

How I Came to Krishna Consciousness by Lokanath Swami

The unseen merciful hand of Lord Krsna helps a determined young student become one of Srila Prabhupada's first Indian disciples.

I was born in Aravade, a small village in the Indian state of Maharashtra that differs little from more than seven hundred thousand others in India. After I graduated from high school, my family sent me to Bombay to study chemistry in college. But my college career was not to be.

In the year 1971, in late March, something happened to prevent me from following the program my family had so carefully laid out for me. For the first time, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada was touring India with his foreign disciples. They had arrived in Bombay just before I had, and now they were going to have a pandal (a spiritual festival) at Cross Maidan.

The devotees publicized the pandal very widely, in newspapers and on billboards. In the advertisements, Srila Prabhupada's disciples were described as American, Canadian, European, African, and Japanese sadhus (saintly devotees). This was unprecedented. Previously, whenever the word sadhu had been applied to someone, it was understood that the person was Indian. There could be no other consideration. But these advertisements were talking about sadhus from all over the world. This was indeed a novelty for every Bombayite, and it especially fascinated me.

Intrigued, I went to the Hare Krishna Festival, which was quite well organized. The Hare Krsna sadhus were the biggest attraction for me. I appreciated their singing, dancing,

walking, and talking. In fact, I liked everything about them, and I attended the function practically every evening. I would simply watch and listen. Though I knew English, I wasn't fluent, and speaking with foreigners was too difficult for me. I purchased a few magazines and a few booklets with the little money I had.

Srila Prabhupada spoke every evening. He discussed many issues relating to Krsna consciousness and made many points. But the point that had the greatest impact on me, and which attracted me to him and his society more than anything else, was the simple point that if you serve Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, you simultaneously serve everyone and everything else. Srila Prabhupada gave the analogy of what happens when one waters a tree. Just by pouring water on the root of a tree, one automatically waters all the leaves, branches, fruits, and flowers on the tree.

Srila Prabhupada had simplified my job. "Here is my chance," I thought. I had always wanted to serve others, and thus at different stages in my life I had contemplated becoming an engineer or a doctor or a lawyer. Whenever I thought of my future, I would think of how I could serve others. Yet although throughout all these years I had mainly thought of service, I didn't know where to begin, and I had practically no resources in my possession. But now Srila Prabhupada had cleared my path by showing the easy way of serving the whole creation through the simple medium of serving the Lord, the source of all that be. This idea greatly appealed to me.

As scheduled, the Hare Krishna Festival ended after eleven days, and everything went back to normal.

I continued going to college in Bombay. I shared a room with some people from my village, whom my family had asked to keep an eye on me. Once, several years before, I had left my studies and gone to join an asrama in a town nearby my village. I had almost made it to the asrama, but the unseen

merciful hand of the Lord brought me back so that later I could join Srila Prabhupada instead.

After this incident, my family had anticipated my going away somewhere, sometime, and that is why they asked the villagers to watch over me. But how much could they watch me? I had gone to the Hare Krsna function practically every evening, and no one had noticed that. I would keep Hare Krsna magazines and booklets inside my big fat chemistry books and read them for hours. My roommates would marvel at how seriously I was studying chemistry. They couldn't detect that instead of absorbing myself in analyzing chemical solutions, I was probing into the ultimate solution to the problems of life.

Whenever my roommates went out, I would bolt the door and, with my arms raised, chant Hare Krsna and dance to my full satisfaction. Having seen the devotees chanting and dancing onstage at the festival, I was trying to imitate them. Thus, in hiding, I was following the process of Krsna consciousness: chanting, dancing, and reading over and over again the few pieces of literature I had.

I knew that the Hare Krsna devotees were living somewhere in Bombay, but after the function their small group had merged into the big city, and I was deprived of their association.

One year passed.

Then, in March 1972, ISKCON organized another festival, this time at Juhu Beach. During the course of the year, the devotees had purchased some land at Juhu, and the function was going to be held right on their premises. Once again, advertisements appeared in the newspapers and in other media, and news of the festival reached me by the causeless mercy of the Lord. I had been waiting for this news, and I was extremely happy to receive it.

Naturally, I attended the programs. I would go long before they began, borrow books, and read them. During the chanting I

would join in wholeheartedly. The foreign devotees, in Indian dhotis and kurtas, and the Indian student, in imported trousers and shirt, would dance together.

Occasionally, during prasadam time, when I happened to be near the gate, the devotees would invite me to come and take prasadam with them. I was eager to observe their life closely, so I would take advantage of the opportunity and join them. They were all nice devotees. On top of that, they were all foreigners, and I was duly impressed.

A few days after the festival at Juhu ended, I sat down and composed an application for membership in ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness). I had decided to join the devotees, and to join any organization, I thought, one needed to fill out an application. I addressed my application to the president of ISKCON, Bombay. I wrote that I agreed to follow the four regulative principles no meat-eating, no intoxication, no illicit sex, and no gambling. I also stated that I liked their dazzling aratis, ecstatic kirtanas, and sumptuous prasadam. (I had picked up all these terms from their publicity handouts.) I went to a typing institute and had the application typed out. ISKCON was an international society, so I thought everything had to be formalized and just right.

Then I went to the Hare Krsna asrama at Juhu and asked who the president was. It wasn't difficult to get to see him. His name was Giriraja dasa. He went through my letter-application, and on the spot he accepted me and embraced me. Not only that: he welcomed me in and immediately introduced me to all the asramites as a new devotee.

I quickly adjusted to my new lifestyle. I had a new home, a new uniform, new associates, a new program almost everything was new to me. Nonetheless, I immediately embraced all of it and liked it. Although the devotees were mostly foreigners, I felt completely at home. I was determined to make this my

life's commitment.

One week passed quickly. Then my elder brother arrived at the temple with one of my old roommates. Among the things I had left in my room was a handbill with the Hare Krsna address at Juhu on it. That's how they'd found me. It was no big surprise to them that I'd joined the devotees. They had been expecting something like this for some time, and now all they had feared had come to pass.

My brother wanted me to visit my family, especially for the sake of my mother. If I wouldn't go she might die, he said. But he assured me my family had no objection to my returning after the visit. I had always respected my brother, and here he was practically begging me to return home, saying that it was a matter of life and death for my affectionate mother and that I could return soon. Finally, I asked permission from Giriraja and left, wearing my new uniform of dhoti and kurta.

After I arrived in my village, people began saying that though I used to be such a nice boy, now something had gone wrong with me. The difference was that I was wearing a dhoti and kurta, chanting Hare Krsna, and avoiding the association of nondevotees. The townspeople considered all these things strange and abnormal.

My father requested me not to wear my new clothes and not to put on tilaka, even though he wore clothes similar to mine and occasionally wore tilaka himself. He was a devotee of Lord Vittala, a form of Lord Visnu, or Krsna, and devotees of Lord Vittala apply tilaka in a way similar to that of the Hare Krsna devotees. On special occasions my father would put on his tilaka, but he didn't want me to imitate him, because he was worried about what people would think. (If such is the reaction of Indian parents, I can hardly imagine the reaction of parents of devotees in other lands).

Thus my parents tried everything in their power to dissuade me

from returning to the Hare Krsna devotees. They even went to astrologers to learn some way to “cure” me or to find out how long I would continue living this “strange type of life.” They were really concerned.

More than a week passed, yet no plans were made for my return to the devotees, as per the original agreement between my brother and me. My parents kept telling me that some relative or other still had to come see me and that it wouldn't be proper for me to leave without meeting him. My family planned to enlist the relatives as agents to somehow or other talk me out of this sadhu business. My parents tried everything on me, but my mind was fixed on going back to the Hare Krsna devotees.

One day I saw my sister shedding tears. When someone asked her what was wrong, she replied, “Just see how in our house all the other boys are nicely engaged in playing cards, but my brother Raghunatha isn't sitting with them.” Such was the cause of her tears. She was feeling sorry that I wasn't playing cards with the other boys but was instead busy chanting the holy names of God on my beads.

When my family all realized I wouldn't give up the life I had embraced, they came up with the proposal that I could continue the life of a sadhu but that I should do it in our village. They promised to build a small temple so I could do my devotional practices there. I rejected this idea, too, however, because I wanted to associate with the devotees. There is no question of leading a spiritual life without proper association, without the association of devotees who are practicing Krsna consciousness full-time. I didn't want to be just another bogus sadhu. India was already overcrowded and overburdened with them. I wanted to engage in the service of Krsna in the Hare Krsna movement. Srila Prabhupada had already cleared my path. He had given me my life's mission, and I was fully satisfied once and for all with that.

I had sold my heart to Srila Prabhupada and Lord Krsna. So, finally, my family accepted the inevitable. I returned to Bombay after about a month and moved back into the asrama. Since I had stayed in my village quite a long time, I wasn't sure how Giriraja and the other devotees would react to my return. When they saw me, however, I was surprised to find myself most welcome, just as before and they were surprised to see me back in their midst. Their experience had been that many Indian devotees had come and gone, promising to return soon, but hardly any had actually returned. Thus they were surprised and pleased to see me. By the causeless mercy of my spiritual master, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and Lord Sri Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, my return to the devotees became possible.

Although it may appear that my joining ISKCON disrupted my family's life and caused a disturbance in my small village, these negative effects were only temporary. In the years since I joined ISKCON, I and many other devotees have often visited Aravade and taught the principles of Krsna consciousness, and now my family and my whole village embrace ISKCON as a genuine religious movement. There are seven full-time devotees from there, my sister has enrolled her son into the ISKCON gurukula school in Vrndavana, and whenever I see my father he asks me for tilaka and proudly decorates his forehead with it. Also, my family and many other families in Aravade regularly chant Hare Krsna on beads. All in all, my whole village loves the Hare Krsna movement, and there is no disruption of any kind.