

A Quest for Dharma Sankirtan's Story

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The Global Leadership Center, or the GLC, at Ohio University is a two-year certificate program that involves both Ohio University and international students. Every quarter, the students work in teams on real-world projects with real-world clients, both in the USA and abroad, in an experience-based education environment.

The fall 2007 project was created in conjunction with the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. The Pluralism Project is an organization which studies the ever-changing religious landscape of the United States. The GLC worked with the New Vrindaban Hare Krishna community in Moundsville, West Virginia. Hare Krishna is a Hindu sect that came to the U.S. in 1968. This quarter, every GLC team worked with a Hare Krishna devotee, detailing his or her experiences and reasons for converting to Hare Krishna and moving to New Vrindaban. The following is one devotee's story.

A Quest for Dharma

Sankirtan's conversion to the Hare Krishna faith in 1973 and his decision to move to the West Virginia Hare Krishna community, New Vrindaban, were entirely uncharacteristic of him. As a child and into early adulthood, Sankirtan, whose birth name was Andy, "just wasn't a joiner." At the age of 12, his friends tried to get him to join the Boy Scouts. However, he was not interested in any kind of organization whatsoever. He retained this attitude about organizations, including religion, as he entered college in 1965.

Before his conversion, Sankirtan lived in Manhattan's lower east side, studying film at City College of New York. His apartment was near the very first Hare Krishna center in the United States, and he occasionally saw the Krishnas chanting in Central Park with their heads shaved, wearing traditional Indian garments.

Upon his first encounter with the Krishnas, Sankirtan was torn. "My gut reaction was both an attraction to the devotees and also a kind of revulsion. I was attracted to their ability to be carefree and chant in public, but on the other hand I wondered why they would have to change their appearance to delve into spirituality because I thought spirituality was beyond outside appearances."

During this time he met his wife, Ruci, whose birth name was Ruth, and the two were involved with the hippie counter-culture movement. Sankirtan said, "The whole hippie movement was about questioning the authority of the government, of your parents, and of the church. I was interested in spirituality but not in joining any organized religion."

In 1969, one of his filmmaking classes required that he make a documentary. He decided to focus on the Krishnas because "These Hare Krishnas looked pretty photogenic with their

orange robes and shaved heads, chanting in the streets.” At the same time, Ruci decided to write a paper for her sociology class on what type of people join the Hare Krishnas.

He and his wife started going to the Hare Krishna temple and discovered more about the group’s beliefs. Two elements of the faith peaked the couple’s interest. The first was a realization that life has a deeper meaning. “I gained the understanding that people are eternal spiritual souls rather than bodies destined to perish.” The second element was chanting, bringing out a natural and pure state of mind through the recitation of a mantra. This sense of peace coupled with the relaxing and enlightening effects of meditation continued to draw the couple to the temple.

In their continued exploration of the religion, Sankirtan and Ruci followed the Krishnas as they chanted in the streets and read the Bhagavad Gita, the main scripture of the Hindu tradition. What was once a college project morphed into a spiritual journey. Sankirtan and his wife were struck by “the devotees’ ability to live a meditative, scenic lifestyle in the midst of this Western civilization.” The Krishnas’ vow to remain free of meat, intoxicants, illicit sex, and gambling was a sharp contrast to what the hippies were doing. After both projects ended, Sankirtan and Ruci began to incorporate the principles of the Hare Krishna tradition into their own lives, though they still had no intention of joining the movement.

After graduation, Sankirtan and Ruci decided to leave New York City and hitchhiked to Nova Scotia, Canada to move in with friends. They had saved up some money, so they had time to simply reflect on nature. Being away from the busy city gave them more time to study the Bhagavad Gita, which explained that no matter how successful one was in material endeavors, life was ultimately unfulfilling if one didn’t follow his or her dharma. Although it has many connotations, dharma essentially means “to follow one’s God-given propensities.”

After six months in Nova Scotia, Sankirtan and Ruci began to run short on money, so they hitchhiked to visit a friend in Madison, Wisconsin. The couple knew of a variety of counter-culture activities happening there, including an active theater group. Given that Sankirtan had been involved in theater most of his life, this city was an appropriate choice.

Once in Madison, their lives began to fall into place, both materially and spiritually. Sankirtan and Ruci quickly found work at a daycare center and had an apartment of their own within a month. At the same time, they met a Krishna couple from California who came to open a Hare Krishna center in Madison. Sankirtan explained there seemed to be a higher being involved in this encounter: “It’s interesting because they appeared at a time when we needed more guidance in our spiritual life.”

The Krishna couple only stayed in Madison for four months before leaving for Detroit. After their departure, Sankirtan and his wife took an active role in the religion. They began holding Krishna programs and vegetarian feasts in their own home. In the Krishna tradition, it is customary to invite people to free vegetarian feasts. All food is offered to Krishna, making it “Prashadam,” or blessed food, and this is a way to share Krishna with non-believers. Sankirtan said, “Around town, we became known as the Hare Krishnas, even though we didn’t adopt their physical appearance.”

Ruci soon became pregnant with their first child, and Sankirtan found himself at a pivotal point in his life. His childcare job did not provide enough to support his growing family, and he had to decide whether to return to college and get a masters degree to teach theater or to dedicate his life to the Hare Krishna faith by joining the temple.

They made their decision after listening to a broadcast from a Christian radio station in 1973. The program featured a couple who had a comfortable lifestyle before they joined the

church, but then sold their home and became Christian missionaries in Africa. When Sankirtan and Ruci heard the kind of commitment this couple had made, they both realized their need to make a similar commitment to their own faith. It was then they moved to Chicago and officially joined the temple. He reflected, “We had evolved in our lives and spirituality, and it was time.”

In 1976, after their second child was born, they moved to New Vrindaban Hare Krishna Community to raise their two children. When they joined the temple, Sankirtan had renounced his life-long love of theater to immerse himself in his faith. He saw it as a very black-and-white issue in which he had to choose one or the other. Although he found a great peace in the Hare Krishna faith, he then began to realize his attraction to theater could be used to help him in his path as a devotee. He soon began his own theater group at New Vrindaban, which performed for over a decade until he had to end his involvement because of a heart attack.

Currently, he performs as a solo storyteller offering multi-cultural programs at schools and colleges. Sankirtan explained, “I saw that to be involved in spiritual life for the long haul, you have to fulfill your dharma, your calling. That calling is both material and spiritual. I am following my dharmic calling spiritually by engaging in the spiritual tradition, but I also had to follow my dharmic calling materially through my theater propensities.”

It has been 34 years since Ruci and Sankirtan heard the Christian broadcast and made the choice to join the Hare Krishna movement officially. Sankirtan says he has never regretted his decision to dedicate himself fully to his faith. “It opened the door to my higher self. Just to be able to understand myself as a spiritual being rather than just somebody who was living out some meager existence in the world.”

For more information on his presentations, visit www.sacredvoices.com.