

Spreading the Holy Name

Stay High Forever!

(An interview with His Holiness Suhotra Swami)

Question: What is the Stay High Forever kirtana, and what does it have to do with the Srila Prabhupada Centennial?

Suhotra Swami: The Stay High Forever kirtana is a simple, blissful way for everyone to taste the nectar that Srila Prabhupada shared with his early followers in New York through kirtana. Srila Prabhupada used to have long kirtanas with the guests at his Matchless Gifts' preaching center. He would chant the Hare Krsna Maha mantra to the classical melody we all know from the Happening album. It would go on and on with the same beat behind it, speeding up only gradually. Often guests brought their own instruments from home. The kirtana started with everyone sitting down, chanting, clapping, swaying back and forth, some hitting tambourines or blowing on flutes. By the end, half an hour or even longer later, everyone would be dancing in ecstasy. But why? In those days, there wasn't even a mrdariga available. No fancy beats, just the teeny-teeny-tay rhythm laid down by Prabhupada on some beatnik's bongos. No chikka-chikka-chikka on the karatalas like today, just a steady chink-chink-kish. The dancing was unrehearsed and spontaneous. Hearing old tapes of those kirtanas may leave us wondering, "How could they get so ecstatic from such unprofessional-sounding music? Was it just some special mercy Prabhupada made available to that rough crowd so that ISKCON would get rolling?" My answer to that question is: the ecstasy that was experienced in those kirtanas was the result of total abandonment to the pure sound of the Hare Krsna Maha mantra. Musical sophistication played no part in it at all. What Srila Prabhupada came to give was God in the form of sound, not some professional style of music. If we are missing that ecstasy now, then simply take the name in the same way Srila Prabhupada gave it in the beginning. Just surrender to the Holy Name without pretension. That is what the Stay High Forever kirtana is all about. It is about getting back to the basics, getting the taste for which we are all so anxious..

Q: Where does that name, "Stay High Forever kirtana" come from?

SS: Hayagriva Dasa printed a handbill with that title to advertise those early New York kirtanas: "Stay High Forever - No More Comedowns!" Such was the hippie lingo of the day. The name was revived last year by a disciple of Satsvarupa Dása Goswámi, Kirtidá Devi Dasi from the Helsinki temple in Finland. She inaugurated the Stay High Forever kirtana program there by advertising a Srila Prabhupada Centennial Stay High Forever Mantra Meditation session. Everyone was invited to bring their favorite musical instrument and chant and play along for one hour. I was visiting Helsinki when the second session was held. So I was requested to sing, lead and play harmonium. Instead of one hour, we went on for two and a half hours. It was so blissful that I vowed that I would hold a Stay High Forever kirtana at every temple in my zone.

Q: What is the usual response?

SS: It's usually fantastic! It is very appealing for people to know that they can bring their conga drum, guitar, flute, saxophone or even the kitchen pots and pans and just wail away. I make it a point to encourage them, because that's what Srila Prabhupada used to do. It sometimes makes for a wild-sounding combination, but it is so blissful. Everybody gets the taste. In Bulgaria, we had on one side of the temple traditional Bulgarian folk instruments like the gedulka, which is something like an Indian esraj, on the other side modern electric keyboards and guitars, and in the middle the mrdangas and karatalas. In Heidelberg, Germany, some break dancers showed up! They spun, flipped and jerked all over the place, and the kirtana just went on and on. But even if no musicians or dancers show up, by the end everyone is in ecstasy and are dancing like madmen. The bliss actually comes from Krsna's holy name.

Q: How long does a Stay High Forever kirtana usually go on for and do you chant only one melody the whole time?

SS: My habit is two and a half hours. Sometimes we go right through the evening arati and class time, just chanting Hare Krsna. I change the key every half hour or so, so that gradually we sing the melody at a higher and higher pitch. Real Stay High Forever fanatics only allow Srila Prabhupada's original mrdanga beat to be played in the background. I don't insist on that myself.

Q: Don't some people get bored?

SS: Well, at the start of the kirtana I give a short talk. I explain the background of what we are about to do and tell everyone about the Centennial. I make a point that what they are about to experience is the essence of Krsna consciousness. So if they are really interested in knowing what Krsna consciousness is, what Srila Prabhupada came to the West to give us, they should stay for the next two and a half hours and just chant and hear. Why should anyone get bored? The bliss is guaranteed for those who just do it. It's never been proven wrong. A few guests and even devotees may leave for whatever reason, but most stay and really enjoy themselves. Veteran book distributors have told me that this long, concentrated kirtana demands a similar surrender as book distribution. It may seem difficult in the beginning, but if one sticks to it, it becomes sweeter and sweeter.

Q: How would you suggest that temples implement the Stay High Forever kirtana in their Srila Prabhupada Centennial programs.

SS: As I mentioned earlier, at whatever temples I visit in Europe, I make sure to hold a Stay High Forever kirtana. As a result of that introduction, some temples have made it a regular program. One afternoon or evening a week is reserved, usually Saturday. Some go for one hour, some go longer. I recommend that a small feast be served at the end. The main thing is to try to revive the mood of ISKCON's first kirtanas. Stay High Forever means, "Let's try to experience what Srila Prabhupada gave his first disciples. In this way, let's get Srila Prabhupada's association ourselves, right now, today. Let's end this illusory duality of ISKCON and WAS-KCON." And it works! People do indeed experience something

wonderful in the here and now. If the Centennial is just a matter of marketing memories, then ISKCON is in trouble. If we are an IS-KCON nostalgic for WAS-KCON because WAS-KCON had something we don't have now, then we are a mundane institution. My hope is that the Srila Prabhupada Centennial celebration will prove that ISKCON is always IS-KCON, eternally. Let's be KCONscious of that eternal fact. That is ISKCON. But to be KCONscious of that does not mean KCONcoction. Rtvik KCONcoctions and rasika KCONcoctions will only foster the falsehood of WASKCON: "I was happy then, but am unhappy now, so now I must KCONcoct." Krsna consciousness means eternal happiness. In Krsna consciousness, there is no "was". Srila Prabhupada used to say, " I am never out of KCONtact with my spiritual master, not even for a moment." That is IS-KCON. The Stay High Forever kirtana is KCONtact with Srila Prabhupada, here and now and FOREVER!