

looking distinctly uncomfortable in her red silk *sari*, jewelry and heavy makeup, had a deer-in-the-headlights look that Yamuna understood and empathized with. It was not that she did not want to marry; rather, she felt as though pulled from introduction to initiation to wedding without a real understanding of what it all meant. And yet, Srila Prabhupada could not have been more kind and accommodating. Janaki later recalled that he personally put flowers in her hair. He then tore off a piece of his own *dhoti*, wrapped it like a shawl on Mukunda, and then after the ceremony tied it to her *sari*, saying that they now had to remain together.

Following her recent initiation ceremony, Janaki, already vulnerable and overwhelmed by the accelerated pace of commitment to their newly spiritualized lives, had immediately slipped out of the building, flagged down a cab and asked the driver to simply drive until she could compose herself. Of course, she had no money, so when they finally reached her apartment, she had the added burden of having to deal with the justifiably furious cabdriver.

For Janaki, who had been abandoned first by her biological father and then her stepfather, Srila Prabhupada, through his unreserved affection and kindness, became a father figure to her. Her connection to Krishna Consciousness was her affection for him, and whatever service she did was a direct expression of that affection.

Yamuna, on the other hand, spent the ceremony thinking how she would describe the esoteric event to her staunchly conservative Roman Catholic relations. She amused herself drafting the post-wedding announcement. “They were married by an Indian Swami in a smoke-filled room with a large fire in the center into which they threw bananas.” No. That would never do. Because their extended family embodied all that was admirable in their Catholic faith, they would try to lend support; they would offer heartfelt congratulations, but they would never understand.

## First Impressions of Swamiji’s Chanting – The Grace of the Supreme Father

**Yamuna:** Toward the end of the ceremony, Swamiji, smiling broadly, picked up a small bongo drum and said, “Now we will have kirtan.” His chanting started off slowly, and he appeared fully absorbed in it. His voice was vibrant and clear, the melody simple, the cadence strong and steady. I was relieved because this part seemed easy enough—quite unlike the Sanskrit recited throughout the wedding ceremony. After a couple of repetitions of

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, Swamiji nodded his head and other voices joined in. Over and over they repeated the three-worded mantra. When Swamiji closed his eyes, I noted that many others did so as well. I speculated that this fostered a trance-like state, but I still kept my eyes wide open so as not to miss anything. I did not chant, fearing that if I were to add my voice to the mix, it might disturb its cohesiveness, its balance.

In this way, I observed and listened to the chanting for a good five minutes or so. Chanting the mantra seemed different from any group singing I had ever experienced. The first thing that struck me was its simplicity: a simple melody, an easy rhythm, and only three words. When I too closed my eyes and joined the others, it was as though I had been chanting this simple song to God forever. I soon found myself soothed and relieved of all my anxieties, though I could not understand how or why this was happening. I just surrendered to the sound and let it envelop my senses, allowing myself to trust, to call out—to open my heart to its promise.

Even as a beginner, I found myself leaving the world of the temporal senses. Swamiji varied the tempo of the chanting, allowing us to experience different emotions. Sometimes he increased the tempo slowly, at other times quickly. He brought the chanting to an intense crescendo, and then again slowed the pace and the kirtan manifested in an entirely different way. It was akin to the pure improvisation of an experienced classic or jazz master, but its purpose and intent were still inexplicable to me. What I did know was that the experience of first chanting with Swamiji created an impression in my heart. I didn’t know it yet, but this small beginning would grow to encompass my whole being, and the chanting would become the fulcrum around which every other aspect of my devotional life would revolve.

Even though I was shy and reluctant to say anything, I later asked, “Swamiji, what is the effect of chanting?” He answered: “Chanting cleanses the heart of all dirty things and brings about love of God.” I thought it a mystical answer, for what could possibly be dirty in the heart? 🙏

