

The Hare Krishnas Uncloaked

*Our Reporter Calls It Quits After Just Two Days in The Temple.
Innovative Lifestyles . . . by Mavis E. Groza*

They have been arrested for harassing the public, accused of forcibly trying to take "donations," refused entry into certain public places and even thrown out of countries.

Most of us know them only as those "strange" young people who dress differently, who bang on drums, jump up and down and chant on street corners.

Few know that they own one of the largest incense businesses in the United States, that they believe in reincarnation, that they worship statues, that they deprive themselves of all sensual pleasures and that they begin their day at 3:30 a.m.

These are the members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) or as most know them, Hare Krishnas.

On September 2, I entered the Hare Krishna Temple in Berkeley for a 48-hour stay. When I emerged some two days later, I had been alternately shocked, surprised, appalled, fascinated and impressed; I had gained an insight that few know since believers do not normally allow outsiders to observe so closely.

I also emerged emotionally and physically spent and with an uncontrollable desire to chant the Hare Krishna mantra . . . *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*. As a matter of fact, in my last hours there, I would find myself in the midst of saying it without knowing when I began.

The Krishna Philosophy

Devotees of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) will tell you that they practice a type of yoga involving a complete physical and mental withdrawal from the materialistic world — yoga that enables you to discover yourself and thus Krishna.

Simply, ISKCON teaches the total abandonment of the material world for the worship of Krishna. Within its temples are three altars on which stand various representations of Krishna, as a child, a young man, etc.

The Krishnas believe first and foremost in deity worship. That is, the worship of these statues of Krishna. Not the worship of what the statues *represent* but the worship of the statues themselves. For it is

their belief that the statues *are* Krishna himself.

ISKCON orders one work only — the service of the Supreme Personality of Godhead (Krishna). As one devotee put it, "It's not what you do — make a garland, sweep the temple floor, distribute books — it's that you do it for Krishna.

"Man's natural state is servant. We are just trying to revive that."

The main work of a devotee is bringing others "back to Godhead" (back to the service of Krishna) and this is done mainly through the distribution of books, magazines and newspapers in public places.

There are few who have not seen a Krishna actively pursuing this goal — on the streets, at Fisherman's Wharf, at the airport or at one of the college campuses. They seem to be everywhere and their number seem to be increasing. Actually, it is not. The San Francisco Temple was founded in 1969 and today with its controversial move to Berkeley it has only 50 devotees living in temple — 20 bachelors, 5 single women, 9 married couples and 7 children. Not a very sizeable number.

Even so, the Krishnas seem to be a very wealthy group. The Berkeley Temple which houses these 50 consists of a building that used to be a very sizeable Christian Church, two houses for married devotees (householders) and another house, yet to be purchased, to sleep the bachelors. The "higher ups" — the president, vice president, etc. — have their own apartments in Berkeley and on the day that I checked into the temple, a group of devotees began a cross-country trip in a \$12,000 mobile home with a motorcycle strapped to the back and a Volkswagen in tow. The president of the temple drives a Mercedes.

Where Does the Money Come From?

Where does it all come from? Quite simply, you.

Every day — seven days a week — the temple sends a group of devotees to the San Francisco Airport to sell books. These books — there are some 20 volumes now and 17 more are expected off the press by Christmas — sell for \$5 each; but as one devotee put it, "We often get much more than that for one." Each day these devotees "sell" approximately 100 books. Even at \$5 each that's \$500 a day.

Every day — seven days a week — the temple sends a group of devotees — usually about four — to Fisherman's Wharf to sell the Krishna magazine, *Back to Godhead*. Each one brings back approximately \$50 daily.

The Krishnas will tell you that they make most of their money on their books — all translated by their Spiritual Master His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and all printed in Los Angeles on an ISKCON press by devotees, eliminating most overhead.

Incense is the big moneymaker for the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. The Spiritual Sky Incense Company was founded seven short years ago on the whim of the Spiritual Master who felt that it would be a good diversion for his followers. Today that company has captured 15 per cent of a \$70 million incense market in the United States. Since

ISKCON is a religious organization, it's all tax free.

Not only that, nearly all the workers in the 50-man plant in Los Angeles are devotees who work for free, or as they would say, for Krishna.

The Married Krishna

This then was the world I entered on a Tuesday evening at 4 p.m. Devotees were involved in temple duties, chanters were returning from the Berkeley campus and children were playing on their tricycles outside the temple. All very quiet and my presence was hardly noticed.

Bhakti das, President of the temple, greeted me; I got a general idea of the daily schedule and then was chauffeured to Bhakti das' apartment. Home for a Krishna can be very austere. Furniture is considered nonessential and the only vestige of material life present in this apartment was a stereo on which only the

tapes of Krishna scriptures and chants are played.

Then I was blowing up my air mattress and rolling out my sleeping bag for a two-night stay in an apartment sorely lacking the conveniences of modern life . . . no radio, no TV, no newspaper.

As for bedding, my sleeping bag was not really unique. In the Krishna devotees' attempt to divest themselves of as many material things as possible, the bed was one of the things to go. Bhakti das and his wife, having their own apartment, were among the lucky ones. They slept on 2-inch mats — separate mats, of course. Most Krishnas spend their resting hours in a sleeping bag, most without the benefit of an air mattress. I had come prepared. I had not only an air mattress but my own goose down pillow — ever committed to material life.

As for the sleeping accommodations, having me in their home did not particularly disturb Bhakti das and his wife Suranam, for the Krishnas do not believe in showing emotion or love in the manner that the majority of the world does.

Sex between husband and wife in the Krishna order is strictly for the purpose of having a child and any pleasure derived from it is purely secondary. Not only that, the husband must, in order to put himself in the right frame of mind for the act, precede it with the chanting of 5000 Hare Krishnas. When not conceiving a child for Krishna, the married devotees show no emotion, in the worldly sense. They do not kiss or caress.

As one devotee explained it to me, "A man shows his love for his wife by conferring with her on the scriptures of Krishna, by offering her *Prasadam* (food which has been offered to Krishna) and, if she is so inclined, by offering her such material items as bracelets that he has acquired from another devotee through the barter system.

Woman as Servant

Why then do Krishnas marry? Obviously to have children for Krishna, but also because "servant to man is the natural state for woman. A woman is put here on Earth for the specific purpose of caring for a man . . . cooking, cleaning, caring for his clothes and bearing his children."

One Krishna said to me, "Only when she is submissive to her husband will she be happy."

It is unheard of for a Krishna wife to question her husband. To her, he is god and she is servant. Suranam, wife of the president of the temple, said, "I am happiest when I'm following my husband's instructions. It's not my position to be in charge. A lot of times I think I know better what to do, but I let him do it his way and it always seems to work out even better."

So extreme is the Krishna belief in male supremacy that they believe that the man is the sole determinator of whether the family will "return to Godhead" when

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death comes (the material equivalent would be to go to Heaven).

"He should not marry unless he can bring the family 'back to God'" and if he does not live a devout life, the family will not "return to Godhead." Even if the wife happens to be a devoted Krishna, it makes no difference. If the husband does not make it, neither will she.

Woman as Villain

Within the temple, marriage is discouraged among the young men. Of the 50 devotees living in the Berkeley temple, 20 are bachelors. They are taught that when you take a wife and in turn have children, you burden yourself unnecessarily. For the Vedic scriptures teach that it is more difficult to "return to Godhead" with these burdens in tow. A devotee must work just that much harder.

Not to mention the fact that the bachelors are taught that the women are, as one devotee put it, "ripping them off." The belief is that one drop of semen is equal to a pound of blood and to marry is "suicide." Semen is meant to go to the brain to nourish intelligence, to assist the Krishna devotee in answering all questions.

Thus, it would appear that to the Krishnas, woman is not only a servant but in some cases the villain. All Krishna women acknowledge this.

In temple gatherings, men take the front row seats; the women group together in the back. If a husband should choose to sit with his wife, he sits at the back among the women. It's called Krishna etiquette.

As one married man put it, "Only we are functioning as Krishna would have men function, caring for our wives in the manner in which they were meant to be cared for. We are the only men. The world will one day realize that."

A Krishna Day

Devotees begin their day at 3:30 a.m. Some of the women at 2:30 a.m. Then when the world is still quiet they hold worship services for Krishna and say 1,728 Hare Krishnas on their *Japa* beads, an exercise that takes about two hours. These beads are carried in a small pouch around the neck at all times in case a devotee should find himself idle during the day. Devotees are to think only of Krishna and when not actively engaged in his service, they are to say the beads to keep their minds on him only.

It is believed that a devotee must be thinking of Krishna at the time of death, else he will not "return to Godhead" (go to Heaven).

A Krishna day tends to be very busy, following this basic format:

- 3:30 a.m. Rise
- 4:15 a.m. *Arotika* (ceremony for diet)
- 4:45 a.m. *Arotika* over Krishna Book reading
- 5:15 a.m. Chanting *Japa* on beads (1,728 Hare Krishnas)
- 7:00 a.m. Greeting the Dieties

- 7:30 a.m. *Srimad Bhagavatan* class
- 8:15 a.m. *Tulasi* Worship (a sacred tree)
- 8:30 a.m. *Arotika*
- 8:45 a.m. Nectar of Devotion Class
- 9:15 a.m. Take *Prasadam* (food)
- 10:00 a.m. Temple duties, book distribution, etc.
(Krishnas pursue their daily duties)
- 12 noon *Arotika*
- 2:30 p.m. Chanting Party back
- 4:00 p.m. *Arotika*
- 6:30 p.m. *Arotika*
- 7:00 p.m. *Bhajan* (singing *Vaisnava* songs to Krishna)
- 7:30 p.m. *Bhagavad-gita* As It Is Class
- 8:15 p.m. *Arotika*
- 8:45 p.m. Hot Milk
- 9:00 p.m. Rest

The main purpose is, of course, to keep the devotees busy so that their minds cannot wander. The classes are designed to "keep Krishna fixed in the mind as the real purpose of life. Only through practice and determination can one control the mind and thus the senses."

Krishnas Take Pleasure in Food

The one sense that devotees have not been asked to give up is the sense of taste. They are encouraged to eat *Prasadam* (food that has first been offered to Krishna). One girl complained that she gained 30 pounds when she first joined the order.

The basis of the Krishna diet is milk and vegetables. They not only do not believe in eating meat, they abhor the idea. The cow represents a life giving force to them. Her milk replaces that milk that was given to them in infancy by their mothers. They will ask you, "Would you eat your mother?"

For those who persist in eating meat, the Krishnas predict a hellish punishment — "they will be forced to eat their own flesh."

Great pride is taken in the food served and each weekend a free feast is served to all who come to the temple, whether they be devotees or not. One of the big duties accorded the kitchen is the preparation of food for the Jagannath Cart Festival & Parade held annually in Golden Gate Park. Food is prepared for upwards of 25,000 people who attend. Not an easy task in a kitchen where cleanliness is practiced to the extreme — hands must be washed after even such an innocent act as brushing aside a loose hair. And to compound the task, all those preparing the feast must have been living in the temple for at least one year.

At 9:15 a.m. the big meal of the day is served, what would be lunch to the rest of the world. It is served on sheets of waxed paper (plates are unheard of) on the floor of the dining hall (the Krishnas, you will remember, do not believe in furniture).

Devotees have now been up for almost seven hours.

Why They Dress That Way

One of the most striking things about

devotees is their dress, and by attracting your attention, it accomplishes its main purpose. It is first and foremost a mark of identity.

It is a style borrowed from East India where the religion began 5,000 years ago. It is believed that Krishna himself wore such dress and all his prophets, including Jesus Christ.

Men wear *dhotis* or baggy loin cloths and *kirta*, a loose fitting shirt. A saffron colored outfit indicates a bachelor and white a married devotee.

All men shave their heads except for a circular portion at the crown of the head. This "pony tail" is called a *sika* and is a mark of submission. It is also thought that Krishna will use this to carry off the devotee at the time of death.

Women wear saris, a 12-foot-long cloth that is wound around the body. This is thought to be the most modest method of dress, hiding many of the curves and thus enabling the young men to think only of Krishna.

Many of the women wear nose rings as an adornment or as one devotee put it, "No chaste woman would be caught dead in public without her nose ring." Such are the teachings of Krishna.

You will also see women with a red dot on their foreheads and a red mark down the part of their hair. This indicates a married woman.

And each morning immediately after his morning shower, every devotee marks his body with a clay and water substance in thirteen different places, saying at the same time the thirteen different names of Krishna.

Who Joins?

What kind of person joins ISKCON? Mostly the young, disillusioned in one way or another by the world . . . each searching for a haven, something to believe in. There are no "old" Hare Krishnas in the Berkeley Temple, not even any in their 30s.

Karunamayi dasi, a young woman of 24, was married at the age of 17. In 1969 she was strolling with her husband on Berkeley's Telegraph Hill when they met a Krishna devotee. They both went to the temple to chant. She chose to remain; he returned to the materialistic world. In 1970 she married Bahulas das, now vice president of the Berkeley Temple. She has twin sons by him, Yamal and Arjuna, now four years old.

She comes from a Mountain View high schooling and a family which she says, "didn't do a very good job of bringing me up." She still visits her parents and it is there that her two sons see their only television. When the two boys see a man and woman embracing on television they say, "Oh, that's just nonsense."

Natsala das, 28, was married and had two children when he joined the temple several years ago. He immediately sent his two children, 4 and 8 years, to the Hare Krishna School in Dallas, Texas.

When he joined, he was a shipping clerk

in San Francisco for a health food distributor. Today he is chef for the temple.

He admits to "thinking of and longing for the material life . . . sometimes when my consciousness isn't good."

His wife, Sasikala, 24, is now pregnant with a "child for Krishna."

Kelilalita dasi is 24 and one of five single girls in the Berkeley temple. She was a history major at UC Santa Barbara with only one quarter left to graduation when she was involved in a car accident. It left her face and body horribly scarred. She never went back to school.

Today she says, "Whatever happens is meant for spiritual advancement. That there isn't really any happiness here. Everything is Krishna's way of making you think of him."

Yudhamanyu das is married, 25, and has been a devotee for three years. He was awarded a \$1000 scholarship to pursue his senior studies in Philosophy at Portland State. Instead, he left college with three quarters remaining and signed the check over to ISKCON.

"My friends thought I had committed suicide." Today some of his friends visit him in the temple and "seem to be coming around."

He married a year ago but still firmly believes that "sex is the greatest shackle of material life. We (Krishnas) have given up such inferior activities because we're engaged in superior activities."

Saranam dasi is the wife of the temple president, Bhakti das. In June of this year she gave him a daughter.

She was a stewardess for American Airlines for 2½ years prior to joining the Krishnas. Today at 28, she is a wife and mother.

"When I was a stewardess, my mother was very proud of me. She closed the door on me when I joined the Hare Krishnas."

She is a firm believer that a woman should be chaste and able to cook and sew. "It is not necessary that she know how to read and write."

Prabala dasi, 22 and a single woman, was once a registered nurse in Kansas. She has been a Krishna for 11 months.

"The most compassionate thing is to give Krishna [to people] because the body is always in misery. It dies every day. We wash it away every time we cleanse ourselves.

A Life After Death?

For those of us who are not devotees of ISKCON, we are doomed to return to this earth in another form after death. The Krishnas teach that there are 8,400,000 species of animals on this earth and it is possible for the soul to pass through all these before it "returns to Godhead."

There is no hell. Earth is hell. Heaven is returning to Krishna and the only way to do that is to become a devotee of ISKCON. A devout life in another religion will gain you a higher birth in the next life but it will not get you to Krishna. Only active participation in the Krishna Temple will do that.

ISKCON teaches that everyone realizes his mistake after death — the mistake of not worshipping Krishna above all else — but then it is too late and you are already doomed to a certain type of life as your next existence on earth. Even as you live in your mother's womb, you remember and at that point pray to Krishna that he let you remember when you are born. But as is the failing of all, you forget the moment you come into contact with the materialistic world.

Children Born of Krishna

The very highest birth you can be granted in your next life is that of a child born to Krishna devotees. For that reason, all children born of temple devotees are considered "special," children of Krishna.

Thus at a very early age, between four and six years, these children are sent to the Hare Krishna School in Dallas, Texas. There they will live until their schooling is complete, about the age of 16. Parents are, of course, allowed to visit their children, provided they can raise the money to make the trip. Of course, since neither one is likely to have a job outside the temple, this is usually very difficult.

At present, there are 95 children in the Dallas school, most of them four or five-year-olds. The children lead a rigorous life, one that has been criticized by many in the Dallas area. They rise at 3:45 a.m. from their mat bed, shower and don the traditional Krishna dress. Many of the girls wear nostril rings and all boys have their heads shaved as ordered by Krishna.

Special textbooks, dealing with such taboos as meat eating and sex, are written especially for the school; and chanting and dancing are daily musts.

Until they are of an age to be sent to the Dallas school, children are cared for by their mothers, who teach them the Krishna chant and doctrines. Boys' heads are shaved almost immediately after birth and girls and boys begin to wear the Krishna dress as soon as they are able to walk.

Many outsiders are incensed by the upbringing of these children and their total lack of contact with the outside world. And yet the children seem happy, playing with their tricycles and getting into mischief.

Since the order is relatively new to the Americas, no child born of Krishna has yet reached adulthood so the full impact of this type of non-materialistic upbringing has not yet been seen. It will be another 10 years before the world truly sees a Hare Krishna born into the religion and permitted no choice as we outsiders know it.

Free of the World

One of the main goals of ISKCON is to be completely free of the materialistic world, to be totally self-sufficient. Towards this goal, the order now has 1,200 acres in West Virginia called "New Vrindavana" and negotiations are now under way for 477 acres in Northern California. There the Krishnas will grow their own vegetables and run their own dairies leaving them beholden to the world only for

such staples as flour, sugar and salt.

As yet the West Virginia farm is not productive enough to feed the entire East Coast but those are the ultimate plans. The California farm will, ideally, take care of the West Coast.

When not farming, Krishna devotees at "New Vrindavana" pursue the usual dietary worship mandated by the Spiritual Master. Soon, however, they will begin construction of seven marble temples on the farm, making it a miniature reproduction of the home of Krishna Vrindavana in India.

When the first temple is completed, the Krishna plan to bathe it in *ghee* as an act of purification. The Spiritual Master His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada has promised to live in the first temple for at least one year — a high honor to Krishnas devoted to his worship.

The 77-year-old Spiritual Master of ISKCON is believed to be a direct descendant of Krishna himself and all devotees are expected to show blind devotion to him. They are taught to obey him without question — to do his bidding without thought — for his will is the will of Krishna.

"You should not try to determine what is sinful or not sinful. You should allow yourself to be led. Then you are not held responsible for your actions. Follow what the Spiritual Master says, then you are safe, even if you feel it's wrong. Follow and do without question."

A dangerous philosophy at best.

Escape

Eight years ago the International Society of Krishna Consciousness established its first temple in New York City. Today it has a community of 100,000 followers and an income in the millions. Whether we like it or not, we have given it a home like it never had in India.

The interest in the Hare Krishnas seems bound together with the continuing interest in EST, TM, Transactional Psychology, Eastern mysticism and the like — a genuine search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. The traditional solutions of religion, ethics and law no longer seem to work for many people. Each of the above-named schools of thought demands discipline and rigid adherence to doctrine, yet they continue to attract. Have we shortchanged ourselves so that we must look elsewhere for guidance, for emotional security, for faith?

I left the Berkeley Temple on a Thursday, two hours short of my 48-hour goal. I was exhausted both emotionally and physically to the point of breaking. My head couldn't take the chanting, the incense and the total lack of emotion anymore. I escaped.

But I can't help but think what would have happened if I had stayed . . . if I had had no place to run to. Where would I be now? I was already well on my way to saying the chant, and after all, if I really wanted to hide, who would look for me there? 

