

Vaishnavi Retreat, A Deep Experience

I rushed home from my final dance practice, grabbed my suitcases and ran to catch the bus along with my mother. Just on time! We sat in the very last seats, sweating from all the rushing. Summer had arrived. We were headed to Govardhan, less than an hour away from Vrndavana for Vaishnavi Retreat for a dance performance later that evening. As we got off the bus and picked up our luggage, my mother excitedly burst out, “Oh, we have been here before Shatakshi!” I looked up and through the gate. We were at the Bala Krishna Bhawan Ashram, the same place we had come to for Japa Retreat last November. Sweet memories invaded my consciousness. A smiling Mataji greeted each one of us by putting sandalwood and musk paste on our foreheads. In seconds all my fatigue vanished. The wet sandalwood paste cooled my forehead and its scent refreshed me. My mother and I shared a glance in appreciation of the excellent arrangements to host invitees at the retreat. We truly felt welcomed.

The heat reminded us we had forgotten to bring our water bottles. Nevertheless, we walked straight to the reception area. Low and behold, there on the first table were two Matajis serving fresh lemonade. My mother and I shared a second smiling glance as we satisfied ourselves with several glasses of the freshly squeezed lemon and gur nectar. Prashadam was delivered to my room where I started dressing in my Odissi dance attire. Ready to perform, I proceeded to the rooftop. The sun had gone down just enough for the temperature to cool off a bit while still lighting up the area perfectly. I couldn't believe my eyes. Sri Govardhan Hill stood right before me with all His majesty. Filled with gratitude upon being bestowed such a beautiful opportunity of service, I offered the first performance of my favorite dance item to Sri Govardhan.

After a good night's rest I went toward to temple hall. I glanced at the schedule sheet of seminars handed out the previous day: “Japa Inspirations” and “The Killing of Dhenukasura” by Prashanta Mataji, “From Sraddha to Nistha and Beyond” by Narayani Mataji, “Our Longing for Reciprocation” by Urmila Mataji.” My eyes stopped there, “reciprocation...” I thought. “Yes, I long for reciprocation...”. “It's time for the morning prayers. Shatakshi, come”, my mother called me. As we entered the temple hall, I felt as if I had stepped into the spiritual world. Such beautiful goddesses dressed in saris, all wearing fresh *tilak*, moved about the hall, so humbly working together to prepare for the arati ceremony of the gorgeously dressed Radha and Krsna Deities. Each and every one of the *Vaishnavis* was engaged so wonderfully, using her talent to serve Their Lordships. I had never before been amongst a group of devotees working together so humbly and cooperatively. I thought back to my own hesitation when I heard the word “*Vaishnavi*” retreat. I wondered about the purpose of a program where *Prabhus* are specifically excluded. But here I saw how freely and lovingly all the *Vaishnavis* were associating with one another and serving the deities. I realized that such spontaneity in association where each and every *Vaishnavi* was given a special, beautiful environment and opportunity to grow was indeed spiritually healing. Indeed this was the best example I had seen of the purpose of *Vaishnavi* association achieved.

At the end of Guru Puja we all proceeded to the roof for the first seminar. The beautiful morning sun greeted us warmly to the clean, rectangular mats covered in white cotton cloth. About a hundred *Vaishnavis* had gathered. Red chairs surrounded the mats seating the older *Matajis*. *Prashanta Mataji*, The Director of the Vrndavana Institute of Higher Education and also Organizer of the Vaishnavi Retreats, sat in front of all of us singing on her *tampura*. As I absorbed the ambiance, I felt my consciousness float higher, encouraging me to take a moment to reflect on my surroundings. I turned left and felt the unmissable presence of Sri Govardhan. I had never before seen Him so closely for so long. Parrots flew from one tree to another chirping and monkeys frolicked all about. Every now and then a peacock cried out, “Mayur...”. “This is real Vrndavana”, I thought, “so peaceful and so beautiful, filled with lakes and trees and Yamuna Devi offering lotuses to Her beloved Krsna. How enchanting must have this place looked when Krsna and Balaram herd Their calves here?” I gazed at the pasture visible from the roof of the ashram and saw two men herd their cows into the forest at a distance. Just then, Prashanta Mataji began a dramatic description of Krsna and Balaram performing Their pastime of killing Dhenukasura!”

She narrated how the cowherd boys were once playing amongst themselves when the sweet aroma of the Tala fruit attracted them. The cowherd boys expressed their desire to enjoy the Tala fruit but inside their hearts they actually wanted to offer the fruits to Krsna and Balarama. In this way they convinced their leaders to take them to Talavan. Mataji was so engaged in narrating the story that her whole body appeared to be emoting

the mood of the cowherd boys. I felt such special absorption in the narration of the Lords pastimes knowing that the pastime being narrated happened not far from where we were all seated. Chirping birds, the enchanting views, fragrant breezes and the mild sunshine added special effects to this divine narration as if we were all experiencing this beautiful pastime through all our five senses.

After concluding her seminar, we headed downstairs to take breakfast in the *prashadam* hall. The timing was perfect. I hurried downstairs with a large smile, eager to see what was there for breakfast. I was delighted to see that all the mats and plates were in place and the servers were ready, holding their respective buckets. I was taken aback by their mood. Their service was flawless. Once again I found myself admiring how adeptly the Vaishnavis were serving one another. I felt my consciousness uplift with inspiration. The aroma of the flat rice preparation and curry had stirred my appetite. I ate thrice my normal breakfast!

The next seminar was by Srila Prabhupad disciple, Her Grace Narayani Mataji. She spoke on the progression of our devotion to the Lord from *sraddha* (faith) to *nishtha* (determination) and beyond. Mataji commenced her three day seminar with a glimpse into six topics: 1) What is faith? 2) Do I have faith? 3) How to get faith? 4) How to strengthen faith? 5) How to pass the test of faith? And lastly 6) The benefits of faith. Having never before heard such a detailed study on the nature of faith, I was absorbed. Within one and a half hours, she had expertly covered all the six topics with convincing statements. “To have faith or unflinching trust in something sublime, one must feel grateful.” I thought back about all the times I had questioned Krsna, “Do you really exist? Why are you so heartless?” I realized how my ungratefulness had the power to diminish my faith.

This principle of gratefulness grew further in my heart in Srila Prabhupad disciple, Her Grace Urmila Mataji’s seminar. Even after millions and millions of years of performing severe austerities and waiting for reciprocation with their desire for conjugal loving exchanges, Krsna instructed the cowherd girls of Vrndavana, the *gopis*, to return home despite having invited them with His flute. I looked down on my own faith, “I wake up for one early morning service and chant some rounds and wonder, “Why hasn’t Krsna reciprocated yet.” “Krsna is not a machine with buttons, He is a person”, Mataji emphasized. Demanding Krsna’s reciprocation after offering a few incense sticks is akin to the sincerity of a man offering roses to his wife while maintaining 100 girlfriends. Should the man become surprised and angry that his wife does not reciprocate? “But it says here in this book, if you bring roses to your wife, it will make her happy.” We left Krsna to flirt with *maya*. We were the ones who broke our relationship with Him. We broke the trust and instead of waiting patiently while working to regain Krsna’s trust, we demand Him to forgive us. In most relationships such an attitude usually prolongs the process of rebuilding the relationship. The attitude that will get us our relationship back with Krsna faster is that of praying to Him for His help to become the kind of person He would want to reciprocate with. Mataji described how on Krsna’s return the *gopis* requested Him to kindly explain the nature of His love and reciprocation as a soft sad flute tune played in the background with a beautiful painting of the forlorn *gopis* projecting on the screen. Mataji concluded her three day seminar’s first session with the words, “We will hear Krsna’s answers tomorrow.”

By this time my mother and I were experiencing so much bliss in attending these special seminars that although we originally planned to return right after my dance performance the previous day, we felt unable to go back. We decided to stay for just one more seminar, “Learning from Srila Prabhupada’s Daughters”. At a first glance on this title, I had felt confused for a moment, “Prabhupada’s daughters?” I thought of Srila Prabhupad’s grand-daughter, had she been invited? By the end of the first story by Krsna Nandini Mataji, on the adventure of how she miraculously was bestowed initiation from Srila Prabhupad at an early age along with her mother and several brothers and seeing her gratitude and love for him drip from her eyes in the form of tears, my heart said, “Really, these Matajis are truly Srila Prabhupada’s daughters and we can learn how to love Prabhupada from them.” I was so moved by Srila Prabhupada’s loving reciprocation with her that tears helplessly dripped out of my own eyes.

It was now time to return back to Vrndavan as the sun was setting. But we were certainly coming back without our suitcases to stay for the whole retreat. The next evening we returned to Govardhan just in time for the final session for the day, “Uttama Sloka, Poetical Expressions of Devotion”. The speaker, Her Grace Vrajalila Mataji, gave a brief introduction of the history of Vaishnava poetry and introduced a poem written by Srila Prabhupad in Bengali and translated to English. In His poem Srila Prabhupad described the glorious quality of compassion of a true Vaishnava. Following Srila Prabhupad’s mood, several other devotees shared

their own poetry written with love, care and compassion. The session ended with my own presentation on the beautiful poetry of Jayadev Goswami who is also known as *adi pada karta*, or the original Vaishnava poet. His style of poetry became the standard of many Vaishnava poets for centuries after His departure from the world.

After the scheduled seminars the next day, a special evening *kirtan* program was held at Ter Kadamba, where Srila Rupa Goswami stayed and worked on divine literature like *Lalita Madhava* and *Vidagdha Madhava*. The *kirtan* started with the Sikshastakam prayers and I was given the blessed opportunity to choreograph a dance to these eight divine verses. While I read the verses of the Sikshastakam, I could feel my body freeze in disbelief. From my childhood, Hanumat Preshak Maharaja and Radhanath Maharaja encouraged me to dance for the pleasure of the Lord on Vaishnava songs and here I was just about to use my training as an Odissi dancer to choreograph the Sikshastakam! With as much sincerity as I could muster, I stood there at Ter Kadamba, dressed in my Odissi attire with folded hands ready to start performing. Out of sheer nervousness to perform in front of so many senior devotees, my heart cried out to Srila Rupa Goswami. "Oh Rupa Goswami, you are described by Srila Krsnadasa Kaviraj Goswami as *sri chaitanya mano bhistam* or one who easily understands even the most inner feelings of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Please give me your blessings today and bestow upon me just a small glimpse into the mood of the Sikshastakam so that I can perform my service to the best of my ability." I absorbed myself into my own insignificant realizations of the mood of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in writing the Sikshastakam and gestured to each phrase sung by Prashanta Mataji personally in a very meditative mood accompanied by the *tampura*. I thought, "Such profound meanings are locked in each verse that only by the mercy of Srila Rupa Goswami, Prabhupad and his dear disciples can I get any realizations or understanding of these transcendental prayers".

My dance was followed by many wonderful *kirtans* that led into the night. The evening concluded with an energetic *kirtan* led by Her Grace Urmila Mataji who was dancing along with the enthusiastic gathering of Vaishnavis.

On the last day of the retreat we headed out for Surabhi Kund on the *parikrama* path which was so close to Govardhan hill that we could touch His stones. The uniqueness of the soft sand that surrounds Govardhan reminded me of how when the loving surabhi cows heard that little Krsna was going to take them to the pasturing grounds the next morning, they set out grinding the pathway with their hooves until the sand became as soft as a bed of flower petals. When we reached, Vrajalila Mataji explained that Surabhi Kund was a place overflowing with mercy because at this spot, the King of Heaven, Indra had been cleansed of His great offence towards the residents of Vrindavana at the request of Mother Surabhi. As part of a sweet exercise to imbibe this mood of praying for others, Mataji distributed to us small chits each labelled with a burdensome emotion hindering us from advancing further in recovering our loving relationship with the Lord. Each of us prayed for our partner to shed this negative emotion before leaving Surabhi Kund.

Upon returning from Surabhi Kund, we shared the jewels we had collected during our experience at the retreat. I reflected back at each opportunity I received to grow spiritually. I felt so grateful, so enriched with wisdom, realizations, service, association and inspiration. I realized how the retreat was very carefully conceived to provide the most conducive environment for spiritual growth for and every Vaishnavi.

About the Author:

Shatakshi Goyal was born near Haridwar, India and raised in the ISKCON community of Boise, Idaho, USA where her parents home schooled her. She completed her education in Electrical and Computer Engineering from Boise State University at the age of 18 with several awards, one of which ranked her one of the top five Electrical and Computer Engineers in the nation. Despite her academic achievements and career in the technological industry, Shatakshi never forgot her love and passion for fine arts. Shatakshi resigned from Hewlett Packard where she worked for two years as a Systems Improvement and Product Quality Engineer and decided to pursue a cherished childhood dream. She moved to Vrindavan, India to study Odissi under the guidance of Guru Kunjalata Mishra and Guru Pratap Narayan at Venunad Kalakendra, a traditional dance Gurukul and an International Academy for Odissi Dance and Music. Shatakshi now lives with her mother and father in Vrindavan and often travels around India organizing dance dramas based on the Sanskrit Dramas written by the Gaudiya Goswamis and Acharyas.