

Take to chanting as austerity : Swamiji's childhood practices

Prabhaata-rashmih

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Harih Om Tat Sat. Jai Guru. Jai Guru.

Sometime in passing references I have told on different occasions to different sets of people big as well as small groups about some of my childhood practices, *aacharas* and *anushtanas*. One or two items that come to my mind are the chanting of God's names as a practice every day before having the dinner. I don't know when it actually started.

In our schools we had regular practice, I don't know when it started, may be 3rd or 4th class, we were having the arithmetical tables. These tables had to be memorized and memorized. $13 \times 13 = 169$, $12 \times 12 = 144$, $14 \times 14 = 256$. Like that we used to tell the tables, maybe from 1 to 5 then 5 to 10 ultimately 1 to 16 and vertically also up to 16. We never started telling the tables from 17 to 20 because those were the times when rupee had something called 16 *annas*. Each *anna* was 4 paise and each paise was 3 pies. I think one rupee was equal to 192 pies. This was the time when, if I remember correctly - my memory takes me to that level, we used to chant from 1 to 16 and 16 multiplied by 16. All these tables had to be chanted and so, it was one practice to chant the tables.

That was one routine. Another routine was chanting the names of God. Most probably our mother was guidance perhaps. So, I used to chant three names. One was *Namahshivayah Namahshivayah Namahshivayah*. The second was *Acchyutananda Govinda, Acchyutananda Govinda*. The third was *'Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*. *Namahshivaya* was easier and short, *Acchutananda Govinda* a little longer, when it comes to *Hare Rama* I think there was a little resistance and reluctance in the mind. Such a long name 16 names are there and may be we used to chant something like 108 times. Then the tables also had to be memorized.

This used to be a practice. May be I was growing. Whether I was fully inspired by this chanting, I cannot say but I was interested in chanting. And there was perhaps a little attunement in the mind also. When I grew a little older I started chanting a number of hymns. Those were the days we did not have books and my family was not such that they would get a book. Wherefrom would the book be available. It was always somewhat for the educated class, knowledge about these matters. Ours was a remote village. In Wadakkanchery it would not be available. We had to go to Trichur which was very far away. Now somebody in the village, in the community where I was living if they had one book or their relative gave a book, then we had access to it and then we used to copy it and learn. Like that a few *stotrams* we started reciting.

In the *stotras vishnusahasranama* featured first. I don't know the age in which I started chanting the *vishnusahasranama* but it must have been 7 years or 8 years. We used to chant sitting in the *mandapam* of the local temple. These *stotras* became part of my life. I was not so very happy reciting the names as such. But when it came to *stotras*, the *stotras* had a very good influence in me. I very well remember the *sivaaparadha kshamaparatha stotram* I remember it very well. There were colourful descriptions of God, routine descriptions I did not like. When there was some sense in the recitation, I used to like it. Don't think I knew Sanskrit and I could understand the Sanskrit verses but never was I interested in chanting a malayalam *stuti* especially devotional. I used to learn many Malayalam *slokas* for my *akshara sloka* competition but nothing in the way of a hymn to god or goddess. I remember very well these verses from *shivaaparada kshamapanartha stotram*

*aayur nasyati psyatam pratidinam yaati kshayam yauvanam
pratyayanti gataah punarna divasaah kaalo jagad bhakshakaah
lakshmis-toya-taranaga-bhanga-chapala vidyuchchalam jivitam
tasman-maam sharanaagatam sharanada tvam raksha rakshaadunaam*

This describes the nature of life. *Aayur nasyati psyatam pratidinam* - our life is ebbing out as we are looking on. The youthfulness is passing. Fortune is a like a wave in the sea or like a lightning. When these two lines were recited by me, I used to feel a joyful attunement.

*kim vaanena dhanena vaajikaribhih praaptyena rajyena kim
kim vaa putra-kalatra-mitra-pshubhih-dehena gehena kim
jnaatvaitat-kshana-bhanguram sapadi re tyaaajam mano duratah
svatmartham guruvaakyato bhaja mana sripaarvati-vallabham*

This is a verse which attracted me which went very deep into my system. Don't think I had understood the whole meaning. But somehow or other, these words used to suggest something to me .. after all it is the meaning. So, they had a lot of appeal. When I look back, I believe all these recitations which formed a very important part in my life. May be as I grew up it must have occupied atleast one hour if not more every day in my life.

These recitations had a very very austere sublimating purifying, enriching and elevating effect in my mind. People always wonder that when you recite should we know the meaning? No, not necessarily; if you know the meaning, you have an additional joy. We have to do practice. For example, you go on a pilgrimage walking. In walking, what do you have in the way of understanding. Nothing. It is only a decision that I will walk the pilgrimage. So you start walking. We went on *parivrajana*. There also we were walking. So in moving the legs, what enlightenment is there. But it is an austerity. If like that, doing *pradakshina*, offering pranams, all these physical activities have got an effect in you. More so must be the effect when you are able to recite something. In recitation the mind, literacy, words and other things will have to come perfectly. I would like you to understand that this is an austerity.

When you chant Vishnusahasranama and Bhagavadgita chapters, understand that apart from the literature aspect of it, the message of it, it is an austerity austerity austerity. *Yajno daanam tapaschiva pavanani maneeshinam*. So, I must thank my parents, the environments in which I grew. I must thank my routines of the young days where a lot of austerity was generated as a stock in my life. Now, when I ask people to chant I don't think they have the feeling of austerity. You simply sit in a place and chant for one hour or half an hour. You can imagine how much of austerity it

produces. This austerity has its sublime and creative effect on the mind. The mind goes on becoming purified. Various distractional thoughts are left over and their place is taken over by this recitation.

Nobody was there to explain to me that *vishnusahasranama* is recited with a view to generate spirituo-philosophical yogic pulsation in the mind and each of it has its destined effect. If one person had told me perhaps I would have picked it up. Though we are chanting the names of Mahavishnu it is not a description of Mahavishnu which will keep Mahavishnu in his stature. The idea is we cannot praise ourselves or our parents. So, we keep Mahavishnu for our praise and in praising we graft him with such names and such potencies and practical applications that all these go to impregnate and imbue our own mind and our own system. If somebody had told me this, I think my whole *vishnusahasranama* chanting would have had a totally higher deeper effect on my system. I only had the austerity benefit; I did not have perhaps the higher and deeper one. I was reading Srimad Bhagavatam. I don't think that I knew all the verses, what exactly they convey. Vidyavataam Bhagavate pareeksha - even for scholars Srimad Bhaagavatam is a very big examination bit while reading and reciting I find so much of beauty, charm, rhythm, what all things. Why don't you take to this why don't you make this as a practice in your life. You cannot wait for additional time etc. Somehow you should steal your time for recitation and then once you have recited and built up the austere stock in you, everything else will follow. Even if you understand and know about it, the austerity has still to be built for which this kind of a time bound application of your personality in the whole process, will be necessary.

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