

October 1988

TO: All Devotees of ISKCON Philadelphia

RE: Women and Men Chanting Japa in the Temple Room during Japa Period

Dear Prabhus,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

I would like to propose that an important policy set by Srila Prabhupada, but ignored during the past ten years, be reestablished. This policy states that women, not just men, are to chant in the temple room during japa period.

The writing of this proposal has been prompted by several factors. The most immediate reason is that winter is encroaching and women devotees have no warm, spiritually inviting area in which to chant. However, this proposal is not merely a plea to alleviate physical hardship for the women, although that is important; it is also an attempt to address some of the underlying philosophical misconceptions and deviations that have contributed to the existing discriminatory practices towards women within ISKCON, policies like that pertaining to the japa issue that are contrary to Prabhupada's teachings. Obviously, any attempt to fully analyze these issues in so short a paper is bound to be cursory; therefore, this paper (like Pranada and Saudamani Prabhus' letter of last winter) is offered as a prelude to invite open and principled discussion.

I sincerely hope that this paper will not be misconstrued as promoting a mundane war between the sexes or as an indulgence in the reactive and dualistic tendency of "one-ups-manship;" my earnest intent here is to try to understand, express and act upon what is philosophically correct. Also, it can be seen that what is best for our spiritual lives individually will, in turn, reap the best results for us collectively -- the individual and collective work in tandem. If as a group we can begin working with the same understanding of what it means to be members of a Vaisnava community -- of what it means in practice for everyone to be afforded equal spiritual opportunity -- and if we can begin working together rather than at the expense of one another, then we will have a chance of overturning the heavy onslaught of ignorance as kali yuga progresses. Without this shared understanding and mutual respect, our unity is necessarily divided, our strength diminished, and our potential for casualties much greater. As Prabhupada stressed over and over again, central to our preaching success is cooperation.

Vaisnavism: A Tradition of Spiritual Enfranchisement

The current policy that exists -- of having men chant in the temple room and women outside -- is one that has evolved through the years as the only acceptable practice, but it not a policy that Prabhupada approved of. In fact, he adamantly opposed it. Philosophically, there are reasons why Prabhupada opposed excluding women in this way. In essence, such sectarianism is in contradistinction to the spiritual tradition of Vaisnavism. Throughout the history of the Krsna consciousness movement, we have been taught by guru, sastra and sadhu that our tradition is one of enfranchisement (of allowing everyone the right to take part), not of hierarchical exceptionalism as has been historically characterized by impersonalist traditions.

In the forefront of the battle against the disenfranchisement policies practiced by the impersonalists was Lord Caitanya. He propounded a communistic model of spiritual practice, laying the groundwork for a future, worldwide movement which is to have at the core of its philosophy the practice of nondiscrimination. This vision of equality is expressed in the 7th chapter of the Caitanya-caritamrta, in the section describing the merciful preaching activities of the Panca-tattva:

patrapatra-vicara nahi, nahi sthanasthana
yei yanha paya, tanhakare prema-dana

"In distributing love of Godhead, Caitanya Mahaprabhu and His associates did not consider who was a fit candidate and who was not, nor where such distribution should or should not take place. They made no conditions. Wherever they got the opportunity the members of the Panca-tattva distributed love of Godhead." [Cc. Adi 2.7.23]

Because Lord Caitanya's preaching mission was unconditionally motivated, he was criticized by the Mayavadis for slumming -- for preaching to and converting the mlecchas and yavanas. Yet by making great devotees out of such lowly persons, Lord Caitanya rendered moot the practice of spiritual biases based on external physical make-up. Spiritual parity is such an important aspect of Vaisnavism that three texts later Prabhupada underscores the same point again:

Here again it may be emphasized that although jealous rascals protest that Europeans and Americans cannot be given the sacred thread or sannyasa, there is no need even to consider whether one is a gentleman or a rogue because this is a spiritual movement which is not concerned with the external body of skin and bones. Because it is being properly conducted under the guidance of the Panca-tattva, strictly following the regulative principles, it has nothing to do with external impediments. [Cc. Adi 2.7.26]

Srila Prabhupada's Instructions

Srila Prabhupada tried to impart to us this mood of enfranchisement,* by allowing everyone, regardless of one's bodily designation, the opportunity to perform any service which would fully engage a person's propensities and thereby best enable that person to advance in Krsna consciousness. This insistence on inclusiveness extended to allowing everyone the privilege to chant in the temple room -- the most spiritually auspicious room -- during japa period.

Now, however, many years later, many senior devotees have forgotten, and younger devotees are unfamiliar with, Prabhupada's unequivocal and uncompromising instructions in this matter. To reacquaint us with what Prabhupada wanted, the following quote from a letter Prabhupada wrote to Ekayani dasi in 1972 is given below. This letter was written in response to a decision by authorities at the New York temple to exclude women from the temple room during japa period:

*Srila Prabhupada discusses the unfortunate historical consequences of spiritual disenfranchisement of the sudras by the brahmanas in India in "The Supreme Destination is for EVERYONE (Rome 5/26/74). For a transcript of this discussion, see Appendix attached.

. . . I do not know why these things inventions are going on. That is our only business, to invent something new programme? We have already got our Vaisnava standard. That is sufficient for Madhvacarya, Ramanujacarya, it was sufficient for Lord Chaitanya, six Gosvamis, for Bhaktivinode Thakur, for my Guru Maharaja Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, for me, for all big, big saints and acaryas in our line--why it shall be inadequate for my disciples so they must manufacture something? That is not possible. Who has introduced these things, that women cannot have chanting japa in the temple, they cannot perform the arati and so many things? That is not possible. Who has introduced these things, that women cannot have chanting If they become agitated, then let the brahmacaris go to the forest, I have never introduced these things. The brahmacaris cannot remain in the presence of women in the temple, then they must go to the forest, not remaining in New York City, because in New York there are so many women, so how they can avoid seeing? Best thing is to go to the forest for not seeing any women, if they become so easily agitated, but then no one will either see them and how our preaching work will go on? (Letter to Ekayani dasi, December 3, 1972)

Taking the "Direct" Meaning of Prabhupada's Instructions

An often-used argument to avoid adhering to these instructions is that chanting in the presence of the opposite sex is distracting. The rationale often used to justify this position is that "we are not on a very elevated platform." This line of reasoning, however, has potentially dangerous ramifications; it can be used as a basis for modifying any one of Srila Prabhupada's instructions. It is akin to what Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur describes in the Caitanya-caritamrta as aksana-vrtti. Aksana-vrtti means "indirect meaning," and it is mentioned in reference to how the Mayavadis give distorted interpretations of the Vedic literature. Instead of accepting Krsna's instructions in a simple, straightforward way, they go to great lengths to create all sorts of convoluted, misleading mental puzzles in an attempt to justify their interpretations of the scriptures.

But Srila Prabhupada cautions us against the dangers of this mental jugglery:

The Vedic literature is to be considered a source of real knowledge, but if one does not take it as it is, one will be misled. For example, Bhagavad-gita is an important Vedic literature which has been taught for many years, but because it was commented upon by unscrupulous rascals, people derived no benefit from it, and no one came to the conclusion of Krsna consciousness. Since the purpose of Bhagavad-gita is now being presented as it is, however, within four or five short years thousands of people all over the world have become Krsna conscious. That is the difference between direct and indirect explanations of Vedic literature. Therefore Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu said, mukhya-vrttye sei artha parama mahattva: to instruct Vedic literature according to its direct meaning, without false commentary, is glorious. Unfortunately, Sri Sankaracarya, by the order of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, compromised between atheism and theism in order to cheat the atheists and bring them to theism, and to do so he gave up the direct method of Vedic knowledge and tried to present a meaning which is indirect. [Cc. 2.7.110]

Similarly, we must learn to hear and act on the instructions of guru, sastra and sadhu exactly as they are presented -- as mukhya-vrtti -- without qualification or manipulation. To concoct one's own meaning is referred to by Prabhupada as being "overly intelligent." Therefore, if Srila Prabhupada says both women and men should chant in the temple room, then women and men should chant in the temple room. And if someone is too agitated to do so, then the instruction for that is also there.

Changing One's Consciousness Is A Practical Activity

One more point needs to be made about the belief that "we are not yet elevated enough to chant in the same room with the opposite sex." Inherent in this line of reasoning is a fundamental misconception of how change of consciousness actually occurs. Essentially, the methodology employed here is a nondialectical form of reification. It says (like the consciousness-raising groups that began in the 1960's) that consciousness precedes practice: "Let me first understand who I am and then later I'll change things. As opposed to: "Let me begin changing things so I can begin to find out who I am." In effect, reification is a form of psychological alienation because it takes a feature of one's thinking and imposes it upon reality, reifying it as the truth.

But this is not how reality works! Prabhupada taught us that by practice we can learn to do anything. Just as learning to chant unoffensively results from a concerted effort to do just that, so does learning to concentrate one's mind and not be distracted by those around us comes from practice. One learns to become respectful of all living entities by engaging in the activity of honoring them, not by waiting for the day when one's consciousness becomes more elevated.

This process of changing one's consciousness is described in the Bhagavad-gita [12.12] as abhyasa-yogena, which means "by the practice of devotional service." By following the rules and regulations under the guidance of a spiritual master, we revive what's already there all along -- our dormant love for Krsna. In a class on this text, Ravindra Svarupa Prabhu explains this intrinsic nature of reality: "The process of abhyasa-yogena is the revival of what's already there. It's not putting something in, or importing something into our psyche. It's clearing away the garbage so it can be reawakened. It's not first that I revere Krsna and then bow down, but rather that I bow down and then learn to revere Him by bowing down. William James said, 'It's not that we feel afraid and then start to run, but that we start to run and then feel afraid.' It's practical or pragmatic.

"What we do is we go through the form of the thing, and then our feelings fill that form. . . . By engaging in this practice, the senses actually become purified. It's the education of the senses in Krsna consciousness, and somehow it involves us as a whole person -- mind, senses, intelligence. That's the way it works."

"Prabhupada used the example also, although it may sound strange, that in India where marriages are arranged, a young girl may not have seen or met her husband, but the practice is that she begins to serve him -- cook the food and things like that, and by that practice actual feelings of love and attachment arise. If you go through these practices, then it evokes the feelings and realizations."

Similarly, if we hope to rise above the dualism of seeing one another as male or female, and to begin to relate to one another as Vaisnavas, then we must be on the clearing platform; we must practice relating to one another in that way. Prabhupada gave us The Morning Program (his precise, practical meaning of abhyasa-yogena), and he told us that if we follow this program rigidly we will not fall into maya. Let us take heed of the words "follow rigidly." Faithfully attending The Morning Program consists of mangala arati, japa period, greeting the Deities, guru-puja and Srimad Bhagavatam class. According to Prabhupada's instructions, the japa segment of our program is faulty: it is a "new programme" tainted by "manufactured invention." If women are not chanting in the temple room during japa period, then we have not yet understood the meaning of abhyasa-yogena.

Other Relevant Considerations

Although Prabhupada's instructions alone are sufficient reason for restoring his former program, there are also practical, moral and preaching considerations that should be mentioned. They are:

(1) During most of the year, and especially during the winter months, there is no adequate space in which the women can chant. This lack of facility is to their spiritual detriment. It forces them to disperse to their rooms for warmth. By not being able to chant in the association of other devotees, women are deprived of that collective strength which Prabhupada so strongly recommended. Alone in their rooms, women have a tendency either to fall asleep or to chant with less attention. Thus, women become more susceptible prey to maya.

(2) The extent to which a society is civilized can be judge by how it treats its women and children. As a society whose philosophy strongly states that women are to be protected, and that Vaisnava women in particular are to be related to with respect -- as devotees of Krsna, not as objects of lust or disdain -- it is vitally important that our daily activities and organizational policies reflect our philosophy. The title "mother" must become more than merely a token appellation. Otherwise, those whom we are trying to preach to will (and many, in fact, do) view us as hypocritical.

Therefore, protection must be understood and tangibly applied on a spiritual as well as a material level. Spiritually, it should be insisted that women, as the more "vulnerable" sex, utilize the devotional serenity (and security) of the temple room during japa period so as to optimally augment their spiritual growth. By viewing one another as Godsister and God-brother, a positive attitude is cultivated, not a negative one that views women or men as sources of distraction or temptation. It is precisely this negativity towards women -- this tendency to relate on a material platform -- that Prabhupada forcefully counters in his letter.

Materially, women's well-being also should be considered. It is only courteous that they be given at least minimal physical conditions for performing sadhana-bhakti. Also, from the vantage of preaching, it reflects poorly on our organization when guests see men stay in the warm temple room, while women remove themselves to the cold foyer. It violates even basic Western rules of etiquette.

(3) The coming and going of devotees through the foyer area during japa period creates a disruptive and unserious atmosphere. Devotees -- both men

and women -- tend to have conversations in this area, thereby hampering one's ability to concentrate and take one's own japa seriously.

(4) There are temples throughout the movement where for years men and women have chanted in the temple room together, separated only by dividers or balconies (but not sound barriers). I have been told that in Miami and Vancouver, women and men chant together without any physical dividers, confining themselves to opposite sides of the temple room. One devotee from Vancouver told me that "being distracted" was simply not an issue, and she was genuinely surprised to find out that her temple was an exception. Perhaps in the beginning of instituting this change, there might be a heightened sense of "otherness" since such a to-do has been made about it, but the fact is that men and women chant in the company of one another in many other circumstances -- riding in the same car together, in the temple room at other times of the day, and at festivals -- yet no one protests in these situations.

Conclusion

This proposed reenactment of Prabhupada's desires should not be seen as a "taking away from the men," but rather as the opportunity to qualitatively boost the spiritual strength of our community. By insisting that we strictly and respectfully relate to one another as Godbrother and Godsister, and rigorously rout out the diseased tendency to relate on a less platform, not only will women be given greater opportunity to develop their fullest spiritual potential, but the overall spiritual climate and attractiveness of the Krsna consciousness movement -- for both men and women in and outside the movement -- will be enhanced. As always, our individual and collective spiritual success lies in pleasing our spiritual master. Therefore, let us ensure our future success by owning up to our past mistakes and rectifying a longstanding error.

Your servant,

Manasa Ganga dasi

In consultation with:
Pranada dasi
Sasvata Pavana dasi
Suci dasi

Appendix

Srila Prabhupada: "The Supreme Destination is for EVERYONE."
Rome 5/26/74 [Excerpt]

Srila Prabhupada: In the beginning, we do not ask anybody to become initiated or a brahmana. No. We simply ask the person to join the chanting. This is our process. We should strictly follow this process. In the beginning, we should not ask that you do this and do that. It is not possible. But everyone should be given chance. Because in the Kali-yuga, there is no reformatory system. Everybody is born sudra, and less than that, candala. So, this has been neglected also. It's not that because all people have fallen, they are less than sudra and candala, let me chant Hare Krsna. No. This is not. The duty of Vaisnava is to reclaim the fallen souls. Just like it is said in the Bhagavad-gita [9.32]:

mam hi partha vyapasritya
ye 'pi syuh papa-yonayah
striyo vaisyas tatha sudras
te 'pi yanti param gatim

Krsna says, "Anyone who can come to My shelter, never mind if he is the lowest of the lowest -- lowborn. Striyo vaisyas tatha. He may even be women, and the mercantile community, and sudra. They are also considered as papa-yoni. Papa-yoni means whose brain is not very developed. That is papa-yoni. . . The supreme destination, back to Godhead, back to home is for everyone. It is not that just God, God means for everyone. God does not say, "Only the brahmana class of men please come here. Others are (?)." No, no. He means everyone, even the lowest of lowest, the lowborn -- papa-yonayah -- women, sudra, or vaisya, or everyone. Krsna says that everyone has got the potential of coming to Me, of going back to home, back to Godhead. Then one to serve Krsna. Who then makes them qualified to go back home, back to Godhead. That is Vaisnava, those who are actually very sincere servants of Krsna. It is their duty. Krsna says that everyone is competent to come to Me if he is following the rules and regulations. Vyapasritya. What is the meaning of vyapasritya?

Answer: Particularly taking shelter.

Srila Prabhupada: Yes, particularly. One should be willing to go back to home, back to Godhead and take shelter particularly or His representative. Such person can be elevated. But unfortunately in India, although the Bhagavad-gita is there they neglect it. The so-called brahmanas and so-called goswamis, they neglected this process. Just like in India, the Mohamedans who claim to be partisan, Pakistan and Hindustan. There are a number of Mohamedans, they protested that India is going to be independent but we do not wish to participate with the

Hindus. We must be separate. Why? Because they have got a bad experience that the Hindus did not treat them very well.

Even sudra in south India, it was the process, so bad process, if the sudra is walking on the street he has to cry, "I am a sudra passing on the street. Please close your door." The brahmanas would close their doors so they would not even see a sudra then everything will be spoiled -- their food grains and everything. They were closed. Now, the reality in south India, the communists. Communists mean the so-called low class people, the sudras and candalas are now in a majority. They formed the government. On principle, as soon as some brahmana comes for government service he will be rejected.

So the brahmanas are now hiding themselves because they cannot get any job. This is foolish. This negligence is not Vedic culture because they neglected. These Mohamedans grown in India, they were not imported from Afghanistan or Turkey or any Mohamedan country. They were Indians. But they were not given any facility for spiritual culture. The brahmanas monopolized it. Although they would not do anything. They were all degraded by the state, they would keep these sudras and candalas downtrodden. . . .

Therefore, when Aurangzeb passed a law, JiJaya tax. "JiJaya tax" means all the non-Mohamedans would be taxed now. These low-class people were so neglected, they thought -- it was natural -- "Why should we pay this tax? We are no very much well-treated by the Hindus. So what is the use of remaining Hindu and pay the tax?" So wholesale this neglected class of man became Mohamedan.

This is this history. Otherwise, this Mohamedan did not come from the Mohamedan countries. In this way, a Mohamedan community was formed gradually and this British government took advantage of this ill-feeling between Hindu and Mohemadans. Anyway, this is the policy of the politicians. Because they are not given . . . our point is that Krsna says everyone should be given chance how to come back home, how to approach Krsna.

So who's duty it is? It is the duty of Krsna's servant. Just like Prahlada Maharaja. Prahlada Maharaja said, "My Lord, I do not wish to go back to home, back to Godhead, alone. I want to take all of them who are godless, or not devotees. I want to take them."