

A Taste for the Lord's Name

By Urmila Devi Dasi

IT'S AFTER THE TEMPLE'S Sunday feast. Packed into our van, the children laugh and jostle one another as we head for the *gurukula* to watch a video of Krsna's pastimes. Nimai, the four-year-old brother of one of our students, starts singing the Hare Krsna *maha-mantra*. He sings quietly at first. Then his singing builds in volume and picks up a clear rhythm and melody. Eleven-year-old Visnujana starts to play the *mrdanga* drum he'd brought to the feast. Soon all the children are singing together. The singing is their pleasure, and they taste the spiritual sweetness of the Lord's name.

Later, my husband and I chant outside on our beads, marveling that the frogs have awakened on this warm February night. Mixed with the frogs' beeps and blups are sounds from our youngest son, Kesava, and the two boys who board with us. "What are they doing?" my husband asks. Listening closely, we gradually distinguished the sounds of Krsna's names.

As they play, help with cooking, pause in their schoolwork, take a walk, or clean the house, our children and students often burst into transcendental song. Each of our students also chants the Hare Krsna mantra as a quiet personal meditation for at least twenty minutes each morning. And most of the older students commit themselves to chanting a certain number of "rounds" on a string of 108 beads.

"Do you chant a certain number of rounds?" I asked a new thirteen-year-old student.

"No," she replied, "I never have."

"Well," I suggested, "how about starting with three rounds?"

Strangely, after three rounds (about twenty minutes) she was still chanting. And the next morning she was again still chanting after twenty minutes. After a few weeks of this, I asked her, "Are you still just chanting three rounds?"

"I've been chanting seven rounds every day," she said.

"Well," twelve-year-old Kesava piped in, "starting on February first I increased to eight rounds. I'm going to move up until I get to sixteen rounds by the time I'm sixteen."

Our students enthusiastically embrace the Lord's name because of training, a supportive atmosphere, their own commitment to chanting, and the reciprocation of Krsna in the form of His name. We start training our students at age five to sit together for at least twenty minutes each morning and chant on beads. While we don't force the students to chant (we don't punish them if they don't), they understand that we expect them to join in. I help the students pronounce the mantra clearly, I help them finger the beads properly (some young students who play with beads do better to chant without them), and I keep bringing their restless minds back to the sound of Krsna's names.

During our chanting time, I insist that each child respect the spiritual life of the others. No talking or fooling around. I have to set a strong personal example of commitment to my own vow of chanting, as well as to the quality of my chanting. It may seem impossible to chant attentively while supervising twenty students, but I find that Krsna helps me.

No matter how much training we give children, they also have to commit themselves to worshiping the Lord's name. This commitment comes from their own experience with chanting and from understanding its value and importance.

I recall an eleven-year-old boy who joined our *gurukula*. He sat morosely morning after morning, mouth closed and face glum.

"Chant," I would say.

"I don't have to."

"No, you do have to. Of course, I can't make you chant. But chanting Krsna's name is the process of spiritual realization for the present age. So if you want to realize yourself and God, certainly you have to chant. You may choose not to in this life, but sooner or later, in some lifetime when you really want to know and love Krsna, you'll have to chant."

Today, at age eighteen, he's still chanting.

Children profit from making chanting a habit. Then their training becomes effective and their own commitment a joy rather than a burden. We form habits to make sure we get things done—bathing, cleaning, or even keeping up with world events. Similarly, taking refuge in the Lord's name, at least for a certain time every day, is so much easier when it is a habit.

Children should also form the habit of chanting or singing the Lord's name at every opportunity. We can teach this mostly by our own example. Do we chant while we wash dishes, drive our car, or fix the leaky pipes? Do we chant (quietly) while grocery shopping? Prabhupada advises, "Don't waste time, but if you have time, chant Hare Krsna."

When we train our children to chant, help them commit themselves to chanting, and help them arrange their time so the chanting can become a habit, we create a supportive atmosphere for taking shelter of Krsna's name. The devotee community can add to that support. We are lucky here in North Carolina to be part of a community where the temple is regularly full of devotees for congregational singing of the holy name. And when the time comes to chant on beads, no one talks or sneaks off to bed or gets distracted. The intense spiritual mood in the temple encourages everyone to chant seriously.

When anyone with proper training and the desire to chant purely chants regularly in the association of saintly persons, Krsna quickly reveals Him-self in His holy name. When chanting with the children, I often pray to the Lord in their heart, "Please reveal how You are present in Your divine name. Please show them Your love and mercy."

Krsna's presence in His name is a display of His mercy. And because He loves us more than we can imagine, He is easily pleased to reveal Himself. If our children come to rejoice in the glories and sweetness of the Hare Krsna mantra, their path to the perfection of life is fully open.

Urmila Devi Dasi was initiated in 1973 and has been involved in ISKCON education since 1983. She, her husband, and their three children live at the ISKCON community in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where she runs a school for children aged 5-18. She is the main author/compiler of Vaikuntha Children, a gurukula classroom guidebook.

From the Students

When I chant, I feel very happy and joyful. When I chant about Krsna it feels very fun so you can just think about Krsna.

—*Cintamani Dasi, age 8*

I like *kirtana* when it goes fast so that you can jump and dance.

—*Gaura Lila Dasi, age 13*

Krsna likes us to chant and dance for Him.

—*Amala Purana Dasa, age 6*

There seems something special about the holy name.

—*Amrta Dasi, age 11*

I like chanting because it is fun. I like chanting when I am sad. I like chanting a lot because we become more advanced when we chant. I like chanting for Krsna to make Him happy. I like chanting so I become happy like Krsna.

—*Visnujana Dasa, age 10*

Chanting Hare Krsna brings you closer to Krsna.

—*Rohini Dasi, age 13*

The most blissful times of my life were the times when I chanted my rounds clearly with full attention. At such times I felt like I could chant forever.

—*Yamuna Dasi, age 15*