

One week before the wedding, Jan and Mike and nine others were the first Western students to take formal initiation from “Swamiji,” thus becoming his disciples. Jan was given the spiritual name Janaki, and Mike, the name Mukunda.

SR: Yes, I’m interested in your meeting with Prabhupada. You met him ostensibly because you were attending your sister’s wedding, but Krishna had other plans for you . . .

YD: He was first truly spiritual person I ever met. It was life altering. I was twenty-five at the time -- in September of 1966. I flew to New York City to attend my sister’s wedding. It was here that I met the him, the Swami. One moment in his presence, and I knew I had met a genuinely holy person -- wise, kind, and pure. Though Indian by birth, I envisioned him on a par with an outstanding Vatican Pope. That, and maybe more.

SR: Can you recreate the scene for us? Do you remember specifics?

YD: I recall the event in some detail. Within an hour of arriving in New York, I was whisked off to a lunch meal -- one routinely cooked and served by Prabhupada in his apartment. When I entered the room, Swamiji, as he was then called, was passing out Indian flat breads. Physically small and almost Gandhi-like frail, his golden skin was shining in the afternoon sun. He was shirtless and barefoot, wearing only a saffron lower robe.

Though seventy-two years old, he moved with grace and agility. As we came closer, as we moved toward him, he smiled and his watery brown eyes twinkled. He welcomed and embraced me before uttering a word. When at last we did have a verbal exchange, I knew I was in the presence of greatness.

My exchange with Swamiji during the meal is a long story. In short, the vegetarian food was called *prasadam*, and it was unlike anything I had ever eaten -- nothing remotely like my mom’s attempt at Indian fare, or like my own, for that matter. Nothing like Indian restaurants, either. It was an entirely spiritual experience. In India, this is considered a part of one’s devotional practice – the food is offered to God with love and prayers, and the remnants are purifying. It’s a yogic form of eating.

These dishes – the ones we ate that day -- made up a meal varied in textures, colors, and flavors. Juxtaposed samplings of sour, sweet, salty, even bitter tastes. Golden-yellow split pea soup, creamy white yogurt, tomato-glazed vegetables, buttery-char-flecked wheat flat breads. As I ate, Mukunda explained that this was vegetarian, temple-style Indian cooking, the recipes centuries old. This was all clearly Wowie-Zowie by any standards, as was the Swami who cooked it.

SR: So the wedding and the *prasadam* lunch was your introduction to Prabhupada, but how is it that you stayed on, became a disciple, and even started cooking for him? And then you sang kirtan on that first record, too. Let’s hear a little about how all of that evolved.

YD: After lunch, that first day, Swamiji asked if I would assist him in cooking the wedding feast the next day, and I agreed. That day, I spent seven hours sitting in one place making only one of the thirteen dishes on the menu -- deep-fried potato stuffed pastries called “Aloo Kachori.” My

assigned task was to make batch after batch of medium-hard pastry dough and seasoned potato filling, then stuff and shape *kachori* pastries. Swamiji deep-fried them and single-handedly prepared the other twelve dishes. It was not until after the wedding ceremony that I first sampled the feast called kirtan – the chanting of the holy name.

SR: Ah, yes, the feast that is kirtan. Good, well put. So after the wedding, Swamiji, Prabhupada led the chanting . . .

YD: Yes, at the end of the wedding ceremony, Swamiji looked at the married couple and guests and said, “Now, kirtan.” He picked up a pair of hand cymbals, closed his eyes, and established a simple one-two-three beat. Quickly, other cymbals and instruments joined him with the rhythm.

Then the Swami began chanting the *maha-mantra* -- Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare -- in a simple melody. Soon other voices followed, singing along with him, in call-and response fashion. When I looked around, I noticed that I was the only person not chanting kirtan. I decided to give it a try, to join in.

I listened to the order of the words until I got it, and then I chanted, first slowly and then with more confidence. It immediately felt good. No lyrics to remember or instruments vying for center stage. Just a rag tag group of near strangers chanting a simple melody, following a simple rhythm and the sixteen syllable mantra consisting of only three words -- Hare, Krishna, and Rama.

SR: Obviously, you didn’t know what you were chanting . . .

YD: And it didn’t matter. After getting lost in the chant for maybe five minutes, awareness of my surroundings slowly faded. I felt very comfortable chanting, and lost any self of self consciousness – I just stopped thinking about peripheral things. I felt myself feeling calm, centered, peaceful. I forgot the time factor and my list of things to do and not to do. Whoa -- chanting kirtan felt cool, very cool.

When the kirtan ended, I looked at my watch. Twenty minutes had passed. I was sorry to see the kirtan end, but ready for the *prasad*, the feast. And tomorrow morning and tomorrow night I could join kirtan again. I remember thinking, “This is something that could become habit-forming.”

SR: Interestingly, around the time you joined Prabhupada, in the fall of 1966, *The East Village Other*, a New York counterculture newspaper, ran a one-page item about the movement. The front page shows a photo of “Swamiji” leading kirtan in Tompkins Square Park beneath the banner headline, “Save Earth Now!” You remember? Below the photo is the full Hare Krishna *maha-mantra*. The article was written by a guy named Irving Shushnick, just a reporter with no particular interest in Eastern spirituality. But he seemed to really catch onto the idea that kirtan was at the heart of Prabhupada’s method. I remember how he quoted Prabhupada: “The kirtan,” says Swamiji, “is as natural as the cry of a child for his mother. It is a meditation of body and spirit through the senses. It is feeling the presence of God and crying out to Him for help.”

YD: I remember that. Really, really wonderful! And it's true: Kirtan is our birthright. It comes from deep in the soul – it's a crying out to God, like a child cries out to its mother.