

Why I Became a Hindu / a Krishna Bhakta

By Stephen Knapp

When I go to India one of the most common questions I get is why did I become a Hindu, or what attracted me so much to India and its culture. Many people wonder why, if I'm born in the opulence and decadence of the West, would I be so interested in India? Why would I be so fascinated by their ancient Vedic tradition? Wouldn't I already have everything I would want, everything I need? Maybe not. Maybe the American dream is not all it's cracked up to be, at least not without a higher level of spirituality for balance and completeness. Maybe Western religion also does not give all we need. So, let me provide a little insight into why I took up the Dharmic path.

Now this is about "why" I became a follower of Sanatana-dharma, not "how" I became a Dharmist, which is a longer story. But this does include a little of how it happened.

Back when I was a teenager, I felt like I did not fit into this world and thought ill of the premise that the whole purpose of life seemed to be based on the idea that you have to get an education to learn a skill so you could find a career that should last the rest of your life, even if you don't know what you want to do. So, I was cynical toward everyone because of that, and would have fun playing the subtle game of tearing apart anyone's paltry purpose for their existence. In that process, I would find that most people also had little reason for what they were doing. They just went along with the crowd because it seemed right, or because their parents wanted them to do something. Of course, it was amusing to my friends to make these kinds of jokes at others' expense, but I was just irritated for being pushed into a world with social patterns and expectations that didn't make sense to me.

In my mid-teens I became a musician. Music was the only thing I liked. It saved my life. I learned how to play guitar and specialized in bass guitar, and became quite good at it. So, I spent time hanging out with other musicians, artists, and hippies of the area, and though we would express ourselves in various ways, we would still get serious at times and sit down and wonder what was our real purpose in this life and where we really fit into this world. Then, in my late teenage years, I had to set my guitar down for a while and do some considerable research into the various philosophies and spiritual paths of the world to find some solid answers for the real purpose of life.

Having grown up as a Christian, which was typical of most people in America, I decided to seriously look into it. I studied the Bible, not only in Sunday school and Church, but privately I read the Bible from cover to cover. It took me a year to do that, so I was fairly determined, but I did it. This was simply to see what was really contained in its pages. I knew of few other people, especially of my age, who had read the Bible from cover to cover. But I had more questions than it could answer. So, I had to keep searching

for the spiritual knowledge I wanted to know, because if you look deeply into the Bible, it mostly covers moralistic principles, what to do or not do. These, of course, are necessary for any religious path, but it is only the beginning. I wanted to know more about spiritual knowledge and the process to increase my spiritual perception. The fact of the matter is that most religions start with faith and end with faith, without any real spiritual experiences or realizations in between. There is often nothing to take you to a deeper level of self-perception, but merely the same beliefs in concepts that remain outside your own encounters, and often times with no encouragement from the church authorities to reach that higher level of consciousness. So, I obviously had to look elsewhere for the information I needed.

Now is that being difficult? I don't think so. I was just asking the kind of questions that any inquisitive and decent human being would ask. But if you look, what does the Bible say about God, even in simple matters such as what is His form, what does He look like? Other than mentioning that He appeared as a burning bush or a dove, etc., it does not say much. It also says he is a jealous and angry God. But why would God be angry and jealous, and of who? He already owns everything, and everyone is under His control, so what is the problem? Or is it actually a matter of humanity merely projecting their own weaknesses on their conception of God? Then the conception of God that is presented is not really God at all, but merely mankind's idea of what God must be, based on their own weaknesses and imagination. Well, this was not what I wanted to learn.

Furthermore, what does the Bible really say about the soul, about our spiritual nature, about our spiritual relationship with God and each other, or even about heaven and hell, or things like that? Furthermore, it was completely absent of any description of the soul. Thus, it really does not say all that much regarding higher spiritual knowledge, which means there are numerous questions left unanswered. This also means that we have to rely mostly on faith that we are doing what is necessary to reach heaven. After all, this is one of the goals of Christianity. Everyone has hopes of going to heaven. In this way, it offers a very elementary level of spiritual knowledge based on the idea that you have to do whatever the church tells you if you expect to have any relationship with God. Without that, you may face excommunication, which is synonymous with going to hell. Sorry folks, but that is not enough for me, or any sensible person for that matter.

However, another problem is that the church took out most references to the topics of karma and reincarnation, which I later found out in my research had been a part of a political ploy to keep people in line with the demands of the church. Without such obedience, they would not be good Christians, and, thus, have no standing in the eyes of God, or so they say. So, you cannot expect to get the whole spiritual truth out of such books when these kinds of things are done to them.

So, where do we go to find the answers? Therefore, I also studied Judaism, Egyptology, magic, witchcraft, I Ching, palmistry, Tarot, Voodoo, Zen Buddhism, mysticism, Yoga, and many other esoteric topics. I even read most of the Koran. However, as anyone who reads the Koran will see, in comparison with other scriptures, it is not a book which focuses much on theology or spiritual doctrine. It does not dwell on

describing our eternal spiritual identity, the characteristics of the soul, or the spiritual nature of God. In fact, it provides a harsh view of God when compared to other religious texts like the Vedic literature. It presents God, Allah, as a God who gives out much punishment with little or no mercy for those fallen ones who do not follow the Islamic path, even though verses within it say how merciful He is. But this is mercy mostly showed to those who are already followers of Islam or who convert to Islam, while apostates deserve to be killed. But, again, is this really God, or only mankind projecting their own characteristics and demands into their concept of God?

In this way, it became obvious to me that all religions are not the same. They definitely take you to different levels of understanding. The Bible and Koran, for example, deal mostly with moralistic principles, which are, of course, necessary if a person is to begin any spiritual process. However, books of the western religions consist mostly of rules, or dos and don'ts with the promise that if you follow all of them properly, you will go to heaven. Otherwise, you go to hell with no second chance. In the conventional monotheistic religions, it's like you are walking a tightrope just to make sure you do not make the mistakes that will take you to hell, what to speak of trying to make any genuine spiritual advancement. But anyone who is spiritually experienced and knowledgeable knows that you cannot go to heaven by faith alone. It just does not work that way. The only way you can go to a higher dimension is by changing your consciousness to a higher level of perception and activity, and doing it right here in this life. And I found few genuine spiritual paths that provided the means or the processes by which you could do that.

Thus, I had to continue looking for the answers I needed for a higher understanding and for things to make sense to me, including the purpose of life. But fear-based religions, those that promise hell and punishment if not followed, were not for me. I did not want the fear of going to hell as the main motivation for accepting a particular spiritual path, or a dogma that everyone was supposed to accept in order to go to heaven, or to maintain an approved connection with an institution or church to keep from being excommunicated and, thus, going to eternal damnation. This did not seem logical to me. I wanted a path that could give me a natural and progressive way to attain a clear perception of the spiritual dimension, not dogma or fear-based indoctrination or blind faith.

In all my research, I finally read the *Bhagavad-gita*, which was like the final piece of the puzzle that I had been putting together from all of my philosophical and spiritual investigation. I could see that all of the spiritual paths were connected. Through the knowledge they offer, they can bring a person to different levels of consciousness, some higher and some lower. But the *Bhagavad-gita* gave me exactly what I needed, which was a big boost in spiritual understanding, and I knew I needed more. So, I went on to read the *Upanishads*, *Vedanta Sutras*, *Yoga Sutras*, and other texts including the *Puranas*. These all gave me profound insights into the purpose of life, and, finally, let me know that this world is not my real home anyway. It is not like I have to find a permanent place here, or an occupation that has to last forever, like I was being taught in school at the

time, and which was expected of me by my parents. I was a spiritual being and only a passing tourist on this planet as I moved forward, preparing for higher realms.

As I studied the Eastern texts, it became clear that we all have a connection with God regardless of what our religion is, or whether we have a connection with a religious institution or church. All we have to do is reawaken that relationship. And the Vedic system gives you many tools to choose from to help you do that, such as gurus and teachers, sacred texts, temples for worship and learning, systems of yoga, and processes of development. Nothing is forced on you.

In the Vedic process, you choose your own speed at which you advance, your own methods that work best for you, the level of understanding and the spiritual texts you want to use. You decide whatever lessons you need to learn in order to proceed. And whatever advancement you make is never lost.

It's not a question of having a dogma forced on you. It is a matter of proceeding at the rate that works best for you so that your spiritual progress unfolds naturally, not artificially or superficially. The Vedic system expects you to have your own spiritual awakenings and experiences when you are ready for them or developed enough.

I did not want to merely read about the spiritual dimension, and what it must be like. I wanted to see it. I did not want to merely read about the Supreme Being, which is more than you can get in most Western religions anyway. Most of them have no idea about His appearance, characteristics, how He acts, jokes with His devotees, or displays His pastimes and love towards them. But I wanted direct evidence and realizations, a connection to fill my soul, and to complete my purpose in life. I did not get that from anything else, whether it was material pursuits or Western religions. They all remained too shallow for me. I must admit that even parts of Hinduism were more like intellectual exercises or pursuits until I came to the teachings of Lord Krishna, especially in *Bhagavad-gita* and then in the *Bhagavata Purana*. These provided deep teachings that awakened a higher awareness of life and the spiritual nature of us all.

I also did not try to learn this spiritual knowledge through an academic pursuit. Most academics have never experienced whatever spiritual culture they teach anyway, or may even teach outright wrong information about it. Armchair philosophers often lack the necessary direct insight and awareness to qualify for teaching others. It is known amongst all Eastern mystics that anyone, regardless of qualifications, academic or otherwise, who does not engage in the spiritual practices described in the Vedic texts, cannot actually enter into understanding the depths of the Vedic spiritual science, nor acquire the realizations that should accompany it. So, rather than pursuing my research in an academic atmosphere at a university, I directly engaged in the spiritual disciplines that have been recommended for hundreds of years. Thus, in time, I studied the Vedic knowledge and spiritual practice under the guidance of a spiritual master.

After several years of serious independent study, I earnestly took to the Dharmic process of yoga and became a steady follower of it. This was because it gives a person

the means or the system to spiritualize one's consciousness, and, thus, actually begin to have insights into perceiving the spiritual dimension. It does not merely prescribe faith that such a thing exists, but it gives you the descriptions of it and the process by which you can have your own spiritual experiences. The point is that the more spiritual you become, the more you can perceive that which is spiritual. This is the key. Thus, the spiritual dimension no longer remains a mystery, or merely something you study or learn about, but it becomes a reality, something to experience. And that makes all the difference. Thus, I imbibed the teachings within the Vedic texts and that of Lord Krishna and took up the path of yoga, especially bhakti-yoga or devotional yoga and became a Krishna *bhakta*. Thereafter, I lived in an ashram to practice, study, and be trained in the Vedic teachings and learn the way of regulated spiritual life, *sadhana*, along with temple rituals, *puja*, and so forth until I became initiated into the Brahma-Gaudiya *sampradaya* under the auspices of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and was given the name of Sri Nandanandana dasa. Several months later I was brahminically initiated as well.

One of the reasons why I became a Krishna bhakta is that He is the God of unconditional love, which is something that everyone is looking for, and He also instructed in the *Bhagavad-gita* to stand up and protect Sanatana-dharma for the benefit of others. At the battle of Kuruksetra, Arjuna wanted to leave the battlefield and go to the forest and meditate, but Lord Krishna said no. It was best to do one's duty and stand up to protect Dharma, not only for oneself but for all others as well. By working for the benefit of others in such a way, one simultaneously helps oneself. You get a little of the credit, or *punya*, for whatever advancement others make because of your endeavors. And now this is one of my main activities, not only pursuing my own practice of Sanatana-dharma, but helping to preserve, protect, and promote or explain Vedic culture so others can understand, utilize and benefit from it.

If we look at the library of Vedic texts like the *Bhagavad-gita*, *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata*, or *Vishnu Purana*, or especially the *Bhagavata Purana*, they all explain various aspects of the nature of God, what our spiritual identity is, what is this universe, where we came from and where we are going based on whatever our actions are, and what are the pastimes, characteristics, attributes, and nature of the Supreme Being. How else are we supposed to learn this knowledge, and where else can it be found in such a complete fashion? I have studied all of the world religions and no other texts or scripture offers such a depth of spiritual information. That is why I have concluded that the Vedic philosophy is the last bastion of deep spiritual truth and knowledge. Nothing offers what it does. Vedic culture, essentially, takes up where the Western religions leave off.

That is why I never went back to the Western religions, though I may respect all paths and still study portions of them for comparative reasons. But what is the point of going back to something less profound, less expansive, less spiritual, less dynamic than what we have in the Dharmic tradition and philosophy as found in India? To do so makes no sense. Though raised in the West with its Christian beliefs and its modern facilities, many of us Westerners look toward the East, especially India, for our inspiration and spirituality. We are rejecting some of the very aspects of the Western religions that some

of the present day Indians are accepting when they convert to them. This means that possibly they have not looked into them as deeply as we have, at least when it comes to seeking the deeper aspects of spiritual knowledge, beyond moral principles. They also may not be looking at the bloody history they have left in their trails through the past. Horrible crimes against humanity have been committed in the name of these religions, mostly in order to control such people and make them convert, not by their spiritual purity, but by political force whether they wanted to or not.

In this way, Vedic culture, Sanatana-dharma, by giving me this spiritual knowledge, saved my life, more than music did. It gave me the insights I needed to understand the purpose of life, what I was doing here, where I came from, where I'm going based on my actions in this life, and how to acquire the highest levels of spiritual perception. It gave me the means to keep going in this world. For me, without those things, my life remained incomplete and void of real meaning. It meant that I had little purpose to continue living. Why bother with something that made little sense to me? And materialistic life was just that, something that made no sense.

However, anyone who grasps the big picture of things, meaning to understand that our existence spans many lifetimes, will know that this is not my first life as a follower of Sanatana-dharma. I was obviously an Indian devotee in India in a previous life. I'm only taking up where I left off from before. And I will continue to follow Sanatana-dharma, as well as work to preserve, protect, and promote it for the benefit of others until the day I die. And I invite others to join me on this great path.

The thing is that I was not born into Vedic culture in this life. I did not learn about it because my parents or grandparents followed it, like most Indians do. I was born in a small Midwestern town in America where there was no hint of any Vedic tradition. So, I had to search for it and fight to attain it. That is why I do not take it for granted at all. And no one is going to take it away from me now that I've found it.

I know what my life was like when I did not have it, and it has made such a difference in my life compared to when all I had was the elementary form of religion that I started with. I learned the benefits of the Dharmic path and how it can relate to my life, and the many improvements of understanding it has given me.

So, as a typical American, when we find something good, positive, and advantageous, we want to share it with others. Our enthusiasm makes us want others to take a look at it and see what they think because they might like it as well. And I've seen what it has done for others with its deep spiritual knowledge, peace, insights into our purpose in life, and how to increase our own spiritual perception, over and above mere faith and hope. This is why I have gone on to write various books on the many aspects of Vedic culture, so others can learn about it, use it in their life, and benefit from it. I especially try to write in a way to make the lofty and sophisticated Vedic philosophy understandable for the regular layman. But amazingly, even though I started out writing for Westerners, many Indian Hindus have also appreciated what I do and have expressed how they have gathered much from my own learning, research, realizations, and

experiences about which I have written. This enthuses me to continue the work I do to help preserve, protect, and promote the Vedic knowledge and its traditions. Its timeless wisdom and spiritual knowledge still serves an important purpose.

However, as things stand today, we may think that the battle of Kuruksetra was just a story in the *Mahabharata*, a scene for the *Bhagavad-gita* in which Lord Krishna told Arjuna that it was foolish for him to want to go off to the forest to meditate when his duty was to stand and fight. But fight for what? To fight for Sanatana-dharma and our freedom to pursue the spiritual Dharmic path. Thus, we should all follow in the footsteps of Arjuna in this way, under the direction of Lord Krishna to do our parts to take a stand to help protect Vedic culture. In this way, I have worked with a wide number of organizations, both within India and outside, and numerous individuals who have similar ideas for doing this.

It is not our time to be timid about standing up for our rights to follow the Dharma. It is not time to be afraid to come together and work to preserve our culture from those forces, whether they be different religions, non-Hindu politicians, Marxists, or secularists who still wish to destroy it or see its demise. We should be on the forefront to work with each other to maintain our spiritual traditions. We should be on the forefront to create a spiritual revolution in India through the promotion of Vedic spiritual knowledge, and allowing all other interested people to participate in it without restriction. If we can do this, we could change India in 18 days, which was the same length of time as the Battle of Kuruksetra. Vedic culture is, as I call it, the last bastion of deep spiritual truth. We must all do our part to preserve and protect it, and make sure that India remains the homeland of a dynamic and thriving Vedic tradition.

Why am I so enthused and determined about this? It is because my life has been so much blessed because of it. I cannot imagine what my life would have been without it. I love this Vedic culture. I love India. I love Sanatana-dharma, and I think everyone should take a serious look at it.

Bharata Mata ki jaya! Jai Hind! Sanatana-dharma ki jaya! Hari Om, and Jai Sri Krishna!