heart’s content. Of course, Rādhārāṇī will not tell Kṛṣṇa this directly, but here in this verse we see Her actual, all-loving heart. She may show Kṛṣṇa Her *māna* (jealous anger), but She is never really angry with Him and never unfaithful to Him. In fact, if by being unfaithful to Rādhārāṇī, Kṛṣṇa is pleased, then Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī says that the distress that He gives Her is the best of Her happiness.

The mood of this verse is beyond our grasp, and not only because it is in the conjugal *rasa*. Conjugal *rasa* is beyond us because it appears to be like the sexual affairs between men and women in this world. As long as we have even a trace of incli-

nation for material sex life, then we are disqualified to understand the conjugal *rasa*.

But we are kept at a distance from this verse for another reason. The surrender and abandon of all happiness and sense gratification which Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī symbolizes is frightening to us. How could we give up everything for Kṛṣṇa? Is this really the demand and the conclusion of Kṛṣṇa consciousness? Can't we keep anything for ourselves? We dwell in foolish conceptions of surrendering to Kṛṣṇa and at the same time living out our notions and desires for sense gratification. Pure devotional service (*anyābhilāṣitā-śūnyam*) is without sense gratification, including the sense gratification of mental speculation and knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Prabhupāda writes plainly, "A devotee should engage himself exclusively for the satisfaction of Kṛṣṇa, without personal motives, and that will make his life successful." And he quotes Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura as saying that "a devotee does not care about his own happiness and distress; he is simply interested in seeing that Kṛṣṇa is happy. For that purpose, he engages in various activities."

We ask the rhetorical question, "Oh, when will that day be mine when I can taste the nectar of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa?" When we ask that question, do we really want to know the answer? Because if we do, the answer is right here. That day will come, that nectar will appear for us when our standard of happiness is that Kṛṣṇa should be pleased. As long as we cling to a separatist attitude that our happiness and Kṛṣṇa's happiness are separate, then we cannot know the nectar of chanting the holy name. We will not be calling out His names in earnest. Or, we may be earnest and sincere, but it won't be for pure love of Kṛṣṇa. At the present moment, we cannot attain such pure love, but Lord Caitanya gave us the *Śikṣāṣṭakam* and by it, the vision of what to strive for, what to yearn for.

"The pure devotional service in Vṛndāvana is like the golden particles in the River Jāmbū. In Vṛndāvana there is not a trace of personal sense gratification. It is to advertise such pure love in this material world that Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu has written the previous verse and explained its meaning" (Cc., *Antya* 20.62).

Lord Caitanya composed these eight verses to teach people in general, and He personally tasted their meaning, *Śikṣāṣṭakam*.



We have been lucky to receive this *Śikṣāṣṭakam* in Śrīla Prabhupāda's translation and to witness the emphasis he placed on these prayers by putting them so prominently at the beginning of his *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* opus. They are the most sublime prayers, covering all the stages of devotional service in chanting, and therefore, they are an ideal accompaniment for our *japa* walks and *japa* talks.

Since I have to leave now, I would like to thank the devotees who have come with me by reading these meditations and gropings in a forgiving way. I claim to walk alone, but I know that we cannot live alone. Even Kṛṣṇa does not stay alone, but is surrounded by His pure devotees. I should not even think that I am a devotee, a Vaiṣṇava, so I thank the devotees of Prabhupāda and the previous Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas for allowing me to chant with them and to place my unsteady feet on the path which they have trod and left for me to follow. All glories to the holy name of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā and all glories to the chanters of those holy names. All glories to Śrīla Prabhupāda. *Chāḍiyā vaiṣṇava-sevā nistāra pāyeche kebā.*



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