

## **Spirituality for Thinking People:**

### **One Man's Conversion to Hare Krishna**

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*The Global Leadership Center at Ohio University documented the conversion stories of Hare Krishna devotees at New Vrindavan, the Krishna community near Moundsville, West Virginia. The students formed teams to interview devotees and write exposition pieces showcasing each member's unique story.*

*Hare Krishna, also known as Vaisnavism, is an orthodox sect of Hinduism that worships a god similar to Christians and Jews, though the god is called Krishna. In the 1960s, the religion was introduced to the US from India by a man named Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada. The devotees of this religion practice a lifestyle regulated by their devotion to Krishna and these four main principles: eat no meat, fish or eggs; drink no alcohol and take no drugs; do not gamble; and remain celibate except for purposes of procreation within marriage. The devotees strive to maintain a simple life through the worship of Krishna.*

In 2000, Keith Harper was sitting on the floor of his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, senses heightened from mind-altering drugs. As he meditated in this state, he searched his soul for spiritual meaning. He was looking for deep meaning from a god he didn't know well. Though never formally religious, Keith had always been spiritual.

“I was thirsty for something with substance, so I started reading anything and everything. I was searching for the spiritual meaning in life, but nothing was quenching the thirst that I had deep in my soul.” Keith eventually found the sustenance for his soul that he was looking for, but he had to move to the other side of the country to discover it.

Later that same year, still searching for meaning in his life, Keith found himself biking through the sunny, open-air streets of Tempe, Arizona. When he got to the city, Keith located a cheap room to rent in a man's home, as well as a means of transportation, buying a rusted old Huffy for \$20 from a student. He had temporarily dropped out of the University of Michigan to enroll in classes at Arizona State University in Tempe and ultimately to embark upon a “spiritual quest.”

As he continued riding his bike down the street he happened upon a bespectacled man wearing an orange robe and hat with markings on his nose and forehead. To Keith, he looked as though he had forgotten to rub in his sunscreen. Stereotyping this man as a religious figure, and misconstruing him as a bible-thumping evangelical sort, Keith approached the man. The orange-robed man stood behind a table covered with religious texts bearing strange names and pictures. Keith intended to logically argue against every point the man could make regarding whatever religion he was pushing.

The man that Keith met “wasn't there to beat people over the head with the Bible; he stood there with the idea of helping the world.” The man's message of living to improve the

world by working in harmony with one another and not living selfishly charmed Keith so much that when he was offered a book, he accepted it. The man asked only that Keith give a donation of whatever amount he saw fit. He donated a \$20 bill, the only money he had in his wallet.

“It was absolutely the first time I had ever given in charity, but the man’s philosophies gave me that inspiration.” Keith said.

The book he was given was the Bhagavad-Gita and it dealt with the philosophies of Krishna Consciousness. Keith began reading immediately. He read while he ate, he read while he walked and he spent nearly 20 hours a day perusing the pages of the book. He did not stop reading until he had finished all 763 pages.

“All my life I had had these pieces to this large puzzle strewn about randomly. With the book, I felt that the man had given me the cover picture for the puzzle . . . he had given me a way to put these pieces together.”

Keith enrolled in classes at the university and decided to visit a nearby Krishna temple in Phoenix. Like his experience with the book, he was immediately enraptured with the people living there and their lifestyle. He decided to move in after his first visit.

“At the temple, I lived with 20 to 30 year-old Indian guys who hardly spoke English. We communicated through the soul. It was the first time in my life I actually had real friends.” He would dance with the devotees and continuously chant the names of Krishna while some played traditional Indian instruments – in a ceremony known as Kirtan, all in worship of their god, Krishna.

While living in the temple, Keith maintained the Krishna Consciousness lifestyle of waking at four in the morning to meditate and worship. He also preserved his own personal style of dreadlocks that hung down to his shoulders. Keith quit doing drugs, increased his focus and

began to receive higher grades in class. This change shocked his peers so much so that they pestered him incessantly for the “grade-weed” they were sure he was smoking.

After a semester at Arizona State University, Keith returned to Ann Arbor and re-enrolled at the University of Michigan. In traditional Krishna fashion, Keith shaved most of his head, leaving a small tuft of hair on the back of his skull and received a spiritual name, Chaitanya, which means "life force." Chaitanya's friends and family were not upset when they learned how he had changed, though they were not as excited as he had hoped. They thought it was a passing phase in his life, but eventually learned to embrace it.

Now back in Michigan, he and a friend wanted to open a temple similar to the one in Phoenix. However, Chaitanya's friend eventually backed out of the endeavor, deciding to get married instead. Still inspired to follow the devotee lifestyle, Chaitanya researched and found a Krishna community located in West Virginia called New Vrindavan.

Chaitanya moved there and has now lived in the community for nearly five years because he finds the lifestyle attractive. All of his needs for food, clothing and transportation are met and he sees it as having more structure and focus than the society outside of it. Within New Vrindavan, he forms part of a four-person management team dealing with what he describes as “general political business.”

“This is my career,” Chaitanya says, when asked if he would work a job outside the community. “Money is more of a burden than a benediction. It's a curse to have.” With money, Chaitanya never felt satisfied. Before living as a devotee to Krishna, no matter how much money he had, he always wanted more. The community functions independently. It grows its own food and produces its own milk because most devotees are vegetarian, which Chaitanya enjoys for its simplicity.

Chaitanya views his conversion as building a greater understanding of the god for whom he had searched his whole life. He is now much closer with his friends and family than ever before. They speak more often now that he has found a path through life that affords him inner peace. Chaitanya is happier at New Vrindavan than he has been anywhere else his entire life. “I couldn’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be,” he said. “I’m on the path to success.” Right now, Chaitanya sees himself not in a religion but rather a “path of godliness. It’s spirituality for thinking people.”