

Spirituality of Food at New Vrindaban

Chelsea Stallkamp

K.C. Bell

Sarah Bruton

Kayce Berke

“It is said that all the individual souls are like leaves on a tree and God is the root of the tree. To try to give nourishment to each individual leaf by pouring water on it is impossible, but by pouring water on the root all the individual leaves will automatically receive nourishment. So, by serving God we will be able to serve all souls, but if we simply serve the souls individually we will fail and we will not be serving God.”
- Gaura, Hare Krishna devotee (New Vrindaban)

Research Method

Four undergraduate students from the Global Leadership Center at Ohio University collected research about the relationship between food and spirituality at a Hare Krishna community, New Vrindaban, in Moundsville, West Virginia. Interviews were conducted at both Ohio University and New Vrindaban and participant observation research was compiled. Every Tuesday of the fall quarter at Ohio University, New Vrindaban residents prepare free, “Krishna-conscious” meals for O.U. students and community members. During these sessions we were able to see firsthand how foods are prepared and the importance of particular food practices at New Vrindaban. In addition we also visited New Vrindaban where various interviews and observational research took place. Secondary research methods consisted of gathering information from www.iskcon.com, *Bhagavad-gita* text, and various texts produced by ISKCON including *The Higher Taste*, a book written as a guide to vegetarian cooking and a karma-free diet.

Philosophy of Food in the Hindu Religion

Currently there are over 400,000 people in the United States who identify themselves as followers of Hinduism or a sect of Hinduism (An Introduction to Hinduism). There are four major sects of Hinduism that represent a vast array of diverse ideas, beliefs, and aims. The Hare Krishnas follow the type of Hinduism known as Vaishnavism. In the Vaishnava religion God is connected to all aspects of life. Food in all types of the Hindu religion is essential to practice and fulfillment of faith. In the Hare Krishna religion food is first offered to God before it is consumed. Food that is offered to Krishna is called prasadam. Prasadam is spiritualized food and once consumed it helps to protect us from illusion, helps to control the tongue, and frees one from sinful reactions (ISKCON). After the offering ritual is completed the food can then be eaten. Once consumed it is believed that the body has been purified. The offering and consumption of food helps create the intimate relationship between devotees and God. The food we eat is considered to be a gift from God and the way it is used has a tremendous impact on one’s life and karma. Karma is the metaphysical belief that every action has a reaction, during either this lifetime or of those to come. Hare Krishna’s follow Vedic philosophy; this philosophy does not sanction the killing of animals. Therefore, Hare Krishnas at New Vrindaban follow a strict vegetarian diet, though some do eat dairy products. They do

not consume meat, fish or eggs in result of their beliefs. Mental and physical health is a reflection of the types of food a person chooses to eat.

Foods can be classified into three different groups, each of which reflects a particular mode of nature. The modes of nature include Passion, Goodness, and Ignorance (also referred to as Darkness). The mode of Goodness is the main pursuit of Hare Krishnas. These excerpts from the *Bhagavad-gita* clearly outline the beliefs regarding the three types of food.

- ∞ “Foods dear to those in the mode of goodness increase the duration of life, purify one’s existence and give strength, health happiness and satisfaction. Such foods are juicy, fatty, wholesome and pleasing to the heart. This is the type of food the Hare Krishna’s strive to eat and prepare for offerings. (Bhagavad-gita 777)
- ∞ “Foods that are too bitter, too salty, hot, pungent, dry and burning are dear to those in the mode of passion. Such foods cause distress, misery and disease.”(Bhagavad-gita 777) Chocolate and coffee would be considered foods in the mode of passion.
- ∞ “Food prepared more than three hours before being eaten, food that is tasteless, decomposed and putrid, and food consisting of remnants are untouchable. These things are dear to those in the mode of darkness.”(Bhagavad-gita 778) Eating meat and or consuming alcohol would fall under this category.

When looking at the origin of the food that is consumed at New Vrindaban it is important to also note that certain types of food are forbidden in the kitchens and are not used in cooking. Meat products of any form would never be present nor would onions, garlic, or mushrooms because of the belief that these types of foods have negative karmic effects. Food is thought to transmit positive or negative energy based on the type of food and the consciousness of the person preparing it. For instance, think of ordering a hamburger from a fast food restaurant. The person preparing the food is working in a hurried fashion and is cooking for the sole purpose of satisfying hunger and gaining capital. Secondly, fast food chains mass-produce foods, which mainly contain meat and other products that are not necessarily environmentally sound. In result, when the hamburger is devoured it cultivates negative karma and consciousness due to the way it was prepared and the ingredients it contains. If a person eats pure food he becomes pure, and if he eats impure food he becomes impure. Even though a person undertakes other forms of purification, if he eats impure food he remains impure. Therefore one must always be careful to partake only of pure food at all times. By performance of yajna ones eatables become sanctified, and when memory is sanctified one can think of the path of liberation, and all these combined lead to Krishna consciousness (Kitchen).

Agriculture

The agricultural production of food is considered to be just as important as the food itself. Since Hare Krishnas believe that there is a connection between Krishna and virtually every aspect of life, agriculture too must be kept with the consciousness of God.

New Vrindaban as a community stresses the importance of farming and consuming locally grown produce. By using their land and cows they are given their own organic produce; this also helps develop a stronger more close-knit community. Within a year the New Vrindaban temple serves over 100,000 meals (Gaura). Due to the high

volume of food commercial produce supplements the community's needs. Agriculture is a spiritual practice at New Vrindaban and there is a long-term goal and movement toward sustainability.

Preparation

At New Vrindaban, much thought and devotion goes into the preparation of the food. While food is being prepared, whether it is for the deities (descendent forms of Krishna) or for the people of the community, it is important that one's conscious is directed toward pure thoughts of love and of Krishna. The most important ingredient that is used when preparing food is love. It is with love and devotion that good karma is achieved.

There are two kitchens at New Vrindaban, one which is used to cook food for the community and one which is used specifically to cook food that will be offered to the deities. The temple kitchen at New Vrindaban is understood to belong to Radharani. She is the Supreme Goddess always seen with Lord Krishna and is the controller within the kitchen (ISKCON). Only those who are Brahmin initiated are allowed to cook for the deities. Certain rules and regulations must be followed before food is presented at the altar; some examples of these rules are as follows:

- ∞ Hold utensils in right hand only.
- ∞ Do not touch serving utensils to eating plates.
- ∞ Be sensitive: give only what is wanted.
- ∞ Be quick: others may be waiting.
- ∞ No mixing: keep the preparations separate.

Cleanliness is the primary rule when preparing food at New Vrindaban; cleanliness of the devotee preparing the food, cleanliness of the food itself, and cleanliness of the kitchen area. Devotees are required to shower, put on freshly washed clothing, and remove their shoes before cooking for the deities. Once in the kitchen, it is forbidden to leave to go to the bathroom because there can't be any chance of impurities which could contaminate the food. Talking is not permitted in this kitchen unless directly related to the preparation of the food, although sometimes the cooks will chant spiritually inclined mantras. Food is prepared for the deities six times a day during particular hours that coincide with times of worship. Sweets are prepared and served at 4:20am, breakfast at 7:50am, lunch at 11:45am, then there is a 3:45 offering, and finally the evening offering at 6:15. In Jaganath Puri the Lord eats fifty-six times, therefore the Lord can eat as many times as you offer (Kitchen).

Presentation of Food

“If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water, I will accept it.”

Bhagavad-gita (9.26)

Food Offered to Krishna

The presentation of the food is just as important as the preparation of the food and there are many steps that go into serving prasadam. Prasadam is the term used to describe all food that has been offered at the altar. Prasadam literally means “the mercy of Lord Krishna” (ISKCON). Before food can be considered prasadam there are necessary steps that must be taken. First, food is prepared in a spirit of devotion by people who follow strict principles of purity. Once the food is cooked it is sprinkled with a special ingredient known as tulsi. The leaves of this plant are believed to be an incarnation of the goddess Vrinda. She is the presiding goddess of the Vrindaban forest, surrounding New Vrindaban. Van means forest; therefore Vrindaban means Vrinda's forest. In the forest she is responsible for serving Radha (Krishna's eternal consort) and Krishna by making suitable arrangements for their loving pastimes in the groves of Vrindaban. The tulsi plant is worshiped and the prayer to Vrindadevi is offered to grant entrance into Vrindaban forest. This allows Hare Krishna's to serve Radha and Krishna. The Goddess is very dear to Krishna and all food is offered with a tulsi leaf.

Steps in Offering Food to Krishna:

1. Once food is sprinkled with the tulsi it is covered.
2. The food is then taken from the kitchen to the altar where it is placed behind a shield.
3. The Priest then purifies the offering table with sacred water while chanting mantras.
4. Prayers are first chanted to his or her guru and then to Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.
5. The food is then offered to Krishna.

The food is not offered directly to Krishna, but rather it is offered through the guru, with consciousness that the guru is actually offering it to Krishna. The guru is therefore the means through which Krishna is reached. It is through the guru that devotees can develop a personal relationship with Krishna. The prasadam is covered and placed behind a shield so it cannot be desired by others, since it's meant only for Krishna's pleasure. After leaving the plate on the altar for half an hour the food is transformed from food into the mercy of Krishna (Prasadam) and it is considered non different from Krishna.

Food Consumed by Devotees

Food that is not offered to Krishna, but that is prepared for everyday consumption still follows many of the same principles of preparation and presentation. The guiding principles used for both are consciousness and devotion. Standards of cleanliness and the chanting of a prayer to Krishna before consumption are still necessary components for

enjoying prasadam outside the temple. Even if food is not offered directly at the altar it is still considered prasadam, as long as it is offered to God in one's heart and thoughts.

Community Issues Regarding Food at New Vrindaban

New Vrindaban is a fairly new community that has been established for about thirty years. It is a young community that is still going through growing pains. The current devotees at New Vrindaban are a part of the first wave of Hare Krishna's in West Virginia. Currently there are issues involving agricultural practices that have been a source of public debate within the community.

1. Strong devotees, especially local farmers, are upset with some members of the community for disregarding local food production. There is constant tension between those who buy or order food that has been grown elsewhere and shipped to the region and those who believe the food should be grown in New Vrindaban. It is felt that "Krishna everywhere, but they are eating otherwise". Many devotees feel that those who buy food from outside the community are spiritually disconnected and are not supporting Prabhupada's vision of a self sustained New Vrindaban.

2. The deer population is a huge concern for farmers in New Vrindaban. The deer population is now 100 per square mile and it is causing damage to crops. There has been an ongoing debate because Krishna farmers have given permission for West Virginians to hunt deer on the New Vrindaban property. Permission was given to the hunters for the sole purpose that the hunters were providing food for their families. Despite this exception, other members of the community oppose hunting altogether because of its inconsistency with spiritual beliefs, specifically the harming of animals. This issue reflects the struggles New Vrindaban faces as an alternative community within the larger context of society.

In conclusion, the Hare Krishnas of the New Vrindaban community are currently progressing to establish themselves and their societal norms. As in any community, there are differences of opinions, but together they are striving to become one with Lord Krishna.

Works Cited

An Introduction to Hinduism. 02 Oct. 2005

<<http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/extra/bl-into-index.htm>>.

"Food." ISKCON. 08 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.iskcon.com/culture/food/index.html>>.

Gaura. Personal interview. 7 November 2005.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Bhagavad-Gita As It Is. Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1986.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The Higher Taste: A Guide to Gourmet Vegetarian Cooking and a Karma-Free Diet. Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1991.

Keith. Personal interview. 7 November 2005.

"Kitchen Rules Pamphlet" New Vrindaban, West Virginia.

Tapapunja. Personal interview. 27 October 2005.