

Jane's Journey

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Introduction

From behind the counter of her health food store Jane looks into the community restaurant. With warm autumn light shining through large windows a large group of vibrantly dressed Indian pilgrims sit at tables eating lunch assuring that this weekend will be a busy one at New Vrindaban. "These few days will boost sales," she thinks, as she looks over her varied assortment of health food and natural products.

New Vrindaban is a spiritual community in northern West Virginia. Just south of Wheeling, the community is set in the tree-filled Appalachian Mountains. The community, founded in 1968, was transformed from a run-down farm into a spiritual commune complete with "Golden Palace," temple, lodge, restaurant, and numerous stores. The residents of New Vrindaban practice a religion known as Hare Krishna, an eastern religion with ties to Hinduism. Most residents of this community live a highly structured lifestyle with hours of scheduled chanting, worship, and religious service while living the four-principle life style, which requires abstaining from gambling, intoxicants, illicit sex, and meat. New Vrindaban is based around the concept of "simple living and higher thinking," but the community is not without controversy. In the 1980's the community was enveloped in scandals based on dishonesty, hypocrisy, and greed. This is the personal story of Jane, a devotee and New Vrindaban resident since 1980 who has journeyed through the Hare Krishna movement.

Eager for spirituality

Jane never imagined as a child that she would one day be living in one of the most devout religious communities in the United States. She never imagined herself raising a family in the mountains of West Virginia and she never believed that her family would be followers of a religious movement centered on Indian tradition.

Many children have their religious lives shaped by family views; some find spirituality through an unpleasant life experience; some choose no specific path whatsoever. When she was two-years old, Jane's parents separated and from that moment Jane's future was put in the hands of her mother. As a result of an agnostic household, Jane describes her early spiritual life as rather bleak.

Her religious frustration did not stem from a lack of education or experience; she was given lessons on Christianity in her elementary school. The problem could have been her dissatisfaction with the communist political philosophy of her step-father and family friends, or simply a frustration with the lack of guidance given by her mother. Jane never felt pushed or pressured to adopt a particular religious or atheistic direction and felt free to explore many ideas and faiths, but also felt unsatisfied with the simple idea that your body was just a body and nothing more.

As she grew so did her spiritual options; with no limitations or reservations on the topic, Jane began to attempt to remedy her dissatisfaction with her mother's teachings by contemplating and searching for the meaning of life. Jane began to explore other beliefs such as Buddhism and Taoism; needless to say, Jane's journey to find her faith was beginning and it would evolve greatly as time went on. Buddhism, as she interpreted it, seemed more of a way to vanish from reality. She found she was unconvinced by the idea of "meditating into nothingness"

and “losing your own identity.” Jane did not want to lose her identity, she wanted to find it.

Music makes the heart grow fonder

At home in Newcastle, England, seventeen-year old Jane walked into an old record shop. Her fingers calmly rummaged through the records, and a unique and colorful album caught her eye. She removed it from its place to take closer look, and found that the cover showed an interesting couple unlike anything Jane had ever seen. Their white faces caught her attention and their bright dresses adorned with lovely flowers were intriguing. Drawn to its aesthetic appeal and low price, Jane decided to buy it. After listening to the album, she realized it was unlike anything she had heard before; it had strange instruments and odd lyrics. Jane soon found herself abandoning her old records and listening to *The Radha Krishna Temple*—produced by former Beatle, George Harrison—over and over. She did not know it at the time, but the lyrics of the record she listened to relentlessly, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna” were much more than alluring lyrics, these words were a peek into her own destiny.

A spiritual journey

Jane does not like to use the term “convert” when describing her acceptance of the Hare Krishna religion. The word implies that one was once involved in another religion and then had a change of heart. This is not the case for Jane, who insists that her religious experience is more of a transitional “spiritual journey.” After repeatedly listening to the record she had grown so attracted to, another event directed her on the path of her spiritual journey.

About a year after she had purchased *The Radha Krishna Temple* album, Jane again found herself in the presence of Hare Krishna when she met an assortment of devotees

performing chants and dances in the bustling London streets. Later that year by interest and request, Jane attended a “hippie” festival in a London airfield. As she entered the hangars the pungent scent of incense calmed her as she took in the sight of the intriguing deities and dancing devotees. The softly spoken Sanskrit filled her and although she could not understand, she began to cry as she realized “she was home”. At the end of the event Jane was given a portrait of Krishna and the opportunity to drop everything and leave the gathering with a group of followers of the movement. As she watched the van of Hare Krishna devotees drive away, Jane was filled with a feeling of joy as she knew this was not the last chance she would have to join them. During this event she discovered the connection between the music she had grown to love and the energetic, kind, and loyal men and women with whom she had spoken. As her interest and devotion grew, so did her relationship with Krishna. Soon she began to experiment with the harmonious chanting on her own.

Could it be that after years of scouring through books on religions such as Taoism and Buddhism that Jane found her place in the spiritual world? After all of her searching Jane had finally found an explanation for life that left her feeling “content and satisfied.” As she experimented on her own with mantras and chanting and attended the local temple, Jane began to feel that this movement, Vaishnavism and Hare Krishna, was “the whole package.” The active lifestyle and devout philosophy consisting of schedules and hours of devotional praise were a perfect match for Jane’s personality and lifestyle. Jane was an active and eager person who enjoyed staying busy, and the Hare Krishna lifestyle provided busyness and consistency. Instead of just praying thirty minutes a day or even just once a week, Jane witnessed individual souls from all walks of life actively uniting together to dance and worship multiple times a day. All of these different people, from different lifestyles and backgrounds were working toward the same

goal, Krishna Consciousness. Jane soon realized that in order to make the most out of this new religious experience she had to try it as a lifestyle; she had to dive head first into the movement and make worship of Krishna the most important aspect in her life. The sacrifices spelled out in the four principles were not too demanding for her since she had previously given up intoxicants, was already vegan, and had never had an affinity towards gambling. Giving up illicit sex was also not difficult since she had just ended a relationship with her long-term boyfriend and the father of her first child.

Every journey has its bumps

Today Jane is a very independent woman in the community of New Vrindaban. She has held leadership positions in the community and even owns the community health food store. She has successfully raised her children as educated intellectuals with open minds. She has displayed all the characteristics of a strong, devout female Krishna devotee, but things were not always this way. There have been times in Jane's life where she was not always permitted to display her independent streak.

In traditional Krishna marriages, love is not the primary concern. A concern for love is replaced with a hope of better serving Krishna with a devout Krishna-conscious family. Jane's first marriage followed the more customary lines of Krishna marriage. The marriage was arranged and her first husband was not necessarily the best fit for her. He believed that a man should be a guru to his wife and that his wife should ultimately serve him. This did not match well with Jane's personality; she had grown up in a feminine household with little male influence and this in turn molded her into a bold, self-reliant woman. Realizing that this was not the role of a typical Hare Krishna woman, Jane chose to suppress this aspect of her personality for the sake

of her spirituality journey. At the time, she was simply serving Krishna the best way she knew how, through marriage.

Ultimately, the marriage with Jane's first husband ended but Jane's love for Krishna remained unbroken. From that experience she began to see a little more of her former personality shine through and she continued on to do great things inside New Vrindaban and for the Hare Krishna movement in general.

Reflections of a journey

Jane entered the Hare Krishna movement as a young woman swept "up in the whirlwind," but her spirituality has brought her to a higher place more in key with her independent character. Ultimately Jane has triumphed over many obstacles as a woman and as a Hare Krishna. She has lived through the controversy that enveloped New Vrindaban in the 1980's, she has overcome a rough marriage, and she has risen to the occasion through her involvement in high positions throughout the community. According to Jane, she never did "convert" to Hare Krishna, instead she experienced an evolution of mind, soul, and spirituality.