

**Cleansing the heart began with cleansing the temple**

*Pitambarada das*

Reading about the myriad ways Sri Krsna brings different souls to His service motivated me to share my experiences of discovering Krsna consciousness. I hope you will find it interesting.

I dropped out of university in May 1985, and moved to London to be with my boyfriend. After two short, intense months, he dumped me to go back to his “ex”. I moved in with some other students I had met previously and we squatted in Brixton with a couple of drug dealers.

I became involved with the anti-Apartheid movement, and was part of the Non-Stop Picket of South Africa House in Trafalgar Square to seek the release from prison of Nelson Mandela. I was arrested on numerous occasions over three and a half months, and still carry scars inflicted by police.

On a Sunday afternoon that August, my 19th birthday, a friend took me to a place where lunch was free and nutritious. We walked up from Trafalgar Square, through Leicester Square and along Greek Street to Soho Square. The sun was shining, and the streets of Soho were crammed with “alternative” types -- punks, hippies, drag queens and leathermen.

Across the square lay an insignificant street leading to one of the world’s busiest thoroughfares -- Oxford Street. Strange to think just how important that little street was to become in my life! On the left-hand side of the street was a restaurant with the exotic name “Govinda’s,” but it was to the next door that my friend took me.

A smell of incense and the sound of singing, drumming and clapping drifted downstairs. Devotees in saris and orange-dyed dhotis stood outside and in the entranceway. They were all polite and friendly, but to me they looked weird -- mud on



their heads, shaven with silly little ponytails. Little did I know that within the week I would be one of them.

I was a little embarrassed to take my shoes off as my socks had holes but, seeing others had bare feet, I joined them. We walked into the temple room, and the noise, smells and sights overwhelmed me.

My friend bowed down to a murti of Srila Prabhupada dressed in orange clothes, and then to a picture of a western man dressed the same. He then took me before the altar and bowed again before the Deities of Jagannatha Deva, Balarama Deva and Subhadra Devi, to whom I lost my heart immediately, strange and nonhuman though they seemed at first.

Finally he bowed to murtis of a young Radha and Krsna -- otherwise known as Sri Sri Radha-Londonisvara—all dressed in glittering clothing with rhinestones. Leading me to one side, he introduced me to a friend of his, a young man named Valmiki das. I was in a daze; it was almost too much to take in, yet strangely comfortable and homelike. We sat down and listened to the music and accompanying chanting.

“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare; Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.”

Before long I was singing along with gusto; I felt so alive. Almost too soon it was over. A conch sounded and the curtains closed. Everyone bowed to the floor and took part in a responsive prayer. I followed suit and thanked God for bringing me there.

After we sat up, we sat in rows, and people began distributing paper plates and cups. Then came the food. It was hot and steaming, and totally vegetarian, of course. I had not eaten a proper vegetarian meal before this, and was very impressed. As we ate, Valmiki prabhu explained all about His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami and how he had brought Krishna consciousness from India in the ‘sixties.

The western-looking guy in the picture I had seen turned out to be Bhagavan das, then a sannyasi-guru; many of his disciples resided in the United Kingdom. After the lunch (where I learned the food was called prasadam and was sacred, having been offered to God), we helped clear up and then it was time for another ceremony, which I learnt was called arati.

The conch, which I had first taken to be a horn of sorts, blew again and the curtains opened. I watched entranced as a woman devotee offered incense, lighted ghee wicks, flowers, a shell filled with water, a handkerchief, a peacock-feather fan, and a yak-tail whisk to the Deities.

So many questions flooded into my mind. Then the ghee-wick lamp was being offered to me! I didn’t know what to do, but Valmiki guided my hand over the flames



briefly and then to my forehead. Next thing I knew, I was splashed with water and a flower was placed in my hand.

I danced and sang with a vigour I never thought possible on a full stomach; joy overwhelmed me and I began to weep. When my friend said it was time to go, as we had a long way home, I agreed, though reluctantly. After our goodbyes, we bowed down again and left the temple room to get our shoes and go home.

All I could talk about on the bus was Krishna. I wanted to know more but, because my friend only went for the free food, he didn't know more than I already had discovered.

I don't know how I got to sleep that night. I had never experienced a "high" like it. I was buzzing; I felt so alive. My eyes, ears and heart had opened to God as never before. I had to find out more!

Next afternoon, I again headed up to Soho Street and the temple, arriving around 5 p.m. I spoke to Sylvia, a woman at the reception desk, who remembered me from the previous day.

As we were talking, Valmiki prabhu came in the door; his face lit up as he, too, recognized me. He invited me up to the temple room, and I went with him. To my surprise, the Deities were wearing different clothes. Valmiki explained about Krishna's being a person; it made immediate sense that a person would like a change of clothes every day.

I asked him about the bag devotees wore around their necks. Valmiki explained the principle of Japa and, asking me to wait in the temple, returned with wooden beads and a cloth bag. He told me the smaller string of beads was to be attached to the bag and used to tally the number of "rounds" you did, and the larger set were for "doing the rounds."

The wood was from Tulasi Devi, a sacred plant, and there were 108 beads on the large set. The Maha-Mantra should be chanted on each bead in turn, and 108 times was one round. As an initiated devotee, Valmiki das had to chant at least 16 rounds daily. He proceeded to show me how to hold the beads, and listened whilst I chanted.

We had to cut short our conversation, as a class was about to begin, so I listened to the talk on the Bhagavad-gita. To this day, I still remember the verse under discussion: "Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear." (Bg. 18.66)

It was as if Sri Krishna was speaking directly to me, and me alone. The answer I had been seeking presented itself unambiguously: "Just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you; do not fear."



I stayed until Sayana-arati that evening, and chanted on my new beads as I walked the five miles home.

The next day, I slept in, still tired from the long walk home. I returned to the temple just before noon and again spoke with Sylvia prabhu and Valmiki prabhu. They explained the four regulative principles to me: No meat, fish, or eggs, no gambling, no intoxication, and no illicit sex.

This all made sense to me. I felt as if I was being reminded of what I already knew. Valmiki introduced me to Ranchor das, the temple president, and I expressed a desire to join ISKCON; Ranchor prabhu seemed pleased. I stayed until the Deities were put to bed, and took the bus home.

Wednesday I rose early and got to the temple at around 7 a.m., experiencing the Deity greeting, Guru-puja, *Srimad Bhagavatam* class and breakfast with my new friends. I felt so complete.

After breakfast, all the devotees disappeared about their duties and, apart from the Deities, I was alone in the temple room. Seeing flower petals from the Guru-puja and debris from breakfast scattered everywhere, my first thought was, "This is Krishna's house. He will be receiving visitors soon. They mustn't see the temple room in this state."

From previous days, I remembered where the dustpan, broom, mop and bucket were kept, and proceeded to get them out. After sweeping the floor, I went upstairs to get water, but the only place I knew was in the lavatory room. As I got there, Lilashakti dasi (head pujari and Ranchor's wife) asked what I was doing. She explained that I should use water from the Pujari department tap, as it was "clean."

She then asked why I was washing the Temple room floor, as it was someone else's service. I explained that no one else had yet begun and I knew it needed doing before guests arrived. At this moment, I believe my true nature was beginning to manifest: I am pujari in my heart. Lilashakti prabhu gave me water and eucalyptus essential oil to put in it. This was the beginning of my service to Sri Sri Radha-Londonisvara, which still continues 18 years later.

Next morning, I rose at 2 a.m. to be at the Temple in time for Mangala-arati at 4:30 a.m. I stayed for the morning programme again, and again I tidied the Temple room -- not that I minded.

That afternoon, I was washing the stairs as Ranchor came in, and I plucked up the courage to ask if I could join the temple and move in. To my delight, he said yes. I asked him if that day would be too soon; he said if I desired that, it was okay. I finished the stairs, and rushed home.



It took me only minutes to pack my belongings into a suitcase and, as I almost fell downstairs with it, one of my housemates came in -- one of the drug dealers. I explained what I was doing, and he gave me a kiss and wished me luck. He asked how I planned to get to the Temple, as I could hardly get my case down stairs. He gave me £50, helped me out to the street and hailed a London Black Cab for me. I got in the taxicab and “left behind the material world” -- or so I thought.

At the temple, Sylvia prabhu gave me a strange look, but when I explained that Ranchor prabhu had given his permission, she gave me a great big hug and immediately called for Valmiki prabhu on the intercom. He came downstairs and, learning I was moving in, became ecstatic. After squeezing me nearly to death in a bear hug, he helped me upstairs to the dormitory. That day I was “shaved up,” and learned to put on a dhoti and tilaka. So began my odyssey in Krishna consciousness.





Rama Kesava dasa

