

Why Hear and Chant in Devotee Association?

*satām prasāṅgān mama vīrya-saṁvido
bhavanti hṛt-karṇa-rasāyanāḥ kathāḥ
taj-joṣaṇād āśv apavarga-vartmani
śraddhā ratir bhaktir anukramiṣyati*

In the association of pure devotees, discussion of the pastimes and activities of the Supreme Personality of Godhead is very pleasing and satisfying to the ear and the heart. By cultivating such knowledge one gradually becomes advanced on the path of liberation, and thereafter he is freed, and his attraction becomes fixed. Then real devotion and devotional service begin.

*The process of advancing in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and devotional service is described here. The first point is that one must seek the association of persons who are Kṛṣṇa conscious and who engage in devotional service. Without such association one cannot make advancement. Simply by theoretical knowledge or study one cannot make any appreciable advancement. One must give up the association of materialistic persons and seek the association of devotees because **without the association of devotees one cannot understand the activities of the Lord.** Generally, people are convinced of the impersonal feature of the Absolute Truth. Because they do not associate with devotees, they cannot understand that the Absolute Truth can be a person and have personal activities. This is a very difficult subject matter, and unless one has personal understanding of the Absolute Truth, there is no meaning to devotion. Service or devotion cannot be offered to anything impersonal. Service must be offered to a person. Nondevotees cannot appreciate Kṛṣṇa consciousness by reading the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam or any other Vedic literature wherein the activities of the Lord are described; they think that these activities are fictional, manufactured stories because spiritual life is not explained to them in the proper mood. To understand the personal activities of the Lord, one has to seek the association of devotees, and by such association, when one contemplates and tries to understand the transcendental activities of the Lord, the path to liberation is open, and he is freed. One who has firm faith in the Supreme Personality of Godhead becomes fixed, and his attraction for association with the Lord and the devotees increases. **Association with devotees means association with the Lord. The devotee who makes this association develops the consciousness for rendering service to the Lord, and then, being situated in the transcendental position of devotional service, he gradually becomes perfect.***

*parasparānukathanam
pāvanam bhagavad-yaśaḥ
mitho ratir mithas tuṣṭir
nivṛttir mitha ātmanah*

One should learn how to associate with the devotees of the Lord by gathering with them to chant the glories of the Lord. This process is most purifying. As devotees thus develop their loving friendship, they feel mutual happiness and satisfaction. And by thus encouraging one another they are able to give up material sense gratification, which is the cause of all suffering.

According to Śrīla Śrīdhara Svāmī, those who are advanced in Kṛṣṇa consciousness should not envy one another or quarrel among themselves. Giving up all such mundane feelings, they should gather together and chant the glories of the Supreme Lord for mutual purification. Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura has pointed out that glorification of the Supreme Lord is especially potent when performed in the association of pure devotees. When devotees engage in saṅkīrtana, chanting the glories of the Lord together, they experience the highest transcendental bliss and satisfaction. Thus they encourage one another to give up material sense gratification, which is based on illicit sexual connections with women. One devotee will say to another, "Oh, you have given up sense gratification. Starting today, I shall also give it up."

One should learn to increase one's love for the devotees, to satisfy them and to give up sense objects unfavorable to serving Kṛṣṇa. And one should learn to view the entire universe as paraphernalia for the Lord's service. By engaging the objects of the senses in Kṛṣṇa's service, one automatically becomes detached from them. And as one passes one's days in the association of the Lord's devotees, one's transcendental ecstasy increases more and more, through discussions about the topics of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam and Bhagavad-gītā. Therefore, one who wants to be free from the harassment of māyā in the form of sense gratification must constantly associate with pure devotees of the Lord who have no engagement other than chanting and hearing the glories of the Lord and carrying out His mission on earth. Śrīla Madhvācārya has pointed out that just as one should cultivate friendship with devotees, one must cultivate a spirit of friendship toward the demigods, who manage the universe on the Lord's behalf. Thus one should live peacefully within this world.

*smarantaḥ smārayantaś ca
mitho 'ghaughā-haram harim
bhaktyā sañjātayā bhaktyā
bibhraty utpulaḥ tanum*

The devotees of the Lord constantly discuss the glories of the Personality of Godhead among themselves. Thus they constantly remember the Lord and remind one another of His qualities and pastimes. In this way, by their devotion to the principles of bhakti-yoga, the devotees please the Personality of Godhead, who takes away from them everything inauspicious. Being purified of all impediments, the devotees awaken to pure love of Godhead, and thus, even within this world, their spiritualized bodies exhibit symptoms of transcendental ecstasy, such as standing of the bodily hairs on end.

— ŚB 11.3.30+p, 11.3.31