

Wandering Toward Krishna: A Conversion Story at New Vrindaban

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Hare Krishna is a subset of Hinduism, also called Vaisnavism. It is a monotheistic religion, believing in Krishna as the supreme Godhead. Devotees believe Krishna is omnipresent and by chanting his name and meditating upon his works, they can achieve Krishna Consciousness, which will ultimately free them from the cycle of earthly existence.

The Harvard Pluralism Project started in 1990 as a method of highlighting and showcasing religious diversity in America. It aims to document and study religious communities in the United States and explore the consequences of this religious plurality.

Wandering Toward Krishna

James Bryant¹ sat in the room with a group of devotees, consumed by the power of the chant. Everyone in the room was chanting the Maha Mantra, the most important Hare Krishna prayer. A swami, an elder Hare Krishna devotee at the highest stage of consciousness, led the chant with passion. Overwhelmed, James broke down into tears.

He later described the experience as one of the peak moments of his conversion to the Hare Krishna movement. The group chanting and singing led him to feel the power of Krishna Consciousness in the community of New Vrindaban, located in West Virginia. After the chant, James came to the realization that “the love that exists between the Lord and the Lord’s devotees defeats the greatness of the Lord Himself.” While the sentiment is difficult to express, it outlines the depth of feeling Hare Krishna devotees experience not only toward God but also toward each other.

Every day, James wakes up for early-morning chanting at 4:30 am. He lives in a room above the temple with other devotees. While the temple is unassuming at first glance, it houses ornate gilded deities and all the trappings of grandeur common to elaborate religious structures. Each day, the temple is filled with New Vrindaban’s residents and pilgrims, eager to participate in the age-old rituals of the Kirtan – dancing and chanting.

Prior to his conversion to Hare Krishna, James often felt lonely, anxious and depressed. After graduating from Cuyahoga University in Ohio with a degree in chemistry, James wandered around the country for ten years, taking odd jobs intermittently but never working or living in an area for more than four months. He traveled all over the United States, occasionally returning to Meadville, Pennsylvania to visit his parents. During this time James often became cynical about God and religion. He recalls feeling empty, classifying his views on God as agnostic, and his spiritual life as devoid of fulfillment.

In the mid 1990's while he was still in college, James picked up a hitchhiker during a heavy rainstorm. The wanderer was a 17-year-old Hare Krishna devotee, and James' first contact with the religion. James was immediately impressed with the young devotee's enthusiasm to share Krishna Consciousness and the fact that the boy carried nothing but the Bhagavad-gita, the Hare Krishna holy book.

In the Hare Krishna religion, devotees worship Krishna as the supreme Godhead. Devotees, as followers of Hare Krishna are called, believe God is present in all things, and the most important way to develop a connection with him is by chanting his name in the form of the Maha Mantra. This is a chant the devotee is required to say throughout the day in order to keep God on his or her mind. Devotees follow five regulative principles: no intoxicants, no meat, no gambling, no illicit sex and chanting sixteen rounds of the Maha Mantra each day.

James often thought of his own purpose in life, and had wondered, "Why am I here? Why am I in this body? What am I supposed to be doing?" In an attempt to answer these existential questions, James decided to do some outdoor soul-searching at a large, weeklong music and culture festival. The Rainbow Gathering is a festival with roots in the 1960's counterculture movement, which occurs annually in July at National Forests. In 2005 at the Rainbow Gathering in the Monongahela National Forest, James had his second encounter with the Hare Krishnas. While intending to use the gathering as an opportunity for rest and personal growth, he instead found loud music and drugs.

Wandering into the woods to escape the confusion of the festival, James heard sounds of chanting coming from a nearby grove. Upon walking closer, James found a group of Hare Krishna devotees. One of the devotees, Balarama Chandra, sat in the center cooking food for the group. James remembers him as looking "exhausted yet vibrant." It was with this group of people that James found shelter from the chaos of the Rainbow Gathering. At the end of the

weekend, the Hare Krishnas invited James to visit New Vrindaban for a festival.

The next weekend James traveled to New Vrindaban for a Hindu festival. He enjoyed the food, music and atmosphere, but was not particularly swayed by the theology of Krishna Consciousness. As he was leaving, he was handed a copy of the Bhagavadgita by a devotee. It was this book that would later have a significant impact on his life.

James fell into depression, questioning his purpose in life. As before, he fled to the outdoors in order to find tranquility, but to no avail. James barely left his room at his parents' house in Meadville for the next three months. It was during this time that he began reading the Bhagavad-gita. James immediately identified himself as being trapped in the material mode of ignorance, and wanted to find a way out. Hare Krishnas believe that people are ruled at any one time by one of three spiritual modes: passion, goodness, and ignorance. These modes are believed to be in constant competition with one another in our spiritual lives. He began chanting the Maha Mantra daily. By the end of the book, he had made the decision to move to the Hare Krishna community of New Vrindaban.

James said his decision was made because he felt the need to live in a “spiritually conducive environment” in order to develop his new faith. He moved to New Vrindaban in October of 2005 and stayed for the next 13 months. He reported significant improvements in his quality of life, and his depression and anxiety had disappeared.

While not yet formally initiated, James alternates between living at New Vrindaban and traveling the country on college outreach programs with his fellow devotees. He says he is happy with his life and that while he does not have definite future plans, he is happy with the direction he is heading on a day-by-day basis. Concerning his initiation into the Hare Krishna movement, James said that he wasn't impatient or overly anxious to meet his guru.

“When you are ready, the lord will send you a guru. I am just focusing on the practice

and following my heart and when the time comes, the time comes,” he said. For now, James is content where he is. While he does not know where he will be in the future, in New Vrindaban or somewhere else, he will continue to chant and carry Krishna in his heart.

ⁱ James Bryant is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of the research participant. The details of James’ education including school and major as well as his hometown have been altered to protect his anonymity.