

THE TOUCHSTONE OF THE HOLY NAME



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1) CHANTING ATTENTIVELY THE BEST SĀDHANA

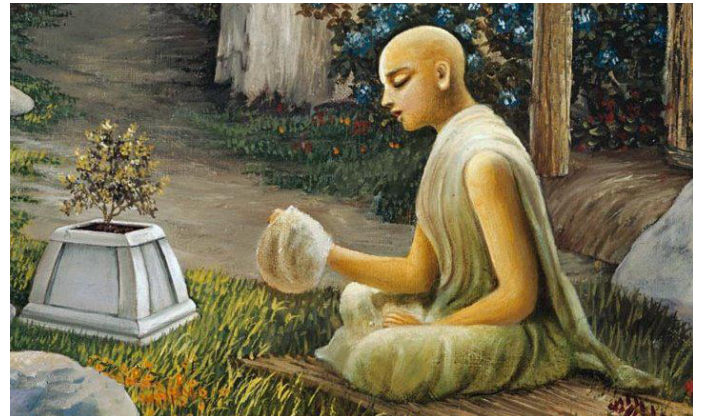
When you start asking yourself “What will bring me closer to Kṛṣṇa?” you will want to find not just any *sādhana*, but the best *sādhana*, which works quickly, bestows the highest results and doesn’t require qualifications you don’t possess. When you found that *sādhana* you will want to know: how exactly should I practice it? This question will almost begin to haunt you: should I go to Vṛndāvana? Should I bathe in Rādhā-kuṇḍa? Should I fast? Should I study?

The goal of any *sādhana* that will bring you closer to Kṛṣṇa is to clean the heart. You can do yoga exercises, you can meditate, but if your heart remains full of material desires and contamination, then what is the use? The best *sādhana* must have the greatest power and the greatest power is with God. Only Kṛṣṇa can truly purify the heart and he does this in his most merciful form: the holy name.

The holy name is compared to a touchstone. By its energy a touchstone can turn everything it touches into gold. The same thing happens when the holy name touches the consciousness of a conditioned living entity – you transform.

Chanting is the best means of attaining perfection in Kali-yuga (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 12.5.51). Only chanting has the power to directly bestow love for Kṛṣṇa, therefore it is considered the best of all *sādhana*s (*Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta*, 2.3.158).

One can only attain the treasure of love for the Lord, however, if one chants without offences (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta Antya*, 4.71). Are you feeling ecstatic love for God? If not



always, you must be committing offences. There is no other explanation. Committing offences during chanting means to bring the false ego into the practice which results in performing the service in a way that displeases the Lord. You can chant for many lifetimes, but if you chant with offences you will not obtain love of Godhead (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi*, 8.16). Chanting with offences is like cleaning something and simultaneously making it dirty again – how will it ever become clean? You have to make a conscious effort to avoid the offences. How to do this is the subject of Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura’s *Hari-nāma-cintāmaṇi* which was the guide for our retreat.

A general remedy against all offences is given by Haridāsa Ṭhākura: “One can never be released from offences against the name by *prāyaścitta* or pious activity, but only by again taking shelter of the name continuously. Chanting day and night, feeling repentant, the offences will go and the fruit of the name will come. One will get *śuddha-nāma*, then *bhāva-nāma*, then *prema-nāma*.” (*Hari-nāma-cintāmaṇi*, chapter 13)

THE ROOT OF ALL OFFENCES: INATTENTION

The tree of offences against the holy name has many branches, but they all grow from one root: inattentiveness. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen one's concentration.

Three kinds of inattention give us trouble:

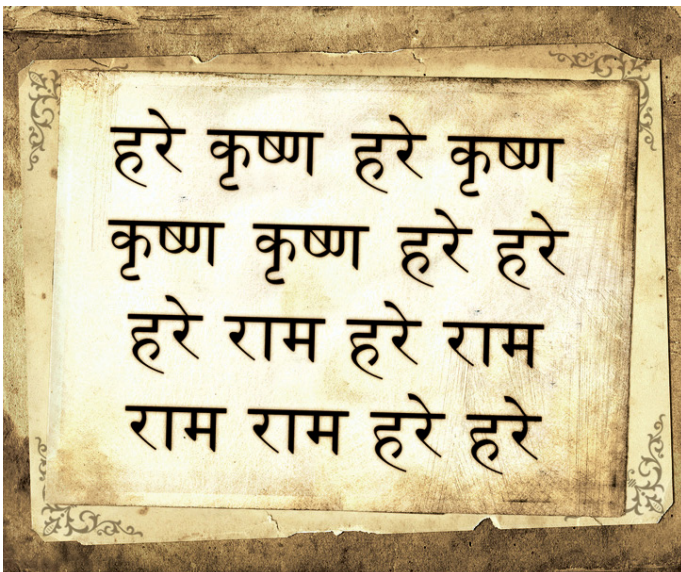
Indifference (*audāsīnya*) – this is when we simply don't care to chant properly, we lack enthusiasm.

Lethargy (*jadya*) – this is laziness for chanting, or not caring to pronounce the names properly.

Distractedness (*vikṣepa*) – this means allowing the mind to wander to other topics or activities than chanting.

CONCENTRATING ON THE FIRST HARE

There is an easy technique with which you can work on these types of inattention. That is bringing your full attention to the first “Hare” of the *mahā*-mantra. In the beginning of the *mahā*-mantra we address Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī, as Śrīla Prabhupāda puts it: “Thus we say, ‘O Rādhārāṇī! O Hare! O energy of the Lord!’ When we address someone in this way, he usually says, ‘Yes, what do you want?’ The answer is, ‘Please engage me in Your service.’ This should be our prayer.” (Teachings of Lord Kapila, chapter 14, verse 32, purport). We should pray to Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī that she may open the gate of the palace of *bhakti* for us and thus let our heart become alive with genuine feelings. These feelings are necessary for proper chanting. Whenever you move your fingers to the next bead on your *japa-mālā*, bring the mind gently back to the first “Hare” and stay with the mantra as long as you can. You can repeat this with the next two first “Hares”. It is like entering a river and staying in it. After some time you can drop the technique, because you have entered the flow of the mantra. By continuing to practice this, your ability to stay with the chanting will increase day by day.



MORE TECHNIQUES TO LEARN TO CHANT ATTENTIVELY

In the *Hari-nāma-cintāmaṇi*, Śrīla Bhaktivinode Ṭhākura gives further advice on how we can make it a habit to chant attentively:

- Earnestly complete your daily quota of rounds, be careful to offer rounds of good quality.
- Chant in the company of a Vaiṣṇava and try to imitate his or her mood during chanting. (Bhaktivinode Ṭhākura writes that when Kṛṣṇa sees the enthusiasm of a devotee who wants to become immersed in chanting like a saintly Vaiṣṇava, he reciprocates and removes the mental lethargy by the power of the name and by the blessing of the association of advanced devotees.)
- Chant at a place where Kṛṣṇa performed one of his pastimes and/or in the presence of Tulaṣī.
- Chant alone in a closed room or cover your head and face with a cloth. Concentrate deeply, pronounce and hear the names distinctly.
- Follow the rules of Vaiṣṇava thinking and behavior and make an effort to drive away material thoughts. Wholeheartedly participate in spiritual festivals.
- Develop an enthusiastic mood for chanting. Remember that the prime cause for attentive chanting is not your qualification, but Kṛṣṇa's mercy. There is no logical reason to be unenthusiastic, since Kṛṣṇa is very affectionate and merciful towards his devotees.
- Pray to the Lord not to become a victim of distraction: “It is impossible for the jiva to singlehandedly avoid and overcome the illusion of distraction. By the mercy of the Lord, however, this is accomplished with ease. Therefore it is essential to fervently beg for the Lord's grace with great humility. This is the jiva's only means of salvation.” (*Hari-nāma-cintāmaṇi*, chapter 12)