

Interview with Bhutabhavana Das

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

February 7, 1996

Q: Alright, this is February 7th, at an interview with Bhutabhavana -- am I saying your name right?

A: Yes.

Q: How do you spell it?

A: B-H-U-T-A-B-H-A-V-A-N-A D-A-S.

Q: Does your name mean something?

A: Yes. Bhutabhavana is actually a name in [unintelligible], it means "one who increases the opulence of the living entity." So actually, a name of God. And then we all have the name "Das" which means servant.

Q: Did somebody give that name to you?

A: Yes, my spiritual master, founder of the Krishna Consciousness Society, A. C. Bukivendanta [?], Swami Provopot[?]. He's my spiritual master.

Q: So can you tell me what brought you to this life? Something about your background, maybe?

A: Okay, well, um, . . . I used to read, I was very involved in biblical studies, and esoteric literature, and uh, and I saw the devotees in 1969 in Detroit, and I read Abugavageeta [?], which was an abridged version. And when I read it, um, I couldn't put it down, in two days I read the whole thing. I was just amazed at the knowledge there, that nothing was a clear to me as what I had read in this book, as someone presenting exactly what life was all about, and that this person is actually in control of everything, which is actually Lord Krishna, as he speaks in the Abugavageeta. So um, that started my road toward becoming involved in Krishna Consciousness. And I'd say within, I ordered a subscription to the magazine "Back to Godhead", and then eventually I joined in 1970, in Los Angeles.

Q: And did you live in an ashram[?] there?

A: Yes, it's called the Bramachery[?] Ashram, which means "celibate students." And there's a, because this is America, in India, practically speaking, there's no such thing as a Bramacherini[?] Ashram, which is, um, the female aspect of the same ashram. So uh, our spiritual master, Provopot, he actually initiated a bramacherini ashram, so there were celibate men and women also in different quarters.

Q: And what was life like there? How did you spend your days?

A: Well, we did a lot of service. We started in the morning at 3:30, we'd get up, and about 4:15, 4:30, we'd have a worship service. And then at uh, we'd chant on our beads for about 2 hours, which we call "sixteen rounds," we chant around our beads sixteen times, which is 108 beads. The mantra, "Hari Krishna, Hari Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hari, Hari, Hari Rama, Hari Rama, Rama, Rama, Hari, Hari." And um, we do that for two hours, and then about 6:30 or so, or quarter to seven, usually there is what we call "greeting of the deities," which is the um, where we have our altar and we have the um, a worship service, where God is actually worshipped in His uh, what we called our "arch of [unintelligible] deity form", which is more or less like a form of God, as He appeared here. There's a form on the altar that is representing Him, and we worship like that. And then after that, uh, that's about usually 25 or 30 minutes -- well right after that, within the same ceremony, there's the worship of the spiritual master,

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which is called "guru puja." And then after that we have a class on this book called the Shirman Baguatam [?], which is called the "spotless piranha," it's about 40, 35 or 40 volumes long. And uh, that's our main Scripture that we study, other than the Abugavageeta. And there are many others that we have, but, that's our, probably our largest book that we study. And then after that, we just, we did various services, like uh, either you worked in the kitchen, or you went out on what we call sankirtan, which means "congregational chanting." In the early days we used to do that quite a bit, go out and do what we called street sankirtan, where we'd chant and dance on the street and give out magazines. And we did that pretty much throughout the day. And then about um, we'd go back to the temple, and at about 6:30, we'd all get washed up, bathed, and uh, um. . . then we'd have a um, what we called a sundarartik [?], it's a different ceremony in the evening, and then we have Abugavageeta class after that. And then we sit around and talk for a little bit, and drink some hot milk and take rest about 9 o'clock.

Q: Wow. So you wouldn't sleep that much, actually. Only got 6 and a half hours or something.

A: Yeah.

Q: How long did you live in LA?

A: Um, for about 7 months. I went to New York in May of '71. And then my spiritual master sent a telegram to have myself and another devotee to come to Africa to join him, in Nairobi. This was in October of '71, I went there.

Q: Wow. How long did you stay in Nairobi?

A: Um, for a year.

Q: Wow. What was that like?

A: It was very nice, very um, informative. I got to see a different aspect of culture, whereas if you're just limited to living in the United States, you think everything is centered around the U.S., even though it's the most important country on the planet, it um--, people, a lot of things we take for granted that everyone knows, people have never heard of in different countries. Or they're just not concerned about some of our concerns. So it was very interesting.

Q: What was the purpose of your work there?

A: Um, we opened our first center. It was called the um, was the Hari Krishna Center in Nairobi, and uh, um, we just uh, started preaching there, basically, and telling people about Krishna Consciousness.

Q: How were you received?

A: [laughs] Overwhelmingly -- the first night, um, I had the opportunity of introducing my spiritual master to the people at the university at Nairobi, where he was giving a lecture, and uh, it was 2,000 people there, and this was like maybe 5 days after I got there. They had just come, they hadn't been there longer than a month or so. And people were very interested.

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Q: Is that center still open?

A: Uh, yes. Actually, they just built a big new temple there.

Q: Wow. So then you came back to the United States?

A: Yes, in '72.

Q: And what did you do then?

A: Um, . . . in '72, uh, I stayed at the New York temple for another year or so. And then I decided I was going to just go home for awhile and see what life was like back at home with Mom.

Q: Was that Detroit?

A: Yes. And uh, I was there for two months, and I said, "Well, I don't like this." So I went back to associate with the devotees in Cleveland. I went to the Cleveland center and I stayed there for about a year or so.

Q: How did your mom feel about what you were doing?

A: Well, she always thought that I was different than the rest of the kids, in that I was so, um, spent so much time in concentration in thinking about God, and so, she just took it as that. Well, of course, it wasn't her way of life -- she's a Baptist, and uh, she um, would've preferred that I stayed in her church, but, she figured, "Well if that's what you want to do, that's what you want to do."

Q: So, I'm sort of unclear on the way that economics worked out. Did you hold everything in common, so like, you know you kind of pooled your money and stuff like that?

A: Well, we never really never considered ourselves as having anything in one sense. The Bramachery is considered to be that whatever belongs to him belongs to the spiritual master. So, uh, lot of us when we first came, we gave everything, just as a form of renunciation of giving something up. And uh, . . . so uh, we just kind of decided, well we actually took part in the Krishna Consciousness movement. Whenever we went out and distributed books and collected, it all went into like a church pool, just like when you give donations in church, they have a building fund, they have a um, so many different funds. So we had a fund for uh, temple construction, we had a fund for maintenance of the devotees, we had a fund for book distribution, which was our main one. That was our main objective, was to distribute books. So most of our funds went toward publication of the books and uh, that was always under the control of the treasurer and the temple president for each individual center. But they were very much obligated to send funds to our central publishing arm, which is called the BBT, or Buktenanta [?] Book Trust, so that we could actually increase our production of books, by which we could share the information with the people will want that. So that's how that works.

Q: And then they took care of your daily needs?

A: Yeah. Well, if you needed something, like you needed a pair of shoes or something, you had to go to the temple president. Sometimes it seemed like it was like pulling teeth, but. . . but uh, it was a simple lifestyle. We uh, . . . things have changed a lot since then.

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Q: In what way have they changed?

A: Uh, well for the most part, most of us don't live in the temple anymore. We all have our own houses. We're more or less a congregation now. We're mostly congregational members rather than, uh, live on the temple complex.

Q: So you don't live at the farm then?

A: No. As a matter of fact, there's about 300 families of Hari Krishna devotees around here. Well I would say, the core that have actually been initiated, devotees, you know. But um, we don't um, I'd say 95% of them don't live on the farm.

Q: Okay. So there's not some sort of spiritual belief that you have to live communally, or --?

A: Well there used to be that idea, initially, because most of us were single kids, or single individuals, who lived in, like I said, either a bramachery, or a bramacherini ashram. So there was no question of going out and getting a job, and keeping, you know, a lot of money for yourself and building your own house. Once we got married, that's a different ashram, that's called a Grehasta [?] ashram. So, a grehastha, for one thing he needs privacy, and for another thing he needs his um, separate place, for um, well economic development, for his family needs.

Q: So did you get married then?

A: Yeah. Got married in, uh, to my wife in 1982.

Q: Do you guys have kids?

A: Yeah, I have four boys. And uh, she's originally from Brooklyn, New York.

Q: And so if you got married in '82, then all the kids must be at home, I mean they're young.

A: Yeah, they're from 10 down to 3.

Q: So how do you school them? Do they go to public schools?

A: No, . . . uh, there's a lot of home schooling around here. But some of the kids go to public schools, especially the older kids, because our school system isn't as developed as um, you know, pre-um, what do you call it, college prep, we don't really have a college prep studies little institute. But, so most of the older kids go to public schools. Um, the younger kids go to, um, we have a school at the farm. And then some, there's a group, there are different groups who home school their kids. Like, um, my one son, who's going to the um, um, the Vishna [?] Academy on the farm, and the other one, who's about seven, he goes to, he's taught by one of the other, um, parents, who home schools her kids also. So we kind of, there's a lot of sharing of um, schooling, and business interest, you know, different things like that. Whatever we can, like put our heads together on as a unit, as a community, we do that.

Q: Are your marriages arranged? Or do you pick your partner?

A: They could be. Well, my, um, my wife and I, when I was India, in 1981, was it '81? No, it was '82. In 1982, um, I was, I told my director that I was planning on getting married, so he spoke to someone else,

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and uh, he said that he had one disciple who was planning, wanting to get married, so we got together and we talked and we decided, well, we'll try it out. So we've been together for the last 14 years.

Q: Is that how a lot of marriages work in your --?

A: Yes, but -- yes and no. Uh, generally, that used to be the standard when we all were living in the temple, that, generally, uh, a single man wouldn't just go up and approach a single woman about it. But there would be some arrangement. But nowadays, it's um, . . . it's a lot different. And sometimes the parents kind of help with trying to find a nice boy or a nice girl. You know, for their daughter or son. And then there's a lot of, there's a lot of intermixing with boys and girls, they develop relationships, just like - - we're just a sample of the um, other society, society at large, pretty much, as we're still Americans.

Q: Yeah, right. Do you dress in a special way?

A: Only when I go to the temple. Most of us, we've assimilated into Western dress. Because most of us have jobs now, and um, just when we got to the temple in the morning or something.

Q: Are you wearing particular colors, though, like. . . no?

A: Oh yeah, well, in um, most of us are married persons, most of us are wearing white, the men. They wear white curter [?] shirt, and the dhoti [?], I don't know if you know what it looks like, it's kind of a wrapped garment, just one piece. And uh, the women, they wear sarays [?], you know, Indian sarays. And um, the, what we call the bramacherys, who are single men, they wear a saffron. But there's not very many of them around here.

Q: These are mainly families that live around here?

A: Yeah.

Q: And then um, is, do you shave your head as part of your belief?

A: Yes. You don't have to. In fact, the majority of the people around here don't. But I've been shaving my head before I joined the Hari Krishna movement, so I just keep on. I just, I had to add something, actually I added this sika [?] in the back, the, like the ponytail. But uh, yeah, I shave it regularly, every 2 or 3 days.

Q: And do you go to the temple every day to worship?

A: Yes, pretty much.

Q: In the morning, is that when it is?

A: Yeah, 4:30 in the morning, is the first program.

Q: Does your whole family go?

A: Mmm. . . not all the time. It's difficult trying to get the kids all bathed and dressed by 4:30. But we go to the second program pretty much all together, at 7:15, which is called the gurupucha, greeting of the deities. Like that.

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Q: And then what do you do for work?

A: Well right now I'm temporarily working with one of the uh, um, one of the other devotees here that has um, well that have what is called a um, um. . . nursery. It's called Daily Discounters. Um, sometimes I work there, and sometimes I work um, you know, in different other temporary positions. There's one devotee that has a T-shirt business, I work with him sometimes.

Q: When you were living communally in ashrams, did each person have a particular job in terms of domestic work, like cooking or cleaning, or did you rotate them, or how did that work?

A: Yes, generally everyone was trained up in a particular service. If you were a book distributor, that's what you did all the time. If you were a cook, just like I spent most of my time for a cook for about 8 years in the movement. And I cooked, helped cooked for our temple in New York, on 55th St, um, I did that for quite awhile. And um, yeah, everyone had some specific service, generally.

Q: And um, do you have any special diet that you follow?

A: Well, no it's--, it's just strictly vegetarian, or what you might call lacto-vegetarian. Um, and uh, we just offer everything to Krishna, or God. In our Bugageya, it says that when one offers his food to God, it becomes sanctified, and it does promote sharper intelligence. And um, not only that, that um, it frees one from sinful reactions, when one offers his food to God. So basically, the diet is just kind of a spiritual diet, but it's lactovegetarian, and we offer all our food to God. Like that. It's called prisadam[?], or mercy of God. But this prisadam, it's not like, if you go, it's not like a wafer or something, it's like a, our complete meal that we eat, like that.

Q: Um, . . . in ashram living, I mean it probably varied from place to place, but um, what sort of accommodations did you have? Did you share rooms with other bramacherys, or --?

A: Yeah, um, we would have like one room and everyone would have sleeping bags. We all slept on the floor. As a matter of fact I still sleep on the floor, I prefer it, somehow or other I prefer it, with a sleeping bag. But um, . . . um, it's um, it was like a big hall or big room, and uh, if there were different rooms in the building then different people would sleep, different groups of people would sleep in different rooms. Just like when I was in New York, on 55th street, we had about 250 devotees living there, it was a 13 story building, so I slept in one room with a roommate, one roommate, they were small rooms. But there were so many rooms that you could facilitate everybody, you know, one or two people in a room.

Q: Did you like living with a big group of people?

A: Uh, yeah as long as I wasn't married. Because, well we, we say that 90% of our advancement in Krishna Consciousness is based on association. So, uh, if you're with somebody who's always speaking to you about spiritual subject matter, uh, then it's very enlivening. It's even more enjoyable than being by oneself. But, uh, it's different when you get married, see.

Q: Sure. And um, once you got married then, um, you had, had your own sort of family quarters or something?

A: No, um, let's see. . . when I first got married, we still had separate, um, because we still were living in the temple, we still had separate dwellings, like there were the women and the men, but then we would

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associate during the day. And um, then when I left Africa and went to Detroit, I decided--, we stayed in Detroit for a short time, and um, then I decided that, well, if we're going to raise a family, we have to get that economic development sense of uh, uh necessity, so I went and started looking for a job, and we stayed with my mother, and that was the first time we actually -- no actually, when we were at the temple in Detroit. See there's a change, there's like a change in the Society as it went along, there were actually provisions for household quarters, or families . So like in Detroit, there's, the temple had about five or six houses around and different couples would stay in different houses. Whereas the bramacherys would stay in one house, all the single men would have like one house, where they would all stay, or the women had one house where they would all stay. But then the householders, they all separate houses, either up or downstairs. But then eventually I did move out of the temple housing and went to get a job, moved in with my mother, and she helped us out, and we started from there, like that.

Q: Sounds like the Society has enabled you to travel a lot.

A: Yeah, because it was an expanding movement. Even now, uh, just like Russia is, used to be such a closed society, as far as Western, or American influence is concerned, but there's so many thousands of Hari Krishna devotees there now. Because since they've opened the doors, you know, that um, . . . so many of the devotees have gone there, and preached there. Russians are very sharp, they're very intelligent people, so they really like the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness.

Q: And you actually were in India for awhile too?

A: Oh well, only for a month. See, we go there for pilgrimage, because there's like thousands of holy places in India. And one of them, which is the, considered the most holiest place, as far as our Society, or the Hindu society, or people just in India, is Brindavan [?], India. We built one temple there, and we're building a whole city-type situation in Mayapour[?], which is in West Bengal. And we have temples all over India, so we go there quite often. And um, this particular year is actually a 100th anniversary of the birth of our spiritual master, who left us in 1977. So there are celebrations all over the world. And it's all basically um, the uh, the main focus of the celebration is in India, where we have our uh, headquarters in Mayapour. And uh. . . it's a, big complex there.

Q: In India, are you um, better known among people than you are in the United States?

A: Oh yes! This is like their culture.

Q: Yeah. So did you feel more, like, accepted there?

A: Oh, yes, and people know. It's like uh, not only accepted, but almost, practically worshipped, because they see that someone has actually come from India and taught other people things that, basically, in their own country they don't know some of them. Because, what Shrilaprovot [?] did was come and give us like a pure teaching of what we call Vishnava [?] philosophy. Whereas in India, everything has been mixed up for so many centuries, and domination by the Muslims, or the um, the Turks, or domination by the British. You know there's so much mixture there, and so many different kinds of ideals that they have um, kind of mixed in with their own beliefs. Sometimes, they don't, they have so many wrong ideals about, supposedly what is considered their own philosophy. So Shrilaprovot,

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when he came to the West, he actually gave us a pure teaching of the actually Vedic[?] literature, and Vedic philosophy, so people really appreciate what we're doing there.

Q: What have your relations been like with the surrounding community here, in Alachua?

A: Oh, most wonderful I've ever seen. In the sense that we're in the, every year we're in the Christmas parade, we're in the homecoming parade. We have a, uh, a festival we call Rafiatra [?], where we pull a cart down the street, and when we have the homecoming parade, we have our cart in the parade. And people know us well here. And not only that, but, we've served about 1 million meals of prosadom [?] at the University of Florida for the last 22 years or so. Right there on campus, every day they serve out prosadom to the students, and there's between 3 and 5 hundred people every day that line up and just get a plate of hot vegetarian Krishna prosadom. Some people like, just for four years, just eat it, just save their money and eat prosadom there every day. We ask for a donation, but you know, you don't have to give anything, there's just a basket there, so, people give sometimes. Yeah, this is the best community, as a matter of fact, our of any place I've ever been in America, this is the best the place I've ever been where there's nice relationships with the public in general.

Q: That kind of surprises me, -- well I'm not from here, but I would've thought that the South would have pretty traditional Christian values and that they might look on anything outside of that with, I don't know.

A: Well they might, but if you've been somewhere for 25 years --

Q: So at first, maybe the relationships weren't as good, --

A: I guess, but I've only been here three years. Of course, back then in the '70's, we were considered weird everywhere we went.

Q: Was that hard for you?

A: No. Matter of fact, it was a challenge, and in the Bugalagheeta, Krishna says that one should learn to tolerate happiness and distress, and become aloof from them, because it's two sides of the same coin of material affection. And so, um, in one sense, it helps you, when there's adversity, it really helps. So, um, we never took it as, we took it as like an impetus to go on, do whatever we were going to do.

Q: Um. . . well one of the things we're very interested in in this project is kind of the 1960's and '70's, because that period saw such a burst of communal living, and um, did you get a lot of, um, what you might call hippie types or counter-culture types coming to you?

A: Yeah, our whole movement practically was started by hippies. So many of us came from that background. I personally wouldn't have called myself a hippie, but I certainly was going towards that lifestyle. As a matter of fact, when I left Detroit in 1970, I hitch-hiked -- I took a bus to Denver, then I hitch-hiked the rest of the way because I didn't have any more money, and when I got to California, I was thinking, "Well, I'll go and try the culture there." Once I wanted to go to Haight-Ashbury, I had heard so much about it, and I was thinking, "Well, I've never taken any acid, but I'll try it at least once," I thought. But within week or week and a half of getting in California, I saw the devotees and I went to the temple, and that was that. So I never really experienced that too much. But I saw many people

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came from that culture in the temple. I mean, people would come to the temple, you could just see, look in their eyes, and they were flying on acid, you know? At that time, so many people.

Q: So do you think that coming to this Society, that kind of saved a lot of people, rescued a lot of people from a bad scene?

A: Yes. Yes. Definitely. Whether they were hippies or scholars, or whatever. There was a lot of people that were just scholars or something, or college students that came and joined. There's one book called Perfect Questions, Perfect Answers that we have in our Society. It's by one of our devotees, he was a Peace Corp worker in Calcutta, and he spoke with our spiritual master at that time, I think it was 1971. And he was asking questions back and forth, back and forth, and it was such a wonderful exchange of information. And so we have that book, but he was a Peace Corp worker, and I think he was a college student. And he's joined, he joined our movement later.

Q: Is your Hari Krishna society here in Alachua, is it pretty international? Or is it mainly Americans? Or -

-?

A: Uh, it's a mixture. There's people here -- also we get a lot of people from South America here, also. Because, - well I wouldn't say a lot, but at least 10 to 15% of the people here are from South America, because there, -- we have something called the GBC, or governing body commission, and there are different members who belong to this, and they have different zones in the world. And uh, . . . uh, there's one member here who's been here for years, who's been in charge of Gainesville, his name is Urdanandamajrag [?], he's a Sunyasayura, one who has dedicated his life to preaching, and not given up marriage. And um, he has a lot of disciples in South America, Brazil, um, I guess maybe Chile, or somewhere else. And so sometimes they come up and they, they're, they come up here because it's his zone, or whatever.

Q: I'm curious some about the leadership structure within ashram living. Can you describe like, how decisions are made, and kind of how the power structure works?

A: Well, like I said, there's a commission of, governing body commissioners, there's about, 20, 25, or 30 of them, throughout the world, who are responsible for different zones: Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa, uh, America, I mean different parts of America - Southern America, New York, Los Angeles, and every year they have meetings. And in these meetings, they have, uh, discussion of how to push on the Society, or how to take care of any problems in the society that may be voiced by the members of the society. And not only are there the GBC's there that have their meetings, then there's what's called the temple president's meetings. So there's different temples throughout the world, and these heads of the different temples, they actually go there and have meetings also, and they voice to the GBC what may be some problem in their constituency or whatever. And so then we get what we call a um, GBC meetings pamphlet or something that tells us what any new arrangements are or whatever that the Society wants to implement, and we generally follow whatever we feel we can. Because uh, it's such a, the Society is so diverse now, that uh, sometimes one may be working and he has a job, and he just goes to the temple, he doesn't really care about upper or middle management of the society, he just goes and does his worship at the temple, you know, does his job, take care of his family, and that's it. So it's not like we're a central government, like everybody who's a Hari Krishna's under some central

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influence. We have basic principles, yes, but it's not like an order will come from down [?] and everybody has to jump to follow it.

Q: But in the ashram, like when you were living in an ashram? You said before, like if you needed something, like a pair of shoes, there was someone you had to go to, to get permission or –

A: Usually a temple commander.

Q: And was that person elected by the people who lived there?

A: No, you just, usually they just, usually what would happen is that someone would see that somebody who's really working hard, and says, "Well this person's really enthusiastic, let me see if he'll accept the position." It's like, not everyone wanted the position. It's like they'll try going around trying to tell everybody after eating a big meal after the Sunday Feast, "Come on, please help clean up. We have to clean up," you know, clean up the temple or whatever.

Q: So the temple commander would be the person who kind of doled out the jobs?

A: Yeah, try to get people to do something.

Q: Did you ever have to play that role?

A: Yes, in LA when I first joined.

Q: Wow, when you first joined they put you in --

A: And then at other times, you know. It's not like it's a big, something that you have to go through a whole big thing to get that particular position. It's just doing the needful mainly.

Q: And how did you like that role?

A: Well, it gave me a different aspect of what's the difference between voluntary service and the need for having someone to do something. There's always this uh, this competition between one to have someone surrender to it and actually having to beg someone to do it, you know? But it wasn't bad. It's a challenge like I was saying before.

Q: Yeah, I think it would be hard to decide whether or not someone really needed what they were asking for. Like I spoke to a priest once at a Franciscan Friary, or whatever that they call it that I went to. And he was the person that the brothers had to come to, to ask for things, and he said it was a really tough job.

A: Yeah, it is. Yeah. Well, that's not so much -- when I say the "temple commander", the temple commander sometimes may fill that role, but mostly that role is filled by the accountant and the temple president. If you need something directly.

Q: Oh so the temple commander's different than the temple president?

A: Yes. Yes. The temple commander is like the sergeant at arms or whatever.

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Q: And then the temple president is more. . . ? What, the --?

A: Yeah, he just administrates everything. Coordinates everything. And sometimes it's, sometimes the temple president seems to have to beg from the accountant more so -- seems like the accountant is actually more important than the temple president sometimes. It's supposed to be like that. Our spiritual master says that the accountant is supposed to be like that. "Why do you want this? What do you need it for?" Otherwise everything would just be wasted.

Q: And then within each ashram, is there someone who is kind of a spiritual leader?

A: Mmm. . .no. Um, each ashram, when we say "ashram", that is a spiritual, um, uh, that is a spiritual situation there. See in the Vedic literature, in the Bagavagheeta, it explains there's 4 varnas [?] and 4 ashrams. The varnas are one's occupational duties, such as um, one may be a brahman or a priest, a sustria or a warrior, a mercantile person or a visha, and a suja, which is a laborer, just a general laborer. And the ashram aspect, that's the ma--, well the varnas are the material side, and the ashram is the spiritual side. So there's 4 ashrams. So one may be either in the bramachery ashram, which is the spiritual ashram, the um, uh grehasta ashram, which is the married ashram, the vanaprasta ashram, which is the um, uh, uh, giving up of household[?] life, and then sunyast ashram, which is completely living home in renunciation and going to preach like that, after one's been through married life, or maybe even -- you can be sunyast without going through marriage.

Q: So, would a sunyast be a person who would lead services?

A: Oh, yes. Well, um, generally, that's shared by whoever has a good voice, what we call a good kirtan leader, or sings well. And then different people, mostly the people who have more experience there, ask to give a class or a lecture. It's not a set person -- it's not like in the church where you have a pastor, and he gives a class, or the sermon, every week. But uh, everyone, our spiritual master has brought us up in the Society that everyone should be able to speak the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness. So especially the older members are asked to give class on certain days. Sometimes they can, sometimes they can't, so you ask somebody else.

Q: Are sunyasts, are they just men, or can women be sunyast too?

A: Basically it's just men.

Q: What are gender roles like within the Society here?

A: Well, sometimes it's a little confusing. But uh, we have to understand that in the Western society, when Shirprovot came here, he did things that no one else in India would do, such as create a Brahmacherini ashram and having men and women living in the same building, even though they were separate. He was criticized for a lot of this. But he said that in America and in the Western countries, men and women are practically inseparable, so if you have to, if you're going to have the men come, then women have to come too. And so, uh, he kind of instituted something new, which actually has born out to be very fruitful in spreading Krishna Consciousness in Western society. So. . . um, so the roles are kind of uh -- that's something you'll always be sorting out, just like you know, in different churches, they have so many different ideals about what women should do and what women can't do, or what men should do. Of course, the men usually always are doing everything. But um, this is

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something that's been going on for thousands of years. It's always there because, um, our spiritual master used to tell us that butter, uh, men and women are like butter and fire, like the man is like the butter and the woman is like the fire, you put the two together and the butter just melts. So, in this sense, there's -- in spiritual life, you always have to try to keep some kind of restricted association.

Q: So are sunyasts celibate?

A: Yes.

Q: And, um, what do you call a married person? Do they have a title?

A: Grihastha.

Q: Are grihastha celibate if they're not going to have kids?

A: Yes, that's the prescription.

Q: And is the idea to have, to have your energy focused on your spiritual life?

A: Yes. Um, basically, in Krishna Consciousness, the whole, we see that the whole world is running on what we call sense gratification. The idea that I am this body, and whatever my mind manufactures for me to enjoy, either through this body or through my mind, then I will satisfy that. But that's completely contrary to spiritual ideals, because we're actually not this body, we're the soul within the body. It's like cleaning a bird cage year after year, and then the bird inside dies, you never feed the bird. So we're trying to enjoy through this body which is limited and temporary, it's not really us, but we're actually the soul within the body. And God is the supreme Soul, and He's the supreme Enjoyer. Everything is meant for His satisfaction. So, as we, uh, try to satisfy Him, then we become satisfied. So, in one sense, sex life is the so-called pinnacle of pleasure in this material world, and so the more you restrict sex life, the more you get a sense of your spiritual identity, because it's the greatest thing that keeps you from knowing that. So that's what we try to do in every ashram.

Q: Would you say that people in your Society have a common um, mission or common vision? And if so, what that is?

A: Yes. Our common mission is actually to make the whole world Krishna Conscience. Because we find that it's lacking, that everyone should be God conscious. Not that they necessarily have to chant Hari Krishna, but if they have a name of God, and they are involved in thinking of God, trying to serve God, trying to see that others are always thinking of God, then that's perfection. That's our goal.

Q: Does your community, your spiritual community here in Alachua, have connections with any other groups in the area?

A: What do you mean, other religious groups? Or our own group?

Q: Um, no, I didn't mean your own Hari Krishna groups, I mean, I suppose other spiritual or religious groups, yeah.

A: Well there's a lot of, there's some interaction, but it's not like we all go to, you know, decide that they'll come to our church and we'll go to their church. Not like that, but we're always open for dialogue

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on basic principles of spiritual activity. Um, throughout the years, many of our devotees have been invited sometimes at a Catholic church, or, not necessarily at a church, but, to different priests, or whatever, and there's some dialogue. There's a lot of famous discussions in some of our literature between our spiritual master and um, um. . . there's one cardinal in France, Cardinal Don Roudes [?], I think he passed away a long time ago though. But uh, there's always been some dialogue between us and different religions. [tape ends] . . . that he has some gold, you can't say that the gold is Christian gold or Muslim gold or Hindu gold -- that gold is gold! It's accepted and can be spent, has value everywhere. So God is actually one person -- there's no such thing as a Christian God, a Hindu God, or Hari Krishna God, there's only one God. So we always have that ideal, so we try to interact with people on the basis of that ideal, whatever religion they belong to.

Q: Now you said you'd only been in this area for like two or three years. You moved here from Detroit? So when you move, do you get sent, or --?

A: No, I'm a householder, I can go wherever I want. I'm not under anybody's jurisdiction, except, there is a pending order from my spiritual master to preach in Africa, and so I'm always desiring to go back there. I've been back there, I've been there four times since I first went in '71. But, due to the necessities of household life and having to provide for a family, raising my children, it's just not the time for me to go there right now.

Q: So you think maybe after your son's are adults that you might back to Africa?

A: Oh, yeah, that's definite. If um, I'm, you know, God willing, you know. Yes, definitely, that's where I'm headed, eventually. My wife and I, we were married in Africa, in Kenya, she doesn't particularly care for Africa so much, but, um, it's what we call, what one calls in Krishna Consciousness, probudatadetia [?], which means "the place where one's spiritual master has told him to preach," that one can become perfected in following that instruction. So, I always want to go back there.

Q: And, because your spiritual master said that was your place?

A: Well he wrote a letter to us and, he at first, he sent me, he asked me to come over there, then he sent a letter to us in our little temple in Nairobi, and said, "Please remain in Africa and develop everything nicely." So, . . .um, eventually I left, but uh, and that was my own decision also. But sometimes, one may be um, influenced, by what he feels what is not satisfactory for his spiritual life. Lot of times he makes a mistake in that choice, but still you know, we're not um, it's not like we're like some kind of a cult where there's, somebody says something you absolutely cannot go against what they say. You, it will be borne out whether you were, uh, the satisfaction is there whether you were proper in doing that or not. And then you learn from your mistakes, and you say, "Okay, well, I'm not going to do that again."

Q: Do people sometimes accuse you of being part of a cult?

A: I don't know. That's so old. Matter of fact, there used to be so many people that, some of our members were attempted to be deprogrammer like other religions. Someone told me the other day that they don't bother Hari Krishnas anymore because our philosophy is so sound that they just can't, like you can't really defeat a philosophy, and innate philosophy, something that actually is part of the

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soul's understanding of life. Just like that you're eternal, and that the soul doesn't have any birth, death, old age or disease, you can't defeat a philosophy when you hear something that strikes the soul as being real. So um, . . . um, people don't, you know, so called deprogrammers don't like to take up Hari Krishna challenges anymore.

Q: Getting back to communal living, when you lived communally, what was the best part? What was the thing you liked the best about communal living?

A: Um, the worship, the um, the singing and dancing and the worship service. Um, within that worship service, one loses a sense of, um, being alone and being part of a greater picture. One actually begins to understand how God actually um, . . . uh, is the Father of us all. It's a family, when we've having what we call kirtan, or singing and dancing together. That's the best part.

Q: And what was the hardest or most challenging of living communally?

A: Fighting with ones -- for me as a bramachery, it was fighting with the ideal of staying single or going with my passions and thinking that I had to get married, because uh, not everybody is suited to stay celibate or single all their lives, you know? Of course, after you get married, sometimes you have to start rethinking everything, but uh, . . . lot of times, but uh, the hardest part was um, for me was um, sizing up whether I should stay bramachery or get married. And also the ideal of getting married is, how do you go about it when you're a single student and you can't really associate the opposite sex, you know like that? And again there's a sense of embarrassment, when in our philosophy, to stay bramachery is actually considered very elevated, and everyone wants to be elevated, so there's this fight between staying elevated or falling into the position of getting married. But our spiritual masters tell us in so many ways, some of this is just based on being neophytes, that one has to situate himself in the particular ashram or in a situation where he can fight and be strong, and not necessarily that you artificially accept one position where you appear to be strong but yet you're weakened. So, if one is better off as a householder getting married, then you should do that.

Q: So you've been part of this life for about 26 years or so?

A: Yep, yeah since 1969, '70, yeah.

Q: Looking back on that time, how do you feel about it? Are you glad you've chosen this path?

A: Oh yes, because uh, the Krishna Consciousness, it deals with eternity, with the nature of the soul, and that even--, just like when I first saw a picture of my spiritual master, in 1969, I bought one book called The Teachings of Lord Jekunya [?]. When I opened that book and I saw a picture of him sitting there, he was sitting in the sun, and it looked like it was three dimensional picture, like I was sitting right outside, looking at him, and all of a sudden, I just knew that I knew him. It was like tears came to my eyes, and for a whole hour I just looked at that picture, and I just said, "I don't know where I've seen him or met him before, but I know him!", you know? Because, in Krishna Consciousness, we understand that the soul's eternal, and if not, that you just have lived this one life. Just like there's one verse that says in our Bugavadita, that as the soul continually passes from boyhood to youth and into old age, similarly the soul accepts another body at the time of death. The self-realized soul, he's not bewildered by such a change, because every seven years, your body goes through a complete change, as they say, all the cells

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are dead, but why are you still here? You're still the same person. So the consciousness goes on, and um, that's the best part about this philosophy is that even though I've been here 27 years, involved in Krishna Consciousness, it's still, there's nothing different -- it's like, it's not like in material science where, okay, you discover something and you realize, "Okay, we have to redo this, it's not right, we can make more advancement." Or make this better, instead of having a TV, you have a TV with a video on it now. But when it's a relationship to the soul, it's eternal, because all the facts are always there, the same thing's been going on for millions of years in relationship to the soul and one's relationship with God. And so there's nothing new. So one gets a sense of eternity by um, accepting the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness, like that. I don't know if I've answered your question?

Q: No, that was great. I guess I just have a final question about your community here in Alachua, your Society: um, is it kind of family-like, in that, like if somebody got sick, like if you got sick, would people care for you?

A: Yes. Someone has a baby, they want to take care of it. The kids, one of our friends just had a baby about three, three or four weeks ago, and so, she's got six kids already, and uh, or is it five? Maybe it's five kids already. And uh, two of the kids, the girls are over at a devotee's house, and the boys are over at our house, and, different things like that.

Q: So there's a pretty strong sense of community?

A: Yeah, and the thing about it is it's getting sweeter and sweeter, because we realize that the potency of our movement is based on familial association. And when people come to our center, just like they're in Santa Fe High School, there's 5 boys -- there are 10 boys in the most uh, it's like a um, intelligent class, or the most intelligent kids in the school, there's 10 boys there, and 2 of them belong to our, they're from our temple center. And so five of the other boys they wanted to come and see what our program was like, and so they came, and we had a big feast and program, and they were so enlivened, they went back and the teacher said, "Well how come all five of you were missing yesterday?" and they said, "We went to Hari Krishna temple, and we're going back!" Because they liked the uh, the association there, it's a -- as a matter of fact, that's what pushes our movement, is that familial arrangement.

Q: And what happens when a person gets older, like when they stop working, someone who's worked for the society their adult life, like um, I forgot the woman's name I talked to first. . .

A: Lashmimony? [?]

Q: Yeah, Lashmimony. Like she's working for the school. After she retires, does the society take care of her? Is there some sort of a pension plan, I guess?

A: Well you're asking, say you have, like we compare our organization, which has been around for 30 years, to the Catholic Church or something that's been around, I don't know, maybe 1800 years, so they have a pretty good social structure. But most of us when we join, we're anywhere from say 17 to 25 or something like that, so it's something that we're incorporating into our social structure. But one can always go and live in one of our temples no matter how old he is, and people will, other devotees will help them, you know?

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Q: So you always take care of your own, basically?

A: Yeah, but then we also have different -- you know like in Philadelphia, we have a um, a shelter, a homeless shelter, and um, we have anywhere from 30 to 40 people stay there every day. I think it's about 30 or 40, I'm not too aware of it, but I know it goes on there. And um, so we have different programs like this developing. Our movement, if we see a need then we're taking up the challenge to fill that need. And uh, this is one thing as we all get older, just like I'm, I'll be 46 this year, um, I see that uh, not only just for me, but I see that there are others that are a little bit older than me in our Society -- we need to start making these different types of preparations and arrangements, social structures like that, for that. But for the most part, most of our people when they get old, they really want to go to India, yes, to Brindava [?] or Mayapour to retire there, because, Brindava is the place where Lord Krishna actually appeared, and there's 5,000 temples there. So many people all over India always go there as retirement. There's hundreds of ashrams where older people are, and people come there, just like when they come to our temple in Vendaven [?], they're given like a meal every day, and a couple of rroupies [?] to buy them soap or something like that. We have a structure like that already in place in India.