

Suggestions for How to Teach the Japa Portion of Collective Worship

Preparation for the teacher

Reflecting on how japa is:

- ☞ The essential practice of Gaudiya Vaisnavism
- ☞ The lifeline back to Godhead
- ☞ The most important instruction of the spiritual master
- ☞ The underlying melody in the symphony of all devotional activities
- ☞ The potential highlight of the school day
- ☞ The life and soul of devotional service

Examining one's own japa

- ☞ How steady and regulated
- ☞ How fast or slow is each round
- ☞ Am I fingering the beads correctly
- ☞ Is pronunciation consistently clear
- ☞ Do I always say the entire mantra
- ☞ Am I easily distracted and prone to engage in conversation
- ☞ Is sleep a problem
- ☞ Do I have a prayerful attitude, crying out in humility for unconditional service

Chanting japa with the children

Starting japa time

- ☞ Start chanting and then everyone joins until it's time to stop
- OR
- ☞ Spend a few seconds getting the children to sit very still and get in a relaxed, focused mood in various ways, such as:
 - ☞ Read a few lines about the holy name
 - ☞ Explain something about the holy name
 - ☞ Give some practical instruction such as sitting still or hearing the sounds carefully
 - ☞ Keep things light and happy

Sitting arrangements: ideas

- ☞ It's best to have a special place for japa that is only used for worship and meditation type activities

- ☞ When chanting japa with one or two children: they can sit by you, at least until they are fixed enough in their own desire that you have complete confidence in their steady chanting
- ☞ When chanting japa with a larger group of pupils: try a circle so that you can see and help each of them, and can easily allow you to maintain order

Position in the circle: thoughts

- ☞ Children's position in the circle can be crucial to their ability to concentrate
- ☞ Some children only fix their minds when they sit next to the adult
- ☞ Others may sit next to the adult for a few minutes on a particular day, and then stay on the track for weeks at any position
- ☞ When pupils are new to school or to japa chanting, you might want to have them sit close to you to be able to give extra help
- ☞ If a child has trouble focusing on japa for a long time, you can ask one of the more enthused pupils to sit next to that child and help
- ☞ Remember that some young pupils who have extreme difficulty even remembering the maha-mantra for months may eventually become lovers of the holy name

During japa time

- ☞ Teach the children how to pronounce clearly "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare" (one time on each bead if beads are used)
 - Note: While some people say the Panca Tattva mantra before each round, that practice was never taught or instructed by Srila Prabhupada and is not part of the Gaudiya Vaisanava tradition. It should not be taught to the children as a "required" japa practice.*
- ☞ Show how to finger their beads if they use them (with thumb and middle finger of right hand, rolling the beads for the first half of the mantra, and keeping them still for the second half of the mantra; never "crossing over" the head bead)
- ☞ Show how to chant at a comfortable speed and "loudly enough so that they and the person next to them can hear."
- ☞ Teach how to breathe between words or mantras so they don't "swallow" a word (It is also possible to chant on both incoming and outgoing breath, but that might be too difficult for young children.)
- ☞ Remove all distractions
- ☞ Avoid interrupting the chanting except for emergencies; best to give instruction before or after
- ☞ Never use any force or pressure, verbally or physically, no matter how subtle, to get children to chant

Japa etiquette and respect

- ☞ Sitting, not lying down or wandering around (walking during japa is fine for longer japa periods)
- ☞ Hands and objects out of the mouth
- ☞ No toys
- ☞ Keeping to oneself; no distracting others
- ☞ No eating
- ☞ Silence other than japa chanting
- ☞ Joyful but serious mood—no silliness

Whether or not a child should chant on beads

- ☞ The use or non-use of beads is a very individual thing
- ☞ A particularly restless and distracted child may immediately become excellent at japa upon receiving beads
- ☞ Another child, when given beads, may play with them, or skip beads, yet chant nicely without the beads
- ☞ It is common for pupils, on their own, to chant on beads for a while or until finishing one round, hand you the beads, and then continue orally
- ☞ Until about age 9-10, is it probably best to have a very casual attitude about whether or not beads are used

Ideas for chanting on beads if beads are used

- ☞ Teach the proper way to finger the beads and to end and start a "round"
- ☞ Watch each child closely to ensure that good habits are being formed
- ☞ You may keep all pupils' beads in one bag, distributing and collecting them daily, so they don't get lost.

When children are disrespectful during japa

- ☞ If at all possible, avoid correcting pupils during the japa time or in the japa area, so as to circumvent any possibility of creating a negative emotional connection with japa, the japa time, or japa place
- ☞ You may make a note of difficult behaviour and, after japa class, have the errant pupil follow general school procedure for dealing with behaviour problems
- ☞ A pupil who is extremely disruptive in spite of such a system needs to be removed from the japa class
- ☞ The pupil who is removed should not be allowed to play during japa time, and you may want to have japa time later with that child

Note: These standards, again, are for behaviour violations—playing, fighting, talking—not lack of chanting

When children are respectful but not participating

- ☪ Give encouragement, love, and help
- ☪ You may want to use a large sheet with the maha-mantra in words and pictures. Some pupils will chant if inspired by incentives and games in the beginning
- ☪ Be creative, lighthearted, and loving in your approach

Example of a japa game: the japa race

The children sit in a line, and, when you point to one for nice chanting, the child leaps forward. Whoever gets to the picture of Lord Caitanya (or whatever goal is available) first, "wins" that game.

How can we decide on the length of japa time?

- ☪ By number of "rounds" or other counting system for number of mantras
- ☪ For children who have not yet fully demonstrated a strong personal desire for japa, determining time by the number of rounds can encourage the children to chant sloppily on their beads, cheat, and develop bad habits
- ☪ Chanting a set amount of rounds can be reserved for older children, about twelve years or more, who have chanted steadily every day for at least six months
- ☪ By amount of time
- ☪ In this program, we are suggesting a very short japa time of about two minutes
- ☪ Pupils of age four through seven can be expected to chant for at about five-ten minutes

Summary

The most important things are that the children always associate a happy atmosphere with their japa time, and that they have the best opportunity to gain a real spiritual taste for japa through the teacher's instructions about mood and concentration.

