

Wandering Soul: The Path to Discovering Krishna Consciousness

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The Harvard Pluralism Project actively engages members of a wide variety of religious populations within the United States providing a source to better understand the inner workings of religious communities. It creates a dialogue through which religious communities can better understand each other and themselves. The project is not designed to change one's religious beliefs, but rather to provide a resource of knowledge to have a clearer understanding of diverse faiths.

With a focus on international affairs, the Global Leadership Center (GLC) at Ohio University has been offered the opportunity to work with Harvard composing articles about Hare Krishna devotees for the Pluralism Project. In addition, the GLC has conducted extensive research of the Hare Krishna culture and religion as well as the Hare Krishna community in New Vrindaban.

The start of the Hare Krishna religion began with the immigration of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in 1965, the Hare Krishna leader in the West, spreading Krishna consciousness across the nation. Hare Krishna is a religion that falls under the umbrella of Hinduism following four basic principles of no illicit sex, meat, intoxicants, or gambling which enables them to lead a pure way of life thus achieving Krishna consciousness. A religion often associated with the hippie culture, it attracted many young adults and college students in the late 1960's. The religious movement was so strong devotees decided to establish Hare Krishna self sustaining communities across the U.S. In 1968 the first Krishna community was created in New Vrindaban, located in Moundsville, West Virginia.

“Why am I doing this?” Chris Fici asked himself this question while delivering pizzas one evening. Just the week before, the 26-year old college graduate stayed at New Vrindaban absorbed in the celebration of Krishna, singing and dancing. Back at home, he was working a mindless job living from paycheck to paycheck and routinely using marijuana. At first marijuana made him more aware of his surroundings and quickly his drug use became an addiction.

Growing up in a Catholic household in suburban Detroit, his strong religious roots helped to foster his personal relationship with God at an early age, but he still felt a sense of spiritual emptiness. As a teenager he and his family stopped going to church on a regular basis, only attending holiday masses.

During Chris’s sophomore year at the University of Michigan he was hoping to discover a religion which could awaken him spiritually. He said, “I started to question my traditional values and wanted to explore an eastern religion.” One day as he was walking on campus, Chris received a pamphlet from a Hare Krishna devotee. After reading it, his curiosity enticed him to speak with the devotee. Chris began to look into meditation, a practice that is used heavily in the Hare Krishna religion. Soon, his interest in meditation fueled his curiosity to go deeper into Krishna consciousness. After finding the Hare Krishna religion, Chris stated, “It was as if it were a natural extension of what I had already believed in.” What drew him to the religion were the demanding lifestyle and the fact that it was something he was going to have to work for.

When first studying Hare Krishna, “I found that I could not doubt the philosophy of the religion, I could not find fault in it.” There was no way to prove it untrue. In Catholicism, “you go to mass and participate in a few activities and are considered Christian, but with Krishna consciousness you really have to work hard and devote yourself to become closer to God.” Hare

Krishna provides the devotee with structure to one day reach moksha, the highest level of spiritual consciousness. Chris believes it to be a complete religious philosophy and an opportunity to give and receive so much.

Chris' movement toward the religion at first was gradual. He had studied the religion for five years before he decided to commit to Krishna. The transition was gradual because "I was in college, I had a girlfriend, and other organizations and commitments. I just wasn't ready to give it all up just yet." After graduating from The University of Michigan with a degree in Film and Video, he remained in a state of confusion. Chris was unable to hold a job and had financial troubles. His interest still remained with the Hare Krishna religion and the external factors he faced in his life justified his decision to move to New Vrindaban and become a devotee.

The transition to New Vrindaban was easy for Chris. He enjoyed chanting the mantras, vegetarian food, and believed in the power of meditation. He was also inspired to convert to Krishna by the people he had met from the religion as well as the peacefulness of Hare Krishna historical figures.

Chris believes since moving to New Vrindaban that he has become a more developed, and a more conscious human being. He has developed a passion to help others with Hare Krishna. His alternative lifestyle has sparked a desire to make a positive impact on society, something he previously imagined doing, but could not find the means to do. Since becoming a part of the New Vrindaban community, Chris is rejuvenated through spiritual practice. He states, "I am now working with the right people in the right environment to make a positive impact on society." Since coming to New Vrindaban he has become more responsible for himself and his actions and is grateful for his experience thus far.

However, being a Hare Krishna devotee is a daily adventure filled with organizing, managing, sobriety, celibacy and the frustrations, as Chris stated, of “getting things done.” Although his devotion is strong, Chris still misses many activities such as watching football games, and listening to music and radio shows. Still, nothing has pulled him from his path. He has to observe himself at every moment and analyze if what he is doing or thinking is right. When speaking of his transition into the faith and new lifestyle he states, “You’re always going to have attachments; it is a matter of facing the process and doing it while witnessing the example of others.

Chris strongly believes that he will “stay in New Vrindaban for at least 5 to 10 years or however long it takes for me to become the best devotee I can be... even if it takes the rest of my life.” This “demonstrates” his loyalty to Krishna and one can see his devotion in his daily activities. He attends religious service everyday, talks to college students about Krishna consciousness and is currently trying to implement a new radio station in New Vrindaban. Although Chris does not have a professional career, he is still utilizing his skills learned in college for the Hare Krishna movement.

When looking at Chris with his shaved head and modest clothing; the typical appearance of a devotee, one can see how happy he is and the impact that Hare Krishna has made on his life. Chris feels he now has the chance to leave a positive mark on the world through his services. He feels his service has given him the opportunity to make changes and enlighten others, something that he never could have accomplished delivering pizza.