

Preach on Purpose!

The Sunday Feast

A few thoughts and realizations by an aspiring humble servant of the Vaisnavas

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The Sunday Feast

Recently I visited the Loft in Auckland, New Zealand (I've been based in Brisbane, Australia for the past two years), and I attended the Sunday Feast program there. Afterwards the devotees asked me if I could give some pointers on things that could be done to improve their program.

The Sunday Feast has been a particular interest of mine for some time, and even an almost exclusive focus of late; as Sunday is the only day I get off work it's the only program that I can really put my time and energy into.

The first time I ever went to a Sunday Feast program was in the mid-90s in New Zealand. A friend of mine took me to the Gopals restaurant that was then open on Queen St, the main drag in Auckland. The meal cost \$2, and he offered to pay for me in order to overcome my reluctance to go. Trudging up the stairs behind him, I was curious to see what it was all about. Without his personal influence I would not have been inspired to go so far outside my comfort zone. The smells were exotic, as was the food on offer. I picked up a flyer for the program at the counter that promised dance and drama. When I questioned a staff member about this I was told that that program had recently been discontinued (my wife to be, Param Satya devi dasi, whom I had not yet met, and Krishna loka devi dasi had just opened the Loft in Newmarket and moved their Sunday program there). I enjoyed an interesting meal, but was a little disappointed that the promised cultural experience did not materialise.

My second experience with the Sunday Feast was the Krishnafest program at the Loft in Auckland a few years later in 1997. I arrived to find myself the sole guest, with His Holiness Chandrasekhara Maharaja presiding. Maharaja gave me a set of cartals and played a bongo drum. I remember that I was very impressed with the way that he drummed and played fills all while singing. I, on the other hand, was having a lot of trouble trying to keep the beat, and singing unfamiliar words to an unfamiliar tune (it was the classic Hare Krishna one). I wasn't used to singing in public, much less seated opposite a strange Hare Krishna monk. After a few minutes Maharaja took the cartals from me and said: "Just concentrate on the chanting."

Since that time I've been to a little over twenty different Sunday Feast programs around the world, and I've been responsible for organizing seven of them in three different countries over the past nine years.

There's nothing too spectacular in that alone – read on and see if I have anything valuable to say as a result.

This is a summary of my current realizations and thinking on Sunday Feast preaching.

The programs that I have been involved in have followed the same basic outline:

1. what devotees refer to as "bhajans" which usually means kirtan of the Hare Krishna maha-mantra sitting down and accompanied by musical instruments such

- as harmonium
2. Class
 3. Kirtan (standing up with mrdanga and cartals)
 4. Prasadam

I've seen other arrangements, but this is the format that I've always worked with, and I suspect the majority of ISKCON centers worldwide work with. I've seen another format where they have simultaneous activities going on. I'm not a big fan of this format as a preaching tool, and I'll explain why later.

Let me run through the program from start to finish with a commentary.

Section One – Bhajans

Usually this section is not well attended, by either the devotees (staff) or guests (including devotee-guests). It's difficult to muster energy to put into this section of the program *because* it is so poorly attended – devotees are not inspired to put out when there is so little response. You know the scene: a couple of devotees show up and do a few tunes in a largely deserted room. Usually only the most hardcore of staff and guests come at this time, as well as first time visitors.

If you draw a graph of energy and attendance across the Sunday feast, you'll find this to be a low point in both senses. First time guests respecting the starting time on the advertising figure out after a week or two that not most other people do not (including the staff), and start to come at the high point – usually just in time for the second kirtan and prasadam. This then further perpetuates the cycle.

The Opening should be strong

The opening should be strong. Whether you are talking about a movie, a class, or a program, the opening should be strong to capture people's attention and imagination. If you want your Sunday Feast program to be dynamic, and I don't just mean the elements of the program, I mean strategically in the sense where it actually functions and takes people somewhere other than to “the Sunday Feast crowd”, you have to have a strong opening. A strong opening allows you to have a powerful engaging program with a consistent energy level across it. You want the people settled in and engaged before you deliver your message – not arriving throughout it, missing the information and disrupting the focus of the speaker and the other attendees.

Principle: The opening sets the tone for the program.

The opening sets the tone for the program. A weak opening means a weak program. A strong opening will enable a strong program to be developed.

It's difficult to break this cycle because your existing crowd, including the devotee-guests are conditioned to this. Don't expect them to lead change. The new people are your best bet.

When you have a low energy opening followed by an energy and attendance ramp what you communicate to the people is: “Don't come on time.” Your flyer says to come at 5 pm (or whatever), but when they get there your actions speak so loudly that it drowns out what you've said. Don't expect the public to respond with a level of commitment and enthusiasm higher than yours. If you want them to commit, you have to model that commitment.

Principle: The public will respond with a level of the commitment and enthusiasm that approaches, but trails, the level that you model.

Once you make a commitment to the opening of the program, and realize that the new guests are your target audience, you have to look at some further considerations.

First of all, with the first kirtan is you are not offering anything uniquely valuable. If people want kirtan, they can get a better one later on. Unless people are really into the chanting, there is no compelling value proposition for them in the opening kirtan. Since first time visitors are your target audience here, don't expect them to perceive value in chanting. Even devotees, who know theoretically the value of congregational chanting, often do not come for this section of the program, what to speak of people who are unaware of its transcendental value.

The other thing that you have to take into consideration here is this: the majority of people who come at the beginning are first time visitors. These are your target audience. In order to come, these people have often had to muster up the courage to come into an unfamiliar environment. They slide in and hope to be as unnoticed as possible. In the book *Harinam Sankirtan Yajna*, in the section that deals with seating at the Sunday Feast, I made the observation that people want to sit at the back, where they can observe without being observed, therefore devotees should sit forward to allow the new guests to sit where they are comfortable.

Now, visualize this: you are a first-time visitor to the Sunday Feast. You have been convinced to come and check it out by meeting a sankirtanero in the street or by receiving a flyer. At this stage if you come by the invitation of a friend you probably come along with them later on in the evening, towards the end of the class. So you're one of the ones who comes alone, or with other first-timer friends, on time. You're nervous – you don't know what it will be like. You're hoping to slip in unnoticed, sit at the back, and check things out, get your bearings.

You find yourself sitting in a sparsely populated room – there goes your chance to blend into the crowd. There are a couple of devotees struggling to lead a kirtan, and horror of horror – they are expecting you to sing. Of course you don't. You're in an unfamiliar environment, with unfamiliar people, being asked to sing unfamiliar words to unfamiliar tunes – and the only time you sing is in the shower, or after a few drinks on a Friday night.

You feel uncomfortable. The devotees who are leading the kirtan feel uncomfortable. You feel uncomfortable because they feel uncomfortable. You feel uncomfortable because they feel uncomfortable because you are not singing. In short – it's really

uncomfortable.

Are you getting the picture? It's not an attractive value proposition.

Get outside your comfort zone to put the guests in theirs

In Harinam Sankirtan Yajna I recommended that devotees go outside their comfort zone in order to make the guests comfortable, by sitting at the front (hey, no-one wants everyone's eyes on them). You need to do the same thing with this opening section of the program. You need to take all the pressure off the people. You will have interactive chanting at the end of the program – you are not adding any value by doing it (especially like this) at the beginning, and you're hammering anyone who is inexperienced enough to show up at this time, punishing them for their naivety. Let me reiterate – the only people who show up at this time are precisely the people who will be most uncomfortable with this!

What we have done with this section of the program is convert it from interactive chanting to make it more a musical performance. Yes, this puts more pressure on the devotees – they have to practise every week, and because the format is one of “musical performance” there is a heightened expectation of quality. It means that devotees have to practise, and you have to field a competent band. What this does is it transfers the pressure from the audience and allows the devotees to take on their anxiety. Yes, it means more pressure for you – and less for the guests! Take it!

This also raises the bar on the opening. It puts a lot more energy into it. All the practise and preparation that you put in during the week is leveraged on the opening of the program. Each week we have different songs from the songs of the Vaisnava Acaryas, none lasting more than 10 minutes, with different singers. We project the words on a screen and give everyone a handout with the English translations. We introduce each one with something like: “Now we present Kabe Habe Bolo, When, O When Will That Day Be Mine, a song by the 19th century devotee and preacher Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur. It is a song that speaks about the inner sentiment of a devotee, and will be sung be so-and-so.”

Let us judge a thing by its results: by creating high energy, varied content that takes the pressure off the guests and offers a significant value proposition (it's engaging, entertaining, and you never know what it will be until you come, or if you don't come), we have gone from an average of 2 devotees struggling to engage and entertain 4 new people at 5 pm to an average of 6 devotees engaging and entertaining 40 people at 5 pm.

And something else, that was unexpected, is that now people sing more enthusiastically during this section of the program than ever before. Taking the pressure off people and creating more momentum “from the stage” combine to make a more relaxed atmosphere for the guests. Devotees have started to cotton on that there is value in coming on time, and momentum is building.

Let me reiterate – you have interactive chanting at the end in a much more effective and engaging package – the final kirtan. If you have reservations about making a

musical performance of the Holy Name, I encourage you to search the Vedabase for Srila Prabhupada's letters to Hamsaduta and Himavati vis: the World Sankirtan Party.

If you are going to preach, do it properly. Give it 100%. Especially if Sunday is *the* day for preaching, there is absolutely no excuse for not putting in a serious effort. If the staff are not proficient at performing kirtan, they must become proficient. They have to practise.

Another point related to this is punctuality. One day we were 15 minutes late in starting. Because of circumstances we started at 5:15 pm rather than 5 pm. Before we could begin I had to go in front of the guests and offer a formal apology. 15 minutes for 40 people means 10 person-hours. 10 person-hours. 10 person-hours. They have donated 10 person-hours, and we just wasted their time. One of the worst things you can do with volunteers is waste their time. Remember that your audience are all volunteers. They don't have to be there, and if you disrespect their time, they won't.

Remember:

- The public will respond with a level of commitment and enthusiasm that approaches, but trails, the level you model. If you can't be on time, you can't expect them to be.
- The opening sets the tone for the program. The opening should be strong. A strong opening will help to create a consistent energy level across the program, which will lead to increased effectiveness of the program in achieving its strategic preaching objectives.

Section Two – Class

We're going to talk about the class on two levels – “the class” itself, and the bigger picture of “the classes” overall. We'll start at the micro level by talking about the structure of a class itself.

The Class

We've spent time researching how to structure presentations, with a view to creating a template or a set of guidelines that assist speakers in constructing their classes, and enable us to maintain a consistent standard of presentation in our program.

Where do I start this one? How about the same way we did section one – with the opening.

The Opening: Your First Impression

Principle: First impressions are lasting impressions.

A class has to have a strong opening, one which captures and engages the attention and imagination of the audience. First impressions are lasting impressions. If you capture the audience at the start, they will be more forgiving if you falter later on. If you lose the audience at the start you'll be fighting uphill all the way, and it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to recapture them later.

A strong opening usually consists of one of three things: a personal history, a demonstration, or a disconnect. A disconnect is where you talk about something completely unrelated to the subject matter. This causes the audience's brains to start ticking over - “what's he talking about?” It's intriguing, and draws them in. You resolve the tension by making a lateral jump to your subject matter.

Another technique is to create a shared experience. This can be done by telling a funny story that gets everyone to laugh together. Another is to seize control of the audience by asking them to do something, for example give a round of applause, or respond in unison to a question.

Before Anything Else: Make it Relevant

Principle: In a busy world, information that does not address a problem that I am experiencing will be discarded as irrelevant.

The first portion of the class is all about establishing the need. If people do not perceive that what you are talking about speaks to a need they have, that it's a solution to a problem that they are experiencing, they will not be interested in what you have to say. People are busy today, and they have to make quick decisions about what they will give their attention to. They will discriminate about the relevance of your material to them based on whether or not it speaks to their felt needs.

So first of all you have to establish the problem that you are going to give a solution for, and do it in such a way that the people in the audience go: “Yes, that's what I'm facing – I could use a solution for that!” The next thought that crosses their mind is: “What's she going to say?” And you have a captive audience. They are on the edge of their seats. They want to know what the solution is.

Have a look again at the opening of the previous section – first of all we begin with a personal history, followed by an exposition of the problem. If you recognised that problem, if it's a problem that you are facing, then you were interested to hear what I had to say about it.

There are few things worse that you can do than download a whole lot of information to people without making it very clear from the outset that it is relevant and useful to them, and where it fits in to their life. You've got to perform the service of giving them their meal hot and ready to eat – helping them to understand what you're talking about in terms of their situation.

Know your Audience

Principle: The better you understand your audience, the more relevant you can make your presentation.

In order to do this, you will need to know your audience – their needs and concerns. The more intimately you know your audience and their mindset, the more accurately you will be able to target your presentation, and the better you will be able to serve them.

Please see the appendix for a discussion of four types of people and the top priority in their value structure – knowledge, effectiveness, profit, and alleviation of distress.

Be Personable

Principle: It's not about you, but you are involved.

Every class should communicate a sense of the speaker, for example through containing a personal history of some description related to or illustrating a point. People want to relate and connect with the speaker on a personal level. They want to know something about *who* they are hearing from, in order to put *what* they are hearing from them into context. So the speaker should put themselves into the presentation, rather than just impersonally presenting the material. People will be more receptive to the message when they know and trust the messenger. Of course you need to be careful not to overdo it; it's not about you - but you are involved.

Less is More

Principle: It's better to err on the side of leaving 'em wanting more.

In terms of class length, we've found that half an hour is the optimal time for a Sunday Feast class to a mixed audience of regulars and new people. More than this wears out people's concentration. Different people will have a different capacity for absorbing information and remaining attentive. A new person without much background information will have a lower capacity. Every new fact, concept, or terminology taxes their brain as they are forced to discriminate and assimilate. A person who has a lot of background information will be able to take more. There will be no magical length that will suit everyone, but think about it – would you rather have people walk away saying: “I wish that you had spoken just a bit more – it was so interesting”, or: “Remind me to come in at half-time next week”.

Targeting the presentation

You can target your class by selecting a particular person that you know, who represents the target audience. Then construct the class with them in mind. In order to create a class with broader appeal you can add a section or an angle for people who represent another area of the spectrum – perhaps with more or less background information. One thing you can do is think deeply about how to present the same point to both groups of people in terms of their situation. As an example: “If you want to advance in spiritual life - and even if you don't – even if you just want to get what you want out of life - in order to get where you want to go you'll need to apply this principle...”

The Logical Chain

Principle: Keep It Simple, Simon.

For a half an hour presentation you are forced to construct a tight argument with the minimum amount of steps from initial proposition to conclusion, and that's a good thing, because anything more than one or two steps will lose all but the already converted, brothers and sisters. We refer to the number of logical steps from proposition to conclusion as “the length of the logical chain”.

A fast-paced, well-structured class that has a strong opening, short logical chain (number of hoops that your audience has to jump through), single primary point and clear action recommendation that is over in half an hour will be attractive. People will be able to give their full attention and receive something valuable in exchange. It will drive people to come back. Give knowledge in digestible chunks.

“I've only said one thing today...”

The two most important parts of the presentation are the opening and the closing. What we use as our guideline for the closing is the following statement: “I've only

said one thing today: _____”.

This forces us to start constructing the class with the end in mind, and also to make one clear point. Especially new people will not be able to digest more than one point. Multiple points compete with each other, diluting the effectiveness of each one.

The Five Questions

Here are five questions that you can use as a guide to construct a class:

1. What do they need to know?
2. Why do they need to know it?
3. What do they need to do?
4. Why do they need to do it?
5. What's the “one thing”?

The class then begins with point 2 – “Why do they need to know it?” to establish relevancy and demand for the solution on the part of the audience. Point 5, the “one thing”, permeates the class. Everything in the class points to it leading up to it, and points back to it after it has been expressed. It is the central theme. It's the one thing that people have to remember, the one thing they have to take away. If they remember nothing other than this one point, that's perfection.

An Anti-Example

I remember attending one Sunday Feast in Tokyo, Japan. During the day we went to Harajuku park, which is an amazing scene of Japanese youth subcultures. First of all we saw the Goths – dressed up so elaborately that you would have been excused if you thought that they were filming a movie. Next we walked further into the park and saw in succession a band playing with a full PA system running on batteries, a DJ with a portable sound system playing techno to a small crowd of raving Japanese teens, a couple of Djs and an MC rapping to the accompaniment of breakdancers, an all girl pop group, and an American singer / guitarist leading a Japanese pop group in a Hendrix cover.

A number of the youths in the park accepted our invitation to come to the small temple that we have in the basement of an apartment building.

A visiting American devotee spoke using a translator. He related how Srila Prabhupada had once told him: “Just tell people about the soul, about Krishna, about Caitanya Mahaprabhu, and the Hare Krishna mantra and the process of sankirtan”, and he then proceeded to systematically elaborate on each of those points.

While he literally carried out that instruction in one sense, I think there was some room for improvement in the way it was done. Communication is about perception – it's about what is “common”. It is about what people hear, as much as what we say. When the two match up, that's real communication.

After the class, over dinner, I asked one of the youths from the park what he thought

of the presentation. He replied with frustration through my friend's wife, who was translating for me: "I didn't understand anything he said. I just want to know if there is a God or not?"

Morale of the story: Know your audience, Be personable, Target your Presentation, Less is More, Keep It Simple, Simon, and make only One Principle Point.

Content Mass and Density

In laying out the class it's important to take into account the "content mass" and "content density".

Content mass refers to the total amount of information in the class. The appropriate content mass for a presentation is determined by the audience – factors relating to this are audience familiarity with the subject matter and background information, the general level of education of the audience, and their predisposition to the presentation. The more familiar people are, the higher their level of education, and the more favourably predisposed to the presentation they are the more information they will be able to process.

Content density refers to the amount of mass in the time period. The longer the class, the lower the density. The more information, the higher the density. Symptoms of too high a content density include distraction and audience fatigue. You can lower the density by taking more time to cover the same material, or by covering less material in the same amount of time, elaborating on less points with more examples. To keep within a half hour time slot it would be necessary to reduce the amount of material being covered.

Travelling advice

Principle: You can travel further if you take rest breaks.

You should keep in mind the overall content mass of the class. Too much content mass will wear out the audience's good will and they will disconnect. You should also be aware of the content density at different phases of the class. Just as in physical exercise, exercising people's intellect benefits from an exert-release cycle that allows recovery. If you pour it on too heavily for too long the audience will not recover. If you work your audience's intellect for a moment, then allow them to relax, they will be able to sustain a longer engagement. You can allow them to relax by switching from philosophy to a story, by telling a joke, by changing the pace, by introducing new elements of presentation (such as a demonstration, a video, a song and dance routine, you get the idea).

Just before this section on content mass and density I inserted a story to reduce the content density. I filled out the material with a story that repeated and reinforced previous concepts, rather than introducing new concepts. Too much new stuff non-stop will wear people out.

Bear in mind that every time you switch pace in this way you basically distract the audience. Too much of this will reduce their retention and assimilation, as they lose the thread and focus on something else. At the same time, not giving enough rest breaks results in a content density that is too high. This will wear them out. Finding the balance between the two takes experience, familiarity with the audience, and above all sensitivity, to sense when the audience is being taxed, and give them the breaks they need.

Four types of classes

There are broadly speaking four types of class:

- 1. Educational**
- 2. Inspirational**
- 3. Persuasive**
- 4. Entertaining**

Every class contains elements of each, but the class will be predominantly one or the other.

An Educational class is concerned with downloading specific information. It will usually be something along the lines of: “Four principles of spiritual success”, “Three obstacles to enjoyment”, and so on, with a number of bulleted points for people to note down. It may be accompanied by a fill-in-the-blanks handout.

An Inspirational class is all about making people feel good and fired up. This kind of class is good to give when you are visiting somewhere. It may consist primarily of stories.

A Persuasive class is designed to focus on getting people to adopt a particular action point.

An Entertaining class is designed to engage the audience and distract them from what they had been thinking about. This type of class is light on content, but helps to bring people together and create a sense of community.

Using the five questions and the four styles, along with the guidelines above, you have the tools you need to build a skeleton for a good presentation.

Contrasting Classes

Here's the class from hell:

- An hour *or more* of excruciating delivery.
- A whole lot of information delivered with no way for me to understand what the heck they are talking about or how it has absolutely anything to do with me or the very real issues that are taking up most of my conscious and subconscious attention.
- No clear single point that I can fix on – rambling and free association - what was

that all about?

- No clear action recommendation, or
- Multiple action recommendations – so many that I can't remember them all, but I can remember that it sounds impossible, and why would I want to do this again?

Here's the ideal class:

- Extremely intriguing, entertaining and interesting opening that draws me in.
- An introduction that helps me understand what is being presented, its context, and how it relates to something that I am interested in hearing about
- A real sense of the person who is delivering the information – credibility of the messenger
- Material presented in a logical, structured fashion
- A single clear point that is repeated and reinforced
- A clear action recommendation
- A length of time that leaves me feeling like I would like to have heard more

To make classes like this requires a lot of effort, but you have to do it in order to make an effective presentation, and simply out of respect for the audience.

Let me put it like this: let's say you have 40 people in attendance. You speak for 30 minutes. That's 20 person-hours of time that the audience is giving to your presentation. Now, how much time are you giving to it? Have you done 20 hours of preparation?

For audiences of devotees massive amounts of information, rambling presentations, long classes, are all more or less acceptable. For new guests, the central question that they want answered is: “Is this for me? Is this relevant to me and my situation? Is this useful?”

You have to answer this question, while respecting their time and their attention span – which initially will be short.

Leveraging your team in class preparation

Sifting through the information and distilling it to the exact points that need to be given and nothing more, and expressing this in a concise and engaging presentation takes a lot of thought and preparation.

You can increase your leverage by doing team preparation. Rather than having one person do 20 hours of prep, you can team up and have four people do two or three hours together. That's a total of 8 – 12 hours. Discussing the needs of the people, their perceptions, the material that should be delivered, the best way to deliver it, examples, structure of the class, getting feedback from the team on previews, all these combine to create greater effectiveness.

The numbers are just rough guides, to communicate the principle: that we need to model the commitment that we want from the people. If we want people to come week after week and assimilate information and act on it, we need to put in the effort.

You can work out what works for you in leveraging a team in preparing classes through experimentation and experience. You may brainstorm together on a very high level, or with at a later stage around a determined theme, you may get feedback on your class before delivering it in order to refine the content and presentation. You may do all of these. The point is, the more people you have working the material, the more person-hours you can put into class preparation in a shorter time without overloading one person.

The Bigger Picture – The Classes

Let's now move to macro-level.

Oftentimes different persons give the class each week, each with their own perspective.

As the speaker we are rightly concerned about our class – how it opens, how it flows, how it ends, the density and mass of the content, the clarity of the message and the action recommendation. We want to make sure that we give a coherent, relevant, engaging, and easily assimilated presentation.

Imagine that each of the classes that are delivered are tightly crafted as described in the discussion above. Now switch perspectives to that of the public, and think about the bigger picture. The audience is not simply sitting through your class – ideally, and this is what we are working with – they are sitting through class after class, week after week.

Now ask yourself this: when you consider the consecutive classes and their aggregate effect - is there a coherent presentation? Is there a “one thing”?

Across weeks multiple action points may be prescribed by different speakers. The aggregate effect is confusing for the public. While one class may make a coherent, easily assimilated presentation with a clearly defined action point, the presentation the next week may compete with this by presenting a different, brilliantly presented and crystal clear point with accompanying action recommendation, followed by another one with a different presentation the following week, and so on...

From week to week people's determination to act on the information presented may be disrupted as they are encouraged to do different things by different speakers. Each class, while extremely effective in its own right, competes with the others, reducing the effectiveness of each one. The overall effect of multiple crystal clear classes may ultimately be the same as a confused and confusing class – no clear pathway forward for the audience.

In other words, while each class needs to be a carefully crafted presentation, the classes themselves need to be part of a carefully crafted strategic presentation, with each class contributing to the overall effect.

There are two considerations that we will now cover: first of all, some principles that

you can use to construct such a strategy for your presentation, along with some examples from our experience, and secondly, how to implement this in practice.

Principles for Constructing a Strategic Presentation

In order to get a strategic framework for your presentations, you need a strategic framework for your preaching.

Here are four principles that should be applied to create this:

- 1. Preach on Purpose**
- 2. Think steps not programs**
- 3. Narrow the focus**
- 4. Teach less for more**

Principle: Preach on Purpose

The first place to start is at the end. You need to start with a clear picture of what you are trying to achieve, and where you want people to go. Without a clear vision of objectives and outcomes you'll have a hard time achieving them, and you won't even know when you have. It will be hard to evaluate how things are going – does a particular change increase effectiveness or not? As the old saying goes: “He who does not know where he is going, often ends up somewhere else.”

A clear picture means: we want the Sunday Feast to do *this*. Here's an example: “we want the Sunday Feast to act as an introductory experience for new people to come and be introduced to Krishna Consciousness, and to draw them in, in terms of involvement to the point where they begin to actively participate and then go on to proactively develop their Krishna Consciousness.”

A point to be noted here is that a Sunday Feast is not a complete Krishna Conscious preaching strategy in and of itself. It can only be part of an overall strategic framework. It can't be “all things to all people”. You can broaden the usefulness of the Sunday feast through various methods, but at the end of the day, you need other strategic elements, such as week day prasadam and association opportunities, in-depth progressive studies, and a wider and deeper community structure.

So with that in mind, you now look at who goes in and who comes out. Who goes in? New people with little or no exposure to Krishna Consciousness. Who comes out? People who have firm faith that Krishna Consciousness offers something valuable to them, and are ready to take the next step in getting into it.

Otherwise, your purpose may be to provide a Sunday night get together for a community of Krishna conscious practitioners. Whatever the case may be, you should be clearly defined in what you are doing, and what's involved.

I personally believe that the only way you can make a program that caters to both the new people and the existing devotees is if the existing devotees' participation is active

in terms of creating an environment and program for preaching to the new people. If you try to construct a program that caters to both as a passive audience, you'll fail in creating something dynamic. My vision of a Sunday Feast is a preaching tool for taking new people and introducing them to Krishna Consciousness, and offering engagement for existing devotees in doing that.

In other words, the process is one of going from passive observer, to active participant, to co-creator - from public to staff - from guest to devotee. A conception such as this allows you to conceive of the two groups of people (guests and devotees) as two ends of a spectrum, and of a process of involvement that converts one to the other.

You may not agree with my conception, but you have to agree that I have one, and that's the point of the first principle. There may be many “right” ways to conceive of things, but you have to *have one*, and it has to be clear. You have to be clear about what you are doing from the outset. You have to *preach on purpose*.

Principle: Think Steps, Not Programs

Having defined your objectives, you can then start to think about the steps that are necessary to take people from where they are now, to where you want them to be. If your idea of the program is simply to provide a weekly social gathering for devotees, or cheap meals for people on a tight budget, or whatever, and not produce any transformation, then you can stop reading now.

Otherwise, in order to go through this process of transformation, people will need to take steps. You need to provide these steps, and they need to have three essential characteristics:

1. Clear

First of all you have to make the steps crystal clear. People may not be ready to take them, but they must be made aware of them. It should be very obvious to people what the next step for them to take is. You have to communicate it through all mediums— in the class, in the conversations with devotees over prasadam, in any handouts, on the websites. Everywhere – it has to be clearly and consistently communicated. If your staff are clear on the vision, they will be able to communicate that vision to the guests.

So you have to be clear on the steps that people need to take, and you have to communicate that through your classes.

2. Easy

If the steps you are asking people to take are too difficult, people are not going to take them. This kind of thing you work out by looking at your conversion rate through the steps. If it is “cold public” to “shave-up-and-move-into-the-ashram” you'll not have a great conversion rate. You have to break it down into smaller steps that people can actually take, and encourage them to take them one at a time. If your conversion rate

between one step and the next is too low, you need to introduce another intermediate step closer to the where the people are at.

The first steps should be as generic as possible. Later on people can take specific steps related to their particular situation in life in terms of their circumstances, but initially you want everyone moving together for greater momentum and simplicity of organization and communication.

3. Strategic

The steps have to take people toward your objective, without side-tracking them. Each step should lead on to the next one, which leads on to the next one, and so on up to the objective.

Once you have these steps worked out, and it's something that you need to continually review and refine in light of how it is actually panning out in the field, you can use this strategic perspective to generate your strategic framework for your classes.

Principle: Narrow the focus

You need to eliminate anything that falls outside these steps. Since you are preaching on purpose and you have an objective to achieve, you are only interested in promoting movement through this process. Don't talk about irrelevant things in the classes. Don't send off-point messages through any medium: what you say, or what you do.

Distill things down as much as possible. We use the principle: "Many ways in, one way out." Each step may have many ways that you can arrive. You can arrive at the Sunday Feast through the Loft, a flyer, the website, a friend, by accident, whatever, but once you're there, the next step is one, and one only.

The idea of Narrow the Focus is specifically applied to the class in the next principle.

Principle: Teach less for more

Teach less material for more retention. Teach less action points for more action.

You need to use the classes to move people along through the process that you have identified as taking them from A (where they are now) to B (where you want them to be), by moving through the steps that you have identified.

People only need to know what they need to know to take the next step. They don't need to be given everything all at once. That will overwhelm them. Research shows that too much choice is a bad thing. The time taken to make a decision increases as the number of options increases, and conversion rates fall off as some people make no decision at all. "It's all too complicated," they feel.

You should not make a class that recommends different courses of action. Nor should you recommend different things from week to week. Both of these create confusion and compete with themselves. If I tell you to do A one week, then B the next week, then C the next week, I've just told you to do three different things. Your response may well be: "Well, which one am I supposed to do?", or: "It all seems too complicated!"

You have to preach on point, week after week. Each speaker has to reinforce the same basic vision for progress. This will then build up the determination of the audience to take action. They will build up a clear picture of the process in terms of *what they should do next*.

Once you have a game plan your speakers can make that play. Without a plan, each speaker is basically on their own. Imagine a team of players on a field with no plan. Although they might be star players in their own right, as a team they suck. Each one does brilliantly, but they work at cross-purposes, some running in one direction, others in another. Now imagine a team with a clear game plan that they are executing. Their effectiveness is immediately increased.

Example:

Our game plan is for people to go from warming the seats during the class to serving out prasadam during the feast and helping to clean up afterwards. That's the next step.

It's easy, because they are already there – we're not asking them to come on another night, to another program, or to another venue. We work to facilitate it as much as possible.

It's clear – we announce it every week from the platform, put it in our handouts and on the website, and the staff all know that that's the strategy, and they work on encouraging people to take that next step - "Get Involved".

It's strategic – it leads on to getting involved in other services related to the Sunday Feast, such as music, setting up, kids' club, cooking, and so on.

The idea with this step is to bring people more closely into the association of devotees. The next step beyond this is to move into one of our small groups, which meet during the week and study Bhagavad-gita from start to finish thematically. That's a whole other topic, but the point is that we have a strategy, and it's based on having clearly defined and communicated steps that are as easy to take as we can make them, and strategically lead on to the next step toward a clearly defined objective.

When you have this strategic framework, any visiting speakers can simply ask: "What's the conclusion that I'm preaching?" You can then tell them what your focus is, and they can adjust their message so that it harmonizes with your overall preaching and contributes to the momentum that you are generating by consistently pushing in the same direction.

How to Implement the Strategic Presentation in Practice

Let's first of all consider some feedback that was received on the night that I visited the Auckland Loft. At their Sunday feast they had a guest feedback form that guests could use to provide feedback about the program. It had specific questions, including "What did you like", "What did you not like", and so on.

On the night that I was there, there were 16 forms returned. As I read over them, it became clear from the comments made that the strongest attractor for people was a sense of community. Maximizing this will create a more powerfully attractive and retentive program.

One other comment, a request, also stood out. One guest requested that the classes go through the Bhagavad-gita from start to finish.

Now I don't personally necessarily agree that doing a verse-by-verse through the Gita is the most effective way to preach to the public, but I think that this comment reveals something that is related to people's attraction to the sense of community.

Principle: Community needs continuity.

Community and communication are two very closely related words. If you have children, or are part of a family, then you know that community needs *continuity*. Communication also needs continuity in order to be coherent. Both are about making something "common", or shared.

Now if each of your classes across weeks are discrete entities, worlds unto themselves, then this does not contribute to continuity, and degrades both community and communication.

You can increase the power of your communication and the strength of your community by having continuity across weeks. You can do this by having a shared strategic vision that is being presented by the different speakers. If every week they are saying the same thing from different angles, people pick up on that. They start to tune in to the frequency.

You can further explicate this by creating series which span multiple weeks, and which build on a particular theme. This has several effects. First of all, it creates a more compelling experience. Yes, you will always be dealing with first time guests and people who come once only. But you're after a process of transformation, and that means that you need to be working with people who will come week after week. If you construct engaging, relevant, entertaining classes, and then link them in such a way that they interact, you create a compelling reason to come.

Without series, as a guest you can come back after a week, a month, or a year away, and it's like you never left. With a series, you can still construct things in such a way that people can jump in at any stage or sample a few different ones, but you can also create powerful value for people who elect to come each week during the series. It becomes a compelling reason to come back ("Don't miss next week's class!"), and it

also rewards those who elect to do so. Each class can build on concepts and refer back to other classes in the series. The effect over weeks is one of creating greater continuity, and hence greater community. It makes it easier for people to feel that they are part of something.

It also answers a desire that people have for a sense of progress. The person who asked for the systematic presentation of the Gita is asking for two things: they are asking for a comprehensive presentation, and they are asking for a sense of progress.

Without series the program is a little bit adrift. There is not a clearly identifiable direction or measure of progress. With a series you get a very real sense of direction, and measurable progress.

The person who comes once, once in a while, or for the first time will always be dropping in on a class which exists as a discrete, distinct entity. The experience for regular attendees, however, will be different. They will be participating in community.

Principle: Organizational Identity fosters Organizational Integrity.

Community means shared understandings, values, history and experience. By creating series which span four to eight weeks, you are creating the opportunity to take part together in a shared experience.

Another benefit of using series is that it taps into a powerful method that people use for organizing and making sense of reality – that of stories, or narratives.

In every community the historian, or story-teller, is a central figure. They relate the histories and stories that bind the community together with a shared heritage.

You can use series to create a meta-class structure that further communicates your values to people. By focusing on themes and issues that you wish to address you are able to further shape the values of the community.

So you can combine the format of series with the strategic focus generated using the four principles (Preach on Purpose, Think Steps, Not Programs, etc.) mentioned above, to generate an attractive and effective presentation.