

Śuddha-bhakti Cintāmaṇi

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Chapter 20- The Qualification to Hear

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- The first nineteen chapters of this book presented a broad overview of the science of devotional service (bhakti-tattva).
- That comprehensive outline described impure and pure devotion; the seeds from which they sprout; the qualifications for practising devotional service; the divisions of pure devotion in practise, ecstasy, and love; and the stages of pure devotion leading to love of God.
- This overview provides the foundation for the main purpose of this book: to determine which subjects are most appropriate for devotees to hear and chant at the various stages of their devotional service.
- The remaining chapters are dedicated to this topic.

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- In Bhakti-sandarbha, Jīva Gosvāmī states that of the limbs of devotional service, hearing about the Lord comes first, because without it no one can know about the others. [Bhakti-sandarbha, anuccheda 8]
- In the same Sandarbha he explains that the process of chanting the holy names perfects all other devotional practices, [Bhakti-sandarbha, anuccheda 273] something Sanātana Gosvāmī also elaborately describes in Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta. [Śrī Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta 2.3.144–86]
- Therefore Śuddha-bhakti-cintāmaṇi describes the process of hearing as a function of the greater process of chanting.
- This work hopes to achieve two purposes on ISKCON's behalf: First, it will provide in one place, a detailed study of how to systematically cultivate chanting of the holy names, a process called nāma-bhajana; and second, it will explain the role hearing and chanting about Kṛṣṇa plays in that process.

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- In this way, it should become clear what place books such as the Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana series have in the spiritual lives of all devotees, whether they are beginners, intermediate, or advanced.
- Although chanting and hearing are the centrepiece of this study, the rest of the book also refers to a few of the sixty-two other items of devotional service.
- We have concentrated our presentation in this way not to minimize the importance of other devotional practices but to keep in focus this book's purpose.
- Readers should bear in mind that due attention must be paid to all other limbs of devotion in order to perfect the process of hearing and chanting.
- Of these other limbs of devotion, two are given special mention.

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- The first is the purifying process of deity worship (arcana), which is discussed in the last section of this chapter.
- The second, remembrance (smaraṇa), is the goal of chanting and hearing and is described elaborately in later chapters.
- When devotees worship the Lord's transcendental form and remember what they have heard of His glories, the chanting of His names becomes the nectar for which they always hanker.
- This is what it means to practise nāma-bhajana.
- Devotees who desire to seriously embrace the systematic worship of the holy name (nāma-bhajana) must accept five prerequisite understandings.

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- Those who neglect these essentials, who aspire for perfection cheaply, inevitably fall victim to the allurements of māyā.
- The five essentials are: (1) that the basis of devotional service in practice is chanting the holy names; (2) that devotees may take up progressively more advanced practices only as they become qualified; (3) that chanting comprises japa and all other forms of saṅkīrtana; (4) that one should engage in the practices of devotion as much as possible in the company of like-minded devotees; and (5) that cultivation relating to one's spiritual form (svarūpa) is possible only at the stage of ecstasy (bhāva).
- Although later sections of this book spell out these points in detail, the next five paragraphs outline them in brief.

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- Chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra is the basis of cultivating pure devotion.
- The Lord's holy name reveals its potencies and empowers devotees to ascend to higher stages of devotion proportionate to the strength and purity of their faith.
- The purer the heart, the deeper the absorption in Kṛṣṇa consciousness; the deeper the absorption, the more accessible the higher stages of advancement.
- Initially, devotees chant out of a sense of duty.
- Later, their thoughtful obligation matures into loving service.
- Beginners chant to achieve love of God; perfected devotees chant impelled by love.
- In any case, real worshippers of the name never give up their chanting, whether at the stage of practice, ecstasy, or perfection.

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- The way devotees practise devotional activities changes as they ascend through the stages of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- To advance to the next higher stage, devotees must qualify themselves by first perfecting and becoming steady in the stage they have already attained.
- To take up the higher stage without having perfected the lower, or to remain on a lower stage and not to move to a higher, obstructs the development of pure devotion.
- For instance, different topics are suitable for hearing at different stages.
- The quality of faith each devotee possesses determines their eligibility to hear (śravaṇādhikāra), which in turn determines which topics are suitable for them.

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- This chapter will elaborate on how devotees can determine and increase their eligibility to hear.
- There are different ways to chant: by oneself, silently or aloud (in japa); with other devotees whether in the temple or in public places (saṅkīrtana); or by teaching the glories of chanting both to devotees and nondevotees (pracāra).
- Preaching also means to speak, write books, conduct dramas, or inaugurate novel ways to spread the chanting.
- All these activities—and not only meditative, solitary japa—when done without offence are means to cultivate the holy name and to achieve perfection.
- The holy name should be cultivated in the company of devotees.

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- Lord Caitanya's followers, duty-bound to work together to fulfil His mission, generally do not resort to solitary practice.
- Even if they chant for a portion of each day in a solitary place, they live and carry out missionary activities with other devotees.
- Thus be they sādhakas or siddhas, there is no scope for those dedicated to Lord Caitanya's mission to be outside the company of Vaiṣṇavas.
- Devotees ascend to the spiritual platform only at the stage of ecstasy (bhāva), and only then do they realize their spiritual personality.

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- Qualified practitioners may feel attracted to a particular mood of perfection, and they may accept certain spontaneous or regulative services according to their qualifications, but they should never prematurely adopt spiritual practices such as cultivating the mellow of relationships (rasa) or the eleven moods of a gopī (ekādaśa-bhāva).
- These treasures awaken naturally under the guidance of the internal potency; they are only for those who are already transcendently situated.
- Artificial attempts at this kind of cultivation are futile. They corrupt devotional practices and place the devotees in spiritual jeopardy.
- On hearing the above five premises, serious readers are bound to ask questions.

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- The rest of this book, in attempting to clarify the path to perfection Śrīla Prabhupāda chalked out for his followers, addresses the most common of these concerns.
- It also highlights the risks involved in deviating from the path.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda said, “I want to see that one disciple has understood Kṛṣṇa’s philosophy.
- That is success.
- That’s all.
- Kṛṣṇa says, yatatām api siddhānām, kaścid vetti mām tattvataḥ.
- So first of all, to become siddha is very difficult job.

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- And then, yatatām api siddhānām.
- There is still difficult job.
- So Kṛṣṇa philosophy is little difficult to understand. If they understand so easily, that is not understanding.
- It is easy.
- It is easy.
- If you accept Kṛṣṇa's words, it is very easy.
- Kṛṣṇa says, man-manā bhava mad-bhakto, mad-yājī mām namaskuru, “Always think of Me.”

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- So where is the difficulty?
- You have seen Kṛṣṇa's picture, Kṛṣṇa's deity, and if you think Kṛṣṇa, where is the difficulty?
- After all, we have to think something.
- So instead of something, why not think Kṛṣṇa?
- Where is the difficulty?
- But he does not take seriously.
- He has to think so many things, except Kṛṣṇa...
- They will argue simply...

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- And Kṛṣṇa says, man-manā bhava mad-bhaktah...
- You do it and get the results.” [Conversation with Indian guests, Hyderabad, 12 April, 1975]
- The conclusion is that even if the path to perfection seems difficult, devotees must know that path, traverse it, and reach its goal.
- The main thrust of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is to show that any person, regardless of his or her background, whether pious or sinful, can become a pure lover of Kṛṣṇa.
- Becoming such a lover is the purpose of initiation into Kṛṣṇa consciousness.
- In Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words, “Pure stage of life is called vāsudeva stage. Just like Vasudeva was father of Kṛṣṇa.

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- That means when one is situated in the vāsudeva stage, śuddha-sattva, pure goodness, Kṛṣṇa is born.
- Kṛṣṇa born means Kṛṣṇa becomes visible, revealed.
- So this initiation process is gradually to raise a devotee to that platform.”
[Initiation lecture, London, 7 September, 1971]
- This section discusses the second prerequisite for performing nāma-bhajana—the understanding that steadiness in Kṛṣṇa consciousness is the qualification for adopting more advanced spiritual practices.

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- As Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam states:

sve sve 'dhikāre yā niṣṭhā
sa guṇaḥ parikīrtitaḥ
viparyayas tu doṣaḥ syād
ubhayor eṣa niścayaḥ

- “Steadiness in one’s own position is declared to be actual piety, whereas deviation from one’s position is considered impiety. In this way the two are definitely ascertained.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.21.2)
- In this verse Lord Kṛṣṇa describes how conditioned souls can elevate themselves to the stage of love for Kṛṣṇa by systematically following the Vedic prescriptions.

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- This progressive path consists of successive stages in which spiritual practices—like hearing of Kṛṣṇa—become increasingly more developed.
- The key to advancement is steadiness.
- If devotees are steady in the practices appropriate to a particular stage of spiritual attainment, then they develop the adhikāra to go to the next stage.
- If they are incapable of following their spiritual duties, they are unqualified.
- Such unqualified devotees still need to develop their steadiness under proper guidance.
- One aspect of irreligion is to adopt spiritual practices more advanced than those for which one is qualified.

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- This results in falldown from one's presumed status.
- Another aspect of irreligion is to neglect the duties of a higher stage at which one is steadily situated.
- This aspect of irreligion results in one's being neglected by earnest Vaiṣṇavas.
- The wise call both these forms of irreligion niyamāgraha—one is a kind of spiritual impertinence and the other a kind of spiritual lethargy. (Rūpa Gosvāmī defines the term [The Nectar of Instruction 2] and both Śrīla Prabhupāda and Ṭhākura Bhaktivinoda elaborate on it. [The Nectar of Instruction 2, purport, and Śrī Bhaktyāloka 1.4])
- The principle of advancing according to one's qualification applies equally to nondevotee workers, empiric speculators, mixed devotees, and pure devotees.

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- Each stage of spiritual life has distinguishing symptoms as well as a unique set of do's and don'ts.
- But the common qualifications that allow devotees to rise from one stage to the next are firm faith in and full knowledge of the spiritual practices appropriate to these respective stages.
- Such faith grows naturally as devotees become steady in the spiritual practices they have already achieved.
- This is what Śrīla Prabhupāda meant when he said, “Continue to your best, and you will automatically advance more and more in Krishna consciousness.” [Letter to Sārādā Dāsī, Bombay, 25 November, 197]

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- The following is a practical example of how devotees rise from one stage of Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the next:
- When devotees enter the path of pure devotion, their first duty is to become steady in chanting, following the regulative principles, and rendering menial service, perhaps by washing kitchen pots or cleaning the bathrooms.
- In time, pure devotion purifies their heart, gives them firm faith in holy name, and steadies them in their service, sādhana, and vows.
- If devotees remain steady for at least a year, they may then rise to the next stage of devotion and accept hari-nāma initiation.
- Having received the blessings of the holy name, initiated devotees may be given greater responsibility.

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- Perhaps they will be asked to guide younger devotees, give Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam class, or head up the saṅkīrtana party.
- They will also be expected to increase their spiritual practices by cultivating the qualities of goodness (cleanliness, austerity, and tolerance) while being cautious to avoid offences both in service and especially while chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa.
- The results of this increased devotion should be visible in their increased knowledge and faith in Vaiṣṇava culture.
- If these sattvic symptoms remain steady for another year, first initiated devotees may rise to the next stage of Kṛṣṇa consciousness and receive mantra-dīkṣā.

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- As brāhmaṇas, devotees are recognized as exemplars and teachers in ISKCON; they also chant the Gāyatrī mantra, worship the deity, and may perform fire sacrifices.
- By rigorous study and application of scripture, they continue to advance through the stages of pure devotion, one step after another, until they reach the ultimate goal of life.
- Devotees often misinterpret Śrīla Prabhupāda's statements about how advancement comes automatically.
- Such statements, they argue, mean that it is not necessary to try to raise oneself from one level of Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the next.
- Spiritual elevation happens automatically; one simply needs to chant.

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- We have already partially discussed the topic of “automatic advancement” in chapter seventeen while discussing the purification of anarthas.
- There we concluded that it was necessary to understand why we commit offences if we wish to recognize and avoid them.
- Here the topic is discussed in more depth, but in relation to practising spiritual life according to qualification.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statements about “automatic advancement” should always be seen in the context of his complete teachings.
- He never presents the idea as an alternative to devotees knowing and systematically applying the science of bhakti.
- Rather, he says that automatic advancement is part of the overall process.

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- Were it otherwise, there would have been no need for Śrīla Prabhupāda to write so many books or give so many instructions.
- He could have simply told the devotees to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and left it at that.
- But Śrīla Prabhupāda emphasized the need to acquire knowledge about devotional service, and he encouraged his followers to make a sincere effort to put such knowledge into practice.
- When devotees did so, then they would automatically advance.
- This understanding is embedded in the words “continue to your best” cited above, and further reinforced by the following:

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- [A]nd jñāna, and you must be fully equipped with knowledge.
- The Bhagavad-gītā is there, the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam is there.
- Now we are publishing other books also, Teachings of Lord Caitanya.
- So read them...if you read, you become fully qualified with knowledge.
- And vijñānam: apply them in your practical life.
- And āstikyam, in full faith of the procedures and in Kṛṣṇa. That will make you successful. [Initiation lecture, San Francisco, 24 March, 1968]
- In summary, devotees must know the duties appropriate to the various stages of Kṛṣṇa consciousness and apply this knowledge in their spiritual life with balance.

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- As already mentioned, they should perfect the devotional practices that fit the stage of advancement they have attained and then move forward to the practices of the next stage.
- When they do so, their ability to adopt more elevated sādhana is guaranteed.
- Equipped with such knowledge and determination devotees automatically advance through successive stages of devotion to ultimate perfection.
- In short, automatic advancement is a natural part of, rather than an alternative to, educated efforts to attain perfection.
- Every spiritual effort includes a process for perfecting duties in order to advance.

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- In the beginning, devotees attached to fruitive work (sakāma-karma-miśra-bhaktas) must strictly follow the regulations of varṇāśrama while cultivating knowledge of the permanence of the soul and the impermanence of matter.
- By performing regular worship they are elevated by spiritual knowledge to the status of detached workers (niškāma-karma-miśra-bhaktas).
- Because they have real faith in Kṛṣṇa's proprietorship, they then give up ritualistic sacrifices and purifying rites to seriously cultivate transcendental knowledge and renunciation.
- Moreover, when chanting and hearing awakens the faith that serving the Lord is the only goal of life, devotees achieve real Kṛṣṇa consciousness and are called śuddha-bhaktas.

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- They are then qualified to rise above the Vedic injunctions and to take shelter of devotional service in practice (sādhana-bhakti).
- In this way mixed devotees perform the appropriate duties of the varṇāśrama system until pure faith awakens and qualifies them for the duties of pure devotion.
- Kṛṣṇa describes this transition process to Uddhava:

tāvat karmāṇi kurvīta
na nirvidyeta yāvatā
mat-kathā-śravaṇādau vā
śraddhā yāvan na jāyate

- “As long as one is not satiated by fruitive activity and has not awakened his taste for devotional service by śravaṇam kīrtanam viṣṇoḥ one has to act according to the regulative principles of the Vedic injunctions.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.20.9)

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- Once having crossed the threshold of pure devotion, devotees gradually progress through various stages, from faith to love, by the same process.
- When devotees first enter the realm of pure faith (śraddhā), unwanted habits obstruct their devotional service.
- To become fit for the next stage of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, niṣṭhā, they must first rid themselves of at least seventy-five percent of their accumulated unwanted habits (anartha-nivṛtti).
- Purified and liberated from the bodily concept of life, the devotees' faith becomes fixed and they qualify for more advanced spiritual practices.
- They may then begin to hear of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes in Vṛndāvana with the gopīs.

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- In this connection Śukadeva Gosvāmī advises devotees so inclined to ensure that they have a faith suited to such elevated meditation.
- If they do, they will be purified further and thus ascend to the stage of bhāva, where the mode of passion has no sway.

vikrīḍitaṁ vraja-vadhūbhir idaṁ ca viṣṇoḥ
śraddhānvito 'nuśṛṇuyād atha varṇayed yaḥ
bhaktiṁ parāṁ bhagavati pratilabhya kāmāṁ
hṛd-rogam āśv apahinoty acireṇa dhīraḥ

- “Anyone who faithfully hears or describes the Lord’s playful affairs with the young gopīs of Vṛndāvana will attain the Lord’s pure devotional service. Thus he will quickly become sober and conquer lust, the disease of the heart.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 10.33.39)

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- The faith spoken of in this verse is not that of a beginner in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, as a certain class of pseudo-Vaiṣṇavas would have us believe.
- Rather, as Śrīla Prabhupāda frequently commented, it is a faith ornamented by mature understanding and love; it is the faith of a devotee in advanced spiritual consciousness. [See lectures, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 6.1.61, Vṛndāvana, 28 August, 1975, and Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 5.5.9, Vṛndāvana, 31 October, 1976]
- The wise disapprove of devotees hearing Kṛṣṇa's most confidential pastimes without mature faith and jumping over the natural process of advancing from one stage of devotion to the next.
- Pure Vaiṣṇavas label as sahajiyās those neophytes who want to purchase a spiritual commodity without appropriate payment.

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- The other side of niyamāgraha is to neglect the practices for which one is fit.
- The purpose of practising Kṛṣṇa consciousness is to go boldly forward to the shelter of the Lord's lotus feet.
- Fit devotees inclined toward hearing about Kṛṣṇa's pastimes with the gopīs in Vraja, for example, should not avoid doing so.
- As Śrīla Prabhupāda says, “It does not mean that ‘We shall not utter even the name of gopīs. We have taken vow to boycott the gopīs.’
- No. They are our worshipable devotees.
- How we can avoid them?” [Discussion with BTG Staff, Boston, 24 December, 1969]

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- If, out of fear of ever-new spiritual challenges, steady devotees fit for the next stage of devotion do not upgrade their spiritual practices, they stop advancing.
- The process of purification suspended by their hesitation to advance, they easily become complacent.
- Such complacency later makes these devotees vulnerable to material attraction.
- Then like the impulsive neophytes, they are prone to fall.
- From these guidelines it is clear that spiritual practices, including the subject matter devotees hear, vary according to the quality of faith.
- Pure faith, steadiness, taste, and attachment are the four stages of devotional service in practice; ecstasy and love are the stages of perfection.

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- Each stage has its unique practices, characteristics, and associated duties, and devotees attain each stage by developing a specific level of faith.
- For instance, devotees well situated in steadiness inevitably aspire after the practices of taste.
- They should make their transition to that higher level carefully, like caterpillars moving from one leaf to another.
- That is, they should remain fixed in the activities of steadiness while they become well conversant with the characteristics of ruci.
- When real faith in the characteristics of the higher stage develops, they may begin to cultivate the disciplines of taste for which they have a specific attraction.

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- As they gain strength from their cultivation, they may gradually adjust their basic practices, increasing some and decreasing others.
- In this way steady devotees rise to new levels of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, cultivating the spiritual frontiers revealed through the medium of taste.
- Progressive devotees move from one stage to another, beginning with the stage of faith (śraddhā), by the same process.
- What are practical examples of such careful transitions?
- In fixed devotion (niṣṭhā), devotees may chant sixteen rounds daily and happily meditate on Kṛṣṇa's form.
- As this practice becomes regular and blissful, the desire may arise to hear more about Kṛṣṇa's qualities.

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- Such devotees may then read songs and prayers that glorify Kṛṣṇa's qualities, remembering them as they chant japa and kīrtana.
- These new practices, symptoms of the stage of taste (ruci), may become so relishable that devotees desire to increase the number of rounds they chant to thirty-two.
- They may experiment for some time with this newfound commitment without disturbing their long-standing services.
- However, when comfortable with their new practices, devotees may, under superior guidance, make adjustments to their normal services in order to facilitate their chanting additional rounds.
- They may also make vows to continue their extra hearing and chanting.

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- In this way, as devotees elevate themselves from one stage of devotion to the next, they gradually make adjustments in both their practices and their duties. [The Nectar of Instruction 5, purport, page 51; lecture, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.16.25, Hawaii, 21 January, 1974]
- Properly done and supervised, this process is self-regulatory and therefore reliable because devotees hear only topics for which they are fit.
- Since the topics themselves direct the techniques of the devotees' chanting, the subjects of their remembrance, and the mood of their worship, devotees who truly follow the process do not succumb to practices beyond their abilities.
- When they are fixed in hearing these new topics, they may hear even newer topics, and when their faith ripens further, they may take another step on the staircase to Goloka.

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- In this way devotees blissfully make steady progress in going back home, back to Godhead.
- It should be noted that spiritual qualification is just as important in hearing philosophy and other scriptural teachings as it is in hearing Kṛṣṇa's līlā.
- Proper understanding of the truths of Kṛṣṇa consciousness requires knowledge and faith; otherwise misunderstandings will cause devotees to argue their own opinions ad nauseam.
- For instance, when the Fifth Canto of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam came out, some devotees tried to visualize Śukadeva Gosvāmī's description of the universe, but they could not make sense of the distances and geometries mentioned in the text.
- Their understanding of cosmology required more than knowledge of geometry and astronomy; it required spiritual qualification

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- In the absence of such qualification devotees had to accept what they were reading on faith.
- In the years and decades that followed, as a result of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s guidance and their own spiritual growth, a number of devotees were better able to understand the Bhāgavatam’s mysterious depiction of the universe and explain it to others.
- Another example of the devotees’ inability to understand siddhānta without appropriate qualification is the controversial “origin of the jīva” issue.
- Based on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instructions as well as on the writings of the previous ācāryas, some devotees argue about whether conditioned souls originally came from Vaikuṇṭha, the brahma-jyotis, or the body of Mahā-saṅkarṣaṇa.

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- Like the depiction of the universe, only persons with realized knowledge and deep faith in Kṛṣṇa's inconceivable potencies can answer this question.
- Devotees who lack such qualification may continue to argue their insufficient realizations, but they succeed in doing little else than stirring needless debate in the Society.
- Therefore Śrīla Prabhupāda's concluding words in response to the direct question regarding the origin of the jīva were “Now don't waste your time.” [Letter to Madhudviṣa Swami, cited in The Great Transcendental Adventure by Kūrma Dāsa, chapter 5]
- He advised his followers to spend energy cultivating their Kṛṣṇa consciousness rather than exploring this topic.

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- By so doing they would endear themselves to the Lord, who would make known relevant ontological truths to the sincere.
- In summary, as devotees make spiritual advancement they become fit to understand philosophical issues such as the structure of the universe or the origin of the jīva, issues they cannot penetrate with immature logic and argument.
- Whether it be līlā or tattva, the subject matter for hearing must be suited to the qualification of the hearer.
- In Sanātana Gosvāmīś Śrī Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta, two separate narratives elucidate the principle that devotees advance according to their qualification.
- The first is of Nārada Muni's quest for the greatest recipient of Kṛṣṇa's mercy, the most advanced devotee.

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- The second is of the cowherd boy Gopa-kumāra's quest for the topmost abode, a quest in which he ascends through various realms where different stages of devotional service are practised.
- In both narrations Sanātana Gosvāmī recognizes the characteristics of the various levels of devotees, devotion, and material and spiritual realms.
- The reader is thus gradually trained to understand the ascending stages of devotion, beginning with the semblance of devotion and concluding with the vraja-bhakti of the gopīs.
- For submissive readers, Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta is a road map to the increased qualifications needed for advancing through the stages of devotional service.

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- One theme of the book, the gradual and indirect path to pure devotion, reminds one of Lord Caitanya's instructions to Sanātana Gosvāmī in Caitanya-caritāmṛta.
- Another, the elevation of Gopa-kumāra on the direct path of pure devotion, reminds one of Śrīla Prabhupāda's teaching that to become his follower one must practise the path to perfection he has presented.
- Gopa-kumāra, like all beginners on the path of pure devotion, advances in Kṛṣṇa consciousness by chanting the mantra given by his spiritual master and by receiving instructions from many great devotees.
- He learns spiritual detachment, acquires transcendental knowledge, realizes the Lord's opulence, achieves perfection, and is finally accepted by Kṛṣṇa as a companion in Goloka.

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- The reader is brought into Gopa-kumāra’s increasingly personal pastimes with Kṛṣṇa as Gopa-kumāra advances. In the process, the reader sees the kind of hearing appropriate for devotees at different stages of devotion.
- Interestingly, after achieving the fulfilment of his desires, Gopa-kumāra receives further instruction from Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī and returns to the material world in order to preach.
- All in all, Śrī Bṛhad-bhāgavatāmṛta is the ideal guidebook on hearing and practising according to qualification.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda says it “teaches people how to become devotees, execute devotional service, and attain love of Kṛṣṇa.” [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Antya-līlā 4.81, purport]

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- Because these three things are the essence of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, it is called bhāgavatāmṛta.
- Intermediate and advanced devotees appreciate the glorification of the Lord due to their spiritual maturity.
- They like to discuss among themselves, read the books of great ācāryas, write down their own realizations, [Bhagavad-gītā As It Is 10.9] and preach and distribute books.
- Although often enthusiastic to pass on their newfound conviction to others, neophytes are not so advanced.
- They have meagre knowledge of devotional philosophy and of topics about Kṛṣṇa.

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- Scripture and the ācāryas recommend deity worship (arcana) to purify and elevate all classes of neophytes.
- Purified by observing the Lord’s form, bowing before Him, and offering Him the fruits of their work, neophytes acquire the desire and ability to associate with Vaiṣṇavas. Lord Kapila says:

mad-dhiṣṇya-darśana-sparśa-
pūjā-stuty-abhivandanaiḥ
bhūteṣu mad-bhāvanayā
sattvenāsaṅgamenā ca

- “The devotee should regularly see My statues in the temple, touch My lotus feet, and offer worshipable paraphernalia and prayer. He should see in the spirit of renunciation, from the mode of goodness, and see every living entity as spiritual.” (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 3.29.16)

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- In addition to purifying the heart, deity worship has two other important effects: it increases the devotees' interest to hear about the Lord, and it bestows the ability to concentrate the mind, which increases the capacity to hear.
- Tending the deity naturally awakens awareness of Kṛṣṇa's personality.
- As devotees become increasingly attached to the person they are worshipping, they want to know more about Him.
- Subsequently, they want to hear about His pastimes and to learn how to serve Him better.
- As they increase their service, their instinctive taste for hearing and reading becomes purified and directed toward topics of the Lord. [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.5.13, purport]

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- The inquisitive neophytes of Naimiṣāraṇya [The Nectar of Devotion (chapter 3), Śrīla Prabhupāda gives the sages of Naimiṣāraṇya as examples of neophyte devotees who surrender to Kṛṣṇa] exemplified this taste when they said, “O wise Sūta, please narrate to us the transcendental pastimes of the Supreme Godhead’s multi-incarnations.
- Such auspicious adventures and pastimes of the Lord, the supreme controller, are performed by His internal powers.” [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.1.18]
- Śrīla Prabhupāda also glorified deity worship as a means to fix the mind: “This deity worship means to train the neophyte devotees how to concentrate upon the form of Kṛṣṇa, especially His lotus feet.” [Lecture, Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.15.28, Los Angeles, 6 December, 1973]
- By observing the Lord’s form during āraṭi, thinking of Him during the day, and tasting His remnants at meals, devotees naturally remember Him.

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- This regular remembrance is a form of training that helps new devotees subdue and direct the restless mind.
- When they have achieved a certain measure of success, devotees find reading and hearing much more rewarding.
- We often see new devotees distracted or sleepy while listening to class or reading. Learning to fix the mind on the deity helps fix the mind on topics of Kṛṣṇa.
- Thus deity worship helps devotees stay alert and focused in other devotional acts.
- Through the medium of deity worship, the devotees' dormant attachment to Kṛṣṇa is awakened.
- That attachment naturally increases their qualification for and interest in hearing topics of Kṛṣṇa.

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- In this way they overcome the influence of the lower modes and advance happily in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.2.19]
- And although deity worship is especially recommended for neophytes, Śrīla Prabhupāda warns advanced devotees not to neglect it. [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 3.29.16, purport]
- Although they were fully realized souls, associates of the Lord such as Rūpa Gosvāmī and Gadādhara Paṇḍita worshipped their own deities with love and attention.
- While advanced devotees generally worship the Lord by the process of remembrance (smaraṇa), they initiate many neophytes into serving the deity in the temple and show their disciples how to dedicate themselves to caring for Him.

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- Śrīla Prabhupāda was concerned that ISKCON's leaders take seriously their responsibility to maintain high standards of deity worship.
- Unfortunately, in some parts of the Society today, even deities of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are not being served to the proper standard.
- Bowing before the deities, chanting their names, and observing āraṭi are certainly parts of the arcana process, but devotees would do well to be more actively involved in the actual worship.
- By cooking for the deities, dressing them, and doing menial services such as washing the floor or making garlands, the devotees can stay conscious of the deity throughout the day and reminded of the standards that please Kṛṣṇa.

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- It is easier for ISKCON's leaders who promote and perform these services to become aware of the ultimate beneficiary of all their other duties and of the state of affairs surrounding the Lord's personal service.
- That kind of management leads to auspiciousness in the Society.
- Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, “Similarly, places outside India where there are centres of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement and where Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa deities are worshipped must all be visited and worshipped by those who want to be spiritually advanced.
- One who intends to advance in spiritual life may visit all these places and perform ritualistic ceremonies to get results a thousand times better than the results of the same activities performed in any other place.” [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 7.14.30–33]

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- But when senior devotees remain aloof from the deities' welfare, the health of temple projects and the spiritual health of the devotees under their care is weakened.
- If leading devotees act as if they are aloof from the deity, their followers will emulate their behaviour and also become indifferent to hearing and chanting about the Lord.
- It follows that if hearing and chanting are to remain the heartbeat of ISKCON's devotional curriculum, and if devotees are to develop the proper qualification for these practices, then deity worship must be done perfectly.

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- Śrīla Prabhupāda stressed this idea strongly when he used the phrase “perfectly done” in his instruction to his GBC secretaries:
- “As GBC you should see the standard is perfectly maintained and that deity worship is perfectly done.
- Then Krishna will give us all protection.
- Neglecting the principles means neglecting Krishna’s order.
- So you are one of the chief men of this institution.
- Kindly maintain your behaviour to the standard so that others will follow and the whole thing may go on nicely.

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- It was said about Lord Caitanya, apani acari prabhu jivere sikhaya; that is, He personally used to practise Himself the injunctions and then He used to teach others.
- That is our principle: Unless one is perfectly behaved person, he cannot teach others.
- My only request is that all the GBC members should be strictly to the standard of life and see that others are also following them.
- Then our centres will be well managed. Kindly do that and advise your co-workers to do that.” [Letter to Hayagrīva, Madras, 13 February, 1972]

stra-guru-tma-rpe panre jinna‘śāstra-guru-ātma’-rūpe āpanāre jānāna
‘kṛṣṇa mora prabhu, trātā’—jīvera haya jñāna

SBC 20 – The Qualification to Hear

- The forgetful conditioned soul is educated by Kṛṣṇa through the Vedic literatures, the realized spiritual master and the Supersoul.
- Through these, he can understand the Supreme Personality of Godhead as He is, and he can understand that Lord Kṛṣṇa is his eternal master and deliverer from the clutches of māyā.
- In this way one can acquire real knowledge of his conditioned life and can come to understand how to attain liberation. [Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 20.123]