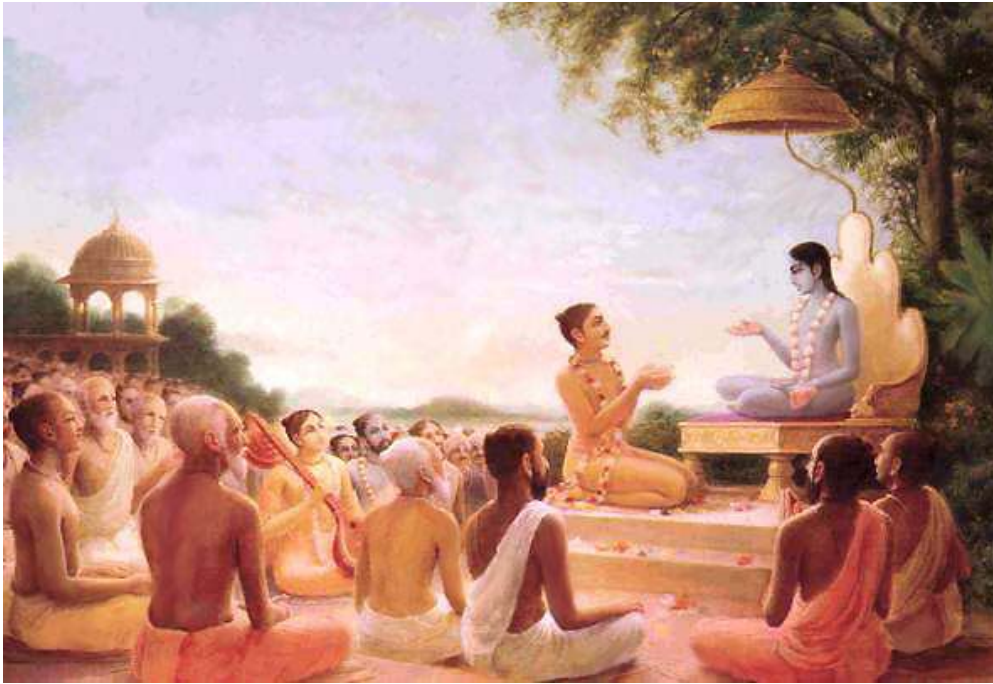


***Sravanam* - the Art of Hearing**

How Hearing is of primary importance for progressive spiritual life



Essay by Krishna Premarupa Dasa, ISKCON Zurich, Switzerland

VIHE Bhakti Vaibhava Course Canto 1-2 - 2017/18

- Study Aim: Understanding - *Sravanam* - The Art of Hearing
- Study Aim: Personal Application - How can I improve my listening and speaking habits
- Study Aim: Preaching Application - This Essay might be shared with others and the content of this Essay will be used for presenting lectures and seminars on the topic in order to encourage other Devotees to improve their own sadhana (therefore sometimes I speak of `I` and sometimes of `we` while referring to application)

Reflections on application in this essay generally written in *italic*

Sravanam - the Art of Hearing

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„How is it possible that every morning after hearing these lectures from the Srimad Bhagavatam I feel so deeply touched in my heart? I feel such a desire to understand more, to learn more about devotional service. I really want to develop my relationship with Krishna; yes this is what I want to dedicate my life to.“ While thinking like this the sound of the Gong announces the time for Prasadam. While others already hurry with their plates to the Prasadam hall, I am still standing on the steps of the Temple entrance from where I oversee the rice fields and palm trees surrounding the Radha Gopaljiu Mandir. Feeling the morning sun on my face I slowly walk down with an incredible feeling of gratitude. I am so fortunate to be able to hear Bhagavatam daily from the person Bhagavata. How amazing this Sravanama, this hearing process is! 1

After I had joined the Krishna conscious movement in Zurich, Switzerland, I spent my first year as a new Bhakta in India, Odhisa at ISKCON Gadei Giri. Every morning two to three hours wonderful Krishna Katha was spoken. It was there, where I realized the power of sadhu sanga and the importance of hearing.

This essay will point out how the process of hearing is of primary importance for progressive spiritual life. We will discuss the importance of hearing (Why this process is important) the qualifications of a listener and a speaker (How to perform this process properly), the glories of Krishna Katha (What are the results of receptive hearing) and how I practically would like to apply this points in my daily devotional life, specifically as a listener, as speaker and also as a leader (Practical application of the conclusion of this essay).

Before doing so, I offer my most respectful and humble obeisances to my Diksa and my many Siksa Gurus from whom I was fortunate to hear and learn about the process of Sravanam - Kirtanam. May their Lordship Sri Sri Radha Symasundara and all the previous, present and future acaryas and Vaishnavas be pleased with this humble attempt to glorify the power of hearing!

The Importance of Hearing

In first Canto of the Srimad Bhagavatam, in the seventh chapter, we find the description of how Vyasadeva meditates on the bank of the river Sarasvati and sees the Lord, His external energy and how the jivas misidentify and suffer. Although Bhakti Yoga mitigates all material sufferings, people do not know this and therefore Vyasa compiled the Srimad Bhagavatam. 2 In that section the following sloka glorifies the hearing process:

yasyāṁ vai śrūyamāṇāyāṁ
kṛṣṇe parama-pūruṣe
bhaktir utpadyate puruṣaḥ
śoka-moha-bhayāpahā

„Simply by giving aural reception to this Vedic literature, the feeling for loving devotional service to Lord Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, sprouts up at once to extinguish the fire of lamentation, illusion and fearfulness.“ 3

In His Purport to this Sloka, Srila Prabhupada in a very wonderful way points out the importance of hearing: „There are various senses, of which the ear is the most effective. This sense works even when a man is deep asleep. One can protect himself from the hands of an enemy while awake, but

while asleep one is protected by the ear only. The importance of hearing is mentioned here in connection with attaining the highest perfection of life, namely, getting free from three material pangs.“

So even from a material point of view the ear plays a very important role. But as Srila Prabhupada points out, it is especially important in relation to spiritual realization. The Lord, also known as Adoksaja, is beyond the perception of our senses. But we can hear about the Lord and that hearing will cause our bhakti to sprout as mentioned in the above text.

Another example we find in the *Nectar of Devotion* where Srila Prabhupada quotes the *Garuda Purana* where it is said that just as a man who is bitten by a snake can be brought back to life by Mantra. Similarly everyone in the material world who is bitten by the snake of Maya and can also be brought back to consciousness by the process of hearing transcendental sound.

But how much are we aware of the importance and the power of the hearing process? We may understand it theoretically but are we applying it in our daily life? In our ISKCON Temple's the Srimad Bhagavatam class sometimes can become just another routine program we have to attend before it's time for Breakfast Prasad. In fact there is a well-known ISKCON Joke which goes like this: The Mantra for falling asleep is `Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya` and Mantra to wake up again is `Mahaprasade Govinda`! Of course the glories of Maha Prasada are wonderful, but it would be beneficial if we could also develop the same enthusiasm for the nourishment the Srimad Bhagavatam is willing to offer us. We also see at the Vaishnava Festivals, during the Abhisheka, the Kirtana and Arati usually all the Devotees participate, but when the time for the Lecture comes, many use the opportunity to socialize with their friends. Certainly there is a place for developing and cultivating friendships amongst the devotees, but it is a pity if it is at the cost of the hearing the glories of the Lord. Caitanya Mahaprabhu used to hear again and again the same passages from Bhagavatam about Dhruva Maharaja's Pastime and Prahlada Maharaja's adventures without becoming satiated by it. But we sometimes think `oh again Nrismha Caturdasi, yes, yes, I have heard the lila already, what will be there for me if I go and listen again?` If we remember the importance of hearing, and how this hearing is actually another way to please the Lord, it can help us to fix our determination and engage our mind and senses in the Lord's service. This requires some sincerity which is one of the key's to successful hearing. The right consciousness needs to be there, in both the speaker and the listener.

The Qualities of an ideal Speaker and an ideal Listener

The ideal speaker is the person Bhagavata. Caitanya Mahaprabhus secretary Śrīla Svarūpa Dāmodara Gosvāmī advised all the visitors who came to see the Lord at Purī that one should understand the Bhāgavatam from the person Bhagavata. There are two kinds of Bhāgavatas; the Book Bhāgavata and the Person Bhāgavata. A devotee Bhāgavata is as good as the book Bhāgavata because the devotee Bhāgavata leads his life in terms of the book Bhāgavata. We should learn from him. Such a person Bhāgavata is a representative of Srila Vyasadeva, which means he himself has heard from the right source in the disciplic succession. This is specifically important, because only one who has heard from the right source can properly repeat the message of the Bhāgavata.

Furthermore, the ideal speaker must be free from all vices and he should be learned. Srila Prabhupada warns: „A gosvāmī, or the bona fide representative of Śrī Vyāsadeva, must be free from all kinds of vices. The four major vices are (1) illicit connection with women, (2) animal slaughter, (3) intoxication, (4) speculative gambling of all sorts. A gosvāmī must be free from all these vices before he can dare sit on the vyāsāsana. No one should be allowed to sit on the vyāsāsana who is not spotless in character and who is not freed from the above-mentioned vices.

He not only should be freed from all such vices, but must also be well versed in all revealed scriptures or in the Vedas.“ 4

After reflecting about these qualities many of us may feel discouraged to actually give a lecture because we don't feel ourselves qualified. And it is true that the audience gets more benefit from the hearing process if the speaker has many realizations and not only theoretical knowledge. At the same time Srila Prabhupada wants us all to become preachers, and for this purpose as a training and for our purification we may also speak Bhagavatam, of course provided that we at least try to repeat the words of the acaryas and live a pure lifestyle.

Srila Prabhupada emphasizes not only hearing but also repeating the message: „One can assimilate the knowledge of the revealed scriptures only by hearing and explaining. Hearing is called śravaṇa, and explaining is called kīrtana. The two processes of śravaṇa and kīrtana are of primary importance to progressive spiritual life.“ 5 No one can actually speak, if he has not heard himself from the bona fide source. Only those who heard and are blessed by their Guru can become an authorized speaker. Srila Prabhupada himself was such a personality, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur was very pleased with the way Abhay Caran was listening: „In October of 1932, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati was leading a circumambulation of the Vrindavan area. Srila Prabhupada joined the party at Kosi. He heard Bhaktisiddhanta speak, listening so attentively that Bhaktisiddhanta took special notice of him. A month later, he took initiation from Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati in Allahabad. Bhaktisiddhanta had come in order to lay the cornerstone for a temple that the Gaudiya Matha would build there. Before the initiation, Atulananda, the matha president, presented Prabhupada to Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, who said, “Yes, he likes to hear. He does not go away. I have marked him. I will accept him as my disciple.”“ 6

So what are the qualities of such an ideal listener? A humble, submissive mood is most essential. It's impressive to see with how much culture and respect Suta Goswami was received by the sages of Naimisaranya. They first offered him a seat and then glorified him, expressing their faith in him as a bona fide speaker. Then they inquired from him with great respect. This same principle was taught by Sri Krishna to Arjuna where He told him that if one wants to know tattva, one has to inquire from a tattva darsina, a seer of the truth, in a submissive way and also please him by rendering service. 7

Another aspect we can learn from the sages of Naimisaranya is their eagerness to hear about the Lord. They expressed their eagerness to hear about the Lord and requested Suta Goswami to speak about the Personality of Godhead and His incarnations. In the purport of this context Srila Prabhupada comments: „The conditions for hearing the transcendental message of the Absolute Truth are set forth herein. The first condition is that the audience must be very sincere and eager to hear. And the speaker must be in the line of disciplic succession from the recognized ācārya.“ 8

Also from the famous sloka śṛṇvatām sva-kathāḥ kṛṣṇaḥ 10 we learn that the Lord personally cleanses the desire for material enjoyment from the heart of the devotee who has developed the urge to hear His messages.

How much have we developed such an urge? The word urge is very significant herein. Urge comes from the Latin word `urgere` which means press, drive and is explained in the Oxford Dictionary as `a strong desire or impulse`. So it's not just a desire to hear, but a strong desire, an urge to hear the message of the Lord. An urge is something which is so strong that we have difficulties to deal with it, like the urge of anger or the urge of the genitals as described by Srila Rupa Goswami in his Upadesamṛita. We should develop an urge to hear about Krishna in a positive way.

Srila Narottama Das Thakur also describes in his Prema Bhakti Candrika how we can engage all our enemies like anger, lust, greed etc in devotional service. There it is described that greed should be engaged in becoming very greedy to hear Krishna Katha: lobha sadhu-sange hari-katha - „Greed I will engage by being greedy to hear the topics of Lord Hari in the association of the saintly devotees.“¹⁰ That`s the proper way of being greedy, greedy for more and more Krishna Katha. Or as Maharaja Prithu has said: "My dear Lord, if after taking liberation I have no chance of hearing the glories of Your Lordship, glories chanted by pure devotees from the core of their hearts in praise of Your lotus feet, and if I have no chance for this honey of transcendental bliss, then I shall never ask for liberation or this so-called spiritual emancipation. I shall simply always pray unto Your Lordship that You may give me millions of tongues and millions of ears, so that I can constantly chant and hear of Your transcendental glories.“¹¹ That`s an expression of eagerness to hear! Srila Gour Govinda Swami used to say that some people may feel that a bad day is a day when some calamity takes place, some natural disaster, but I say the day I am not able to hear Krishna Katha, that is a very bad day!

Result of Hearing about Krishna

If this combination of a bona fide speaker and an submissive and eager listener is there the Lord is manifested in such an assembly of devotees and the result of such sravanam and kirtanam are very wonderful: „Loving devotional service to the Lord begins with hearing about the Lord. There is no difference between the Lord and the subject matter heard about Him. The Lord is absolute in all respects, and thus there is no difference between Him and the subject matter heard about Him. Therefore, hearing about Him means immediate contact with Him by the process of vibration of the transcendental sound. And the transcendental sound is so effective that it acts at once by removing all material affections.“¹²

Srila Prabhupada speaks here of an immediate contact with the Lord, that`s very significant. Krishna Katha and Krishna are non different, therefore a transformation takes place as soon this contact is established: „just like the iron rod. Iron rod, you put into the fire. It gets warm—warm, warmer, warmer. And when it is red hot, then it is no longer iron. Iron it is, but it does not act as iron, but it acts as fire. That iron rod which is red hot in association with fire, you can take that rod and touch anything; it will burn. That means it is no longer acting as iron; it is acting as fire. Similarly, if you associate with this transcendental incarnation, sound incarnation of God, then you will be gradually godly. You will be godly. You can become godly with God's association, not by any other material, extraneous things.“¹³

As a result of such contact with the Lord unlimited benefits can be derived such as: it cleanses the heart from Anartha, makes bhakti sprout, extinguishes lamentation, illusion and fear, it leads one to remember the Lord, cuts the binding knots of karma, it qualifies one to see the Lords lotusfeet and establishes the Lord in ones heart.

How Bhakti arises in our heart by hearing is beautifully described by Srila Prabhupada with the following words: „The Lord can be realized through the aural reception of the transcendental message, and that is the only way to experience the transcendental subject. As fire is kindled from wood by another fire, the divine consciousness of man can similarly be kindled by another divine grace. His Divine Grace the spiritual master can kindle the spiritual fire from the wood like living entity by imparting proper spiritual messages injected through the receptive ear. Therefore one is required to approach the proper spiritual master with receptive ears only, and thus divine existence is gradually realized.“¹⁴

From this we can understand that by the hearing process not only jnana, knowledge is transmitted but also realization, vijñana! As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, just by listening to daily

Bhagavatam Classes from the person Bhagavata, not only theoretical knowledge but foremost sraddha, faith was planted in my heart.

Recently, while studying at the VIHE I had a another experience that illustrates this point. I was trying to memorize some of the Slokas of the first Canto. I had my eyes closed and with rapt attention I repeat one line of a verse after the other, śuśrūṣoḥ śraddadhānasya... all of a sudden I noticed how the melody I chanted changed in a different tune, how my hands started to move just like a conductor of an classical music orchestra in a way I never did before. And the next moment I saw, in my inner eye, the smiling face of our teacher Prasanta Mataji and how she was teaching us the slokas with so much love and enthusiasm. In this moment I felt very blessed, I knew, by the mercy of my teacher, I was not only able theoretically understand the importance of memorizing slokas, but I got also some drop of vijñana, some small insight of how beautiful this slokas are, how wonderful it is to actually learn, memorize and recite them! I truly developed some deeper taste in this from of devotional service, which I did not had before to that degree and this was possible due to association and sincere hearing. As Srila Prabhupada has described in the above quoted Purport: `the spiritual master can kindle the spiritual fire from the wood like living entity by imparting proper spiritual messages injected through the receptive ear` in this case the `fire of deep appreciation and taste for reciting Slokas` of my teacher kindled the `fire` for this devotional activity in my wood like heart. The true teachers and representatives of the parampara are always full of compassion and love, and they very much desire to share all their realization with their students, it is up to us how much we are able open ourself to that mercy.

As mentioned before, the right consciousness in both the speaker and the hearer needs to be there. Only then the desired result can be expected. Srila Prabhupada also warns us, that although the process in it self is very simple, we should not think its something cheap: „There is a type of spiritual master and disciple much advertised in this age of Kali. It is said that the master injects spiritual force into the disciple by an electrical current generated by the master, and the disciple begins to feel the shock. He becomes unconscious, and the master weeps for his exhausting his store of so-called spiritual assets.“ Srila Prabhupada then emphasises that: „we do not find such folk tales in the dealings of Śukadeva Gosvāmī and his great disciple Mahārāja Parīkṣit. The sage recited Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam in devotion, and the great King heard him properly. The King did not feel any shock of electrical current from the master, nor did he become unconscious while receiving knowledge from the master.“ The Purport ends with an important message: „The process is simple, but only the sincere party can achieve the desired result.“ ¹⁵

Nityam Bhagavata sevaya - Or how the improve our Sravanam?

naṣṭa-prāyeṣv abhadreṣu
nityam bhāgavata-sevayā
bhagavatya uttama-śloke
bhaktir bhavati naiṣṭhikī

„By regular attendance in classes on the Bhāgavatam and by rendering of service to the pure devotee, all that is troublesome to the heart is almost completely destroyed, and loving service unto the Personality of Godhead, who is praised with transcendental songs, is established as an irrevocable fact.“ ¹⁶

Srila Prabhupada established Srimad Bhagavatam Class to be held at every ISKCON Centre on a daily basis and by this he made sure that the `nitya bhagavata-sevaya` is continuing. But how much do we take advantage of it? In this essay we have described the Art of hearing so far as follows:

Hearing is a very important and a very essential part of devotional service, because just by hearing from a bona fide speaker about the glories of the Lord our dormant love for Krishna can be reawakened. Hearing about Krishna is so potent because the subject matter about Krishna and Krishna himself are non different. From this we understand the result of hearing, which also was described in this text: Through the direct contact with the transcendental sound vibration our heart becomes purified and bhakti is established. Hearing also very essential and is of primary importance for progressive spiritual life simply because all other processes depend on the first one. Generally it is confirmed by the acaryas that any of the nine processes of devotional service can give the highest perfection and the different great personalities who attained perfection have proven this fact. At the same time we understand, that everything starts with hearing, in this sense they are depended on the hearing process. What can we speak, if we have not heard first, what can we remember if no Krishna Katha had entered our ears, our hearts? We also discussed how both the speaker and listener needs to be bona fied, which means they have to follow in the guru parampara and must have the proper mood of humility and submissiveness so that the desired result can be achieved.

The Conclusion of this study is obvious: more emphasis for sravanam, the Art of Hearing must be given! But how to do that? The last section of this essay will deal with some ideas of practical application to improve my personal habits of hearing and speaking Bhagavatam:

Action steps to improve my attitude as a listener

My dear Mind please accept the following instructions:

- a) *hear, speak and remember more often the importance of sravanam kirtanam*
- b) *attend Srimad Bhagavatam classes daily, understanding the importance of it*
- c) *increase your interest in the subject matter by reading the section of Bhagavatam that will be discussed, prepare questions you would like to ask the speaker!*
- d) *inspire others to cultivate more enthusiasm to hear*
- e) *take notes during classes*
- f) *maintain a humble and submissive mood regardless of who the speaker may be*
- g) *increase the quality of hearing by proper `digestion` of what was heard, applying the principle of: 1. sravanam - hearing. When we hear, we especially want to be touched and transformed. It is important to hear with this inner alignment. 2. manānam - think about what has been heard. 3. nididhyāsanam - deep contemplation. Give the subject matter room in your heart. 4. vandanam - pray. Pray to be able to apply what you have heard and to realize it in the experience. 17*

Action steps to improve my attitude as a speaker:

My dear Mind please accept the following instructions:

- a) *understand the responsibility you have - audience should feel spiritually nourished after the lecture. Hari katha is meant to create a desire to come closer to Krishna!*
- b) *prepare your lecture well in advance*
- c) *quote sastra, Srila Prabhupada, the acaryas, include analogies, stories and Vaishnava songs*
- d) *study scriptures on a daily basis, increase your own understanding, memorize new slokas*
- e) *maintain a strong sadhana - purity is the force, the more you have, the more you can give*
- f) *always maintain a humble mood - never think you are a great speaker just repeat the words of the acaryas.*
- g) *offer prayers, seek blessings*

Action steps to improve my attitude as a Leader, who wants to promote importance of hearing:

My dear Mind please accept the following instructions:

- a) *Teach and preach the importance of hearing*
- b) *encourage temple devotees to attend daily bhagavatam classes*
- c) *inspire congregational members to hear and also to speak krishna katha*
- d) *invite advanced devotees, sannyasis and preacher to the temple to speak krishna katha*
- e) *Teach by example: be a good listener and speaker yourself*

These are some thoughts how to apply what we have understood about this topic. I seek the blessings of all the Vaishnavas so that I may be successful in this humble attempt and hope the reader of this essay could also find some benefit for his own practice.

Everything depends on the mercy of the Lord, this is also valid in regard of the hearing process:

„Revival of the dormant affection or love of Godhead does not depend on the mechanical system of hearing and chanting, but it solely and wholly depends on the causeless mercy of the Lord. When the Lord is fully satisfied with the sincere efforts of the devotee, He may endow him with His loving transcendental service.“¹⁸

We may endeavour to improve our hearing but a real transformation of the heart takes place only if we are able to please the Lord. Since service to the Vaishnavas is always pleasing to the Lord we find a secret herein also in regard of increasing our taste for sravanam:

śuśrūṣoḥ śraddadhānasya
vāsudeva-kathā-ruciḥ
syān mahat-sevayā viprāḥ
puṇya-tīrtha-niṣevaṇāt

„O twice-born sages, by serving those devotees who are completely freed from all vice, great service is done. By such service, one gains affinity for hearing the messages of Vāsudeva.“¹⁹

May we all get an opportunity to serve the Vaishnavas so that we develop a higher taste in hearing and thereby attract the Lords mercy in form of pure devotional service!

Hari om tat sat

Vrindavana, completed on the day of Siva-ratri on the 14. February 2018 - Kṛṣṇa Premarūpa Dasa

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- 1 - Bh. Christoph (Kṛṣṇa Premarūpa Dasa) 02/02
 - 2 - SB 1.7.6
 - 3 - SB 1.7.7
 - 4 - SB 1.1.6 pp
 - 5 - SB 1.1.6 pp
 - 6 - Prabhupada lilamrta, vol. 1, p. 71
 - 7 - BG 4.34
 - 8 - SB 1.1.13
 - 9 - SB 1.2.17
 - 10 - Prema Bhakti Candrika; Song 2, Text 10
 - 11 - SB 4.20.24
 - 12 - SB 1.7.7 pp
 - 13 - SP Lecture on Maha Mantra 8.9.66 NY
 - 14 - SB 1.2.33 pp
 - 15 - SB 1.12.3 pp
 - 16 - SB 1.2.18
 - 17 - Sacinandana Swami, Amrita Vani No 2/3
 - 18 - SB 1.7.10 pp
 - 19 - SB 1.2.16