

A Life of Cultivation: Farming & Spirituality

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Preface

The Harvard Pluralism Project aims to document and study various religious communities within the growingly diverse United States population. One such religion is Vaishnavism, which is essentially an orthodox sect of Hinduism. Hare Krishna, one form of Vaishnavism, was brought to the United States from India in the mid 1960's recruiting many followers primarily from the hippie movement. One of the main Hare Krishna communities in the United States, New Vrindaban, is located in West Virginia. The Global Leadership Center (GLC) from Ohio University has partnered with the Pluralism Project to contribute information and insight on this community.

The GLC is a two-year certificate program in which students work in teams on a total of six projects for real clients. These projects are internationally focused and have business, communication, educational, and cultural diversity themes. In this particular project, teams were paired with a Hare Krishna devotee living in New Vrindaban and were responsible for interviewing them to ultimately tell their story. The story is focused on one devotee's conversion to the Hare Krishna movement and his/her decision to move to New Vrindaban to develop his/her faith. The following story is about Tapahpunja, formerly Terry Sheldon, and conveys his conversion experience.

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“My conversion was more a gradual adaptation of absorbing myself in the culture of Krishna consciousness,” Tapahpunja explained. His conversion took nearly six years and completely changed his life. For over thirty years he has lived in New Vrindaban, a Hare Krishna community in West Virginia. Here, he has fully immersed himself in Krishna consciousness by embracing the values of “simple living” and “high thinking.” Simple living involves refraining from things seen as material indulgences such as intoxication, gambling, illicit sex, and eating meat. For Hare Krishna devotees, the real pleasures of life are found in connecting to and serving God.

In the many years that Tapahpunja has lived and served in New Vrindaban, he has followed a monastic schedule, getting up around 3:30 am and going to the temple at 4 am. There, he chants, meditates, and participates in singing and dancing to worship Krishna with the rest of the community. After that, he goes to work at The Garden of Seven Gates, where he is responsible for cultivating crops to help sustain the community. On weekends, Tapahpunja is busy welcoming guests into his half acre Teaching Garden, and explaining the importance of organic farming. He has a strong background in farming, having grown up on his small family farm in northern Michigan.

It was both his love of farming and his involvement in hippie culture that were contributing factors to his conversion. He joined the hippie culture because when he graduated high school, he saw four options for himself: go to college, fight in Vietnam, work in a factory, or become a hippie. After one year of college he dropped out with the realization that he was not interested in a career; he was looking for a calling. The epicenter of the counter-culture movement at that time was California, so Tapahpunja

moved to Berkeley where he lived on the streets. It was also in Berkeley that he first came in contact with Hare Krishna devotees, who hosted a free weekly vegetarian feast. After attending a few of these feasts and getting to know some of the Hare Krishna devotees, he began to admire their genuine compassion and dedication to serving others.

While in California, Tapahpunja started to feel the need to truly “find himself” and decided to move back to Michigan in order to do so. By chance, a friend of his owned some remote land that Tapahpunja was allowed to live on and cultivate. One day, a man with a shaved head wearing Tulasi neck beads (which identified him as a Hare Krishna devotee) wandered onto the property and asked Tapahpunja if he could stay for awhile. Though this was unexpected, Tapahpunja warmly welcomed the guest to stay.

During his stay, the man began telling Tapahpunja the philosophies of the religion and sharing with him Vaishnava literature. Tapahpunja was inspired by some of the writings and admired the gentleness of this man. They sat together discussing life and spirituality and the devotee gave definitive answers to many questions, some of which Tapahpunja had never even contemplated. In one of their discussions, the man said to Tapahpunja, “You really think you got it together, don’t you? Well, your happiness is an illusion.” Tapahpunja was shocked. He realized that if this man was courageous enough to criticize the person who was feeding and housing him, then he must strongly believe what he was saying.

Slowly, Tapahpunja modified his behavior and together they stopped using drugs and consuming alcohol. The devotee also took him to a temple in Detroit where Tapahpunja actively participated in daily worship. Tapahpunja was very impressed by the cleanliness of the temple in comparison to the surrounding inner city atmosphere. He started going more frequently and realized that Hare Krishna was exactly what he had

been looking for - a socially active movement rich in culture and tradition. He was initially attracted to the cultural practices and not necessarily just to the philosophy. He explained, “I wanted to see it in real life; what it looked like and smelled like. I didn’t feel like I was joining a religion, I felt like I was joining a cultural revolution. It offered education that I could not find anywhere else.”

After living in the Detroit temple for a short time, Tapahpunja decided that his heart was really in rural living and not in the city. He heard from another devotee about a Hare Krishna community with a farm in West Virginia. He realized that this was a perfect setting where he could combine his passion for farming with Vaishnavism. In the spring of 1974, Tapahpunja loaded up all of his farming tools and made the move to New Vrindaban. It was apparent to Tapahpunja that there was a strong need for farming equipment because, upon his arrival, his tools disappeared within minutes as people immediately started using them. Shortly after that, he was put in charge of the gardens at New Vrindaban, and of course, got all his tools back. Within weeks, he had started to create a real farm setting in the hills of West Virginia.

Reflecting on his decision to convert and move to New Vrindaban, Tapahpunja commented that “This is a real revolution. It’s creating a genuine alternative the likes of which is grounded in tradition... Combine that with meeting people who actually have integrity, spirituality, and are rewarding to be around, and that’s it, that’s the conversion.” When asked if he had any regrets, Tapahpunja responded “My only regret is that I didn’t start earlier with Krishna consciousness.” Having spent over three decades cultivating his farm and religious beliefs, Tapahpunja believes he has finally found the calling he had been looking for all along.