

Writer Marie Carter from www.yogacitynyc.com, sent interview questions (via e-mail) to a handful of Hanuman Chalisa chant leaders, including Joelle Danant, for an article on the Hanuman Chalisa chant for www.yogacitynyc.com. Marie then integrated some of Joelle's answers into her article that appeared in www.yogacitynyc.com in Fall 2009. Below is the complete interview between Marie Carter and Joelle Danant.

MC: Marie Carter

JD: Joelle Danant

> MC: How long did it take you to learn the Hanuman Chalisa?

JD: It took me 9 months, if you consider the time when I made a conscious decision to learn it by heart -- the same amount of time for a baby to be ready to be born... . However, I began practicing the Hanuman Chalisa by reading the lyrics while chanting, a couple of years before that.

> MC: What methods did you use?

JD: At the very beginning, I kept listening to Krishna Das' versions, over and over again. Then I decided to look at the text without any accompanying melody, and to learn 4 lines at a time, by repeating them with infinite patience. Once I knew the first 4 lines, then I would study the next 4. Once I felt that I knew them, I would go back to the beginning and recite all that I had learned from the beginning. Then I would add the next 4 lines, and each time, I would keep accumulating the earlier lines, and so forth.

> MC: What version did you listen to?

JD: At first, I listened only to Krishna Das's versions. At the time, I knew only 2 (his first 2 versions). Then I got to discover the versions by Ambika, Nina and Shyama, as well as by Keshav. I loved all these versions.

One day, Ambika's versions particularly opened my heart real big (January 1st 2005, at Dharma Yoga Center's 108 Hanuman Chaleesa event). So I asked her if she would not mind recording her versions on my home recording system, so that I could practice with them. She accepted. I then kept practicing on Ambika's versions for quite some time... . Until one day, after having practiced several such Hanuman Chaleesas in a row, a brand new melody came to me for this great poem! This was my first version. I still did not know the Chaleesa by heart though. And I also realized that by creating a new melody for it, I was no longer sure where to place some of the accents and rhythms for some of the words.

After 5 new melodies for the Chaleesa came to me -- through on-going practice -- I realized that I'd better ask for help from a more experienced kirtan wallah on my pronunciation with my melodies. Since I had established a contact with Ambika, it was easy to reach out to her. She kindly and patiently listened to my chanting on some of my melodies and coached me. I was on my way to a much better pronunciation on my new melodies. (* please see below, an optional added line.)

> MC: What is the most helpful advice you can give to someone starting out?

JD: I believe you have to fall in love with this chant before you can even try to learn it. That's what happened to me. I had no intention of learning this poem by heart, nor of creating my own melodies for it. But I unexpectedly fell in love with the incredible beauty of the rhythmic and rhyming sounds that resonated through my whole being... .

It's been so magical to just chant the Hanuman Chaleesa from the start! I discovered with wonder that no matter what melodies one would choose to recite it, the Hanuman Chaleesa always remained very beautiful and magical, thanks to its own inner rhyming sounds and rhythm, thanks to its great energy... . If you have the desire to learn it, then trust that it is meant for you to learn, and trust that your own soul, Inner guidance, as well as the grace of Hanuman, will help you along the way... .

I believe Hanuman, Symbol of great devotional love, is part of our Soul. And our Soul needs "us as egos", to call the Soul. Singing to Hanuman, which is what this chant is about, is a call to the Soul; and this call to the Soul is necessary to re-awaken the connection, the union, between ego and Soul. My point is that our sincere intention of calling the Soul, calling Hanuman, in order to help re-awaken and remind us of who we really are, as Divine and united with Soul, is KEY, in helping us to learn this chant.

And the process of learning this complex, 40-verse chant in a foreign language, can be likened to the challenging spiritual path itself: we must first COMMIT to the practice; produce effort regularly with DISCIPLINE and focused ATTENTION, -- just like in a meditation where we can witness distracting thoughts coming by, but we choose to return our focus to the practice. Then, once our egos have taken these first 3 steps (i.e., 1. intention of calling the Soul, 2. commitment, 3. disciplined practice with attention and effort), then the Higher Power of Grace comes to us, takes over and grants us to suddenly "know" whatever we had to learn -- in this case, the Hanuman Chaleesa).

It is interesting to note the story of Hanuman as a Child. He was endowed with great Power as an incarnation of Shiva, but in his playfulness and mischievousness, he angered one of the adult Hindu Deities. As a result, this angered Deity had cast a spell on Hanuman as a child, that he would forget who he was as a Deity, hence he would forget how powerful he was, unless someone else would remind him of who he was. The Hanuman Chaleesa is a hymn of praise to Hanuman, to remind him of who he really is. And in one of Krishna Das' great versions, the first line is "Bajelo, Ji Hanuman", i.e., "Remember Hanuman...". And as I think Krishna Das might have pointed out, we can draw a connection between Hanuman's story, who has forgotten his true Divine Nature and true Power, and our story as Humans, who have forgotten our true Nature as Divine Children of the Divine.

With this understanding, the process of attempting to learn the Hanuman Chaleesa becomes our attempt to overcome our perceived limitations, when confronted by the apparent complexity of the chant, to open our hearts to the greater Reality and Grace awaiting at the corner of our devotion... a victory of love over fear, and of union over separation -- Hanuman's story... our story. Having said that though, I think it's OK if one finds it too hard to memorize this poem at this time, as there are infinite other ways to make a sincere call to the Soul, not just through practicing the Hanuman Chalisa.

> MC: How did you feel once you knew it?

JD: It first felt like a major achievement after much effort... I first thought it was a big deal to know the Hanuman Chaleesa by heart, and so there was a vague sense of pride at first... But when I noticed that there were so many yoginis out there who could recite it just as well, I realized that it was not so unique, and this was actually healthy to keep my ego in its humble place -- as that's not what this practice is about anyway. It's about surrendering the ego to a Power greater than us. So I later felt like knowing it by heart was a blessing of grace from Maharaji, from Hanuman, from God. Something bigger than me has taken over and I am just enjoying the ride of Grace. In my best moments, the more I chant it, the more grace takes over. However, there are still a few times, once in while, when my ego might get in the way: I might get distracted and might feel lost for a second, or the chanting feels like it takes more effort. I am coming to interpret these moments as part of a greater, more subtle perfection, i.e., not the perfection as defined by the ego, but a perfection that allows for understanding so called mistakes or challenges as opportunities to practice radical self-acceptance and humility, as well as to choose to return our attention back to present moment awareness.

> MC: Do you continue to practice chanting it?

JD: Yes, pretty much every day. This is one of my main spiritual practices (I am "interfaith"). More new melodies keep coming in for it... . I love to improvise and create new melodies in general anyway; and the Hanuman Chaleesa seems to lend itself wonderfully to this Lila.

I'd like to add that, after having learned the Hanuman Chaleesa by heart, I still have had to go back to its translation several times, to remind myself of the deeper meaning of this sacred, devotional poem. I first mainly used the translation from Krishna Das' website. And when Krishna Das's book on the Hanuman Chaleesa, "Flow of Grace". came out, with its accompanying CD, it made a big difference in further deepening my love and devotion for the Divine, via Hanuman's great story of devotion for the Hindu Deities Ram and Sita. KD's book deepened my sense of awe, devotion and reverence for the Divine, the Hindu wisdom, Hanuman, and particularly for this great practice. Hanuman, Son of the Wind, Messenger of God, is the same as Christ, same as Hermes, the mysterious Breath-Bridge between Heaven and Earth. All is One. The One has many Names and Many Faces. By constant repetition of the Divine Name(s), we can remember who we really are.

* optional added paragraph: What propelled me to complete my learning the Chaleesa by heart, was when Ambika invited me to lead one of the Hanuman Chaleesa events, with only one other co-leader, Donna Wang, at the September 2006 Hanuman Chaleesa event at Dharma Yoga Center. All the more experienced kirtan wallahs were on their way to India. So I was going to have to lead 5 or 6 Hanuman Chalisas at that event. I told Ambika I did not yet know it by heart. She said it was OK. But I added extra time and effort in preparation for it :-). I still used the lyrics sheets on that day, to be safe. But never since.