

The Art of Japa

pramāda japa (Inattentive chanting)

Advaitadas:

Recently I heard a humble Vaiṣṇava admitting to driving his car with one hand and doing japa with the other. Since ignorance **IS** an excuse, let no one take personal offense at this comment: This is a most gut-wrenching example of *pramāda japa*, or inattentive *japa*. *Japa* is worship and meditation, and neither of these can be or should be done while steering a car through the traffic. In this way it is simply impossible to give the holy name of the Lord the attention and the worship it deserves, adding to it that one touches one's sacred beads to the steering wheel and gear-shift. Though strictly and officially speaking *pramāda japa* is not an offense to the chanting of the holy name, it obviously is (The 10th offense, *śrute nāma-māhātmye'pi prīto'yaṁ rahitaḥ*, "to be bereft of love of the holy name, despite having heard its glory", fits the best). Suppose Śrī Gurudeva is coming to visit us in our home and we continue to watch TV, perhaps telling him to take a seat, telling one's spouse to offer him a glass of milk and occasionally saying something to him and half-listening to him, but at the same time continuing to watch the TV - this would certainly be offensive. Some attention may have been given to Śrī Gurudeva, but it is shared with attention to material things. So it is too with combining *japa* with any other activity, what to speak of driving a car!!! Instead, *japa* must be done sitting down in a lotus position in a solitary place, keeping one's *japa mālā* to one's heart, either murmuring or mentally repeating the syllables of the holy name. Sanātana Gosvāmī writes in his commentary to Hari-bhakti Vilāsa that murmuring (*upamśu*) is actual *japa*, while loud *japa* equals *kīrtana* and mental *japa* equals meditation. Hari-bhakti Vilāsa (17.132-3) confirms these points as follows:

*pralapan vā japed yāvat tāvan niṣphalam ucyate
vadan na gacchan na svapan nānyāṁ kim api saṁsmaran
na kṣuj jṛmbhana hikkādi vikalikṛta mānasaḥ
mantra-siddhim avāpnoti tasmād yatna-puro bhavet*

"As long as one speaks, one's *japa* will be fruitless. While speaking, walking, lying down on bed, or having one's mind agitated by thinking of something else, sneezing, hickuping or yawning, one cannot attain perfection in one's *mantra* practise."

Some may argue that these strict rules for *japa* are only meant for the *puraścaraṇa* ritual, not for *harināma-japa*, but if that were so then Sanātana Gosvāmī would have written a separate paragraph with rules for *harināma japa*, but he didn't.

Falling asleep during *japa* is *tamo-guṇa*, walking around is *rajo-guṇa* and sitting down is *sattva-guṇa*.

Bhakta: "I wonder what is the convention for doing *japa* in the land of Gaurāṅga? Is it just to sit down in one place and not do any more on the mala anywhere else, unless you return to sit in that place? I wonder why there is such disparity in places like ISKCON, where they chant anywhere and everywhere while doing all sorts of mundane things too."

Advaitadas: "Unfortunately the practise of *pramāda japa* is widespread - all Vaiṣṇava groups commit it, not just ISKCON. They consider quantity more important than quality, and, at any cost want to finish their quota. Unfortunately most *bhajanānandīs* spend lots of time doing (mostly *pramāda*) *japa* but practically no time in *harināma saṅkīrtana*. For me, half an hour of rip-roaring *kīrtana* does more to me than 8 hours of *japa*."

Bhakta 2: "So far I know, there is in Śikṣāṣṭaka, *nāmnām akāri bahudha...* verse, which says of the *nija sarva śakti* invested in the holy name."

Advaitadas: "That is true, but this does not mean it is devotional to think of other things while chanting. If you think of sex and you chant *hare kṛṣṇa*, it is obviously not pleasing to Kṛṣṇa. 100% attentiveness is hard for a beginner, but we should at least avoid circumstances ourselves that will cause or increase *pramāda japa*, like going out to the market or driving a car with our hand on a *japa-mālā*."

Bhakta 2: And it is well known that *guna-rūpa-nāma* are non-different from each other. So if we say of "*pramāda japa*", then it is worth mention the "*pramāda līlā-smaranam*", I think. Otherwise it comes one to think that *līlā-smāranam* is most powerful than *nāma-smaranam*.

Advaitadas: *pramāda līlā smarana* is a contradiction in terms. When there is *pramāda* (inattentiveness) there simply isn't any *smarana* (remembrance) anymore. You can only think of one thing at a time, after all. Chanting with beads is a physical act, while the mind can be somewhere else. So there is a possibility of *pramāda japa* but not of *pramāda smarana*. *līlā smarana* does not have restraints like *japa*. One can wash the pots, cook, wash one's clothes, do shopping, clean the house etc. while remembering the *līlā*, while none of these things can be combined with *japa* (although you never know, nowadays people may even chant *japa* while cooking or washing the pots). In other words, for *japa* one needs to reserve special time for an exclusive *sādhana*, while *līlā-smarana* does not require a time set apart exclusively. It is an inclusive practise, that can be combined with all kinds of external practises. "*svapne rādhā-kṛṣṇa dekhe*" Indeed, Rūpa and Sanātana could even see Radha Kṛṣṇa in dreams. Smart person who can combine *japa* with sleeping!!!

The Padma Purāṇa's Śrīmad Bhāgavat Māhātmya (5.73) says *vyagra citto hato japaḥ* — "*japa* is lost through a restless mind."

Summarising the issue of *pramāda japa*:

1. One can not speak with others or drive a car while giving sufficient attention to the *nāma*.
2. One commits offences to the sacred prayer beads while touching them to the ground while paying obeisances or touching them to the steering wheel or gearshift while driving. They are sacred tools — not toys! Remember that the 108 beads are sacred Tulasī. The Haribhakti Vilāsa and Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu mention 32 ritual offences (*sevāparādhas*), one of them being *eka haste praṇāma*, offering obeisances with one hand. This offence is being committed each time one bows down to the floor with one's beads in the hands.
3. By publicly chanting one makes a big show of oneself as a great devotee practitioner.

Bhakta 2: “So far the beads are concerned, as I read in one recent post on your blog, then there is the method of counting on fingers, and I read that Mahāprabhu was counting *nāma* on his fingers, in that case there is no offence to the holy beads, so it can be outlined as a solution to that problem.”

Advaitadas: “Offenses to the holy beads occur when we bow to the ground to the deities or a *sādhu* while chanting *japa* — we hit the holy beads to the ground. Generally we are not to imitate Mahāprabhu. If we would use this argumentation we could also justify things like saffron *sannyāsa* with *daṇḍas*. Beads are described in the Hari-bhakti Vilāsa and are the regular tools for *japa*. I am not wholly against chanting on the fingers, though, provided there is a peaceful situation that allows concentration.”

The problems with the hard and fast rule that devotees all have to chant 64 rounds -

1. It is a huge bulk- often it becomes a drag to daily do such a mountain of *sādhana*, and when one gets upset with it that results in *nāmāparādha* (the 10th offence, *prīti rahita*, having no love for the chanting).
2. The mind is fickle and is hard to concentrate for so many hours.
3. Humans are created in the mode of passion — *rajasi pralayaṁ gatvā karmasaṅgiṣu jāyate* (B. Gītā 14.15) *karma-saṅgiṣu karmāsakta manuṣyeṣu* (Viśvanātha Cakravartī's comment) The body is passionate and restless and when one has such a huge quota to do one starts wandering around with one's beads, combining *japa* with other things, thus making the offense of *pramāda japa*, inattentive chanting.
4. One may get into a mechanical daily routine (again the *prīti rahita-aparādha*)
5. Often one becomes proud of one's high quota of chanting, and
- 5.a. when pride comes in the whole sacrifice is lost or becomes little more than a pious activity.
6. One often simply lacks the *ruci* and thus the spiritual energy to chant 64 rounds.
7. Chanting one *lakh* (64 rounds) of *japa* is completely impracticable for a busy householder or even for a *sādhu* who is busy serving the Guru, the deities, the Vaiṣṇavas or the cows in an ashram.

8. Quantity does not guarantee quality. It is not like *karma yoga*, "the more the better." Śrī Vallabhācārya teaches — *na hi sādhana sampattyā hariḥ tuṣyati karmavat* — 'It is not a huge amount of *sādhana* that will please Hari, as if it is *karma*.' *bhaktānām dānyam evaikam hari-toṣaṇa sādhana* — 'It is only the devotees' humility that can satisfy Hari.' This point is also made in Caitanya Caritamrita —

*heno kṛṣṇa-nāma yadi loy bahu bāra, tabe yadi prema nohe nohe āsrudhāra
tabe jāni aparādha tāhāte pracura; kṛṣṇa nāma bīja tāte nā hoy aṅkur*

"If one takes that Kṛṣṇa-nāma many times but there is no love and one sheds no tears, then I know that there is ample offence there, that blocks the sprouting of the seed of the Kṛṣṇa-nama."

9. Unfortunately in certain circles it is really a social must to chant 64 rounds. What quality will come forth from having to perform under social pressure? And what will be the motivation of the chanter in such social circumstances?

Sadhu Baba was not against chanting a high quota of *japa*, but he cautioned: মূলকথা লক্ষ্য ভ্রষ্ট হইয়া লক্ষ্য নামেও লক্ষ্য পৌঁছানো যায় না — "When one loses track of the essence one can chant 64 rounds but will still not attain that target." With that he meant that one must continue to think of the *mantra-devatā* (Kṛṣṇa) while chanting the *mantra*, otherwise what is the use?

If one is able to sit down in peace and chant 64 rounds then that is great. Sādhu Bābā taught his followers: জপার্থে শ্রীশ্রীহরিনামের মালা লইয়া পথে ঘাটে হাটে বাজারে লোকসংঘর্ষে পাদুকাপায়ে, গল্প জুড়িয়া তাম্বুল চর্বণ করিতে করিতে চলা নিষেধ । তাহাতে শ্রীশ্রীনামের মর্যাদাহানী হয় । নামে রুচিতে কস্মিন্ কালেও আসে না বরং অহং অভিমান বৃদ্ধি পায় এবং শ্রীশ্রীনামের চরণে মহা অপরাধ ঘটে - "It is forbidden to take one's *japa-mala* out on the road, to the market, to the bathing-places, to public gatherings, wearing shoes, talking to others or chewing betel-nuts — it will be disrespectful to Śrī Harināma. In this way *ruci* for *hari-nāma* will never come, rather there will be an increase of ego and it will create a big offence at the lotus-feet of Śrī Harināma."

If one can still do 64 rounds, within such parameters, then what could be greater than that?

Bhakta 1: "Would you want to comment on Mahāprabhu's wish for chanting a lakh of names, why did he say he wouldn't eat in the house of someone who wasn't a laksapati if such a practice isn't practicable for the bulk of his followers?"

Advaitadas: I couldnt give you more of a full-proof comment than the following one:

1] Mahāprabhu said he would anyway only eat from brahmins, that is clearly written in the Caitanya Bhagavat text, so since you and I and none of us are even Hindus at all, let alone brahmins, will Mahāprabhu not eat from us you think?

2] In 16th century India the brahmins may not have had a heavy 9 to 5 job with hours of commuting time added to it (I do grant you that some *gr̥hasthas* do boogy a lot of spare time away, but that is why they are *gr̥hasthas* - *gr̥hasthas* are fallen souls).

3] A clever guy who chants one lakh in 4 hours. Chanting what? *ramramramramramramram*? Doing one lakh would take me and most other sadhakas at least 8 hours.

4] The question is whether Mahāprabhu, even if the above requirements were met, would eat from a person who chants under social pressure or without attention.

Bhakta 3: As far as the *japa* topic, I do like the point you have somewhere (blog or one of the pdfs) about chanting a set number in front of your Thakurji, as a part of daily *sadhana*. I think that is a nice approach--try to create a regular, attentive practice. A friend told me recently of a *japa* "workshop" in which participants chanted 64 rounds daily for a week or so. They apparently had a very good experience doing so, although on the first day one person threw their beads away in disgust! Regular, periodic attempts to chant 64 rounds seems like a good approach: *ekādaśīs*, *niyam-sevā*, etc.

Advaitadas : About the 'workshop'-idea - the idea to chant any amount of *japa*, small or large, in the company of others gives me the creeps. In the company of beloveds one would start chatting with each other, in the company of (semi-) strangers one would feel uncomfortable, check each other out with the eyes. The best is just yourself and Thakurji.

Bhakta 4: This reminds me of a story I read in regards to BP Puri Maharaj. His tip for chanting 64 rounds was to chant 16 rounds in four sittings. One in the early morning, one around noon, one in the afternoon and other in the evening, or something like that. In any case, you could try doing it at the *sandhya* times even though there are only three *sandhyas*. Still, I thought it was a nice tip.

Advaitadas: Yes, though this again is only possible for an unemployed single, not a woman with three children or a man who commutes for hours to his 9-5 job.

As for Haridās Thākur chanting 3 *lakhs* of *japa*, well he obviously had that particular function within the circle of Mahāprabhu's eternal associates. The others weren't seen doing such an exclusive *japa sādhana*, but rather engaged in *kirtan*, writing books, preaching, cooking, deity service and so many other services.

Is Kṛṣṇa such a calculator machine that he will **ONLY** accept a person who chants His name exactly 36.5 million times a year, 365 million times a decade, and not one syllable less?

From Advaitadās' *iṣṭagoṣṭhīs* with Nirañjan Prasād Dās:

Advaitadas: "On the one hand Bābā has taught us "It is forbidden to take one's *japa-mālā* out on the road, to the market, to the bathing-places, to public gatherings, wearing shoes, talking to others or chewing betelnuts — it will be disrespectful to Śrī Harināma. In this way *ruci* for *hari-nāma* will never come, rather there will be an increase of ego and it will create a big offence at the lotus-feet of Śrī-Śrī Hari-nāma." Yet on the other hand Śrīman Mahāprabhu says in the Caitanya Caritāmṛta (Antya 20) *khāite suite yathā tathā nāma loy, kāla deśa niyama nāi sarva-siddhi hoy* — "Whether you are eating or reclining, wherever you take the name of Kṛṣṇa,

regardless of time or place, you will attain all perfection.” How can we understand this apparent contradiction?”

Niranjan Prasād Dās: The verse *khāite suite yathā tathā nāma loy, kāla deśa niyama nāi sarva-siddhi hoy* (C.C Ch.20) deals with Śrī Hari-nāma **kīrtana**, which is a public affair — anytime — anywhere — loudly or within oneself, but: *japa* on one’s *mālā* is a hidden thing, it must be done in solitude (*nirjane, ekānta*); it is the order of the scriptures and above all of Śrī Gurudeva. The scriptures (Haribhakti Vilāsa 17.58) say:

*bhūta rākṣasa vetālāḥ siddha gandharva cāraṇāḥ
haranti prakāṣaṁ yasmāt tasmāt guptaṁ japet sudhīḥ*

"The ghosts, Rākṣasas, Vetālās, Siddhas, Gandharvas and the cosmic wanderers take the (benefit of the) *japa* of the public chanter. Hence the wise must do *japa* in secret." *japānya-kāle mālāntu pūjayitvā sugopayet* — “In times other than *japa*-time one should worship the *mālā* and keep it hidden.” (Haribhakti Vilāsa 17.57)”

- Letter, December 4, 1996

Loud *japa* is not better than mental *japa*.

Haribhakti Vilāsa (Nārasimha Purāṇa and Yajñavalkya, Haribhakti Vilāsa 17.161-162) says:

*tri vidhā japa yajñāḥ syāt tasya bhaven nibodhaya;
vācikaś ca upāṁśuś ca manasaś ca tridhā mataḥ
mantram uccārayed vyaktāṁ japayata sa vācikaḥ;
kiñciccabdāṁ svayaṁ vidyād upāṁśuḥ sa japaḥ smṛtaḥ
upāṁśu japam uktasya tasmācchato guṇo bhavet;
sahasro mānasaḥ prokto yasmād dhyāna samo hi saḥ*

"There are three kinds of *japa*– vocal, muttering and mental. Loud chanting of the *mantra* is called vocal *japa*, whispering is called *upāṁśu* and mental chanting is called *mānasik japa*. Whispering is a hundred times better than loud *japa* and mental chanting is a thousand times better. This is equal to meditation."

Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī writes in Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu (1.2.149): *mantrasya sulaghūccāro japa ity abhidhīyate* “Very soft repetition of the *mantra* is called *japa*.”

Śrīmad Bhāgavata (11.12.17¹, 11.21.36, 12.6.37-40) repeatedly teaches there are four levels of speech. For instance, verse 11.21.36 says:

śabda brahma sudurbodha prāṇendriyam anāmayam

¹ *sa eva jīvo vivara-prasūtiḥ prāṇena ghoṣeṇa guhāṁ praviṣṭaḥ manomayaṁ sūkṣmaṁ upetya rūpaṁ mātrā svarā varṇa iti* - According to the tika of Sridhara Swami, *ghoṣeṇa* refers to *parākhya vāk*, *manomayaṁ* to *paśyanti*, *sūkṣma* to *madhyamā* and words *mātrā*, *svara* and *varṇa* to *vaikhari*.

ananta pāram gambhīram durvigāhya samudravat

“The meaning of the Veda (Brahman manifest in word) is most difficult to understand, consisting as it does of the vital air (*prāṇa*, the *parā* stage of speech, which is only perceived by *yogīs* and *ṛṣis*), the mind (the *paśyanti* stage residing within the *anāhata cakra*, including the *madhyamā* stage, consisting of *buddhi* or the intellect, and residing in the *maṇipura cakra* located in the heart) and the organ of speech (the *vaikharī* state, the most gross one). It is endless in time and limitless in space, profound (obscure) and difficult to fathom like the ocean.”²

This roughly corresponds with the three stages of *japa* — *vācika* being *vaikhārika* or grossly vocal, and *upāṁśu* and *mānasika* being *madhyama* and *paśyanti*. Above the *vaikhārika* level the words do not differ from the objects they describe.

Wherever there are statements, like in Caitanya Bhāgavata, that loud chanting is better, they are made in the context of preaching.

Added caution

One’s beadbag is not a wallet. Often devotees keep bank bills or coins in their bead bags. That is very dirty. Money can never be clean(ed) and it is not proper to keep it with one’s sacred Tulasi-beads.

Japa is best done in *granthis* (multiples of 4 rounds) — 4,8,12,16 etc. rounds.

² Sridhara Swami comments: *prathamam prāṇamayam parākhyam, tato manomayam paśyantyākhyam, tata indriyamayam madhyamākhyam* — “Prana refers to the supreme sound of *parā*, then the mental level of *paśyantī* and then the sensual *madhyama*.”