

Children and the Holy Name

By Aruddha devi dasi

Recently I was asked to speak on the theme of “Children and the Holy Name.” I was excited about the topic; after all, isn’t this the essence of our children’s education? Krishna and the holy name are non-different and in the age of Kali He incarnates as the holy name to make it easier for us to approach Him. The scriptures say that Kali-yuga is full of quarrel, hypocrisy, anxiety and temptation, and thus it is difficult to approach the Lord through the processes of meditation, temple worship, sacrifice, etc.—methods that were easier in the previous ages.

The story of Ajamila in the Srimad Bhagavatam is a good example of how maya can affect us in so many subtle ways, even if we are trained in brahminical culture. This story is very relevant for us as we home school our children and try to instill good character in them. Even with this training, are our children safe from the lures of illicit sex, drugs, etc.?

As Ajamila was walking back from the forest, he saw a prostitute engaging in lusty affairs with a man and his mind became agitated. He left his chaste wife and went after the prostitute and brought her home. He engaged in abominable sinful actions and tried to satisfy the prostitute with all kinds of material things, which he acquired by dishonest means. Srila Prabhupada explains that maya in the form of attraction to the opposite sex is so strong that anyone who does not take shelter of the holy name is apt to fall down.

“Madana-vepitam. Madana, this Cupid. When Cupid attacks somebody or one who... When one becomes, I mean to say, too much attracted by lust, all his education, all his culture, all his knowledge, becomes stunned. That is the... Therefore one has to avoid this society.... Therefore, from the very beginning of life a boy is sent to gurukula for good association. Gurukula means... Still there are many gurukulas in India, a spiritual master training some boys in spiritual life. That has also become polluted. So many things... This is Kali-yuga. Therefore the only way of deliverance from this bewilderment is chanting Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna... ”

Prabhupada explains that although Ajamila was properly trained, he was still attracted to illicit sex because he was a young man. “So these things are being shown regularly in the cinema. What character will be formed of the young men? By seeing once, this Ajamila, he fell down so much, and our boys and girls are seeing these things every day in the cinema. So what kind of character you can expect from them? These are the instruction to be taken from Srimad-Bhāgavatam.”

Understanding the perils of Kali yuga, Srila Prabhupada asked his followers to chant 16 good rounds of the Hare Krishna Mahamantra. He knew that without chanting the holy name it would be practically impossible for people to follow the four regulative principles. In the 1960s when Prabhupada first came to America, people were not willing to give up their sinful habits. They saw free sex, drugs and intoxication as a way to achieve peace and spirituality. So Prabhupada simply introduced the chanting of the holy

name and as their hearts gradually became purified, they gave up their sinful habits and became sadhus. Even today people are surprised to see the transformation that is brought about by chanting the holy name.

Chanting is like a detergent which scrubs our heart clean of all misgivings. The holy name alone has the power to overcome the degraded aspects of today's society, such as illicit sex, drugs, and meat eating. This was why Lord Caitanya came 500 years ago – to kill people's demoniac mentality by the weapon of sankirtana, or chanting of the holy name. Chanting has the power of infusing the hearts of even the most fallen souls with stirrings of bhakti, what to speak of devotees and children of devotees who have good association and training.

Even though we are training our children to become devotees of good character, still as they get older they can become affected by mundane association in schools, colleges, and the workplace. Srila Prabhupada was well aware of this and therefore he decreed that of all his instructions, the chanting of 16 good rounds is the most important. Chanting has the power to protect us from maya's subtle intrusions and keep us fixed on the path of bhakti.

Again, we see this in Ajamila's case. Although he succumbed to immoral behavior, he was saved at the end of his life when he called for his son, who was named "Narayana." Even though he was calling for his son, the Lord's name is so powerful that agents of Vishnu immediately arrived on the scene and stopped the Yamadutas from taking Ajamila to hell for punishment.

So as parents we should not only be concerned to give our children a good academic education but also a taste and attachment for the holy names. Krishna is the source of both material and spiritual knowledge, so if we teach our children to serve Krishna, they will naturally and effortlessly also receive knowledge, wealth, fame, strength and renunciation. The Srimad Bhagavatam tells us:

“All the demigods and their exalted qualities, such as religion, knowledge and renunciation, become manifest in the body of one who has developed unalloyed devotion for the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Vāsudeva. On the other hand, a person devoid of devotional service and engaged in material activities has no good qualities. Even if he is adept at the practice of mystic yoga or the honest endeavor of maintaining his family and relatives, he must be driven by his own mental speculations and must engage in the service of the Lord's external energy. How can there be any good qualities in such a man?” (5.8.12).

In other words, material qualifications naturally follow spiritual qualities, and not the other way around. We know this from the examples of Sudama Brahmana, Dhruva Maharaja, and many other great devotees.

So how can we develop in our children an attraction for chanting the holy names? Srila Prabhupada's formula was very simple: if children simply follow their elders and rise

early to do the morning program—japa, kirtana, reading Srimad Bhagavatam, and eating prasadam—they will become pure devotees. Here are some ways we can infuse our children with love for the holy name.

Through Daily Practice

A daily morning program is essential to developing a taste for chanting. When we come before the Deities and sing for Their pleasure, we become purified and naturally develop attraction for Their names. We are all creatures of habit and by a routine program our minds can be disciplined to think about Krishna all day and stay away from temptations. Srila Prabhupada said that rising early every day and singing the Lord’s names are the only austerities that can be expected from children. Other than this, they should be allowed to play, eat as much prasadam as they like, and engage in study.

Both good association and training are necessary to help children chant nicely. Bad association in the form of television and video games should be avoided at all costs because they distract the mind away from Krishna. Chanting will have less effect and the spiritual progress they make can be counteracted by bad association.

Chanting Japa

I gave my sons bead bags when they were three years old, and when they turned six I encouraged them to chant one or two rounds. We always chanted together. I did not let them chant japa on their own because they could develop bad habits and chanting could become a chore or burden. As we did our japa, I would inspire them to chant better, explaining to them that Krishna would dance on their tongue if they chanted purely. This fascinated them and they tried to chant better.

Srila Prabhupada did not want children to be forced to do japa. They should not see it as a punishment but rather as a fun way to talk to Krishna and develop a personal relationship with Him. In other words, when children misbehave, we should not punish them by making them chant an extra round. Similarly, we should not threaten them with extra chanting: “If you don’t do this, you will have to chant an extra round.”

In a letter to Bhanutanya in 1972, Srila Prabhupada wrote: “Why they are inventing these such new things like marching and japa like military? They should run and play when they are small children, not forced to chant japa, that is not the way.”

However, he said children should be encouraged to chant japa, even small children. One time he became upset when small children were not allowed to use japa beads while chanting because they were disrespecting them. He wrote in a letter to Yadunanda in 1975: “I have just been informed by my servant, Srutakirti, that the young children, under twelve, are not allowed to use their japa beads while chanting. This policy is not good. Why this change has been made? I never said they should not use their beads. That is our business. They must be taught how to respect their beads. How they can learn unless they use them?”

One good way to encourage children to chant is to have them participate in japa get-togethers with friends. In Boise every Ekadashi devotees get together to chant japa for one hour and then honor prasadam. This encourages even small children to chant because it is a friendly, intimate setting and they see other children chanting.

Similarly every year on January 1st we celebrate “Japathon,” when all the devotees and congregation members get together to begin the New Year by chanting as many rounds as possible. Our goal is to chant one name of Krishna for every citizen of Idaho. All together, about 80 participants, including 20 children, chanted over 1500 rounds – 2.5 million names, far exceeding our goal of 1.25 million names. Madhava, age 11, chanted 60 rounds and others such Emily, Laura and Sugopi chanted 35, 30 and 25 rounds respectively.

ISKCON Boise started the New Year Japathon festival in 1998 for the spiritual benefit of the citizens of our community. In the beginning years, our goal was to chant as many holy names as there were people in the city of Boise, but gradually we increased our goal to the population of the State of Idaho. Over the last few years, several other temples have picked up on the idea and are conducting their own New Year Japathons. For some children, the Japathon provides their very first experience of japa and they begin chanting regularly after the event. The atmosphere is very sweet and everyone starts the year feeling encouraged.

Small children who are encouraged in a positive manner will learn to chant japa by imitating the adults. Although they may start slow, once they become twelve or thirteen years old, they will increase their number of rounds and begin seeking initiation from a spiritual master. Srila Prabhupada said that children above ten years old can receive initiation and after another year of perfectly chanting 16 rounds and observing the other regulative principles, they may receive second initiation. It is very good if our children have the shelter of a spiritual master before they live away from home for the first time.

Underlying the rules and regulations of good chanting, the most important principle is approaching Krishna with love and devotion. If we miss the spirit of chanting, then the rules become a burden. As parents, we should give our children unconditional love, and then encourage them to give that love to Krishna. In this way, they will grow up to become strong devotees, fixed in their relationship with the holy names.