

## Life at a Hare Krishna Temple

James Nail

Modern Western culture is viewed by many of its members as representing the peak of mankind's abilities, the culmination of our attempts to subdue nature and to carve out a lasting, important niche for ourselves in the world. Indeed, there is much to support this notion, for certainly, in history no other society has offered so much in the way of technology, prosperity and physical comfort to so many people. It is commonly asserted that not even the most exalted personages in other societies lived as well as does the average middle-class American today.

Yet it is also said that the average American really doesn't know how to enjoy his or her own wealth, that in the midst of such affluence s/he is desperately unhappy and confused. More and more critical voices are heard, warning of the dangers of pollution, crime, drug-dependence, cancerous technological growth and the manipulation of the masses in the interests of a few. Each year brings with it a whole new crop of crises and problems.

In our hurried, profit-oriented society, a number of organizations offer their members alternative lifestyles. Thus, parallel with our great technological advances have arisen countless new religious movements, each attracting great numbers of devotees and each, to varying degrees, projecting an image of opposition to many of the dominant goals of our materialistic culture. Some are revitalizations of fundamentalist Christian sects. Others are eclectic, deriving their philosophies and practices from traditional religions, psychology and the American work ethic. With their emphasis on self-denial, transcendence and the cultivation of the soul, Eastern religions are becoming increasingly popular throughout the United States. "Yoga" and "Meditation" have become household words.

One of these new religious movements is the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). It was brought to the United States in 1965 by the same man who is still its leader, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. It is said that he had been sent by his own spiritual master to "spread knowledge in the Western lands," had arrived in New York with ten cents in his pocket, and built the entire movement from that point to its present size of over 120 centers all over the world. Members of ISKCON practice what they call "bhakta yoga," the discipline of love, devotion and service to God, who is called Krishna. The philosophy is based

on the ancient Vedic scriptures of India, translated into English (in more than 70 volumes) by Prabhupada. "Devotees" typically live in communal temples, stressing utmost simplicity in day-to-day activities, observing strict laws and ceremonies and, in all things, attempting to please Krishna. Their ultimate goal is soul-purification and release from the physical world.

Before beginning my work, I had rather expected, because of the unconventional standard of appearance for which the devotees are most commonly known, to find them to be somehow basically alien. I had expected to find a group of people who had simply jumped on the bandwagon of a strange new fad precisely because of its unconventionality. Yet to shave one's head and live in a temple, chanting Sanskrit names of God, seemed an extremely radical aberration and I firmly expected my findings to corroborate this notion. So, it was with the ambivalent feelings of trepidation and joy in the unusual, the "And now for something completely different" feeling, that I made preparations for gathering data. I planned to first spend several consecutive afternoons at the temple before actually beginning work. This was in order to get a "feel" for the people and environment, and to give them time to make the same adjustments to me. I wished to make myself less of a stranger before intruding with notebooks, questions and a camera. Then I was going to schedule formal interviews with various devotees and invent elaborate questionnaires.

As it happened, there were no questionnaires and only very few formal interviews, but I spent more time at the temple than I had previously planned, *participating* in temple activity. I did such things as helping to chop vegetables for a religious feast, sweeping up around the trash cans in the back of the temple, spent an entire weekend, painted myself with tilach (a special clay used to symbolize the giving up of the body to Krishna) and wore the orange clothes I had earlier considered so strange.

My method of investigation has very much shaped my results. All my information is derived from devotees at the Berkeley ISKCON temple and from participant observation. I have not compiled lists of statistics regarding the structure of the temple or its operations, nor have I attempted to give a definitive description of ISKCON as a world movement. These are the boundaries I set for myself when I began this field project. Though I came to realize the limitations of my

focus, I was able to gain an understanding of some of the values and perspectives shared by ISKCON members.

#### Description of Temple Life

During my stay at the temple, I found that the activities of the devotees are strictly regulated, with a carefully formulated schedule covering almost every waking moment. This rigorous discipline is followed in order to minimize mental preoccupation with the physical world. As one devotee put it: "This way, you never have to think about what you're going to do next, when you're going to eat or sleep or anything like that, because its already worked out. It frees your mind for more important thoughts, lets you concentrate on Krishna." Practicing austerities and deprivations of the body is an important part of purifying the soul and freeing it from the bondage of Maya (the illusion of material existence).

A typical day begins at three in the morning. The devotees get up and take cold showers — cold in order to remind the still-sleeping body that physical life is essentially misery and that the purpose of the day is to serve Krishna. Great emphasis is placed upon personal cleanliness, for part of purifying the soul is to keep the body clean. Showers are taken upon rising, before retiring and always after defecating. After meals, the hands, mouth and feet must be cleaned and no one may enter the kitchen at any time without carefully washing. This rule of cleanliness in the kitchen is so strict that if one touches anything but food or cooking utensils in the kitchen, the entire washing procedure is repeated, regardless of how brief the contact may have been or how clean the article touched was.

After the morning hygiene is completed (including the application of tilach on the forehead, which is done while reciting ritual prayers and various names of Krishna), there is a period of half-an-hour to an hour, until four-fifteen, which is set aside for chanting Joppa. Chanting Joppa is very similar to the Roman Catholic practice of saying Rosaries. Each devotee has a string of 108 Joppa beads. The Maha Mantra (*hare krishna hare krishna krishna krishna hare hare hare rama hare rama rama hare hare*) is recited once on each bead, going around the string. One of the duties of each devotee is to chant his "rounds", consisting of sixteen times around the string — 1728 mantras! Maha, or Great, Mantra is composed of the transcendental names of God, Krishna and Rama. These transcendental names are different from their mundane counterparts in that the actual sound of the spiritual words produces a physical and spiritual "vibration" which helps to free the soul from the physical world. It was explained to me in the following way. "Men's languages are not perfect. The word is not the thing itself. You could chant 'water, water, water,' forever, and you would still be thirsty. But the spiritual language is different; it is perfect. When you chant the name of

Krishna, he is actually present."

So, the first waking hour is spent chanting. Then, at four-fifteen, the curtains in front of the idols are drawn back and a conch shell is blown, signalling the start of the Mongol Arotik, the morning worship service. The arotik is an ecstatic affair, with singing, dancing and chanting before the deities. The drums begin pounding slowly, and a single voice rises in song, the entire group repeating the words. Everyone sways back and forth, slowly to the music. The drums beat faster and faster, the singing becomes rapid chanting, and the dance becomes frenzied. All the while, the priests are up on the stage with the deities, performing various ritual services and burning incense, making stylized hand-movements, and seemingly remote from the activity below. This ceremony proceeds into the worship of the tulasia plant, holy because, according to the Bhagavad-gita, it grows at the feet of Krishna and is his pure devotee. Throughout all the ceremonies, men and women stay distinctly separate: the men worship and dance around one tulasia plant, the women around another. In fact, this segregation of men and women in the Krishna movement is so strict that for one year after joining, the men are not even allowed to speak with a member of the opposite sex. Meals are taken separately and all contact between the sexes is limited, although both live and worship in the same temple.

At six o'clock, after worshipping the tulasia, a teaching service takes place. It begins with a ritual declaimer by the teacher, recounting the wonders, age and value of the Srimad-Bhagavatam, the subject matter. Then the teacher sings the verse to be studied and, one at a time, men first and women afterward, the devotees sing the verse aloud. The entire group repeats each line in a chorus. The verse is then translated word for word and the teacher explains the precise meaning: first of each word, then of the entire verse. He goes on to give examples and analogies, stopping occasionally to make sure everyone understands. The effect of this ritualized teaching ceremony is truly beautiful. I had the impression that I had been transported through time and space to a place where all knowledge and absolute truths were known and were being handed on to a new generation to be guarded through the ages. This idea of carrying on ancient knowledge is one of the basic tenets of the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness. It is constantly stressed that the Vedas are the most ancient scriptures in the world, containing all science and all truth. It is the stated goal of Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, the head of ISKON, to replace the dying Brahman class of India and to provide a "class of learned, intelligent men" to lead the world back to wisdom. Prabhupada is something of a Christ figure to the devotees. He is their "spiritual master"; only through him can they come to Krishna and he is worshipped in much the same way as are the other deities.

After the Srimad-Bhagavatam class, the congregation gathers before a photograph of Prabhupada which rests upon a large red velvet and gold throne. The group kneels, faces to the floor and sings praises to their master. When a garland of fresh flowers is placed upon the photograph, the morning worship service is completed. The remaining time until seven a.m. is allotted to chanting Joppa.

At seven, a brief but very important ceremony takes place. The deities' costumes have been changed and the entire group lines up in front of the idol at the left of the stage. A traditional song begins playing through the large speakers in the deity room. I was told by Kritakarman, the chief priest of the Berkeley temple, that this is the oldest song in the world, first sung by Brahma, the creator of the physical universe, upon his birth from the lotus flower in the navel of Krishna. The song tells of the eternal pastimes of Krishna which are a common topic of conversation at the temple. The group sings, prostrating themselves as a gesture of submission in front of each of the idols in turn.

At seven-fifteen, it is time for breakfast, or morning prasada. All food prepared at the temple is placed on an altar as an offering to Krishna before it is eaten. Every living thing, according to the Vedas, is an incarnation of some spirit-soul and is precious to Krishna. Therefore, one cannot kill without incurring a negative reaction upon oneself, either in this life or in a future one. Offering the food to Krishna takes away the bad karma of having destroyed life and Krishna bestows blessings upon the spirit-soul which died to provide food. Also, when prasada is offered to Krishna, he comes and manifests himself in the food. This brings considerable blessing to the person who then eats it and for this reason a visitor to an ISKON temple is invariably offered a meal, regardless of when s/he may arrive or how hungry s/he may be.

For breakfast, everyone lines up and files past a serving table, where s/he is helped to a grain-and-fruit-based meal served upon a piece of paper. Meals are taken on the floor and eaten with the fingers, using only the right hand. During the breakfasts which I shared at the temple, an older devotee sat on the floor and read aloud from a book of Krishna's pastimes. All present were listening attentively, occasionally making comments or appreciative sounds and gestures. Unfortunately, as I didn't have breakfast at the temple very often, I'm not sure whether this is an everyday phenomenon.

Morning prasada is taken with the entire group, but then the members separate as each has specific duties to accomplish such as: cooking, cleaning, laundering and stringing flower garlands. The priests stay at the temple to hold the six daily arotik services and make offerings to the deities. The most important and auspicious jobs are performing sankirtana and organizing "chanting parties." Sankirtana, which means "chanting the holy names in congregation," is the duty

which occupies most of the day for the majority of devotees (some members hold regular jobs outside the church). This is the major fund-raising process of ISKON and includes selling of holy books and pamphlets, distributing flowers and food on the streets, and asking for contributions. Sankirtana is a very holy activity and is looked upon as beneficial to everyone involved: the devotee, who is selflessly serving Krishna; the temple, which receives the money; potential devotees, who may be drawn to the temple; and those who contribute money, which adds good karma to their soul-energies. Having a chanting party, which means chanting the maha mantra out in public, is also quite beneficial for it provides some contact with the name of God to a maximum number of passers-by. Actually, chanting parties are another form of sankirtana but are generally considered separate from fund-raising activities.

Prasada is served again at the temple at two-thirty in the afternoon; this is the last meal of the day. Hot milk is served after evening arotik ceremonies, but it is regarded as auspicious to limit one's intake of food. As stated earlier, arotik is held six times daily, but people usually attend only twice or three times a day. There are only a few people present at the other services. The temple begins filling up again at about five-thirty, and arotik is held at six-thirty. Later Bhajan is held. It is quite similar to arotik but without wild dancing and the chanting is more soft and subdued. A class in Bhagavad-gita follows. At eight o'clock hot milk is served and the final arotik service occurs at eight-fifteen. The day ends at nine o'clock when the lights are turned off, and any leftover time between then and the end of the last arotik is used to finish chanting Joppa (although it is considered more auspicious to have finished chanting one's rounds by ten in the morning).

#### Analysis

Upon my first arrival at the ISKCON temple in Berkeley, I was more or less put in the charge of Bhakta Frank (bhakta means devotion, or devoted, and is used as a prefix to a devotee's name until his spiritual master assigns a permanent spiritual name). One of his duties is to help with the orientation of new members. Frank is tall, about thirty-five years of age, and has a varied background. For a time, he made women's handbags professionally, was editor of an underground newspaper and attended a Roman Catholic seminary. He was attracted to ISKCON, he says, because he was searching for a way to be of "loving service" in the world and there was no opportunity other than at a religious community to engage in this sort of life. When asked why he had discontinued his earlier religious training, he said, "The Catholic seminary I was at was too much into authority so they missed the whole essence of religion. They didn't really have the experience of god-consciousness." At the

ISKCON centers, Frank says, everything is geared to be “functional, but in a loving way.”

His commitment must also be at least partially the result of a pessimistic view of the current trends of society which drew Frank to Krishna Consciousness, because embedded in many of his statements and explanations of Vedic philosophy were examples of failures and mistakes of Western culture. He said, for example, that he sensed something drastically wrong with the world, that there is no morality, that people are getting wilder and more violent than ever before, that large corporations are in control of everything, and that even hospitals today are only out to make a profit. He said that no one really knows what they’re doing anymore, citing as an example the case of automobiles and rapid transportation systems in general, often thought of as a great technological achievement of modern man, which he considered more of a curse than a blessing.

The idea that modern society is purposeless and foolish is typical among devotees. Caru Das, the leader of the Berkeley temple, likened Western man to someone who just jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, is about to die, and is saying to himself, “Gee, the sun is warm today, there’s a nice breeze blowing; what a nice day it is today.” A typical attitude is, in Bhakta Mark’s words, “I just knew it was all insane.”

I began to wonder whether there was something similar in the backgrounds of the devotees. I had been having a casual conversation with Mark, and had mentioned that I thought perhaps I should have been asking people questions about their backgrounds — whether they were from broken homes, or had been addicted to drugs, and so on. He said, “Well, just watch the people walking by here, trying to enjoy themselves. I didn’t come from a bad situation at all. I came from what is supposed to be a really good situation. I just knew there had to be something better.” I asked another devotee, Bhakta Daniel, what he thought about American society compared to other societies around the world, and he replied, “I’m not like a lot of people. I think the United States is o.k. but everybody here just wants to have sense gratification, and that’s not the way to live. We need to combine our technology with the spiritual wisdom of India.” Daniel told me that just before he had come to an ISKCON temple for the first time, he had seen a man run over and killed by a car, and he had thought, “Man, death is so close....” He said, “Devotees come here because they’re sick and tired of the world, mostly — or they just can’t make it, you know . . . because here there’s so much love and attention.”

It seemed that whenever the topic of conversation was the world outside the temple, there was nothing but pessimism. But quite the reverse was true when speaking of Krishna Consciousness or the change in lifestyle brought about by living at the ISKCON center. I spoke with Bhakta Spencer many times, and

never heard a word about anything but the ecstasy of chanting and serving Krishna. “It’s just ecstasy, divine bliss. Your eyes get opened more and more with time and practice. It just gets greater and greater. People can tell, too, after just chanting one time, kind of like licking the outside of a jar of honey. And it never gets boring.”

Kritakarma also stressed that chanting never becomes boring. “That’s something about transcendental things — they never get old. It’s funny, because after you live here for a while, your whole conception of time changes completely. One day blends into the next, and you don’t seem to age so much. That’s one way you can tell that the things we are doing really are transcendental, because they just go on, forever.” Kritakarma joined ISKCON three-and-one-half years ago. He had been an engineering student at the University of Oklahoma and had started taking LSD. He said that he had suddenly started thinking about things like reincarnation and yoga, had read the Tibetan Book of the Dead and had realized that all the things he had been thinking were written down thousands of years ago, by some people thousands of miles away. “I used to say that Acid turned me on to Krishna, but really I was looking for something, and I didn’t find it in Acid. So I came to Krishna.”

From this small amount of exposure to the physical and mental environment of an ISKCON temple, the reader may have formulated some conception of the reasons why some people decide to leave their families and friends and the outside world in order to join this organization. The Bhagavad-gita says there are four reasons that a man comes to Krishna: he might be distressed and looking for comfort; in need and looking for help; inquisitive and looking for answers; or wise and looking for God. There are definite mental currents and themes present at the temple which lead me to believe that there are several things that Krishna Consciousness might offer, especially to someone who is, in Bhakta Daniel’s words, “sick and tired of the world.”

Our society today is fractionalized without solidarity or a feeling of belonging. Job mobility and other factors tend to uproot families, and it is a rare person who can say: “My father lived here, and his father lived here. I belong here. I’m a native of this state, I go to this school, I live in this community, and all these people are my neighbors and friends.” In contrast, life at the temple seemingly offers a feeling of solidarity and brotherhood. There is the feeling of “you and me against the world,” and it is emphasized by renouncing the world, shaving one’s head, living in a large group and wearing similar clothing.

There is no certainty in the modern world; things appear to be constantly changing. The social condition everywhere is boiling; warfare, revolutions, and terrorism are rampant. Not only are we caught between all kinds of conflicting propaganda so that our minds

tend to become bewildered, but we have little idea what to anticipate. Krishna Consciousness offers what purports to be an ancient science, a science given by God himself, with answers to any question the mind can conceive. The correct lifestyle is carefully prescribed, goals are provided and all answers are backed up with the authority of scriptures that are five thousand years old; the scriptures are deemed those upon which the world's most "spiritually advanced" society has relied for all time.

And finally, in a way, the modern world is rather boring. In a materialistic culture, there is little which one can appreciate in awe and wonder. All appears to be the result of human activity. Technology, for all its "breakthroughs" has become an accepted thing; even the flight to the moon has become "old hat." We become jaded to the excitement of human accomplishment. ISKCON, on the other hand, offers the rich life of the imagination, the unfathomable and unparalleled glories of Krishna. There are the constantly exciting stories of demigods and demons, reincarnation and spiritual growth, and the pastimes of Lord Krishna. Is it possible that man has a basic need for the adventure and involvement of myth, legend and religious belief? If so, then this is one area in which our steel-and-concrete society has failed us miserably.

I have no all-encompassing theories to present and, of course, the possibilities of research into Krishna Consciousness are by no means exhausted. There is need for a more systematic approach to the structures of temple organization and the movement in America in general (now that a beginning has been presented) in order to arrive at an understanding of ISKCON. I would also be interested in the results of two other types of investigation. Some organized attempt should be made to delineate and analyze the differences between traditional Hindu theology and that of Prabhupada — devotees insist there is none. Secondly, an extensive compilation and comparison of individual case histories should be undertaken. In the meantime, I hope that this paper will suffice as a survey of one ISKCON temple and its significance to the lives of its devotees.

