

Is there Something Better?

by Leah Wainscott, David Jones, Emily Mitolo, Christina Conrad

Global Leadership Center, Ohio University

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About the Project

The Global Leadership Center of Ohio University has been working with Harvard University since 2004 in pursuit of spreading religious and cultural awareness by contributing to the Pluralism Project. The Global Leadership Center is a two-year certificate program which “strives to develop internationally-minded, locally-engaged leaders in all walks of life.”

In fall of 2007, students were given a project charge which required them to tell the story of a Hare Krishna devotee’s conversion to the Hare Krishna religion and his/her decision to move to New Vrindaban to develop this faith. The feature story following will illustrate that charge.

Hare Krishna is a multi dimensional religion that has been practiced on American soil since it was established here in 1965. Hare Krishna followers believe the Hindu god Krishna is the Supreme Being and worship him as such. The beliefs and practices of the movement are closely related with Hindu Vedic philosophies, thus resulting in Hare Krishna being credited as a sect of Hinduism and properly referred to as Vaishnavism. One of the main goals of Vaishnavism is to obtain “Krishna Consciousness.” Hare Krishna preaches that the time we live in is evil, the age of Kali. The only way to gain salvation is to attain Krishna-consciousness by way of ethical living and chanting the Maha Mantra, a habitual prayer to Krishna.

Tucked away in the hills of Marshall County, West Virginia, New Vrindaban is a sanctuary for Hare Krishna followers. Since its first brick was laid in 1968, New Vrindaban has been a Krishna Conscious community where believers live, work, and worship.

Krishna: The Perfect Match

“I laugh every time I tell the story because it seems so bizarre.” Krishna Bhava, previously known as Christine, said as she recounts the day of her arranged marriage. Even now she admits it is unusual to her. Although she had never met her soon-to-be husband, she said she “didn’t really give it much thought.” Krishna Bhava, otherwise known as KB, still insists that it was both “intuition” and her God, Krishna, which has guided her marriage with Kripamaya for more than thirty years.

A box of sand in the middle of the room was glowing with flames as KB and Kripamaya threw their “sinful desires of the heart” into the Fire Sacrifice during their wedding ceremony. At age nineteen they shared their first words together at the altar. Although they had never spoken, they knew they were meant to be together. As part of the traditional Indian Hare Krishna custom, marriage was the day when two virtual strangers promised to devote the rest of their lives serving each other and their God together.

During their adolescence, Kripamaya and KB were living separate lives in Delaware and New York respectively, searching for answers to life’s most absorbing questions. Their lives had obvious parallels. Each came from a dysfunctional family and left home at an early age seeking independence. KB reflects on her sense of dissatisfaction at the time, “a less than perfect life always leads to questions like ‘is there something better?’”

Kripamaya, previously known as John, was surrounded by a community-oriented Quaker family, yet felt isolated and alone. He felt disconnected from his mother because he did not share her enthusiasm for the Quaker religion. At the age of seventeen he lost the connection with his

father, finding out the man who raised him was not his birth father. John felt depressed and began to search for “an alternative to his depressed life.”

Miles away in New York, KB was attending a Catholic grammar school. Her parents worked diligently in order to provide for Christine and her siblings. She felt the reverberations of her mother’s busy work schedule and her father’s habitual alcohol use. Unconvinced that this was the life she wanted, she sought refuge in yoga. Christine’s mother understood the lack of parental support at home and allowed her to leave for a summer yoga program at a Hare Krishna Center.

All John knew of the Hare Krishna movement were “robes and bald heads” he had seen on a Delaware city street. “Scared out of his wits,” he crossed the street to keep his distance from them. While crossing, never would he foresee his future devotion to the Hare Krishna movement.

John’s initial fear transformed into curiosity when he stumbled across free yoga lessons at the local Hare Krishna center. Yoga wasn’t the only lifestyle change for John at this time. After discovering the horrors behind the meat production industry, vegetarianism was the only option. Coincidentally yoga and vegetarianism are staples of the Hare Krishna movement; for John these became the catalysts for his decision to join.

Today at 52 years old, Kripamaya can be found worshipping at a Hare Krishna temple near his modest home in West Virginia. The aroma of Bombay encompasses him as the sounds of the Maha Mantra reverberate through his mind; a feeling of utter peace consumes him. Engulfed in overwhelming bliss, he recognized himself as being in the purest state of mind, also known as Krishna Consciousness. Kripamaya is indisputably convinced his decision join the

Hare Krishna faith was the right one. He explains that his and KB's journey to pursuing Krishna Consciousness was not a conversion but rather an addition to their way of life.

One of the philosophies that drew KB and Kripamaya to the Hare Krishna religion is the concept of reincarnation. Neither individual wished to believe that this one lifetime would determine their eternal fate. KB still cringes at the premise of final judgment; possibly encountering ceaseless burning flames. Complementing reincarnation is the concept of karma, the cycle of cause and effect in past, present, and future lives. As Hare Krishna devotees, they live day to day assuming the actions they make will influence the outcome of their next lives.

As newlyweds, Kripamaya and KB were in search for a temple to begin their lives together. Kripamaya and KB found their way to a sacred temple in West Virginia by "default" rather than by choice. Their previous temple in Columbus had collapsed, sending them over 200 miles east to New Vrindaban. But in Kripamaya's heart, he had always known he wanted to live there as a devotee, "the whole temple seemed to sparkle...it was very clean and had a beautiful smell. It was a beautiful way to celebrate God."

At New Vrindaban, they have learned to serve both each other and Krishna, strengthening each relationship simultaneously. Kripamaya and KB agree that the personal journey of Krishna Consciousness is improved by having the bond of marriage. Kripamaya emphasizes how helpful it is to have a partner through the religious journey. Marriage and raising two children has undoubtedly empowered their relationship with both each other and Krishna.

While having dinner with a young Vaisnavite couple, KB and Kripamaya were requested to reveal the secret to their successful marriage. To Kripamaya, the answer was obvious,

“Because it pleases Krishna.” Caring for both family and Krishna has proven to be both a satisfying and enjoyable experience for KB. She explains this parallel, “After having a family that you care for and make many sacrifices and compromises for, you can do the same for God.” Still worshippers at New Vrindaban, the couple continues their lifelong endeavor of building a deeper relationship with Krishna and each other.