



The Art and Science of *Harinam Sankirtan Yajña*

*There is a science to everything, knowing which
one can develop the feel necessary for the art.*

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The Art and Science of Harinam Sankirtan Yajña

There is a science to everything, knowing which one may develop the feel needed for the art.

Preface to the Second Edition

Actually, this is edition 1.5. I wrote the first edition in 2001 while in New Zealand, just before leaving to live in Peru. I wanted to share with the devotees the institutional knowledge that was locked in my head and about to leave the yatra.

When I arrived in Peru I spent some time working on the second edition, including a long stint reading every reference to the word “kirtan” in the Vedabase. I wrote and edited, polished and cut. And then one day, while on the bus, my laptop was snatched out of my hand with the only electronic copy of the first and second editions on it.

Six years later calls for a downloadable version of the original book are increasing. My knowledge has grown, obviously, but this book still represents a good starting point for others. I have added a few things that were in the second edition that I wrote in Peru, but this is pretty much still the first edition.

On behalf of all readers and myself, I extend sincere thanks to Angela Kelly for taking the trouble to type this all in from a hardcopy.

Please visit my website at www.atmayogi.com for more resources.

In service,
Sita-pati das - Brisbane, Australia, November 2007

Mangalacaran

Please let me begin by offering my obeisances to the Vaisnava devotees of the Lord. They are just like desire trees, they can fulfil the desires of everyone, and they are full of compassion for the fallen, conditioned souls such as myself.

I offer my obeisances to my gurus, by their mercy I have glimpsed the unlimited ocean of nectar that is to be found in Krishna Consciousness. I pray for their blessings so that I may be able to say something of value.

Although I am an ocean of faults, whatever good qualities are to be found in me are present by the mercy of the devotees alone.

I have no qualification to speak on this subject matter, but still some devotees have requested me to do so, so I will attempt to transmit that knowledge I have gained from my preceptors in this regard.

Please forgive this presentation and the presenter for imperfections and have mercy on me for whatever glimmer of sincerity I have. The swanlike devotees of the Lord can extract nectar even from an ocean of poison.

Fixing my mind on the lotus feet of those mahajanas of kirtan who have imparted to me the little I have remembered, now I will try to speak about Harinam kirtan.

Harinam is very important. In fact Harinam is our life and soul. The congregational chanting of the Holy Name is the yuga-dharma. It is very important that we try to do it as best we can.

Congregational chanting (sankirtan) can take many forms - book distribution, preaching programs, prasadam, harinam kirtan. Harinam

kirtan is when the devotees perform congregational chanting of the Holy Names. We do this to purify ourselves, to purify everyone else who hears, and to glorify Krishna. We want to maximise the benefit that people will get from it. If they see and appreciate, “Oh this is very nice” then they make more advancement than if the Harinam party in some way grossly offends their material conceptions. Also we want to encourage them to join by breaking down any self-created barriers to taking part. To this end, we must become expert in the Science of Harinam Sankirtan Yajña.

There is a science for this, just as there is a science for everything else. It does not mean that one must perform Harinam like a robot according to rigid rules with no room for individual expression, but at the same time certain parameters are there. It is just like cooking - it is done according to a recipe, but there is still room for individual flair and expression, and the result is quite wonderful. Similarly, in Harinam first we should learn the basics, and then by becoming comfortable within these parameters the kirtan will become very sweet. That is the main thing about Harinam kirtan - it should be sweet.

Here are the basics.

What to wear

Cut a profile for Krishna. On Harinam the devotees are representing Krishna and the Krishna Consciousness movement. Just as Krishna is all-attractive, the devotees should also be all-attractive. That means that the devotees individually should be attractive, and as a group the devotees should be attractive. Devotees become attractive by chanting their rounds nicely and refraining from sinful activity, this makes them very beautiful. As a group they are attractive because of their spiritual exchanges and relationships. Still, beyond this we can pay attention to details that increase the ecstasy and the attractiveness.

Back in the ISKCON of the 70's, Tamal Krishna Goswami had a team who did Harinam every day. They all wore matching yellow skivvies and brown sweaters. The effect was striking and very pleasing to the eye and the mind. Prabhupada very much appreciated this. He wanted that people should have respect for the Holy Name when it was being chanted, not that they should say: “Look at those hippies.” To this end, devotees should be dressed nicely.

There should be no mixing of devotional (dhoti / sari, kurta, chadar) clothing and “karmi” clothing (pants, sweatshirts). Because we are representing an alternative lifestyle to that offered by modern western society, we don't want to give the impression of superficiality or compromise. Of course we understand that everything is Krishna's energy and can and should be utilised in His service, but this realisation is not held by the majority of the people we are trying to reach on Harinam.

It is best if men wear all white or all saffron. The ladies should wear saris that are predominantly one colour. Too many colours detract from the effect of the Harinam by creating confusion. The Harinam should be well-defined so that it stands out in the midst of the streets of Kali-yuga. It shouldn't be camouflaged so that it just blends in.

It is best to wear sandals or some other similar footwear that creates an impression of simplicity in the minds and hearts of onlookers. Devotees should not wear backpacks. If things need to be carried, one devotee should have a bag for them. We want people to go away with the impression that it is possible to be happy without reliance on material props. They will be attracted by what they perceive as simplicity and joyous austerity.

The devotees should always smile. This is good for the devotees and the onlookers. It encourages the onlookers to view the Harinam as

something good (they will often not know how to take it and will look for subtle cues among the devotees to evaluate it), and lets them know that chanting makes you happy. It helps the devotee by creating an uplifting mood in the mind. The tendency may not be there at the beginning of Harinam while the mind is strong, or at the end when the devotees are feeling tired, but it should be done anyway as a duty and service to Prabhupada and Lord Caitanya. Because it is a service to the Lord, doing this will make you happy. Especially pay attention to this at the beginning and the end of the kirtan. These are the times where you don't necessarily feel like doing it - that is the opportunity to do service out of bhakti.

Sometimes all the devotees in the kirtan are carrying things, instruments or banners or flags or whatever. It is best if some of the devotees are simply dancing with their arms in the air. This gives the impression of freedom and a causeless internal joy that requires no external paraphernalia. And that's what it is.

Instruments

Chanting and playing of instruments go well together. ***How loud should instruments be played? Less loudly than you can chant.*** The chanting should be the main focus, the instruments should be more in the background. You should also take note of the overall intensity of the kirtan. In this respect you should follow the lead of devotees who are expert at gauging the mood of the kirtan. Instruments should not be played in an overlording fashion. Best to keep it simple and sweet. A good solid beat that encourages the chanting is better than something complicated that encourages your ego.

Do something with your hands. Not all the devotees should play instruments, but all the devotees should engage their hands in the service of the Lord. Clap, or raise your arms in the air. Smile and wave

to people. Encourage them to raise their arms, to wave. When someone waves to the Harinam party while hearing the Maha-Mantra they make advancement. Lord Caitanya is so merciful that He accepts their waving as obeisances.

Interaction

Look at people and smile. Don't be ashamed of what you are doing. People are suffering and you have the cure for their material disease. When people see you are happy and not on the mental platform, they also smile. Generally everyone is trying to be happy at the expense of others, so they cannot smile at strangers. Because we are trying to be happy at the gain of others, we are the well-wishers of all and can smile at everyone. We are not trapped in mental conceptions. Just seeing the devotees smiling at them uninhibited is enough to liberate many people from the mental platform. Immediately they smile back and accept the Harinam.

The goal is to somehow induce people to accept the Harinam. The mercy is equally distributed to all, but some are taking it more than others. It is our duty to create faith in people so that they will take it. If you put yourself on the line then they will reciprocate. Look at someone and smile. They can easily dismiss you and look away or make some other demeaning interaction, but often you will find that they appreciate your candour and the way you have made yourself vulnerable, and they reciprocate by making themselves vulnerable to Lord Caitanya. You cannot be invulnerable and hidden within pretensions and mental conceptions and still distribute Lord Caitanya's mercy. He will not allow it.

Now is the best time to practice being humbler than a blade of grass. Pray to Lord Nityananda and Lord Caitanya that somehow you can spread their mercy.

Be considerate and aware of everyone else on the street. One should be ready to offer all respects to others. Don't block people's path or make them feel crowded. A large party of chanting devotees can be intimidating. Be aware of this and try to make people as comfortable as possible. When someone is coming, acknowledge them and move the party to let them pass. When cars stop, acknowledge them, wave and smile. Go to single file in narrow areas. Be aware of your environment and how you are representing Krishna in it. Try to manifest the good qualities of the Six Goswamis of Vrndavan who were dear to the gentleman and the ruffian due to their gentle dealings. People will respect this. The overlording tendency should not be manifested on a large scale, neither should the tendency to be unconscious of the needs of others. These are symptoms of the modes of passion and ignorance, respectively.

Look at other devotees. Try to see with the mentality of an onlooker seeing the Harinam party for the first time. See the devotees for who they are, the most merciful servants of the most merciful incarnation of the Lord, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Think about Prabhupada and how much he underwent to bring this Sankirtan movement to us. This meditation will help you to develop the right internal mood. From a right mind comes right action.

In temples, men and women are separated into two groups. The old style was to have the women in the back and the men in the front. The new official ISKCON standard is to have the men and women side by side. There are two good reasons for this. One, people tend to view the "women in the back" in the same way as "blacks in the back". It smacks of oppression and marginalisation. I am not just speaking of "outsiders" or newcomers, who may perceive it in this way. This mentality may actually come to us, and this arrangement may reinforce it. It is not good for preaching, and it may not be good for our consciousness. Men and women are equal but not equivalent partners in

this movement. Two, I for one, and while I can't speak for everyone else I know that others feel the same way, feel uncomfortable with a whole lot of women standing behind watching me (at least in my mind). It makes me feel uncomfortable, especially when I think that I am blocking their view of the Deities.

Division and segregation in the material world are the means by which one group oppresses and exploits another. Therefore people are today rejecting division and segregation, mistakenly thinking that these things are the cause. This is analogous to the rejection of material personality and individuality as being the cause of suffering that leads to impersonalism as a solution. While we do not agree completely with this assessment and the conclusion, we must be sensitive to the prevailing mood of the times in order to preach effectively. Rigidly enforced segregation is unnatural for this culture and may cause people to feel uncomfortable to the point that will reject the kirtan process as a result. This is a very bad thing. At the same time, unrestricted mixing of the sexes is not a good thing for the consciousness of the devotees. We cannot be slavishly attached to the rules and regulations at the expense of the actual purpose of the Sankirtan movement, to propagate the mass chanting of the Holy Names. This situation requires dynamic adjustment. In order to address this, we have tried various combinations. In general we find that the women will stick together and interact with each other, and the men will stick together and interact with each other, but the two groups will move around each other in such a way that one group does not necessarily obviously "predominate" over the other, and the existence of the two groups is not immediately apparent. When a formation such as a circle takes place, there are not two circles, one for men and one for women, but one circle which has a women's section and a men's section. These sections may not be grossly physically defined, i.e.: the men and women may appear to be all mixed up, but the interaction between the participants is on the basis of men and women. As Srila Prabhupada said, Preaching is the Essence, not rigid segregation of the sexes.

I am talking about progressive preaching situations here, I am not advocating something new or different for ISKCON or ISKCON temples, that is for the GBC and the local temple culture to establish.

When chanting in front of the Deities, remember the immortal words of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Thakura – “Don’t act in such a way as to see Krishna, act in such a way that Krishna will see you.”. Neglecting the devotees and looking at the Deities can be an excuse for taking shelter of impersonalism. The devotees of the Lord are as worshipable as the Lord Himself. When we are dancing in front of the Deities, we are dancing for their pleasure, for them to look at us, not that they are there as objects for our vision, but we are to be beheld by them. Otherwise you will have guests standing there, ignored by the devotees, who are ignoring each other and dancing in front of these dolls. This is personalism, and guests should feel that. Exchanging wild glances and touching the bodies of devotees in kirtan are loving exchanges.

Dancing

Dancing is very important. Chanting, dancing and feasting are the three pillars of Krishna Consciousness.

Dancing should be sweet. It should not be passionate. Dancing is done to please the Lord, not to please yourself. Dancing is there to give the opportunity to engage the entire body and all its senses in the chanting process. The devotees should dance to do this, to please the senses of the Lord. Dancing in this way will attract the minds of onlookers. They will also feel their natural tendency to chant and dance in glorification of the Lord awakening. When dancing is done in this fashion it brings ecstasy. When dancing is done to lord it over others, or to experience bodily sensations, then it detracts from the kirtan. Sweet dancing that attracts Krishna will attract everyone.

Dancing should be done in such a fashion that it encourages others to join in, not in such a fashion that it discourages people. Wild dancing creates a barrier that will exclude people. Don't dance for your own pleasure, dance to induce others to dance - this will please the Lord.

The devotees can dance in a very simple fashion by doing the swami step with their arms raised in the air. This is very easy for anyone to do and does not make anyone feel like it is too difficult or that they will not be able to do it properly.

Prabhupada also approved of formation dancing. Formation dancing is good for public Harinam, and when done right, is good for sweeping people up into a collective ecstasy that can bring them to the same platform of experience of the kirtan as the devotees. Formation dancing should be sweet and devoid of passion. People like to feel part of something, to experience camaraderie. This type of dancing can help them to have this experience.

We should always be careful that even if we are feeling some ecstasy in chanting, our dancing is contributing to the ecstasy of the kirtan and encouraging others, not discouraging them. More people should be joining in, attracted by the dancing and chanting. People should not be dropping out, finding themselves “left behind” as devotees begin dancing in a more energetic manner that is justified by the collective level of conscious absorption in Harinam kirtan.

Individual devotees’ dancing should be attractive, and the overall body of devotees while dancing should be attractive. We should always think of the overall impression of the Harinam, not just ourselves. Think of yourself in the context of the overall group.

When moving back and forward in a space while chanting, maintain a constant distance from the other devotees. Make sure that you are all

evenly spread out. Leave enough space in the formation that others can feel comfortable about joining in. It should be a wide spread collective movement, not an exhaustive club. The effect should be like the waves of ecstasy in the ocean of nectar washing gently on the shore, not like sheep huddling together as they run from one end of the paddock to the other. If you can create the ocean of nectar with your formation, then everyone will be swept up in the waves and join the dancing. Raise your arms in the air. Don't run. Let the ecstasy of the movement slowly build. We are doing it as a service to the Lord, and as a result he reciprocates by making us ecstatic. Group movements like this, devoid of passion and the influence of the false ego are very attractive to people. They want to be involved in a movement like this.

Follow the overall direction provided by the leaders of the dancing. Generally one person will lead, and sometimes a few others will act as guides by picking up on their mood and amplifying it. Be aware of what is going on. Don't become so involved in your own consciousness that you lose touch with everyone else. This is congregational chanting. Absorption in your own chanting and bhajan is for japa. Watch what the kirtan is doing. Slowly build it up into movement by beginning to "rock" the kirtan back and forward and let everyone enter the mood of moving nicely together. Do things gradually. Don't go from a stand-still to marching back and forward across the temple room. This can cause people to drop out. Watch how the body of the kirtan is moving. As it increases, increase with it. Just as pushing a swing at the harmonic point of its swing will increase its swing, similarly, pushing the kirtan at its harmonic point will cause it to increase in a natural, gradual way. Pushing it disharmoniously will cause it to jerk around, and people will drop out.

Be natural. Do things nicely and don't become confused. Try to connect with the flow of the dancing. The dancing should be flowing like water, become swept up in the flow. If suddenly the flow seems to change just ascertain how it is going. Don't become passionate and unresponsive.

Don't become ignorant and confused, uncertain. Don't worry, it is not a performance, it is a group involvement of the entire sensory apparatus in glorification of the Supreme. When everyone leaves the mental conceptions of what is going on behind, then everything goes on nicely. When this happens it becomes the most beautiful thing to onlookers, and exceeds any professional performance because it is completely spiritual. This dancing takes place in the devotees' spiritual bodies.

Rocking the kirtan

If you are leading the dancing, you should get the kirtan party moving gradually by rocking it. Just as a frog will not jump out of a pot of water that is gradually heated up (or so they say), similarly people will find themselves gradually warming to dancing in kirtan if it is done nicely in a progressive way. You can start by swaying from side to side. This is a very natural and easy movement. When everyone is swaying together, you can change the swaying to an angled sway to the front, then you can move up to the two step. From there, as the kirtan increases in intensity and people become more involved, you can move the kirtan back and forward nicely.

Dancing formations can include the following:

- The swami step
- The two step, where devotees take two steps forward, then two back
- Moving backwards and forwards
- Moving sideways
- A snake
- A star

Remember to comprehend the overall formation. Is everyone spread out evenly? When people begin to clump up, this is symptomatic of loss of

group consciousness. Everyone should be working together. This synergistic activity is very attractive to people.

A snake is where one person leads and the whole line moves like a snake. Transmit the movements of the leader back through the line. Don't take a short cut that dampens the movement. The tail should whip around. This is useful in a crowded fair where groups of people are standing about. The kirtan party can weave in and out in a lively fashion. Be lively. Wake up, don't lack lustre. Be enthusiastic about chanting and dancing.

A star is where the devotees are in a circle and go back and forwards toward and away from the central point.

As the dancing intensifies the formations can include:

- Moving in a circle
- One or two devotees dancing together in the middle of the circle
- Two groups moving back and forwards or sideways and crossing in the middle
- Two lines forming and devotees dancing in pairs down the middle

When the devotees dance in a circle it should look like a wheel that is revolving, not like people going in a line. The formation should be loose and wide. Sometimes it has the tendency to close up and become too tight for people to join in. This is okay sometimes, especially when the kirtan speeds up, but generally it should be left wide and loose to encourage participation. Devotees can spin or dance together in the middle, or form another circle moving in the opposite direction.

Use of space

Kirtan takes place in space. This space is a shared environment that is not the exclusive territory of one person. I have observed how devotees use space in kirtan.

First I will talk about what I have observed in the Loft in Wellington. Often in the kirtan the devotees remain within an invisibly bounded space. People are not aware of this consciously, but there is a mutually agreed line that they will not cross. The exclusion zone may be in front of whoever is leading to the front of the room, or it may be a circle around whoever is leading, or it may be a line dividing the room in half from where the leader is standing. This exclusion zone should be broken down, as it represents mental constraints. The entire space should be utilised in the kirtan - we should not hold some reservation in our mind where the kirtan cannot enter.

A useful conception is one that comes from my clowning guru, Strawberry the clown, one of "playing with space", and not just that, but our mental conceptions of space.

A couple of examples: One person came to the Loft and led a kirtan. He stood in the middle of the room. Immediately everyone stood on one side of the room facing him and no-one would go to the other side of the room. Everyone faced one way. I stepped forwards two steps and turned around. Suddenly I was on the "other side" of an invisible line that demarked the "front" of the "crowd" and marked the beginning of the exclusion zone that included the "performer" of the person leading the kirtan. Kirtan is not a staged performance; it is a fully interactive immersive experience. Kirtan has no boundaries.

Often when guests come they will stand at the back of the kirtan and be a "spectator", perhaps not even chanting. I will speak more about this a little later. What I want to address now is how this mentality is still present in us in a more subtle form, even when we appear to be participating in the kirtan. We are spectators on another level. As a

group we define a mental space in which there is a “stage” area and an “audience” area, and we try to avoid going on to the “stage” area. Different people in the kirtan will define these areas differently. Guests will define the stage area as the area where the devotees are dancing. At the Loft, it seems to come out that whoever is leading is in the “stage” area, and anything in front of them is on the stage. No-one will go into this area. These areas, and the mental conceptions of our identity and our participation in the kirtan that they represent must be destroyed. Kirtan has no boundaries. Of course, if you create an environment that challenges people's mental conceptions too much, they will not be able to remain within it, but there is a way of doing it that works. Two examples:

A number of years ago, one devotee whom I consider as my siksa guru came to the Loft and led a kirtan after the Sunday feast. We were sitting down and he began to pass the leading of the kirtan to the two guests who were there. They took it up and led. It was amazing to me to see this done as I could never conceive of doing such a thing. Afterwards he told me: “You have to make yourself vulnerable.”

Strawberry told me: “The audience wants you to succeed. They will do it.” If you put yourself into a situation where you will fail, often people come forward to save you. If you pass the kirtan on to someone else in a way that you are relying on them, often they will “save” you by taking it up. If you pass in such a way that you have nothing to lose, often they will not. This is a subtle point and hard to bring out, but you have to come out from your mental conceptions and go on the “stage” first, even though your mind also doesn't want to.

The idea of passing the kirtan around is one of playing with the idea of a “leader” and an “audience”. We like to have clearly defined mental conceptions that represent the measure of reality. This means Maya, “to measure”, to bring reality within the grasp of our intellect. In this way we seek to limit the infinite and bring it within our control. It is not like

that. Let's say I am a guest coming to a kirtan for the first time. I observe and then build a mental map. There is the “stage” area. Attention is focused there. I am in the “audience” zone, where attention is not focused. If I stand here, I can perceive the kirtan as an observer, but the kirtan cannot observe me. I am not a participant, I am a spectator.

We should not allow this to develop. The Holy Name will see us, not the other way around. We have to make the entire kirtan into a participatory zone and remove any “spectator zones”. In a loving and encouraging way, rather than a challenging and frightening one. If things should not work out, if someone should refuse to participate, it should be us who is left looking foolish, not them. Then people come to the party. We don't want to go into the stage area, anymore than anyone else, although we will have our own definition of the stage area. This reticence will have its basis in two things. One, we simply don't want to become the centre of attention, we want to be part of the audience, maintain the safe position. Two, a more subtle form of the first, we don't want people to think of us as a show-off, we want to be known, but as being humble. Krishna commands us: “Give up your safe position and come out to meet me. Never mind what people will think of you.” We have to do it, we have to make the first move onto the stage in order to flood the stage with the audience. We have to become vulnerable, and then others will come to our aid. They will be compelled, they will be attracted, they will be charmed. The attention of the room should be distributed in such a way that there cannot be an audience zone. If you play with the space you can disrupt the mental conception of the “front” of the kirtan (usually defined as the side facing the Deities) and the “back” (vice versa). In doing this, you can use a mental conception that the Deities are observing the kirtan (rather than the usual idea that the kirtan party is observing the Deities) and that the kirtan is a performance for their pleasure. What do they want to see? They want to see people liberated from the constraints of their minds through the Holy Name. Generally the devotees will individually

have a mental conception that “I am looking at the Deities”. This will cause a group behaviour pattern that makes the altar into a stage, the Deities into the performance and the kirtan party into the audience. The guests then define this entire arrangement as the stage and themselves as the audience at the “back” of the room. Not only is this not the actual situation, it creates an environment that, I have to say, just looks downright weird to guests. So break this by turning around to face the devotees. Don’t worry about turning your back on the Deities. They are present everywhere and the necessity of breaking people out of their minds is the important thing, and that is what they want to see. Try to serve them, not to enjoy them.

So you can break it this way. I am giving some mechanical steps, but this is simply an example, the underlying principles are a different conception of the identity of the participants and their relationships, the nature of the space they are in, and how they utilise that space based on these two things. You have to have these things to actually pull it off, but if you just try mechanically, then you will get realisation from it.

If you disrupt the idea of the front and the back, by turning around and interacting with the devotees, pretty soon the people who were at “the back” find that they are not at the back anymore. If all the devotees at the front suddenly turned around, then the people at the back would suddenly be on the stage, and they would probably feel very intimidated and may walk out. They certainly won't feel encouraged to participate. This is too much. You have to gradually raise the temperature.

Change the perception of space. Make it more centralised and circular rather than linear. If you do a circle dancing formation it will fully disrupt the linear nature of the space. Make the circle wide and go around anyone on the outside. If someone suddenly finds themselves inside the circle, they are on the stage, and in order to fade back into the audience, they will have to join the circle. This is the classic manoeuvre

that I use to get everyone to dance. When you go around to someone who is not participating and want to get them to join, you look at them and smile openly and encourage them to join you personally. Don’t take shelter of the group at this point. If you mentally identify yourself and the others who are dancing as “us” and the person you are inviting as “them”, then they will be intimidated. If you identify yourself as an individual and the other person as an individual and invite them to join you in the circle, which is “them”, a personal invitation, then you make yourself vulnerable. You have separated yourself from the group to make a personal approach. You are vulnerable to this person. If they rebuff you, you have no other shelter. If you remain mentally identifying yourself as part of the group in order to minimise your exposure, we are less likely to free yourself or the other person. It is a very subtle thing, and how will I explain it in words?

This is transmitted to the other person in a myriad of ways that your mind manifests without your conscious knowledge and their mind interprets without their conscious knowledge. How you look at them, for how long, how your eyes move, which direction they break contact with the other person’s eyes, how your weight is distributed on your feet, which direction your momentum is in, how you position your body, how you reciprocate with their symptoms of these things. These things are all very subtle, but they automatically arise from your mind depending on your own mental conception. Break free yourself and others will follow!

Sometimes you may not even look at the person, but may move the circle in such a way that it “collides” with them (gently of course) and begin pushing them with your body, then look at them with a surprised look, as if you only just noticed them. This is comical. Everybody’s attention is focused on them. Suddenly the idea of being a spectator seems silly to them and they abandon their mental conceptions to dance in the kirtan. If you have a playful mood and can feel the rhythm (not the musical rhythm) then you can do these things. You have to have

association of people who can do these things in order to be able to get it. I offer my humble obeisances to those devotees whose kirtans are full of playfulness and gentle mocking of my false self-conceptions born of pride. May they be merciful to me and give me some realisation of what I am trying to describe.

A circular kirtan is better than a linear one. It gives the ability to shift the focus of the kirtan party to different areas. Having said that, sometimes a linear kirtan is better than a circular one. There is only one rule - there are no rules, except the rule of love, and that rule, like our heart, was made to be broken by Krishna. Passing around the leading of the kirtan, playing with it, is very nice too. All these things give rise to an environment in which spontaneous loving exchanges can take place. A kirtan that is bounded with mental conceptions and 1, 2, 3 formulas is not as ecstatic as a spontaneous, playful kirtan free of mental hang-ups. There is no formula - it is play. It is not vaidhi, it is raganuga. This is our ideal. Our ideal is become free and help others to become free, not to train the guests that they should face this way and move this way and sing like this at this time and this person does this and then that person does that, in this way, and this is Krishna consciousness.

In a circular kirtan the stage becomes the centre and the outer ring becomes the audience. If you disrupt the circular pattern from time to time and have everyone move about then it will shake things up. You can change from circular to linear and then back in order to change people's position.

Due to our innate external, sensual orientation in the conditioned state we tend to gravitate towards the periphery of Krishna consciousness. After coming and being attracted to the core of Krishna consciousness we gradually drift outwards and get involved in non-essential aspects. We have to have frequent shake-ups. After some time we fall into comfortable patterns. The kirtan patterns have to be changed. Knowing when to move and when to be still is important. There are rhythms

within rhythms within rhythms, from the daily cycle to the monthly to the seasons to the years to the yugas and so on. The kirtan is also like this. We have to develop a feel for this, individually and collectively. Every kirtan is different and what works one time will not work again. There is no winning formula except Krishna consciousness, which cannot be defined and is ever fresh. We cannot capture this thing in words or static mental conceptions. It is dynamic, full of life and love.

Even if you are not a leader, not the kind of person who can be the first to cross over boundaries, you can help. The Krishna conscious person is naturally a leader because they are following their heart and hold no other consideration higher. They are not constrained by their mental conditioning. You can work towards this by following someone in the kirtan who is like this. "I cannot break free from this, but this person can - let me follow them." Then you too will get it. This is what I try to do. When I meet someone who is like this, who is prepared to cross over all kinds of mental barriers, to stand up to potential ridicule and derision, then I try to follow them. There will always be show-offs who want to lord it over in the kirtan, but there are others who were free from mental conceptions born of pride and false identification with the mind and want to help others to come to this platform. They don't care what people think. They don't have an exploitative mentality that wants to be known as being cool, or a mentality of renunciation that leads them to try to be unseen. They have some desire and feeling for dedication for Krishna's pleasure. They may not be completely free, but they may be freer than we are, so it is in our best interest to follow as far as they can take us. We must know that such a platform exists and people who can help us to go there also exist, and we must learn to recognise them.

Kirtan in public space (street etc)

I want to say something about kirtan in a public space, such as a Harinam now. Harinam is different because the entire kirtan becomes a stage and the public become an audience. To break this conception down requires more than at the Loft. At the Loft people's natural tendency to want to go with the flow and belong to the majority work in favour of them joining the kirtan. In public it works against it.

I will talk about two things here: how devotees utilise space in terms of the kirtan internally and its presentation to the public; and how they can utilise space in order to encourage participation.

When performing kirtan in a public space it has elements of performance, but also elements of interactive activity. When people see a Harinam party, often they will classify it mentally as a "performance", because that way it does not require them to interact with it. It is something interesting to look at, that's all. People routinely do this to their environment in cities in order to handle the overload that would occur if they were fully immersed and dynamically responding to everything. There is simply too much going on. If you had to look at every person and negotiate an interaction you'd be worn out pretty quick. So what happens is that people alienate themselves from each other by adopting roles. It goes over the top very quickly.

Case in point: On my way into work today I walked off the street and waited for the lift to come. A gentleman entered the same space I was in. I looked at him, but he didn't look at me. I was thinking about it dynamically, and it was actually quite ludicrous. He had entered into the same space as me, but didn't even acknowledge my existence. He looked everywhere but at me. This method of non-interaction is quite common in cities, and saves us from the strain of interacting with a person, which can take mental energy from us if the person is negatively disposed. We end up becoming impersonal in order to avoid becoming vulnerable. I stood there and looked directly at him. He looked everywhere but at me, and became uncomfortable under my

stare. "Why is this person looking at me?" Because he hadn't looked at me at all, he hadn't negotiated any relationship with me. This made it difficult for him to conceptualise what was happening. We got into the lift when it came and I asked him what floor he was going to. We struck a nice conversation and had a good interaction. Afterwards, as I left the lift he said: "Have a nice day." Not as a formality, as it so often is, but as a heartfelt thank you, and what for? The main point of this example: Validation.

Two things: people adopt roles and role-based thinking to avoid vulnerability and conserve their mental and emotional energy, and they are all seeking validation. Think about this: If you construct a mental world in which other people have no value, then you'll be the only person who'll want to live in it.

What happens to a kirtan party is that people will often not have a predefined role to fit into, although "Hare Krishna's chanting in the street" has become one in itself. Generally they will view it as either a performance in the manner of street theatre, or else an expression of some religious sentiment, real or imagined. It should have elements of both. As discussed, it should look and sound good to present a good impression, but it should also have life, real life.

First the use of space internally. The devotees' interaction with each other forms the basis of the performance aspect of the kirtan. As far as these interactions are concerned, the public are involved as spectators only. They can see how the devotees interact with each other. Things like devotees making eye contact and interacting speak volumes. How the devotees involve each other and reciprocate with each other create an impression in the minds of the onlookers. One mime teacher who gave a workshop to the devotees at the Loft remarked that he worked with many groups, but none of them could "tune into each other" like the devotees could. The devotees could hold a conversation with eye

contact in a way that most people cannot. This is because of the underlying atmosphere of trust.

In kirtan sometimes devotees will not look at each other. This can come from the influence of the false ego. We are often scared of what others think of us. Or we may be sensitive that they are scared of what we think of them. But to look someone in the eye and say, non-verbally, "I'm not afraid, and you have nothing to be afraid of, trust me," speaks to the heart. This is where the issue of validation comes in. We live in our mind to a large degree, determined by our conditioning. We don't derive our identity from the soul and the platform of the soul, our inner life. We derive our validity from external sources, from others' opinions of us, expressed overtly or in subtle cues. People are attracted to other people who validate their existence and identity, who make them feel worthwhile. In kirtan if devotees are encouraging of each other and open then everything will be sweet. The main thing is not to take yourself so seriously. To be able to laugh at yourself is very important. When you take yourself too seriously you have to be very careful that others are also taking you seriously, or you will be unhappy. When you laugh at yourself and everyone else laughs with you, then they will feel happy, and you will too. They will not feel the pressure that they need to perform to conform to some unrealistic standard. They feel free to be themselves, and to grow naturally.

So people look at the internal dynamics of the kirtan, for the subtle cues that project an overall impression – "Wow, these people are really happy!" What they are seeing is that the devotees aren't hung up, they are carefree and spontaneous with each other, they have trust and aren't afraid to become vulnerable and be intimate with each other. Spontaneously dancing with each other, moving into each other's space, looking at each other lovingly and smiling. All these things speak louder and deeper than hours of preaching philosophy.

So this is the internal dynamic of the kirtan party. Remember - charity begins at home.

The external dynamic: When you go into the street to chant, you will often find yourself cast in a role in many people's mental world that has no validation. This role may be one where people are dismissive: "Religious fanatics." "Not the bloody Hares again", and so forth. This is communicated through the interactions of the public with the devotees. How they look at them, the expression on their face, how long they hold eye contact for, how they break it.

What happens here is that devotees who do not have substantial internal experience, or the simple faith that can characterise youthful enthusiasm can buy into this. Interactions with others follow a pattern where one person initiates the interaction and then usually the other person responds on the same level. As in my example of the gentleman entering the public space with me, in the brief negotiation period he initiated an interaction that was one of ignorance, "and soon we'll be out of this space - we can pretend we're not here together now, and soon we can forget that we were here together." Usually the other person (me in this case) would follow this strategy, because they cannot be validated with another response, unless they renegotiate, for example, asking what time it is.

What will happen on the street is something like this. A person may look at the harinam party and think: "That's all bluff. There is nothing behind it. They are just like me." They will project some dismissive interaction that casts the devotees in an invalidated role, by shaking their head disapprovingly and making some face or something similar, even simply maintaining a stone-like poker face. When the devotee interacts with this and finds himself or herself invalidated, they may retreat. In other words, not finding the validation that they need to establish their own identity, they will break off the transaction. They probably won't respond in kind, so they will terminate the transaction

altogether. They will be unable to look at the person, who will then think, “just see, just like me.” What has happened is that they have tricked the devotee into hurting them by creating a mental model which, because that person didn’t validate them, the devotee refuses to validate that person, which is what alienation is based on. When the devotee can look at the person and see a spirit soul trapped within the conditioning of the mind and smile at them and chant the Holy Name of Krishna to them, the person will find their heart melting. Nityananda Prabhu is the over the top example of this. He got no validation from Jagai and Madhai. He was totally cast in an extremely negative role in the interaction, and he even lost his devotee support, but his internally derived identity was unaffected. He said later: “I don’t care what they have done.” So we also need to have this internal substantial experience that makes all these external things insignificant. Nityananda Prabhu carried on in the face of verbal abuse, physical assault and a very real threat to his life.

Can we carry on in the face of an interaction, a glance, a gesture, a look, that tells us that what we are doing and what we are is not worthwhile? Whose approval are we after? We have to give - give validation to these people, give them the Holy Name, give them the feeling that “I am free, and you can be too. Trust me, I won’t hurt you.”

We may be sustained by the idea that “I’m a devotee, and this is what a devotee does” in the beginning, but this will not take us very far in itself. We will have to leave this conception behind to get a deeper understanding of the essential dynamic nature of what we are doing. How the reciprocation is taking place between us and this person, how the Holy Name is descending and appearing on our lips to benedict both this person and ourselves. When people see this in the devotee they recognise: “This person is liberated.”

You can involve the public, depending on the situation. Sometimes people will spontaneously join the Harinam party, dancing and singing. This especially happens at night when people are out in the mood of

enjoyment. You can use formations that encourage this by incorporating movement, open formations which have spaces for people to join in, rather than rigid structures that have a closed circle of devotees excluding the public, keeping the kirtan party loose so that people can join without having their personal space cramped in doing so. The devotees have to go out into other people’s space and hold the kirtan there, not expect them to come into the devotee’s space. You can lead the kirtan party into a crowd of people and turn the whole thing into the kirtan party. At this point the line between performance and interaction becomes blurred. Those people who are now in the kirtan space are interacted with as devotees. They may not validate the devotees, and they are at the same time seeking validation themselves. The devotees may find themselves retreating and tending to seek others who will validate them, other devotees in the kirtan party. What happens then is that the devotees go into a “performance mode” because they are scared of invalidation if they remain interactive with the public. The public then becomes disengaged, disinterested and alienated. They will think of the devotees as invaders of their space and acting as overlords, like themselves. Here is the opportunity to give validation to all these people and bring them to the level of the kirtan party. However, this takes faith to do. Get your validation from the Holy Name!

Once I led a kirtan party into a crowded garden where people were drinking alcohol. I was standing in front of one man who was drinking, encouraging him to chant Hare Krishna. He was standing there stone faced, just looking at me. The power of the Holy Name is so pure that his heart was changing without him or anyone else realising it, there was no external sign. The other devotees pulled me away, because they were uncomfortable with the situation. However, we should always remember that when we are transmitting the Holy Name nothing can harm us, and we should not lose this conviction if we are physically attacked. In this situation, however, this was not going to occur. I have had some experience, through doing late night Harinams, of the way in

which you can stand in front of someone and chant to them and look at them and become totally vulnerable and that person can not validate you at all, can be totally dismissive or antagonistic, and the fact that you never reciprocate with them in that way leaves them powerless. You can see their heart thawing out as this happens. I have had people come up to me and threaten me and try to attack me, and been in the middle of brawls in the street and seen how the Holy Name is a protective shield. I have heard of people being physically assaulted and even grievously injured on Harinam, and of course we have Nityananda Prabhu's example. However, this does not change my experience of the potency of chanting the Holy Name and its power to change people's hearts. It will make you transcendental - there are no external considerations, and it must be chanted with this conception. If I am ever assaulted while doing this, it can only be the action of Harinam prabhu himself.

On another occasion I was in a Harinam party that Indrayumna Swami led into a crowded garden bar at a rock festival. We chanted and danced our way around the whole area and reciprocated with the people. Everybody loved it. Indrayumna prabhu is expert at reciprocating with people. You have to make yourself vulnerable. You have to make yourself vulnerable. You have to make yourself vulnerable.

The devotees are really giving unconditional love to people, something that has become a sahajiya cliché, but which has its very real application in the lives of the devotees. By validating people without expecting any validation in return, devotees are actually giving unconditional love. One thing to watch is how the mind can become attracted to reciprocation from others and begin to focus on getting energy from others in terms of their validation that comes as a result of validating them. In other words, the subtle sense gratification that accompanies philanthropic or altruistic works that are tinged with the desire for fruitive gain. Instead of being attached to giving the Holy Name to the public, one becomes attached to having people say: "Wow,

those people are really happy." This is the desire for pratistha, the most subtle anartha.

Mechanical things: Form the kirtan party into orderly rows when it is moving. Two rows are enough, single file when passing through a constricted space. Everyone has to be aware that they have to leave room for the public so that the public does not feel threatened or inconvenienced. Be aware of yourself as a part of a larger whole. You might think "Hey, I'm just one person and I'm just walking here." But public perception is not of you as an individual, it is of the Harinam party as an organic whole. Develop this awareness - you are an integral part and parcel, you do not have a separate existence. Contribute to the centre. Corporate. Think harmoniously and of the bigger picture.

How many times have I seen devotees standing around unconscious of their aggregate effect on the environment and perception and reaction of the people surrounding them? When we are fully immersed in love of God we will act this way, otherwise we have to be conscious in order to become Krishna conscious.

Seating at the Sunday Feast

As a corollary to all this, I want to examine the phenomenon of seating at the Sunday Feast.

Let me give an example to begin with: A park bench is sitting in a public space. Person A arrives at the bench and sits at one end of the bench. Person B arrives and sits at the other end. When person C arrives to sit on the bench, she will sit at the midpoint between A and B. This is the equilibrium point between the two people. The distance that we position ourselves signals various things about our involvement in a situation and our disposition to people in that situation. We will sit close to someone we feel close to and far from someone we feel far

from. We will sit close to someone we want to get close to, and far from someone we want to get away from.

If Person A sits at one end of the bench and Person B sits at the other end, then Person C will sit at the other end, rather than between the two. Where we position ourselves will determine where others will position themselves. We want to encourage everyone to be a participator, not a spectator, and we want to be a participator ourselves.

The natural tendency, as I have observed it, is for anyone arriving at the Sunday Feast to sit at the back. A person walking into an unfamiliar space filled with unfamiliar people doesn't want to walk past them all, calling attention to themselves, and then sit there with everyone's eyes burning holes in their back, at least in their mind. What happens is that the devotees also do this. This means that everyone, guests and devotees alike, are all trying to avoid sitting in the front. What we end up with is everyone crammed up in one part of the room, and late arrivals cramming themselves up even more, or sitting outside, even though there is actually plenty of space on the room.

Devotees need to sit at the front. They need to move out of their comfort zone and create a comfort zone "behind" them that is not pushing people out of the door. If the devotees begin by sitting right up the front and filling the space in that way, then other people, such as guests, will be encouraged to come in further and become more involved. When devotees don't want to be involved, guests certainly won't want to be. Don't be a spectator, be a participator. Go out on a limb, put yourself in the hot seat.

When there are speakers, devotees should sit close to them, not position themselves across the room. It is said that one should sit at the lotus feet of a saintly person, not simply observe them from a distance. This is practical - then the speaker can make a quiet request to someone

nearby, or someone nearby can render assistance when it is needed. This is called "getting the mercy" - try it sometime.

Devotees arriving later should walk across the room to find a space in the area that no-one else will sit, not take up the only positions that guests will be comfortable to sit in, forcing the guests to either sit way outside their comfort zone or sit outside. This has to stop. The mood has to be one of intelligently dealing with the situation to make the guests feel comfortable, by stretching our own comfort zone. Go out on a limb to make others feel comfortable. They won't know what you are doing but it will have its effect - it will warm the atmosphere up.

Frankly, it looks ridiculous when everyone is herding like sheep to try to be in any position where they are not "part of the action", or in other words anywhere where anyone can see them. Devotees have to get beyond this and learn how to arrange the situation for Krishna's pleasure, instead of trying to arrange it for their own.

In summary of this section, we have to be conscious of our use of space and the effect it has on our own consciousness and the consciousness of the guests and the public. When need to become participators and not spectators ourselves, and we need to develop an atmosphere that encourages others to become participators and not just remain spectators. At the same time we need to make those who are spectators comfortable so that they do not feel alienated by our actions. In order to accomplish this, we need to become vulnerable ourselves. By taking the first step, this will encourage others to trust us and to come out of their safety zone.

I don't have any realisation of these things, and they may well be wrong. These are just my thoughts.

Playing Musical Instruments

Sometimes devotees consider that I have some musical ability. I have no talent, but through the mercy of my gurus I have gained some small ability.

Just as spiritual life begins with sadhana, regulated performance according to rules, similarly playing musical instruments begins this way. Later the spontaneous platform becomes manifest.

Just approach a bona fide spiritual master, render service to him and inquire submissively from him. Such realised souls can impart knowledge to you because they have seen the truth.

Everything follows this format. Try to learn from someone who knows. We have to be submissive and start from the platform – “I know nothing”. Then we can advance. Find someone who can play and inquire from them. Get them to show you something simple.

Practice - Practice - Practice!

You have to practice. Do not think that you can become good at anything without practice. Spiritual life takes effort. Kirtan is spiritual life. Kirtan takes effort. You must practice. Practice means just like sadhana - every day at least some small amount. You cannot expect to be able to add value to a kirtan and attract people and glorify Krishna nicely without some effort. Kirtan is spiritual and no material ability will be of any use. The only qualification for Krishna rasa is greed. How greedy you are for Krishna rasa will determine how much and intensely you will practice - either that, or your desire to overlord will. Either way you'll become progressively purified through this. Better to practice to be an overlord in Harinam kirtan than an overlord in some mundane field of activity. Your practice will be rewarded. Have

someone show you one small thing, then practice it. The best way to practice is to do it regularly for a small period, rather than infrequently for a long time. This practice builds familiarity and then more realisations will come. You have to build a relationship with the instruments. If they don't like you, or they don't know you, they won't work very well for you in kirtan. You have to earn their trust and respect. Practice is seva.

Practice slowly. Don't be passionate and attempt to emulate the goal. Follow, don't imitate. If you practice at a slow speed, then your feel will develop properly. If you artificially play fast your feel will be wrong and the kirtan will not be very sweet. Always practice much more slowly than you will play in kirtan. Slow and steady builds power, precision and confidence. Speed will come automatically and if you continue to practice slowly it will be precise as well as fast.

Listen to others

Listen to others playing kirtans and tapes of kirtans with the intention to hear what they are doing and how they are doing it. Don't just listen to the kirtan as a whole and think: “Oh that's nice.” Dive into the kirtan and separate out what people are doing to contribute to the kirtan to make it nice. When you begin to hear in this way you can yourself do the same thing.

Learn how to structure a kirtan from someone. Don't just take bits and pieces from here and there and string them all together according to your mind's dictation. Find someone you can follow and learn what they do. It is like preaching. You just learn Prabhupada's preaching first, the elements, how they are structured. Then you get some feel for where this preaching is coming from and what it is intended to do, and then you develop your own style from your own realisation and

individual identity. Rote learn kirtans - the beats, the melodies, the structure, the tempo changes, the flow.

When you are in the kirtan, listen. First sravanam, then kirtanam. So many times I have heard the leader of the kirtan sing one melody, or with one meter, and heard the kirtan party respond with another one. This is not dynamic. We need to extend ourselves, not remain with what we know and what we are comfortable with. Listen and learn something new. Don't be confident that you already know it all, or that the kirtan leader actually doesn't know what they are doing, or that you can't do it, so you'll just do this instead. Give it a go and go somewhere you haven't been before, somewhere outside your comfort zone. That is where Krishna is to be found - not in the warm bed of your home or comfortably surrounded by friends and family, but in the dark depths of the forest late at night, in the face of social and familial disapproval. Heed the call of his flute and cross all boundaries to go to him.

Learn how to look after the instruments

Learn how the instruments are to be looked after. Learn how they are to be tuned. Out of tune instruments lead to out of tune kirtans. Only maha-bhagavats and the tone deaf like out of tune kirtans. Instruments should be tuned before the kirtan begins, then the overall sound will be very sweet and there won't be clashing rasas between the instruments. Inexperienced people may not be able to say that a kirtan is out of tune, but they will be less favourable to it. It is a subconscious thing for most people.

Learning how to look after and tune the instruments is the first step in learning how to play them in kirtan.

Different kirtans will be in different keys - ideally all the instruments in a given kirtan should be tuned to a pitch that is in the right key for the

kirtan. For example, a kirtan in the key of D major on the harmonium should use a mrdanga with the dayan (the small end) tuned to D, F# or A, and the bayan (the big end) tuned to D. The karatalas should be D. The key of D is the best key for both men and women to sing together in, so it isn't a bad idea to get all your instruments tuned to this key and learn to play all your kirtans in it. Playing in different keys adds variety, but there is a science to which keys should follow others. If you change from one key to another in the next kirtan you can enhance or detract from the mood.

Here are some basics about the standard instruments:

Treat all the instruments with respect. Don't put them on the ground. They are servants of Krishna, and when you play them in kirtan you are serving them. Look after them well. We are Vaisnava dasanudas, the servants of the servants of the servants of Lord Krishna.

Clapping / Tambourine

Hand clapping is good in kirtan. It is something that anyone can do, and something that everyone can do together. It lifts the energy of the kirtan and draws you in.

According to Srila Rupa Goswami in his *Bhakti-rasamrita-sindhu* when you clap sinful reactions fly away from your body just like startled birds fly away from a tree. Some devotees say that clapping in kirtan causes the lines on your hands (representing your destiny, or your karma) to change. Such a thing is not inconceivable given the power of bhakti.

Listen to a recording like Kirtan Rasa, Vaiyasaki prabhu's spontaneous live recording in Europe. Here you can hear everyone clapping together. Tambourine or *chimptas*, the Indian instrument that looks like

a big pair of tongs with cymbals on them, lead the clapping. Encourage people to clap, and help lead them in doing it single time or double time in the right places.

In a standard kirtan clapping should be done on the 1 and the 3 beats, and then on each beat (1,2,3,4) when it is “double time” – when the mrdangas are playing fast and the karatalas are doing the *ching-chika-ching* thing. Clapping, tambourine and chimptas should *not* play the 1-2-3 karatala beat.

Karatalas

Karatalas have pitch. They have multiple tones, but one tone is the dominant that determines the pitch. Karatalas come in pairs, but due to Indian quality standards, the pair are usually unmatched. At the very least the pitch of the two karatalas should not be dissonant, and the tone should be the same. Ideally, the pitch of the two karatalas should be the same, and it should be the right pitch for the kirtan they are being used in. Better to have less karatalas in a kirtan than have bogus ones - i.e.: karatalas that clash with themselves, or karatalas that clash with the rest of the kirtan. Each set of karatalas that you have, you should know what they are tuned to. Check them with a harmonium. Discard any that are too unmatched, or mix and match them with others made of a similar metal.

Get some good karatalas, learn what pitch each set is, and keep them nicely in a small bag. You can make a good one with a drawstring and a baffle inside to separate the two karatalas and stop them from clashing while they are being carried.

Pitch is how “high” the sound is. Tone is the “quality” of the sound. Terms to describe pitch would include high and low. Terms to describe tone would include clear, clanging etc.

Karatalas in Kirtan

Playing karatalas is usually the first thing people learn to do. They learn the standard 1-2-3 beat that Prabhupada taught. This is a good beat to play. Don’t play too loud or hit the karatalas too hard. This can cause pain in the heart. My friend Emerson can play the karatalas so sweetly that they sound like they are singing. Play them very softly and sweetly. If you hold one without letting it ring and let the other one sound clearly, without the sizzle that comes from letting them contact when they are ringing, then you will get a clear tone, especially if they are tuned differently as most sets are, and also the sound will not be too loud. This is very nice and is how they are played traditionally in India.

The formula that was given to me by my guru in this respect is:

One Karatala
One Karatala + One Mrdanga
Two Karatala + One Mrdanga
(Three Karatala + One Mrdanga)
(Two Karatala + Two Mrdangas)
Three Karatala + Two Mrdangas
And so on...

Karatalas are very loud. They will wash out the chanting very easily. Turn down a recording of a kirtan and the last thing you will hear are the karatalas cutting through everything else. The first thing that people can hear of a kirtan party is the karatalas. Don’t have too many or it will be all they can hear. The chanting is the main thing.

Once you have mastered the basic 1-2-3 beat, you should have someone instruct you in how to play the double time beat, and then practice that. Once you have that, seek out a mahajana who can show you the dadra

taal (6/8) beat. With those three beats you can say that you can play karatalas.

Conch shells

Conch shells are nectar in kirtan and on harinam. If there is only one thing I've learned from reading Bhagavad-Gita, it's that everyone who is anyone has conch shell. When the conchs blow, the hearts of the demons are shattered. One conch shell is okay, two conch shells are nice, three conchs are nectar. On harinam when three conchs are blowing together, people go crazy. When we started using conchs, people would begin cheering and clapping when we blew them. It really adds a far-out dimension to the whole thing.

You'll get the feel for when to blow to spread the madness just by using them. When Krishna blows his conch, Pancajanya, all the punishing activity in the hellish planets stops and the people are freed from their suffering.

Mrdangas

Mrdangas come in five main varieties: Clay with leather heads, fibre glass with leather heads, brass with leather heads, American 'Balaram' - fibre glass with mylar heads, and wood with leather heads. Each of the different types has its strengths and weaknesses.

The two ends of the spectrum are the clay mrdanga and the Balaram mrdanga. The clay mrdanga is all natural and totally bona fide. The Balaram mrdanga is all artificial and totally technological. The others lie somewhere in between. I have no experience so far with wooden mrdangas.

Each drum is an individual, just like we are. There are some broad guidelines that apply to all examples of each genre though.

Clay mrdanga with leather heads

A lot of this applies to all the mrdangas with leather heads. The clay mrdanga has the best sound when it is in form. The heads have the best sensitivity for subtleties and the tone is awesome. In India no doubt they rock, but put a clay mrdanga in a cold, damp environment and it turns to flab. Clay mrdangas love warm, dry conditions. If you have to warm your mrdanga up in the morning, do it by playing it in before a kirtan (or you can damage your hands), or else use a heater. Don't heat the drum directly, use a cloth that you heat and then rub on the mrdanga. Heating it will have the effect of tightening the head and raising the pitch. The best way is to have it in sunlight.

The mrdanga should only be used when the kirtan is in the right key for the given drum. You can do a little bit of tuning to adjust for weather conditions, harmonium variations etc. but you can't change the key of the mrdanga. Tune the mrdanga to the kirtan by lightly tapping the edge of the heads on the ground to raise the pitch, and whacking them down with something (like a water bottle or a small mallet or hammer) to lower it. Make sure that the two heads are tuned to a consonant pitch. If they are dissonant it doesn't matter how good you can play – you'll sound terrible. Tune them a major third or a fifth apart.

If the mrdanga is too "tinny", rub a damp cloth around the edge of the head. Watch out that you don't rub it on the black part or it will come off! Whatever you do, don't use one of these mrdangas in the rain. It will ruin the drum.

The mrdanga will need to be given an overall tune initially and every so often. Each mrdanga will have a particular key that it is suited for, and micro tuning needs to be done for a given day's conditions and minute variations between different harmoniums etc. Going around the mrdanga and taking the slack out of the straps does the overall tuning. The best way to do it is to tune the mrdanga to a given harmonium and use it with that, tuning it for environmental conditions. Don't try changing the pitch of the mrdanga to play it in a different key on the day - it is a serious job and should only be done if it is a long-term solution – i.e.: “now we have two mrdangas, let's use this mrdanga for kirtans in F now”.

Don't put the mrdanga down on its heads. This will affect the tuning, and you also risk puncturing the head which, unless you're in India, means it's a write-off. Put the mrdanga down on a cloth, a cushion, or a proper mrdanga ring, on its side.

Clean the mrdanga heads using medium fine grain sandpaper to scrub off the dirt that accumulates. Give the black part of the head a bit of a brush. Your mrdanga will love you for it, and it will improve the tone no end.

Keep the drum in a cover unless you are using it. This will protect it from being punctured and from environmental conditions. You wouldn't like to go around uncovered all the time would you?

Fibre glass mrdanga with leather heads

These mrdangas come from India also. They are a good compromise between the clay mrdanga and the Balaram mrdanga. They are not so affected by environmental conditions and are more robust than a clay body, and at the same time they keep the distinctive tone and sensitivity of a leather head. Their main drawback is the loss of weight in the tone

through having a lighter body than a clay body. Clay has a certain characteristic tone that comes from the earth element - very heavy.

These mrdangas are cheaper than Balarams. They are good for travelling parties. They are lighter and less fragile than clay and less affected by adverse weather.

Brass mrdanga with leather heads

These mrdangas have their own characteristic tone again. The metal creates a ringing gong-like tone. They are less affected than clay and more durable, but certain ones can dent more easily than fibre glass. It is a matter of personal preference as far as I can tell.

Balaram mrdanga

These mrdangas represent the best that Western technology can contribute to mrdangas. They are made in the States, although I understand that there are some locally produced copies too. The new States ones are definitely superior to earlier specimens however, whatever their origin. They have a fibre glass body, mylar heads, alan key controlled tuning, rubber bumpers to protect your hands and a snap-on woven strap. They are super durable - the body is virtually indestructible, they are hardly affected by temperature and weather - they can be played in the rain, and they can be tuned to different keys easily and quickly. Also, they are component-based and all the parts are fairly easily replaceable, unlike the Indian drums. The only down side is that their tone and sensitivity is limited, and they are expensive in comparison with the Indian drums. For outdoor Harinams and big moshing kirtans however, they are perfect. Throw in a clay mrdanga when conditions are right and you've got a recipe for some Maha-Mantra madness.

Tune this mrdanga before every kirtan. Use an allen key to go around the head tightening each screw to raise the pitch and loosening them to lower it. Make sure there is even tension around the head or it will generate uneven harmonics and have a different pitch in different areas of the head. Again, make sure the two ends are constant. Don't put this drum on its head - even though that won't detune it, you can puncture it, and spares are expensive, come from the States, and sometimes are not of good quality. Several replacement heads I have seen have pulled out of their rims when they were tuned up - bad batch we were told. I have spoken with someone who told me that the original technician who developed the heads has given it up as the toxic fumes from the materials made him sick. Since then they haven't quite got it right with making the heads. The old heads have clear rims that the head is set into for the little end (the dayan). The newer ones have opaque rims. The head skin pulls out of the rim in a lot of the newer ones.

Some schools advocate tensioning opposite lugnuts, so you tension one, then tension the one opposite it, then go back to the one next to the first one, then do the one opposite that.

Others say you should go around do the ones next to each other. Either way you should strive to have an even tension. Don't have one nut holding all the pressure and others coming loose because the tension is so uneven.

After some time I am beginning to develop a more subtle appreciation of the tuning of the drum. The overall tone of the drum is one thing, but the harmonic overtones are another. These overtones are generated by the individual tensioning of the lugnuts. The average of the lugnuts will produce the overall tone, but individual lugnuts may be tuned dissonantly. My technique at the moment is to go around the head and lightly tap it next to each lugnut and try to get a consistent pitch at each point. Dissonant overtones produce a disagreeable sound, and also act

to cancel each other out, producing a pitch that is correct but a tone that is far from desirable. In this case the drum will not resonate very well and will sound muffled.

When the mrdanga is tuned to itself, your beats will sound 150% better than if the two ends of the mrdanga are out of tune with each other. When the mrdanga is tuned to the harmonium or other melodic instrument that sets the key for the kirtan, the whole kirtan will sound 300% better. No-one will be able to say why, but you won't need my money-back guarantee once you try it a few times – you'll see for yourself.

Travelling with the Balaram mrdanga

Your Balaram mrdanga should always be in a case, even if you are taking it from one room to another when it is not being played. This will increase its useful lifetime by orders of magnitude.

I had a friend sew a case for mine using an Indian cover as the basis. It has some padding and is riptop fabric. The drum has been in active service for 7 years now and looks as good as new.

If you have to leave your mrdanga somewhere, such as in a car, make sure you remove the tensioning of the heads. We left a Balarama mrdanga in a car in Ecuador and the top head was ruined due to heat expansion.

If your mrdanga is going to be going to high altitudes, do the same thing. When we travelled into the Andes we would always loosen the drum heads before stowing them beneath the bus.

When we travelled on an airplane we once made the mistake of removing the heads, fearing they might be punctured. Instead the drum itself was chipped where the heads sit on. We had to repair them with a

rubber compound to stop them from ripping the heads when we put them back on. So now we leave the heads on, loosen them off, and pack the drum in a box with a blanket or something similar to protect it.

Fixing Balaram mrdangas

The biggest problem with Balaram mrdangas is the point where the tuning plate screws interface with the body. The body is fibre glass, the screws are metal. The interface is a drilled out hole that has a screw thread insert.

Over time the ability for the screws to stay tight in this insert deteriorates. If you are in a first world country you can get something Lock-tite, a compound that acts like a mild glue. When I went to Peru I couldn't find this, but found another solution. There is a Kevlar tape that is sold to make underwater screw fittings waterproof. You wrap the tape around the screw, and screw it in. It compresses in the thread and makes the seal both waterproof, and a lot tighter.

After some time the sleeve insert may come loose inside and turn, or just come out altogether. When this happens the drum can no longer be properly tuned. The screw will tighten, but the thing that it is tightening into is no longer anchored to the drum body.

The solution is simple. You may be able to glue the insert back in, or you may have to replace it. Go to a store that sells fasteners and get some inserts that have a thread in them that fits the mrdanga screws and a flange at one end. You may have to replace the imperial threaded screws with metric ones of the same diameter. Drill out the hole in the body if you need to in order to fit the insert inside. Use an epoxy resin like Araldite to fix it in place, with the flange inside the body. The flange stops it from coming out, the epoxy stops it from rotating, and the thread allows the screw to interface with the body. Voila! The

Balaram is even stronger than before! You might want to consider doing the whole drum when one goes, just to save yourself the trouble later.

Conclusion

Probably the best set up is to have a clay drum and a Balaram drum. Alternatively a fibre glass mrdanga with leather heads is a good compromise on the clay mrdanga. Then you have the best of both worlds, unless your preference is for the tone of one of the other drums. If it's a choice between any of them then get a Balaram. If you can't afford it, get a fibre glass or brass one with leather heads.

Playing the mrdanga in kirtan

The mrdanga is variously said to be a manifestation of Balaram and Krishna's flute. There is no contradiction. Sankarsana, the first expansion in the spiritual world, is Balaram, and He is responsible for manifesting all of the Lord's paraphernalia, such as Lord Narayana's shoes and Krishna's flute.

Before playing the mrdanga, one should purify oneself and chant the mantra:

*Namo jagannath sutaya
Namo mrdanga labananga
Rasamudhuri sahasra guna
Sangyuktang mrdanga namo namah
Baladevaya namo namah*

I don't know the exact translation, but it looks something like this to me:

“Obeisances unto Sri Caitanya, the son of Jagannatha Misra. Obeisances unto the mrdanga, he is producing thousands of beautiful mellows. Obeisances to the mrdanga who is Balaram himself.” Something like that, you will understand it better than I if you chant it every day.

To play the mrdanga takes purity. My mrdanga-siksa-guru returned to visit me once and said: “You are becoming purified. In order to play the mrdanga it takes purity.” I have seen guests go: “Wow! That’s cool - let me have a go!” and grab the mrdanga, only to be frustrated and embarrassed when Balaram will not make a single sound for them.

The mrdanga makes all the sound itself. Lord Balaram, if He is pleased with you, will play - otherwise he will not. By rendering service to the mrdanga through hasta-sadhana, or finger practice, with devotional intent, Balaram becomes pleased.

Play only those beats that you are confident with and capable of playing. Don’t experiment in kirtan. It is far better to play simple solid beats than showy ones that spoil the kirtan for everyone. The mrdanga is the foundation of the kirtan, the pulse. If the pulse is disturbed, the whole body is disturbed.

You have to follow the leader of the kirtan. Knowing their mood helps, otherwise you can use “standards” that they’ll also know. You’ll learn these by following other mrdanga players and listening to tapes. How the kirtan builds, how it breaks, how it rolls. As a rough rule of thumb: try to enter into the kirtan leader’s mood and anticipate. You can get a feel for when they will change and change your beat at the same time. When they clash the karatalas continuously, this often means: “Break out the good oil.” That’s when you shift from a holding pattern into a rolling attack. Another good one is when they stop playing karatalas, you watch, when they drop them in again, you rev the kirtan up.

Learn from experience which beats work in kirtans and which ones don’t. When you hear a good beat in a kirtan, get it down and try it out. Learning what to play when takes some time and the feel needs to develop internally, it can’t be intellectualised too much. Different environmental conditions dictate different responses. Heart is definitely superior to intellect in this field of activities, and as said before, to play mrdanga takes purity. As the heart becomes purified of false ego, the ability to play as a part of the kirtan increases. If you want a good mrdanga mantra to meditate on, here is one: “I am the eternal servant of Krishna”.

Different people have different tastes. Try playing totally bona fide Indian style to Westerners and no-one will no what you’re on about. Play Western style kirtan beats to Indians and they’ll think you’re crazy. Different cultural upbringings gives rise to different tastes. As the purity progresses the taste goes back to the original science of mrdanga playing, but you and everyone else in the kirtans you play in may not be ready for that. Play what is appropriate in a given situation to induce people to chant and dance, that is the general principle.

When the kirtan is raging and whoever is leading lights it up, and you feel like your lights are about to go out, now’s the time to call out for the mercy. Praying at the lotus feet of Lord Nityananda-Rama was never more appropriate. If you call out to Him with sincerity, He’ll come through with the goods - if He wants to. Either way you’ll become dependent. You’ll certainly get the feeling that you are serving the mrdanga, and not the other way around.

Don’t play mrdanga and not chant. Chanting is the main thing. People are watching you on the street. You are struggling to play some complicated beat in order to impress everyone, you are not chanting, you are not smiling in ecstasy, you are not happy. People look and think: “He is just like me, he is simply struggling hard with the mind

and senses to try to squeeze some juice out of this world.” Don’t be like this. Play what you can play easily and chant loudly. Chant loudly.

There are many sources of kirtan beats. Best to learn the ones that everyone else knows, then you can play in kirtan with other mrdanga players. If you are sincere, Krishna will send you your gurus. If you are insincere and simply wish to play showbottle beats to attract ignorant and foolish people rather than the Supreme Personality of Godhead, then what can I do to help you? I am in the same boat.

When playing with other mrdanga players, one of the players usually has the lead. The others follow that person. The person who is leading is generally the person who is best suited for the job - they will be the most experienced player, or the one who has the most experienced playing with whoever is leading the kirtan. This is how you will learn new things, by following others in kirtan. Learn enough to get your foot in the door, enough that you are comfortable and confident to play, and then follow.

Those who are following have to pay attention to the leader. When he changes, you change too. If he plays a beat you don’t know, play what you can of it. The most important thing is that the main bottom end beats match. You can play another beat you know that is similar and that matches. Best thing is to try to learn the beat they are playing by concentrating and playing what you can of it.

If you are leading, don’t go too far away from what those who are following can do. Beats that no-one else can play might feel good for you, but they are not good for the kirtan.

Mrdangas that are not tuned together can create a wall of sound. Tuned mrdangas with players who work well together can be very potent. The two sounds are very different and both have their pluses and minuses. Sometimes a wild kirtan with out of tune mrdangas can be just what’s

needed to blow the maya out of your mind. Sometimes sweet mrdanga playing with nicely tuned mrdangas is the best thing to attract people. Knowing how to adjust for time, place and circumstance is part of the art of the science of Harinam Kirtan.

I may include some mrdanga beats at the end. You can learn them more easily, more effectively and more personally by learning them from someone who can teach you in person. I will give you my system for writing beats down though, so that you can use it to break down beats and transport them in a book while you learn to play them.

Two other points before we move on. One is that playing mrdanga can play havoc with your hands. The way to fix this is to moisturise them intensely - not just when you play, as a reactive measure, but proactively to help them condition themselves to playing. Some devotees use lanolin. Personally I use a product called Tui’s Farm and Animal Balm, aka ‘dog balm’ - as it says on the label it’s good “for cracked udders”. It’s pretty powerful stuff, and it’s cheap too. It is a beeswax product. The next thing that happens after your hands become conditioned to playing and your muscles can hold out is that your hands become bruised from playing. My advice is to take homeopathic Arnica drops and use an Arnica cream on your hands.

You can use mustard oil or similar when you can’t get anything else, but a beeswax balm is better. Moisturise all the time to build up your hands’ resistance. Put it on, massage it in and leave it for some time before doing anything. Definitely after playing use it, also after showering. Playing dries your skin out, and then it cracks and you bleed and hurt.

After a number of years, if you stick at it, your hands will no longer bleed, and they will no longer bruise. In longer kirtans I often take a break for a moment or two and gather some sweat from my body to

keep my hands from drying out. That's all I have to do these days to play for hours on end.

The other point is that if you play in a kirtan indoors for some time avoiding going outside for half an hour afterwards if it is at night or cold out. Your body will warm up and going outside can easily make you sick. Drink heaps of water afterwards to replace the fluids you'll lose.

Djembe

Some people are dead against the use of the djembe, a single headed drum of African origin, in kirtans. I'm against its use in temple arati kirtan in the temple, but am happy with it in festival kirtans in the temple, kirtan outside the temple, and on harinam.

This drum adds a huge amount of bottom end and really gets things moving. It needs to be played with someone who either plays mrdanga or is skilled at playing along with the standard mrdanga beats. It should complement and reinforce the standard beat, rather than compete with it.

Accordion

This is great for harinam in the street. Especially Western audiences immediately perceive "festival" when they hear it, however it's good the world over.

Harmonium

Harmonium, although not of Vedic origin, is one of the standard instruments for leading what is sometimes called 'bhajans', sitting kirtan.

The harmonium is a bellows-driven wind instrument with a keyboard. It is an adaptation of European instruments such as the piano, piano accordion and European harmonium. When the British colonised India, the Indians liked the piano, but people did not usually sit in chairs. This looked very funny to the Indian people. They built a smaller, more portable unit that could be played sitting down and could easily be taken between houses for chanting sessions.

Purists who want to be "fully Vedic" should note that Narottama das Thakura never touched a harmonium or even laid eyes on one, much less played it with his bhajans. Where do you draw the line with what's "Vedic"? The adoption of the harmonium demonstrates that ours is an evolving tradition that adapts to changing culture environments.

Choosing a harmonium

A rule of thumb you can use in evaluating a harmonium is its weight. A lighter weight harmonium is probably made from a cheap wood like pine, and will not resonate very well. Pine also has the problem of expanding and contracting in different temperatures and humidity.

Harmoniums come in different formats, from the cut-down no-frills Aindra style, which has one setting - on, to the orchestra-in-a-box style favoured by Vaiyasaki das. Aindra's harmonium has two sets of German reeds and no stops. Made by his Vaiyasaki's has three sets of reeds, note coupler, scale changer, and multiple stops.

Additional features such as note couplers and scale changers, although handy and neat, are not necessary for Harinam, as evidenced by Aindra,

and can cause problems later on in the harmonium's life. Better to avoid such things. A scale changer is used to shift the whole keyboard up and down to change the key of the kirtan without changing the fingering. If you don't get a scale changer you will be forced to learn to play properly. It will take you longer to get there, but you will be a better player when you do, and you won't be confounded when you get on a harmonium without a scale changer. The note coupler works by playing the note an octave down from the one you are playing. This gives it a fuller, deeper sound. You can play perfectly well without one.

The stops work by stopping or allowing the air flow through the reeds, which produce the sound. You've heard the saying: "Pull out all the stops". That's what you do when the kirtan is cranking and you're pumping hard out on the bellows.

Which brings us to our first point. Don't over pump the harmonium. This is one of the primary ways in which a harmonium is ruined. Over pumping will damage the integrity of the bellows and the air compartment. It will also put the harmonium out of tune. Temple harmoniums, which after all only belong to Krishna, are always the victims of this style of playing, which seems to be prevalent amongst the devotees. We all learn by imitating those we see, and this style has infiltrated ISKCON. Dr Gupta refers to this phenomenon as "living the Vedic lifestyle the Western way". I found myself at the wrong end of a rather sharp reprimand to this effect when I played a harmonium in front of one of my gurus. It was a little hard for my ego at the time, but I have realised what I was taught in this regard.

When you drive a car up a hill you can give the engine more gas than it needs. If you ease back on the accelerator, often you will find no corresponding decrease in your speed. So it is with the harmonium. If you ease back on the bellows, often you find no significant decrease in the output of sound - the harmonium is maxed out. All you are doing by

pumping more is increasing the internal pressure, which causes the reeds to go out of tune and puts heaps of stress on the harmonium.

Often devotees favour a style of pumping that produces a sound reminiscent of an accordion, the hee-haw kind of sound. This is done in time with the beat of the kirtan. This is not good for the harmonium as it is done by over pressurising the harmonium and causing drastic differences in the pressure. The harmonium is more like the bagpipes. It has an air chamber that once pressurised allows you to play notes continuously until it is exhausted and needs to be refilled. The amount of air that leaves the air chamber is affected by the number of notes that are played simultaneously, not the speed of the kirtan. Big chords and heaps of sets of reeds ala Vaiyasaki will use up more air than single notes and a stripped back harmonium ala Aindra. In other words, don't pump more air as the kirtan speeds up. Be conscious of how you are playing and frequently slow down to check if you are over pumping.

You can blow your harmonium up and put it out of tune if you really want to, but temple harmoniums and other people's harmoniums should not be treated this way, so you should learn to play properly. If you have your own harmonium, be very judicious about letting other people play it if you want it to last. The best thing is to have a blanket policy - that can help to avoid the situation where people think it's something personal. Actually it is personal. Everything belongs to Krishna, and we want to make sure that it is looked after for Him.

The harmonium needs to be tuned. Even when they are new from India they are not tuned properly (Indian quality control again). Some harmoniums are better than others. Some from the same manufacturer may be terrible while others are good. Either way, a harmonium will never be completely properly tuned. Because of the way the Western chromatic scale and diatonic tuning works, the ratios will never match all the way across a keyboard. It's pretty technical, but you can take my word for it. When one chord is in tune, another chord will be slightly

out. This aspect aside, here is what I have learnt from instruction and experience about tuning harmoniums that are too out.

Tuning a harmonium

When having a kirtan, generally you will tune any mrdangas, guitars and other instruments to the harmonium. This is because the harmonium cannot be tuned on the spot, and usually stays at the same pitch between kirtans, whereas the other instruments do not. At the same time, it is salient to bear in mind that harmoniums, while roughly accurate to absolute pitch, are arbitrarily tuned according to the reeds they have in them. In other words, very rarely are two harmoniums tuned together. That means that when switching harmoniums, often mrdangas, guitars etc. need to be retuned.

A harmonium is out of tune when you hear excessive dissonance when playing two notes together, or when playing a single note. The dissonance when playing a single note is caused by the fact that there are two or more reeds for each note and they are out of tune with each other. When a single note is out, any chord with that note will be out. I say excessive dissonance because tuning a harmonium is not an easy task, so it has to be a significant problem to justify the effort.

Identify each of the notes that are out before you begin. You'll want to do all of them in one fell swoop.

In order to tune a harmonium you will need the following:

- An electric tuner
- A small file or Stanley knife blade
- A screwdriver (for some harmoniums)
- Some paper

Some of the more elaborate harmoniums will allow you to access the reeds without a screwdriver - they have pegs that swivel out of the way to allow you access. On other harmoniums you will need to remove some things on top at the sides, probably a panel at the front, and release the body of the keyboard to pivot it up.

Before you do this though, you need to do a once over the keyboard to see what the overall tuning of the harmonium is. Play each of the keys and observe the electric tuner. Some of the keys will be out, but you will get a feel for how the harmonium is tuned overall. It may be +20% from standard, or -10% or dead on. Some harmoniums may be so badly tuned that it is difficult to find a majority consensus - in this case, good luck. Make something up. If your harmonium is a whole semitone or more out, you may wish to consider unscrewing and shifting all the reeds across one place. I've done that before and it made it a whole lot easier to sing with that particular harmonium in kirtan.

Once you have established a consensus for where your harmonium is at, you can target the notes you have identified as being out of tune. I'll give you the steps for a two-reed harmonium and you can work it out for a three reed box. The first step is to put a piece of paper under one of the reeds to stop it vibrating. Make sure you target the corresponding reeds for the key you are playing. If you do the wrong ones you can make a mess. You can count from the end (black *and* white keys) or look on the reeds for the stamped note name.

Now play the note and check the tuner. If the reed is in tune, reverse the paper and check the other one. One of them at least will be out of tune if the note is out of tune. As an example, if the harmonium is generally +20% and a given note is only +10%, it may well be that one of the two reeds responsible for that note is less than +10% and is "dragging" the other reed down. In this case you'll find that one reed is +20% and the other is +5%, or you may find that both reeds are flat. However you

find it, if the pitch of the reed is sharp or flat from your consensus scale, you can tune it in the following manner.

To make the pitch go up (it is flat), file some of the reed at the top. To make it go down (it is sharp), file it at the base.

Remember: File at the top to go up. File at the bottom to go down.

Makes sense, doesn't it?

You can use the file, or use the Stanley knife blade to reduce the mass of the metal in the reed above or below the 50% length mark. The closer to the extremity that you file, the less has to come off. The lighter the reed (or the higher the note you are tuning) the less has to come off. Better to under do it than overdo it. Keep checking periodically to see what your progress is. If there is no change, double-check that you are working the right reed. Don't file the side of the reed - file the face. Filing the side will create the situation where air can pass by the reed without vibrating it. When filing, put some folded paper or similar behind the reed to stop it from being pushed in, and to protect surrounding reeds. When you are finished filing, even temporarily, wipe the sides of the reed with the paper as you remove it and blow any filings out of the box. Filings caught in the reeds will cause buzzing. This buzzing will go away after a while, and you may be able to speed it up by cleaning the reed.

If the reed will not sound after filing, it may be that it has been pushed in flush or less with the reed plate. In this case, just gently push / bend it out. There needs to be a little room for the air to go around the reed and start it vibrating. Not enough room and nothing happens, too much and the air just whistles on by and nothing happens again. Like everything else, there needs to be the correct balance to get the desired result.

If you blow it and mistakenly file a reed beyond its tolerances, there is still hope. Cover the hole with paper or similar and wait until you can contact someone to get you another reed from India or elsewhere.

That's pretty much all there is to the technique. The rest is feel that you will develop. It is a good way to develop a relationship with your harmonium.

Fixing a harmonium

Other things that you can do to the harmonium are putting a spring in it and resealing it.

When you open the air compartment up to get to the reeds, you may notice that there is a strip of leather around the edges of the compartment. This is how they make an airtight seal in India. To refurbish this seal, you can scrape the leather with a razor at 90° to its face. This will rough the leather up and make a better seal. You can go one better than this though, and remove the leather and replace it with something from a hardware store that is used for sealing doorframes. Be aware that this will increase the stress on the pegs holding the compartment closed if you have one of those harmoniums. If it's a screw down one, no worries. This is a good one for old blown-out harmoniums that need a reconditioning.

The bellows on the harmonium is sometimes pushed out from the harmonium body by the air pressure in the compartment alone. This isn't really good enough, and technique dictates that you hook your first finger into the first fold of the bellows to assist it. This can wear you out, and just isn't a nice way to have to play. To fix this, get hold of a bed spring. Cut half or so of the coil off. You can check how much to cut off by trying it out while it is still whole.

Open the panel on the bellows that allows the air to come into the harmonium. Here you can see the ingenious valve that is simply a sheet of leather suspended over the air intake (from a cow that died of old age of course). Now unhook the bellows at the end that normally stays hooked up when you play. Chuck the spring in there. If you are putting it in permanently, use a screw or two (one each side of the coil, into the body of the harmonium) to fix it in place. Now put the bellows back on, and hey presto - instant bellows return. Putting it in the end that stays hooked up gives it the leverage of the whole length of the bellows. Don't make it too powerful or your arm will drop off when you play for a while. If there is already a spring in there, you can recondition it by pulling the bellows out a few times to stretch it. Replace the spring if this procedure doesn't produce satisfactory results.

Learning to play the harmonium

The harmonium plays what you sing. If you can sing a tune then you can play it. You simply learn to play in that way. Make the connection between what you sing and what you play early on. The harmonium provides an excellent way to practice your singing also. Learn a scale or two from somewhere and play them and sing them. Play a note and sing it. Do it in this way. The kirtan is already within you, you just need to let it come out. Everyone can sing the classic Radha Krishna Temple tune - teach yourself to play it by singing it and finding the notes. Work up from there. If you want to learn a kirtan from a tape, learn to sing it. Teach it to yourself by singing the notes. You will become more expert as you go on.

The way to learn a kirtan from singing is to find the one note that is the root. That is the note that the kirtan always wants to return to, the note from which it comes. That note is like Krishna - the whole kirtan revolves around that one note musically. Once you have that note you can easily discover the rest of the kirtan.

Persevere. At first you'll suck. It will be extremely difficult to learn kirtans. Don't think it will always be like this. One day it will click - your familiarity with the harmonium and using it in kirtan will build up - you'll be able to play it with ease and make the sounds you want come out, at least enough to have a nice kirtan, and that is enough.

The only technique you need to worry about really is the method of pumping as previously described, how to "hold" the harmonium, and how to use your fingers on the keyboard.

Playing the mrdanga

If you worship the mrdanga as a representation of Lord Balaram, you will do much better, if not in your mrdanga playing, then at least in your Krishna Consciousness. I started out by worshipping the mrdanga with incense and flowers, and this can't hurt.

Although we call this drum a mrdanga, actually it is a khol. The khol is a primitive version of a tabla, which has a much greater expressive range and more sophisticated tone. However, the khol has the advantage of portability, and it can put out a louder sound when you beat it.

Good advice that I received was to play the mrdanga with your thumbs anchored onto the body of the drum. This way of playing helps you to develop the right technique with your wrists. It teaches you the economy of movement that is necessary to play fast and for a long time without running out of steam. Of course in kirtan you will not play this way, but mechanically practising like this will train you to do the least amount possible and to isolate your arm movements.

To develop endurance in kirtan, don't stop. Just keep going. If you feel like you are going to fail, drop back to a version of the beat that has less beats in it but still carries the same basic feel. It is like weight training, you keep going on a heavy weight, and when you can't do that one any more, you switch to a lighter weight and keep going, to failure. Don't stop. When you run out of energy and can't go any further, then you have to go and let the mrdanga play, and then the kirtan becomes very nice.

The big end of the drum is called the bayan ('b' is for big), the small end is called the dayan.

There are two basic sounds - open and closed. Open is when you hit the head and allow it to ring out. Closed is when you hit it in such a way that it cannot sound, or such that it stops the sound if it is ringing already. Another sound, which is a combination of the two, is the muted open. This is an open hit quickly followed by a closed hit to mute the sound. It produces a very staccato effect that is good if you have to keep the sound level down, or you want a precise percussive effect. The way to do this is to hit the bottom end open. Your hand should hit the drum in such a way that the rim of the drum contacts the palm of your hand just below the fingers. This part of your hand should remain glued to the drum and then you just lever your hand forward to touch the drum. You don't have to apply pressure to make a slapping sound, just touch the head in such a way as to stop its sound.

Here is my system for writing beats down:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
O			X		O	O	

Along the top is the count. You count it "One and two and three and four and."

The next line is the dayan, the top, small end of the drum. 'X' means a closed hit, 'O' means an open hit.

The next line is the bayan, the big, bottom end. When there is a space, there is no hit.

So learn to play this beat, first try the top end. Count "one and two and three and four and", hitting the drum on each count, alternating between closed and open hits. The effect should be a pulsing off-beat. The closed hit produces staccato. The purpose of the closed hit is to stop the

sound of the drum and help keep time, it should not be overly emphasised as a slapping sound.

After becoming comfortable with this, try adding in the bottom end, one beat at a time. Count “one and two and three and four and” playing the top end. Now add in an open hit on the bottom end on the “one”. Then add in another on the “four”. Next add in the closed hit on the “two and”. Finally add the open hit on the “three and”. There you have your first beat, and a handy method for recording beats.

The mantra for the top end is “te ta te ta te ta”. “Te” means top end closed. “Ta” means top end open.

So now that you have the method for writing and reading beats, here is a course in mrdanga playing. This is for basic western style kirtan – don’t expect to be a bona fide player and foot it in India after this. However, expect to jump up and down and chant Hare Krishna loudly.

Hasta-sadhana

Hasta-sadhana means finger practice. These drills are common top-end patterns that you can use in kirtan. Many times you can achieve vastly different feels using the same bottom end pattern, and simply varying the top end.

1. Te Ta

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O

This will make the kirtan move along in a bopping fashion. The sound is “te ta te ta te ta te ta”. To get the “ta” sound ringing out loudly and

clearly is very important. The “te” closed hit is not meant to create a sound, but rather to dampen the sound of the “ta”, creating a staccato effect. The “te” should be more of a touch to the mrdanga to signal to it that it should stop singing than an attempt to slap it into submission. The mrdanga will cooperate if you have a service mood.

2. “Forwards”

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X		O	O	X		O	O

This beat can be used for really fast beats if it is played at double time. The count for the double time version is as follows:

3. “Forwards” (double time beat)

1	++	++	2	++	+	++	3	++	+	++	4	++	+	++
X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O

Closed on “one”, open on “one and”, open again halfway between “one and” and “two” - just think of it as tapping the mrdanga twice when you say “and”. The sound is “te tata te tata”. The first version will help you to get it. When this pattern is played with this count, it becomes the fast beat for the “kesava dhrita” part of Nrsimha prayers, or the fast beat in the second half of the panca-tattva mantra.

You can use this count to help you practice it:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	X	O	O	O

4. “Backwards”

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		X	O	O		X	O

This one is the reverse of the forwards beat. “Ta te tata te tata te tata te ta”. This is commonly used in North India tabla beats. The double time beat is:

5. “Backwards” (double time beat)

1	++	+	++	2	++	+	++	3	++	+	++	4	++	+	++
O		X	O	O		X	O	O		X	O	O		X	O

When it is played double speed with this count, it becomes the top end of a Vrndavan mellows style fired-up beat.

Here it is with an eight-count:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
O		X	O	O		X	O	O		X	O	O		X	O

6. “Funky swing”

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		X	X	O		X	X

This one comes from a Vrndavan mellows beat that has a really funky swing to it so that is what I am calling it here.

These four are enough to play a lot of kirtan with. Later I will introduce dadra taal, or six beat top end rhythms. These rhythms turn into a triplet feel when played in a standard four beat kirtan (which most kirtans are).

This means that you play three beats in the space of two (half of six is three, and half of four is two). This feel makes the kirtan swing. That will come later. First we will focus on this plane. The foundation must be strong, then the building will be very good. Don’t jump ahead, practice very slowly and methodically and become a good player, not a flashy one.

Kirtan Beats

So now we will work through the beat that was used as the first example, using all these different top ends to achieve different sounds.

7. Te Ta standard beat

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
O			X		O	O	

8. Forward standard beat

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X		O	O	X		O	O
O			X		O	O	

9. Backward standard beat

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		X	O	O		X	O
O			X		O	O	

10. Funky swing standard beat

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		X	X	O		X	X
O			X		O	O	

Get a feel for each of these. Here are two bottom end variations. The first one is the standard off-beat, the second is the “Da ge te te take dhena” beat.

Using te ta on the top end:

11. The standard off-beat:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
(O)	O		X		O	O	

Play the bracketed beat instead of the second beat on the first time round after a fill, then play the second beat and drop out the bracketed beat each time after that.

12. Da ge te te take dhena

This is a beat from Bablu das. Here it is first with the off-beat top end:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
O	O		X		O	O	

Use this beat when you want to ramp it up. You can start with the forwards standard beat, go to an off-beat top end standard beat, then go to this beat to build up a kirtan.

13. Da ge te te take dhena - Bablu das style

Here it is with the authentic Bablu das style top end:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		X	X	X		O	O
O	O		X		O	O	

To get it just right, the three closed hits should be progressive. The first one is one finger, the second one two fingers, the third one with three fingers. This creates a subtle progression of closed tones.

14. Da ge te te take dhena - Variation

Here’s one from the Roxburgh St lounge, using the “Te Ta” top end:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
O	(O)		X		O	O	O

Play the bracketed bottom end on every second beat. From 3+ it sounds like:

“Dhun dhun dhun **dhun** da, dhun dhun **dhun** dhun da.” Bold type denotes beat one. Use this one to build up from the “Da ge te te take dhena” beats.

15. Alternating between single and double time

You can alternate between double and single hits on the top end:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
X		O	O	X		O		X		O	O	X		O	
O			X									O			

16. Swing beat

The funky swing top end comes into its own in the swing version of the standard beat. The swing version is good for long periods of chanting the same melody, such as when the microphone is being passed around the kirtan.

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		X	X	O		X	X
O	X		X		O	O	

The closed beat on the 1+ off-beat gives the beat a swing.

17. Speeding up

You can play the standard beat, substituting an open beat for the closed beat:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
O			O		O	O	

This is similar to the beat that Agnidev use at Gaura-arati back in the 70's. Listening to his style of playing on tapes, it appears that he didn't so much use the dadra taal beats that have come into vogue since then.

18. Speeding up more

Now add this beat at the end:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
O			O		O	O	O

19. Another speeding up beat

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	O	X	O	X	O	X
O			O	O		(X)	X

The additional closed beat on 3+ gives it a more urgent, commanding feel. This is an alternative to the commonly (mis)used dadra taal beat that has a similar bottom end pattern. Use this beat to transition up from a standard beat.

20. Mid range beat

This beat fits into the mid-range. I got it from a Bengali bhajan where they went from a very slow, Prabhupada beat style beat to this, to good effect. When the change happened, that karatalas went on cue from a lazy swing feel 1-2-3 to an on the beat "tick tick tick tick" to match the top end of the mrdanga. The change of feel was striking.

1	++	+	++	2	++	+	++	3	++	+	++	4	++	+	++
X		O		X		O		X		O		X		O	
O				X		X		O	O			O	O		

Some fills

21. Build up

As a turnaround, or build-up for the next mantra, and as an intro to this beat play:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O
O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

22. Kheta kheta jha

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+	1
	O		O	O		O		O	O		O		O	O		O
X	X	O	X	X	O	X	X	O	X	X	O	X	X	O	X	X

The mantra for this one is “kheta kheta jha kheta kheta jha kheta kheta jha”

23. Ta ta kheta jha

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+	1
O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
		X		O		X		O		X		O		X		O

This one is a variant.

24. Intro to double time

This fill works well as an intro to a double time section:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+	1
O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
X				O		X				O		X				O

25. Thundering turnaround

This sounds good at a slow speed with heaps of mrdangas in the Pancha-Tattva mantra:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+	1
O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

26. Another variant

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+	1
	O		O		O		O		O		O		O		O	

Double time beats

Now the double time beats.

27. Double time lead in

First the double time lead in:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		O		O		O	
X		X		X		X	

5	++	+	++	6	++	+	++	7	++	+	++	8	++	+	++
O				O	O			O	O			O	O		
X						X						X			

I've expanded the second half of it into double-double time in order to give you the idea of how it sounds. I'm not sure if this is the exact timing, but if you listen to kirtan tapes, you'll hear it and recognise it. The mantra is "tak tak tak tak take take tak"

This first one is the double time beat for the Nrsimha prayers and pancha-tattva mantra:

28. Forwards double time beat

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
X		O	O	X		O	O	X		O	O	X		O	O
O		X		O	O	O		X		O	O			O	O

I have made one of the top end hits bold. If you emphasise this one it gives the beat a nice swing. To make the beat more percussive and "tight" add a closed bottom hit on 1++ and 5++. This has the effect of making that loud open sound into a muted hit, essential if you want to keep the noise down. Open it up for a more throaty sound.

29. Backwards double time beat

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
O		X	O	O		X	O	O		X	O	O		X	O
O			X		O	O		O			X		O	O	

This beat is useful for practice, but in practice (as in a real kirtan) you would be more likely to use a "build-up" version of this beat, which involves more closed bottom end hits.

This beat is called the closed double-time beat:

30. Closed double time beat (forwards)

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
X		O	O	X		O	O	X		O	O	X		O	O
X			X		O	O		X			X		O	O	

This beat is preferable for the long run because it does not override the kirtan. Obviously you can play this with the top end backwards as well.

You can alternate between the two:

31. Alternating double time beat (forwards)

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
X		O	O	X		O	O	X		O	O	X		O	O
O			X		O	O		X			X		O	O	

This one is called the one plus three beat because you do one open and three closed:

32. One plus three double time beat

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
O X O O X X O O

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
X X O O X X O O

Build-up double time beats

33. Forwards

First this:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
X X X X X X X X

Then this:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
O X X X X X X X

Alternating with this:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
X X X X X X O O

34. Backwards

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
O X O O X O O X O O X O
O X X X X X O O

35. Off-beat variation

Here is Vraja Dhama's off-beat variation. This is real tricky stuff:

First this:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
X X X X X X X X

Then this twice:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
O X X X X X X X

Then the off-beat and the fill at the end:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X O O X O O X O O X O O
X X X X O O O O O O

36. Rolling double time beats

This is all open. Use this in the “Nitai-Gaura haribol” section when it is cranking.

```

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 +
X   O O X   O O X   O O X   O O
O   O   O O   O       O   O O

```

You can throw in an open off-beat every now and then for variety.

Fills

I won't try to write down many of the fills, because the timing is too subtle. You will have to hear them for yourself.

37. Close down fill

Here is one fill however, from Vraja Dhama's bag of tricks:

```

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 1
X   O O X   O O X   O O X   O O O
  X       O       X   O O       X   O O

```

This fill is good to play to “close the section down”, after running through a double time section and then returning to the standard beat, such as when ending the fast part of Nrsimha prayers and going back to “tava kara kamala...”

Dadra Taal beats

These beats are all in 6/8 time. That means that they have a triplet or a “galloping” feel when played into a 4/4 (kairava taal) timeframe as they

are in standard ISKCON temple and street kirtans. They are useful for making a kirtan swing. I tend to avoid using them unless it is for a Vrindavan mellows type head waggling kirtan, or I am running out of steam. My personal realisation is that they should not be over used. They have an interesting effect, but the kairava taal nature of the kirtan should not be overly compromised. You can mix the dadra taal version of a beat in with the kairava taal version (usually the only difference is in the top end) to good effect.

The other way that I am now using them, is to start the kirtan off in dadra taal, and then switch to double time in kairava taal. This is something that the 24 hour kirtan in Vrindavan guys do frequently. It works best when you have someone who is familiar with this leading the kirtan – otherwise they can become confused. Also to do this you need a cartal player who can do dadra taal karatalas.

38. Dadra taal top end

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1           2           3           4           kairava taal (4)
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + dadra taal (6)
X   O       O       X   O       O

```

The above diagram shows how the six beats fit into the same time space as four beats. Notice how the 2 and 3, and 5 and 6 beats of the dadra taal fall just to either side of the 2 and 4 beats of the kairava taal (4 beat). This gives the kirtan a swing, while the consonance on 1 and 3 means that the kirtan doesn't go out of time. There are one and a half dadra taal beats to a kairava taal beat.

39. Basic dadra taal beat

Here is a basic dadra taal beat:

1		2		3		4	
1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X		O		O		X	
O		O		X		O	

40. Basic dadra taal variation

Here is Vraja Dhama's variation:

1		2		3		4	
1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
X		O		O		O	
O		O		X		O	
O		X		O		O	
O		O		X		O	

You can use this as a fill at the end of the mantra during a kairava taal section.

41. Build up dadra taal hybrid beat

Often in ISKCON kirtans, this beat follows the standard beat in a progression to build up intensity. This beat is actually a hybrid, in that the first half is dadra taal, the second half is kairava taal. The count is "one two three, onetwothreefour". For this and the following beats the correct karatala beat is the "1-2-3" beat.

1		2		3	+	4	+
1	+	2	+	3	+	1	2
O		O		O		X	
O		O		O		X	
O		O		O		O	

42. Fast dadra taal beat

1		2		3		4	
1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		O		O		X	
O		O		O		O	
O		O		O		O	

This beat is used when the kirtan is rolling along. It is analogous to beat 17, but has a swing feel, rather than the driving feel that beat 18 gives. Use beat 18 to go into the fast section with energy, and then use this beat to swing along at that speed. Whenever there is an increase in intensity, meaning an increase in tempo, go back to beat 18. Alternately, you can use the next beat.

43. More intensity

1		2		3		4	
1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+
O		O		O		X	
O		O		O		O	
O		O		O		O	

This beat is the same as the previous with the addition of another beat on the bottom end which makes it more compelling.

44. Kairava taal top-end variation

Here is a version of this beat with a kairava taal top-end:

1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
O		O		O		O		O		O		O		O	
O		O		O		O		O		O		O		O	

Drop this beat in when the kirtan changes up a gear and you are already using the beat above.

45. Fast off-beat

1	2	3	4	
1 +	2 +	3 +	4 +	5 + 6 +
X	O	O	X	O O
[O] (O)	O O	(O)	O O	

This beat is for the really fast part of the kirtan. Add the bracketed beat for more madness. Play only beat 3 on the bottom end when you get too tired, then drop the 2+ in, then the 1+ when your energy comes back / the kirtan calls.

Play the first open bottom end in square brackets on the first time round only. You can alternate between the fast off-beat and the more intensity beat number 43 to vary the kirtan when it is travelling at this speed. Drop into the fast beat number 18 from the first section, with an off-beat top end to get some real Maha-Mantra madness happening.

46. Breakdown

I cannot write this one down because the timing is too subtle for me to grasp. Please listen to the tape if you have it, or find someone who knows this. This breakdown is useful when you get tired, or to build up tension.

“Prabhupada” beat

There are many variations of this beat. Here are a few of them.

47. Te ta top end

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O	
(O)								

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O	
X	X	O O	O	O	O	O	O	

Don't play the first bottom end open the first time through.

48. Variation one

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	+
X	O	X	O	X	O O	X	O	
(O)								

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	+
X	O O	X	O	X	O	X	O	
X	X	O O	O	O	O	O	O	

49. Variation two

This variation adds an off-beat at the “end” of the beat. Play the bracketed beats only the second and subsequent times.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	+
X	O	X	O	X	O	X	O	

(O)		(O)													
1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	5	+	6	+	7	+	8	+
X		O		X		O		X		O		X		O	
X				X		O	O	O		O		O		O	

50. Variation three

This is closer to the original way that Srila Prabhupada played it:

I can't do the whole thing as a beat pattern, so I will give you the mantra instead.

Dha te ta e tete tete ta (khe teta khe te) ge da gi da gi da

Dha - both hands together open, strong

Te - top end closed

Ta - top end open

E - space for rhythm

Khe - bottom end only closed

Ge - bottom end only open

Gi - bottom end open, top end closed

Da - bottom end open, top end open

The bracketed portion is played faster than the other part, so I have put it in brackets to make this apparent.

I have many more beats and pieces, but these are enough for most kirtan situations. If you go to India, many people will be playing a different style. If you want to learn this style, then watch Krishna Kirtan das and Nityananda Prana's video, and get a copy of Bablu das' book and tape to learn this style. I will give you one hasta-sadhana from Bablu das' style.

This hasta-sadhana will have a mystical effect on your playing. Although you may not play any beats that use this pattern, it is pleasing to Lord Balaram.

51. Bablu das hasta-sadhana mantra

The mantra is:

Te Re Khe ta

Te - top end four fingers closed

Re - top end with thumb

Khe - bottom end closed

Ta - top end four fingers open

Practice this mantra very slowly and evenly. Precision rather than speed is the goal. You are not trying to become a fast player through this exercise but are trying to render service to Sri Baladeva. If you play this non-stop for 15 minutes every day, your playing will become expert. When you play it like this, your mrdanga will begin to sing. Each mrdanga has a different harmonic tone that will come out when a standing wave forms inside the body. If you play this exercise correctly this will happen, and the mrdanga will start to sing.

I have not given the beat for 3/4 time frame kirtan, such as Damodarastaka. There is a beat, but I have not yet mastered it. You can use the dadra taal beats in this situation, although you will have to play them with a different feel than when you force them into a kairava taal kirtan.

I will talk about one more thing. Plastic heads are not so good for this, but it is possible to get something of the subtle sounds from them that

come from leather heads. In tabla playing and traditional khol playing, there are many more expressive sounds used on the bottom end, as well as to a lesser degree, in khol playing at least, the top end.

Subtlety is an unknown factor in a raging kirtan, but in bhajans or Vrindavan-mellows type kirtan with harmoniums they can be used to good effect.

To begin to get more sounds from the bottom end, it is necessary to modify one's playing technique.

To play the bottom end, anchor the wrist of the left hand (or right if you play goofy) on the rim of the drum. Now strike the bottom end by "grabbing" with the fingers. Make sure your fingernails are cut right back so you don't damage the drum. At first you probably won't get much of a sound out of it – that's okay - persevere. Strike the drum low down toward the other side and pull your fingers back toward you. Don't hit it close to your wrist in the upper quadrant of the drum. The drum skin will be very taut at this point and it will be harder to get a decent sound.

Your arm will get tired very quickly as you hold too much tension in it. As you get used to this style of playing, however, you will relax more and it will be easier.

The next step is to move the wrist forward slightly onto the drum head and apply different amounts of pressure to change the tone of the drum head. You will develop a feel for it, and will be able to get different tones from the bottom head, rather than just one sound.

The next thing is to hit the drum, and then move the hand quickly across the head to get the "whoop" sound. After a while you will find a subtle level of interaction with the drum which involves tracing the pattern of harmonics on the skin, rather than deforming its shape

grossly. In the first stage you change the tone by interacting with the skin itself. In the next stage you interact with the landscape of vibrations that arise from the movement of the skin.

The next thing is to get the "whoop" sound without needing to have an open hit preceding it to get the skin vibrating. These things will all come.

If you have the tape, you can listen to some of the things you can do with this. I am a rank amateur and am simply stumbling around in the dark imitating the beautiful bird song of the swans who play in the pure ponds of nectar under the shining light of the Holy Name. Please have mercy on me.

52. Damodarastakam Beat

This beat is 3/4, or "waltz time".

e tete tete ta
e ki ki te dha dha
e dha dha te dha dha
e dha dha te dha dha

Here are the word for word synonyms:

e - space (you say this to mark a beat, but do not play anything)
te - small end, closed sound
ta - small end, open sound
ki - big end, closed sound / small end, open sound
dha - big end, open sound / small end, open sound

Appendix: Some Thoughts on Music and Chanting

“Musical ability is nothing – devotion is everything.”

This was a powerful quote that deeply affected me as I studied everything Srila Prabhupada had written or spoken about kirtan that was recorded in the Vedabase. This statement was in a letter he wrote to a disciple.

There is one apocryphal story of Srila Krishnadas Babaji, a godbrother of Srila Prabhupada from whom ISKCON devotees learned the “*Jaya Prabhupada, Jaya Prabhupada*” chant in kirtan:

Krishnadas Babaji, who was well known for his mrdanga playing and kirtan singing, had the habit of chanting all night on Ekadasi. One Ekadasi some devotees approached him where he was sitting under a tree. Externally they wanted to have his association and chant with him. Actually they had brought a tape recorder with them and were hoping to get some new kirtan melodies, mrdanga licks, and a new recording of the famous kirtaniya.

Srila Krishnadas Babaji sat under the tree chanting japa, and the devotees did likewise. After some time of this, they said to Babaji: “Maharaja, we have brought some cartals and mrdanga. Shall we do some kirtan?”

Understanding their minds Srila Babaji replied: “Tonight, no disturbance – only Harinam.” With this he went back to chanting japa.

Srila Visvanatha Chakravarti Thakura writes in his Madhurya Kadambini of the “excellence of elements”. Before the heart is completely cleansed, there is no pure taste for the Holy Name.

Therefore we rely on supporting elements to get some taste. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati speaks of this in a preaching context:

“People have already made up their mind that they will hear anything but Hari-katha. For their benefit, we have to perform Hari-kirtan. As mustard cake and salt is mixed with a cow's food when she doesn't want to eat, so we mix some pleasing songs with Hari-katha so that it will be attractive to all. In this way, people can curb their propensity to hear film songs by hearing songs about Sri Sri Radha-Krishna. Kirtana is meant for attracting the audience towards hearing... As deer and snakes can be charmed by music and songs, if Hari-katha is presented in the form of songs then even the minds of materialists will be attracted.”

In the late sixties Srila Prabhupada wrote many letters to Hansadutta and his wife Himavati, casting the vision for his “World Sankirtan Party”. It was to be a kirtan group consisting of two harmonium players, three mrdanga players, and six cartal players. This group would travel around the world performing kirtan concerts in halls and charging for tickets.

Srila Prabhupada spent weeks personally coaching the three grhasta couples who pioneered preaching in England in the performance of kirtan. He was very pleased by the organized harinam team of Tamal Krishna Goswami. For preaching we must do things nicely so that they will be appreciated by the public.

At the same time, we hear stories that Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati “would have the worst singer lead the kirtan”, in order that his disciples not become attached to the musical carrier wave that accompanies the name. As he was leaving his body he asked for one disciple to sing. When another disciple, a much better singer, took over Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati stopped him: “No! I don't want to hear a nice voice – I want to hear *him!*”

“Musical ability is nothing – devotion is everything.”

Srila Prabhupada wrote to temples instructing that harmoniums not be used in temple arati kirtans. The emphasis is to be on the chanting, and on rhythmic accompaniment to encourage dancing.

The dynamic principle is that whatever encourages more attentive chanting and more participation in dancing is favourable and should be accepted. Whatever works against that should be neglected.

This principle is universal and is applicable in all circumstances and situations. In public it means one thing, in the temple, another.

It is the heart of the devotee that causes the change of heart in the listeners – not musical ability. I have done kirtan with persons who are expert musicians, but their goal is to impress rather than to serve the name. The taste is like sweet rice mixed with sand.

"Do not try to become a very popular musical party. Music is for chanting. We are not musicians. We take advantage of the typewriter but we are not professional typists."

- Srila Prabhupada

Whatever I have to offer in kirtan comes to me in the form of drops of nectar that fell from the mouth of Sri Prahlad Prabhu in a kirtan in front of Sri Sri Radha Giridhari in New Varshan. I held the microphone for him for an hour as he chanted and danced, and this service connection has created my small piety in this respect. Soon after this event I wrote the first edition of this book.

Earlier that morning I asked him after his class:

“Prabhu, you have been saying that we should not be mechanical in our service. I am such a fool that I don’t know what to do – could you give some steps that I can follow to do that?”

After some laughter, and a thoughtful pause, Sri Prahlad replied that one of the symptoms of love is attentiveness, so we should apply ourselves to our service with attention to detail.

So it is with kirtan. We should be attentive to details because this is a service that we are performing. We are servants of the servants of Srila Prabhupada, servants of our guru parampara, and servants of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s mission. We must represent it nicely. We have to induce the people to chant and dance.

Music is not meant for our enjoyment – it is meant for the glorification of the Supreme Lord.

Although Vidura’s wife offered Krishna the skins of bananas and threw away the peels, we cannot offer half cooked preparations under the plea that it is the bhakti that counts. Especially we cannot serve this to customers in our restaurants as prasadam distribution.

In the same way we should apply ourselves to learning nicely how to serve the Holy Name and assist the people to somehow appreciate it and take it. That should be our sincere desire and motivation.

Whatever desire we have to be appreciated, to be the star, to be known as expert or good, that may be there. If it is we should recognize it and lament that it stands in the way of a pure offering to Guru and Krishna, and we should continue with our service with the conviction that *just as fire purifies metal, similarly by staying in the fire of harinam sankirtan our hearts will become purified*. Without doubt.