

Gopi Sandal Interview- Hare Krishna(International Society for Krishna Consciousness),

Interviewer: Jeremy Adkison, Interviewee: Gopi Sandal

Jeremy= J, Gopi= G

J: All right, we are recording. I am Jeremy Adkison with Gopi Sandal. The first question I am going to ask you is if you consent to having your oral history donated to the Religion in Kansas project?

G: I do.

J: Hurray! Can you tell me, your name, where you live, and what you do for a living?

G: I am Gopi Sandal, I live at Bhaktivana Yoga Center in Baldwin Kansas. I teach Yoga classes, I offer Yoga teacher training, and I do a therapeutic massage.

J: And you are a Hare Krishna?

G: Uhh, I guess you could say that.

J: Is that how you identify, what do you identify as your religious belief?

G: Well, I would say I am a Vaishnava. And, um, but most people would say Hare Krishna, because that's our mantra. That is the mantra that we chant, the main, kind of most important part of the practice that we do is chanting this mantra.

J: What does a Vaishnava mean?

G: Vaishnava means a follower of Lord Vishnu, or Lord Krishna. So it's a monotheistic tradition, it predates Hinduism, and its considered to be the very oldest, uh, spiritual tradition.

J: And where were you born, where were you from originally?

G: Southeast Kansas, grew up in a little town. My dad was the local doctor, and my mom did the nursing, and helped him in the office. I have four sisters. So, we grew up with a garden outside of town, had some horses, and it was very prvincial(sp) kinda upbringing.

J: And what was your family's religious background when you were young?

G: They were going to the Methodist church. And, yeah, my mom was the MYF leader for many years, and uh, Methodist Youth Fellowship. So, there would be campfires with the church kids groups, and I just remember that the nicest part about church was that when we would sing everyone became really blissful. I remember really appreciating that part. I never got the philosophy that much. I felt like there were some questions unanswered that I was really curious about, but I really appreciated the feeling of being in church.

J: So, when you were growing up would you have said you were a Christian, a believer, or would you have said that you really didn't have a faith and that you just kind of went along?

G: Uh, yeah, I kinda went along. I really liked the idea of Jesus, and I would pray, um, and umm... But there was a kind of openness probably about, you know, that probably set the stage for later when I looked into other paths. I felt like I was just learning something that was not so much different, but more information about the same curiosity that I had, the same thing that I was trying to figure out.

J: And how old were you when you started looking at other religious beliefs?

G: Uh, probably when I was, you know, 17, 16, 17, I started asking about different traditions and, and checking into meditation, different kinds, and reading books about different- and when I got into college then I started to really, really, just uh, wondering what was out there.

J: How did you come across Vaishnavism when you were in college?

G: Um, I... I met someone when I was traveling. My girlfriend and I planned what we called The Fools Journey, after I had been in college for a couple years. Then when I was, yeah, that was when I was 21, and so we decided that the night before we left for our journey to Europe, together, we would do a theater piece at the art center. And this was called 'Who is She?', and so it was kind of an improvisational mime that we did about a generic girl who was looking for the meaning of life. It was significant to me later because the story that we developed went something like this.

That, um, the stage opened on a kind of heavenly scene. There were people dressed in white robes who were dancing around, and tossing these invisible globes back and forth, playing with each other. And you could hear the sound of little finger cymbals being chimed and the chanting Om. We didn't know too much about why we were doing what we were doing, we just had some kind of vague inspirations, and ideas and went with it. And so then while their playing in this heavenly environment, one of the people sees a bunch of masks that are on sticks, that were kind of like in a garden full of masks. And she picks one up and looks through it and sees the world of duality out there. And she starts saying, "Edges. Fascinating." and somehow or another this mask gets stuck on her face. And then there's a blackout. Then she wakes up in a very mundane situation, in a rocking chair, kind of trying to wake up from a sleepy state saying, "Who, why, where, what, when?"

Just then a trickster appears with a mask of a coyote. So, a Native American tradition, they have a coyote trickster. Its someone who comes, like God coming in many forms to help wake you up. And so this trickster played those finger cymbals, and tried to, it was like, she would almost remembered, "I seem to remember, I came from someplace!" but she was totally in a forgetful state. So she starts this journey, we mimed looking in our boots, behind the furniture, going outdoors, looking behind trees, searching everywhere, and.. didn't really know how to end this

story. But, then, we did a... She starts saying, "I am! I am! I am, I am, I am, I am, " and ends up chanting Maya, Maya, Maya, which actually means the illusion of this material world.

And, anyways, so then the next morning we took off for Europe. And had no, no uh... Eventually we planned to go to a dance workshop in England. But for some time we were just gonna roam. So we got off the plane in Luxembourg and just, just walked, and walked, and a huge- like walked all afternoon without a map or anything, and ended up coming right back to the place we started. And this was like hilarious to me, because it was an analogy of my life. At that time I was really feeling, like, full of this question "What is the meaning of my life, where am I going, what is the meaning, why am I here? Where am I going, what should I be doing?".

So we hitch hiked and in Belgium we found this little church, with an old monastery next to it. And in the church was very beautiful stained glass windows. And I remember sitting and praying to Jesus to please give me some guidance, give me some clues as to why I was here. And uh, and then we stayed with a family that was living in this little monastery, who let us chop wood for room and board. And uh, this woman, is it okay if I'm diverging?-

J: No, this is fine.

G: Okay. So, the lady of the house, who was feeding us meals she said to me that she was a little sidekick. She said to my friend "You will wear to braids and be married soon," and then said to me, "You will wear one bread but you won't be married for a long time." It was just after that that she helped, well we tried to join the circus and they wouldn't have us. And we ended up, she got a ride for us to Paris, and arranged for a place for us to stay. But I had this little book which I had received in New York before on our way to England. A little book that a Krishna devotee had given us, with addresses, and there was an address in Paris. So that's when I actually went to visit the temple. And when they gave us this book they also gave us a record of George Harrison and some other people singing mantras on it. And I heard this sound of this mantra being sung. I felt very deeply that there is nothing more important to me then to find out what this means and to meet the people who are doing it.

And I didn't think it would actually happen, but then when we were in Paris that was what happened. I visited the temple, the Krishna temple, and it was a very unique experience. It was a traditional temple, they had deities of Radha and Krishna there. Somebody explained to me that this is Krishna, this deity is a form of God. And I, for the very first time in my life entertained the thought that maybe God could be a person after all. I kinda give up on that possibility before because it just didn't make sense, the old man in the sky idea didn't make sense to me. But they explained that actually God could have a form, a spiritual form, not a material form, a form made of eternity, bliss, and knowledge. That he is ever youthful, extremely beautiful young boy. So, I was intrigued with that.

We stayed there for a few days. And then they offered to let us visit the castle, the chateau out in the countryside in France. And I went there for a couple weeks and it was very annoying, they

kept saying things with so much assuredness, like “ This is the absolute truth! ” * Giggles. * And I found that very disturbing that they seemed to be so full of confidence about these things that I had never heard of before. But at the same time I was intrigued enough that I thought well, I’m going to find out something more. Because this information they were telling me about they said was from the oldest books in the world, that their teacher had translated from Sanskrit.

Then, after a couple of weeks my friends suggested that this was all very cool but I think we should be moving on now. And, just at that moment, this picture of Krishna like jumped off the wall, like right in front of us. * Giggles. *

J: Physically jumped out at you?

G: Well, it fell off the wall, into our laps almost. There was no one running down the hallway or anything, it was kinda quite strange to us. And my friend turned to me and said, “ Or, if you wanna stay by all means do what you wanna do!”

J: So you believe that was Krishna giving you a heads up?

G: I thought maybe that was a little hint. But then we did go, we went on to London. Although as soon as I got London I was like “Look! In the book, there’s another ashram here, another temple here.” And I went there, we went there, and I ended up staying there for ten years.

And my friend got married quite soon after that. She stayed for a few months and went back to Kansas and got married to an old friend of ours. She got very much into Native American practices and wore two braids. And I didn’t get married for about ten years, and one braid was the Vedic style. So, I remember that lady who predicted that years later.

Yeah, so then my parents were concerned. I wrote home, “ Guys, I think I’ll stay here for awhile, I don’t know how long, Namaste.” * Laughs. * “With these Hare Krishnas!” and they were quite concerned. Their friends told them, “ You know, she’s probably been brainwashed, ” and um, “ we think this is something like the Jonestown group.” And actually that was just right at the time when this horrible thing happened in America where some cult members murdered themselves, committed suicides, hundreds, right?

J: Yeah.

G: So it was really close to that time. So they came to England to check it out.

J: To check it out or to steer you away?

G: Yeah, well, they, I don’t know how serious they took it but they were advised that I should be deprogrammed, and that it could be a serious problem, and that they needed to fix the situation. Um, but when they arrived I think they were happily surprised. They hadn’t known really anything about it. They were able to see that this is not like some young charismatic teacher who started a cult. It’s actually a very saintly gentlemen who is guiding these people. It’s based on a

very ancient, very bonafide spiritual tradition. They saw that I wasn't, that I wasn't, you know... Getting intoxicated, I was celibate, I was eating healthy, and so they felt better. They saw that the people there were so happy. They were like, "Oh my god, what are they taking if they're not doing drugs?" everyone was very joyful.

J: Well, I mean, was that pretty much the reaction? They were just okay with it when they came to England?

G: Well, actually, they are very basically open minded people. So they wanted to give the benefit of the doubt, and when they saw it they said, "Yeah, it actually seems like not a bad situation." I'm sure it wasn't easy.

J: What about your siblings?

G: Well, I was actually kind of a raging fanatic when I got back to Kansas to visit them! * Giggles. * Well, I can't actually remember how bad I was. You know how it is when you get infused about something and you think that other people should do it to. So, but um, I guess they were all very open minded as well. "If she wants to do this, let her do it!" * Laughs. *

J: You're a Vaishnava. What would you say your general religious beliefs are, if somebody asked you what you believed what would you tell them?

G: I would say that the goal of life is to uncover the pure love that is already there within the heart, pure love of God. That a very wonderful means of doing that is to chant the names of God. The bhakti(devotional) yoga process is really a lifestyle. As much as a person can... Organize their life in such a way that whatever they do they dedicate that to God. It's not so much about restricting yourself from so many things, doing so many rituals, that can be part of it. The essence is that whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you think about, you try to have God at the center, and devote your energy to God to try and make your life a celebration of God. And Krishna is a name for God that means the most attractive, just like a magnet attracts other magnets in that same way God is attracting our souls. So there are unlimited names for God but this one is considered to be very, very sweet. And each name will have a different effect that we chant according to the sincerity, or the intention that we have, we call out somebody's name and that brings a different effect.

Like, for instance, my father- some people called him Dr. Bridges and he would answer, "Yes, can I help you?" and other people called him Arthur and he would say, "Hey. What's going on?" and other people would call him Art and he'd be like, "Yo!" or however they said that back in the 60's. And there were some people that called him daddy, and he would answer them differently, he would be like, "Huh, yeah? Yes, honey?" and there was someone who called him sweetypie and when he heard that name it would pull on his heartstrings and he'd answer more like, "Uh-huh!"

And so when we, uh, the name God means something like great, or good, very good. So God is great and God is very good. The more intimate names are more attractive to God, brings out a special kind of flavor, sweetness. And so when we call out a very sweet name with a very sweet intention like, “ I love you, I just wanna serve you, somehow or another let me please you. “ When God hears that, when we’re saying it like that, we experience a lot of pleasure, and the soul is pleasure seeking. Its not like we can ever give that up. We want to experience bliss, pleasure, happiness. The problem is that we are just getting like little drops of that in the material world, where we live now. We are wanting an ocean of happiness but we are getting like one drop. Its temporary- we get it and its gone. So we spend time hankering to have that, to have that happiness. Then while we have it we’re in anxiety, thinking, “ Oh my god, what if it’s taken away, what if I lose it, what is they leave me, if my car breaks, if I lose my job, what if?”

And then we do lose it. Inevitably our dear one leaves us, dies, we get old and sick, then do lose our job, then we die. So this is like haunting. People are being haunted by this feeling, that this doesn’t feel right- that I should have to die. I don’t feel like I should have to suffer illness, it just doesn’t seem right. Because, actually, our real identity is that we are eternal- we are eternal spiritual beings. We have this eternal relationship with God, so if we’re looking the other way we are just not getting the full ocean of bliss that we could be experiencing. And it’s possible to get back to that, even in this lifetime, to experience that kind of taste that we’re hankering for. It’s like we’re thirsty, our soul is thirsty, and we won’t really be satisfied till we quench our first.

So, yeah, my experience has been that this chanting is a very effective means for helping to awake that. And it’s something that can be done by any person of any religion, any culture, you know it doesn’t matter how you dress, what your lifestyle is like to a huge extent. It helps if you drop certain anchors that create more difficulty forward to move forward in spiritual life. Like, if your involved in doing violent things to other people, then it’s kind of like an anchor. Because you have hurt someone you have to experience the reaction to that, the karma, so it’s kinda hard to sail along. You have to keep going back, to deal with that stuff you have created from your past. So we try to be nonviolent in action, speech, thought. It’s a process, it’s a long, long journey to actually develop these nice qualities that come with being at the true, you know, the true servant of God. It’s not really about the externals, it’s a personal journey for each person.

J: There are certain things though that you don’t do, that you’ve taken vows against doing, like intoxicants. Can you tell us a little bit about that, and how you live your day to day life?

G: Those are called the four regulative principles. No meat eating, no intoxication, no gambling, and no illicit sex life. Sometimes they are also described as the regulative principles of freedom. And for that same reason that I was saying that every action that we do has a reaction, so these are things that can just kinda implicate us more in the complications of material living. So it may sound like a difficult situation, if we’re not used to thinking like that, but actually it’s not that we have to give up everything and sit down in the Himalayas. It’s simply, simplifying your life, kinda trying to eat vegetarian food, which is not difficult these days. To find a person to commit

to, a partner to commit to, if possible, its helpful. Rather than going here and there constantly through your life trying out this person and that person, and to keep sober and not complicate your life with things like gambling. Once you get used to it you don't even think about it, it makes things easier, simplifies your life.

J: Tell us about yoga, and how you got involved in yoga and what that does for your life?

G: I have always had a real natural attraction to Hatha(sp?) yoga, from the time I was a teenager.

J: What's Hatha(sp?) yoga?

G: That just usually refers to the yoga asanas and the breathing practices, postures, breathing practices, they've uh... I just have always done that in my life, and more recently in the last 20 years got more seriously educated about the technical part, and began teaching. I've found that it's a nice segway to bhakti, to devotion. It's a nice way that helps to kinda prepare you to go internally, to meditate. It's just a natural way to help give up all kinds of disease in your body, in your mind. Emotionally, it works in a very unique way to allow any energy that might have gotten stuck in your subtle body to just move on through. So that you can just be more light and free to have a peaceful mind.

It works very well!

J: What about your business, how did you get involved teaching yoga to students?

G: Well, it just kind of organically evolved. As I said, I was just practicing myself, and at one point a sister of mine asked if I would teach a class to some teenage girls and their moms. To help them with their self-confidence issues. They just felt like it helped so much that I thought, "Yeah, actually why isn't everybody doing this?! It feels so good, everyone should feel this good."

So, in '85 or something I started teaching some classes and just kept it up. When the kids got a little older I just increased, and when we got out into the country I was fortunate to have a space out there to use as a yoga studio, so that we could have classes in a real peaceful atmosphere. And then somehow I just got infused about teaching, training yoga teachers. So we could also go a little more deeply into the philosophy. We studied the Bitanjali(sp?) yoga sutras, which are mostly about the nature of the mind, how to help the mind become peaceful. And also we do some Bhagavad-Gita, try to include some elements of bhakti in a very non-sectarian way. You know, how everybody can bring out the feelings of love in the heart while they do the yoga postures, and so we do a little chanting.

J: And your married, and you have children and they are all devotees too?

G: I am married, I have three sons. Our kids really, we didn't insist that they do the practices with us when they were young. We more or less just tried to be an example ourselves, an honest

example. Like, we weren't saying we were perfect at it, but we just tried to accept ourselves as we are and they could see that we were happy with the spiritual practice we were doing. I know that they, I think are not doing a lot of the practices, but they have, I think, benefited by having learned about some of the principles of how karma works, how reincarnation works, some of the understanding about who God is. But they are also very open minded, they try to see that you know, in a very all inclusive way, that everybody is on a journey and more or less where they ought to be on that journey at that time, and doing their best to become the best person they can be. Yeah, good kids.

J: You raised your kids in Kansas, correct

G: Mostly.

J: did you ever feel like there were any challenges to being a Vaishnava in Kansas, raising your child, and being a part of what is typically considered a stigmatized religion?

G: I guess I just expected that it would not be so much hard for me, but harder for other people to understand what I was up to. Having grown up here I knew it was just weird, * Laughs. * somehow the external parts anyway. You know, I mean I chose to just dress in a regular Kansas clothing most of the time. When we do our devotional practices in the morning or on the weekends then I will wear traditional Indian sari, or Punjabi suit. But um, I just wanted people to feel comfortable that I am just a regular person and I didn't want people to be frightened of me. * Laughs. *

J: Why do you think people have such a negative view about Vaishnavism, specifically as it is represented by the Hare Krishna movement in mid-America, in Kansas even? Why do you think people have such a negative view?

G: I think that pretty much all over America, probably the number one reason is that when... In the early days the methods of book distribution were really fanatical, and people, the devotees, going into airports, in the cities, just accosting people, trying somehow or another to get them to take books. It just rubbed people the wrong way, and it caused a lot of problems later on. They had good intentions, and they were just feeling like, "If people would just read something about this then they would appreciate it!" but many people are not there, you know. And I think our guru Srila-Prabhupada really wanted people to be able to read his books, but I am sure that he would hope they would receive them in a way that was very gentlemanly or gentlewomanly.

And also, one of the practices is to dance and chant through the streets with loud musical instruments. So where do you see that in Kansas, or anywhere? It's a tradition that in Indian they wouldn't think was so unusual but... So yeah, people just think their aliens, it's pretty hard to relate to them. But, you know, gradually, I think that people are becoming, through our modern technology, and for so many reasons people are becoming acquainted with other cultures, other

ways, and becoming more open to many different ways. The devotees are calming down a little bit.

J: What do you think of when you think of God? Who do you think of when you think of God?

G: I... I think of Radha and Krishna as the original form, the original personality of God, in the form of the original male and original female. The original energy, and the energetic. The source of all beauty, the source of all sweetness, strength, and our ever well wisher.

J: Well thank you very much for taking part in the interview, I appreciate it.

G: Okay, thank you.