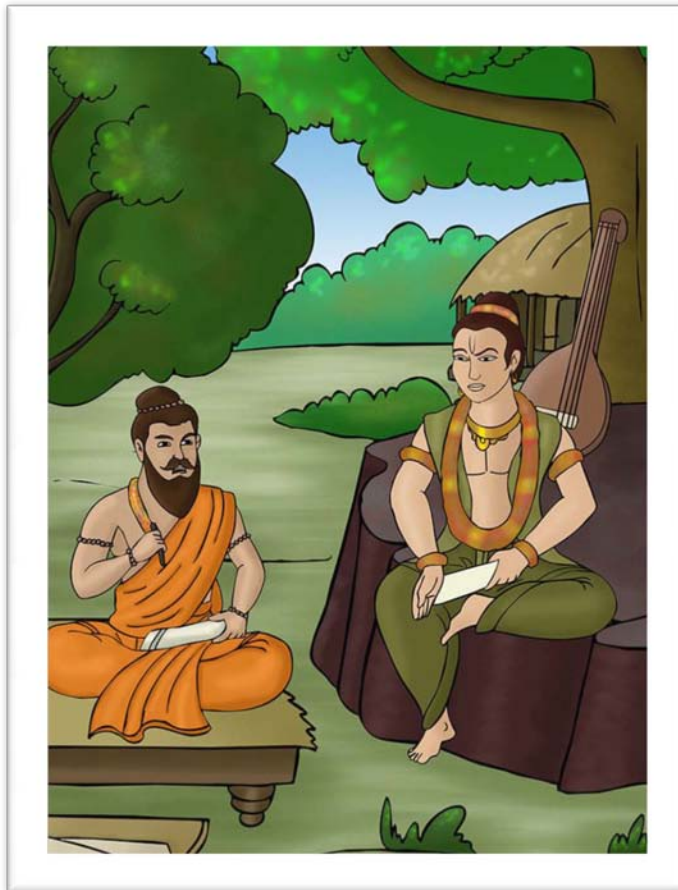




On Learning Verses



For the Vaisnavas

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WHY DO WE LEARN VERSES (ROHININANDANA DASA)

1. To help us see *sastra-caksusa*, through the eyes of scripture.
 - a. Fixing us in Transcendence. (Bg. 2.55)
 - b. Absorbing our minds in Krsna consciousness always. (Bg. 6.30)
 - c. Controlling the agitated mind. (Bg. 17.16)
 - d. Helping us to discriminate properly. (Bg. 16.24)
 - e. Helping us in times of need. (Bg. 2.14, 5.22, 8.15-16; SB 1.15.28-30)
 - f. Even if we end up in an animal's body (SB 8.3.1)

2. To help us speak authoritatively. (Bg. 17.15)
 - a. As a lawyer cites lawbooks and legal precedents to convincingly make his case, so we should be able to fluently cite sruti- and smriti-sastras to make our case for Krsna.
 - b. To silence opposition. Srila Prabhupada would sometimes defeat Mayavada philosophy by quoting one line from a verse (e.g. Bg. 9.14) or even one word (e.g. "ca" from Bg. 13.3)
 - c. To command respect and communicate authority. As a policeman's presence communicates power, authority, and knowledge of the law, so a preacher "armed with slokas" is confident, respected, and ready for action.

3. To improve the quality of our presentation.
 - a. Expertly citing and applying verses is the basis of a good presentation. (e.g. Prabhupada's lecture on SB 3.25.8 given on 8 Nov '74 in Bombay)
 - b. By helping to hold the interest of the audience.
 - c. By helping to make our presentation more colorful.
 - d. By helping us with ideas to support, project, and expand our theme.
 - e. By helping us to realize a verse's meaning and deepen our Krsna consciousness.

4. To curb the tendency to speculate.
 - a. "A devotee is as thoughtful as a nondevotee is speculative." (SB 4.24.59 ppt)
 - b. By protecting us from whimsical, self-destructive behavior. (Bg. 16.23)

- c. By keeping our footsteps right behind the previous acaryas, like Srila Rupa Goswami, whose adherence to sastric principles was “exactly like the lines on a stone” (CC Antya 6.309) and Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, who was famous for *rupanuga-viruddhapasiddhanta dhvanta-harine*, having zero tolerance for any teachings even a speck deviant from the teachings of Srila Rupa Goswami.
- d. “Philosophy without religion (*dharma-sastra*) is mental speculation.” (Bg. 3.3 ppt)

5. To help Srila Prabhupada’s ISKCON branch of the Caitanya tree establish and perpetuate the Hare Krishna movement as an authentic spiritual culture.

- a. A culture is established first of all by its language and depth of thought.
- b. Besides our books, we must also have “book Bhagavatas,” who know the books “inside out,” “threadbare,” “all-around,” and live their lives accordingly. (see also *pariprasnena*, Bg. 4.34 ppt)

6. To worship Krsna with our intelligence. (Bg. 18.70)

7. To help us remember and love Lord Krsna.

- a. Who is known as “Uttamasloka.” (SB 1.5.22, 2.3.17)
- b. By immersing ourselves in descriptions of Krsna’s wonderful qualities. (e.g. SB 10.26, 10.90 selected verses)
- c. By immersing ourselves in beautiful verses spoken by the Lord. (e.g. *Bhagavad-gita*)

8. To learn how to pray by reciting the prayers offered by great devotees (e.g. SB 4.24.74, 4.30.3, 7.9.18)

9. To become purified of material contamination.

- a. By associating with spiritual sound, nondifferent from Krishna and His pure devotees. (SB 1.5.38, 1.3.40, Bg. 15.15)
- b. By remembering the Lord 24 hours a day. (*smartavyah satatam visnum*)

10. To prepare us for the time of death. (Bg. 8.5-6, SB 2.1.6, 8.3.25)

11. Srila Prabhupada wants us to. (see below)

SRILA PRABHUPADA ON WHY WE LEARN VERSES

So read Bhāgavatam, pronounce the verses very nicely. Therefore we're repeating. You hear the records and try to repeat. Simply by chanting the mantra, you'll be purified. Simply by chant... Even you do not understand a single word of it, simply if you chant, this vibration has got such power. Śṛṅvatām sva-kathāḥ kṛṣṇaḥ puṇya-śravaṇa-kīrtanaḥ [SB 1.2.17]. If you simply chant and vibrate this verse, these verses, these śloka, it is puṇya-śravaṇa-kīrtanaḥ... One who is chanting this verse, and one who is hearing this verse, he is becoming pious automatically. Pious. To become pious one has to endeavor so much, do this, do that, but if you simply hear these verses of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Bhagavad-gītā.

Therefore, as a rigid principle, in every temple there should be class for hearing and chanting. Without hearing and chanting, to become leader it is impossible. You can, you can become leader in the material world, but not in the spiritual world.... Śravaṇam kīrtanam viṣṇoḥ smaraṇam [SB 7.5.23]. Smaraṇa means remember. If you chant and hear, then remembrance will automatically come. Śravaṇam kīrtanam viṣṇoḥ smaraṇam pāda-sevanam. Then you will be engaged in worshiping His lotus feet. Arcanam. Then you'll be engaged in arcanam, the temple worship; vandanam, offering prayers; dāsyam, you'll engage yourself as servant; sakhyam, you'll become friend of Kṛṣṇa; ātma-nivedanam, and surrender everything to Kṛṣṇa. This is the process.

So each and every verse you should chant very perfectly, nicely, meditate upon it. That is the process of progress, advancement in spiritual life. We should get all these verses by heart, and chant, and offer prayer to the Lord, vandanam. Vandanam. These are meant for such purpose.

(14 April 1972, Los Angeles, during SB Lecture 1.8.22)

HOW TO LEARN VERSES (DRAVIDA DASA)

1. Study the Sanskrit Pronunciation Guide at the back of the *Gita*, learn how all the letters are pronounced, and what the consonants and the long and short vowels are.
2. Read the English translation of a memorable verse and become familiar with it.
3. Study the word-for-word meanings for the first line of the verse.
4. Determine the meter of the first line of the verse (more on meter below).
5. Chant the first line of the verse repeatedly until memorized, keeping the meaning of each word in mind.
6. Proceed to the second line, then the third, and complete the verse.

Sanskrit Meter

The meter of a verse is the rhythmic flow of light and heavy syllables that make up each line. A light syllable is held half as long as a heavy one (like an eighth note versus a quarter note in music).

1. A syllable is a combination of letters with one vowel sound.
2. A light syllable is one with a short vowel followed by less than two consonants.
3. A heavy syllable is one with a long vowel or with a short vowel followed by two or more consonants.
4. Ignore hyphens and spaces between words and focus on the flow of syllables.
5. Aspirated consonants (**ph**, **gh**, **jh**, etc.) count as one consonant.
6. As soon as you see an *anusvāra* (**m̐**) or a *visarga* (**ḥ**), the previous syllable is heavy.
7. The last syllable of each line is almost always heavy, regardless of other considerations.

The above is summed up at the end of the Sanskrit Pronunciation Guide as follows: “There is no strong accentuation of syllables in Sanskrit, or pausing between words in a line, only a flowing of short and long (twice as long as the short) syllables. A long syllable is one whose vowel is long (**ā**, **ai**, **au**, **e**, **ī**, **o**, **ṛ**, **ū**) or whose short vowel is followed by more than one consonant (including **ḥ** and **m̐**). Aspirated consonants (consonants followed by an **h**) count as single consonants.”

MORE ON HOW TO LEARN VERSES (ROHINANDANA DASA)

Practice learning the daily *Srimad-Bhagavatam* verse as it is being recited, then...

1. Try to learn the meaning of some of the Sanskrit words when the English word meanings are being recited to increase your Sanskrit vocabulary.
2. Listen carefully in class for pronunciation, context, and application whenever a speaker quotes a verse.
3. Regularly listen to the recordings of Srila Prabhupada, noticing when and how His Divine Grace quotes verses.

4. Regularly review the verses you already know to keep them fresh for use.
5. Try to learn verses at a regular time every day. As the body becomes strong when we feed it regularly, so regular recitation of verses strengthens the mind and spirit.
6. If you're having trouble learning verses alone, it may be easier with another devotee.
7. Remember, since Krsna is the source of memory, we have a limitless capacity to remember verses!
8. Try to enter the meaning of a verse and allow it to change your life.
9. Think of a topic, then immediately think of verses related to the topic.
10. When you come across a verse that you would like to know better or learn by heart, make a note of it, recite it a few times, and note different contexts to which it could apply.
11. Learn a few verses thoroughly rather than many verses vaguely.
12. Learn the word-for-word translations so that as you recite a verse, you can clearly picture its meaning in your mind.
13. Practice quoting the relevant part of a verse instead of wading through words and lines to reach the part you want to cite.
14. When you quote a verse, do it slowly, clearly, and think about it, instead of quickly blurting it out while you think about your next point to present.
15. Try to make thinking about and reciting verses part of your way of life.

MORE ON HOW TO LEARN VERSES (VAISESIKA DASA)

1. Sing the sloka to a tune – call and respond style -- accompanied by mrdanga, kartala and harmonium. (We do this sometimes in our classes at ISV.) When we melodiously sing the same verse together it stays, ringing in our ears and hearts.

2. Carry selected slokas on index cards and pull them out to read them during breaks or at intervals during the day. Don't miss the opportunity to learn even when stuck in line at the bank or at a red light. Hearing and seeing the sloka at intervals and while in various circumstances and environments can be helpful for learning them.
3. Do some research and then write something about each sloka that you are learning. A sloka really sticks when you see the context in which others have used it -- in lectures or in their writings -- and when you read commentaries written about it. If you take the time to write an essay about the slokas you are learning, you'll feel an intimate connection with the sloka and will remember it in context of its manifold meanings and applications.
4. Make a recording of the slokas you are learning -- in your own voice -- and listen to them repeatedly. I heard about a study that proves how listening to one's own voice on a given subject, helps a person retain it.
5. Keep the sloka that you're learning by the phone. When appropriate, before getting off each call, ask the person you're talking to if they would like to hear one verse that you're learning. If they agree, read them the sloka. This usually leads to more discussion about the sloka that helps you to remember it. In a similar vein, add the sloka you are learning to the end of an email or letter that you send, citing it as a point of interest.

HOW TO RETAIN VERSES (SURESVARA DASA)

As Rohininandana Prabhu points out, we have to regularly review the verses we learn to keep them fresh for use. But there is something else we can do to retain verses, and that is to connect them to our feelings.

As a young *brahmacari* in the 1970s, by Prabhupada's mercy I was able to memorize all of the *Gita's* 700 verses. During the six years it took me to do this, I had a system of learning new verses while regularly reviewing the ones already learned. I was organized and regulated, but what made the verses stick was how I lived with them.

When I would start to learn a new verse, I would write it on an index card—the Sanskrit, the word meanings, and the English translation. After studying the verse, I would put the index card in my shirt pocket and make the verse my motto for the day, my slogan, my philosophy of life. Whatever happened to me, I would relate it to my

new verse until I knew it by heart. You know a verse for good when you can recall it no matter what time it is or what mood you're in. That usually took me about three days.

During those three days or so, so much would happen, so many thoughts and feelings. But the verse was always there for me. I belonged to the verse and the verse belonged to me. I was meeting my dearest friend, Lord Krsna, in sacred sound.

In the Nectar of Devotion chapter "Techniques of Hearing and Remembering," under the heading **Expecting the Lord's Mercy**, Srila Prabhupada quotes a famous verse from the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, 10.14.8: "My dear Lord, any person who is constantly awaiting your causeless mercy to be bestowed upon him, and who goes on suffering the resultant actions of his past misdeeds, offering You respectful obeisances from the core of his heart, is surely eligible to become liberated, for it has become his rightful claim." After citing the verse, Prabhupada remarks that this verse from the *Bhagavatam* "should be the guide of all devotees."

That's what my *Gita* verses became for me--my guides and dearest friends, They are Krsna in sound. Eternal He is, cognizant He is, but ultimately He is sentient ("Absolute is sentient..."), capable of the deepest, everlasting feelings. Likewise, whatever we have strong feelings about, we easily remember. And when we connect our feelings to Lord Krsna's, as He expresses Himself through *sastra*, the experience of those feelings, called *bhakti-rasa*, eventually "turns into eternity." (NOD Preface)

Practice the art of connecting the words of the verses to your spirit's deepest feelings, and you'll retain those verses forever.