

Swami Bhaktipada, Ex-Hare Krishna Leader, Dies at 74

By MARGALIT FOX

Swami Bhaktipada, a former leader of the American Hare Krishna movement who built a sprawling golden paradise for his followers in the hills of Appalachia but who later pleaded guilty to federal racketeering charges that included conspiracy to commit the murders-for-hire of two devotees, died on Monday in a hospital near Mumbai, India. He was 74.



Mike Appleton for The New York Times

Swami Bhaktipada presided over a Hare Krishna service in 2004 at the Interfaith League in the East Village.



New Vrindaban Community

The cause was kidney failure, his brother, Gerald Ham, said.

Mr. Bhaktipada, who was released from prison in 2004 after serving eight years of a 12-year sentence, moved to India in 2008.

The son of a Baptist preacher, Mr. Bhaktipada was one of the first Hare Krishna disciples in the United States. He founded, in 1968, what became the largest Hare Krishna community in the country and presided over it until 1994, despite having been excommunicated by the movement's governing body.

The community he built, [New Vrindaban](#), is nestled in the hills near Moundsville, W.Va., about 70 miles southwest of Pittsburgh. Its conspicuous centerpiece is [the Palace of Gold](#), an [Eastern-inspired riot](#) of gold-leafed domes, stained-glass windows, crystal chandeliers, mirrored ceilings, inlaid marble floors, sweeping murals, silk brocade hangings, carved teak pillars and ornate statuary.

New Vrindaban eventually comprised more than 4,000 acres — a “spiritual Disneyland,” its leaders often called it — with a live elephant, terraced gardens, a swan boat and bubbling fountains. A major tourist attraction, it drew hundreds of thousands of visitors in its heyday, in the early 1980s, and substantial annual revenue from ticket sales.

The baroque frenzy of the place stands in vivid contrast to the founding tenets of the Hare Krishna movement. Rooted in ancient Hindu scripture, the movement was begun in New York in the mid-1960s by an Indian immigrant, [A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada](#). It advocates a spiritual life centered on truth, simplicity and abstinence from drugs, alcohol and extramarital sex.

But by the mid-1980s, New Vrindaban had become the target of local, state and federal investigations that concerned, among other things, the sexual abuse of children by staff members at its school and the murders of two devotees.

The resulting federal charges against Mr. Bhaktipada, a senior spiritual leader of the movement, and the ensuing international publicity did much to contravene the public image of the gentle, saffron-robed acolytes who had long been familiar presences in American airports.

He was the subject of a book, [“Monkey on a Stick: Murder, Madness and the Hare Krishnas”](#) (1988), by John Hubner and Lindsey Gruson, a former reporter for The New York Times, and a documentary film, [“Holy Cow Swami”](#) (1996), by Jacob Young.

Mr. Bhaktipada, also known as Kirtananda Swami, was born Keith Gordon Ham on Sept. 6, 1937, in Peekskill, N.Y., the youngest of five children of the Rev. Francis Gordon Ham and the former Marjorie Clark.

The elder Mr. Ham was a Baptist minister steeped in old-line tradition, Gerald Ham said.

“My father would fit in very well with some of the evangelical people we have today raising such a ruckus,” Mr. Ham said. “The Bible was inerrant. We were all indoctrinated and baptized and so forth. Keith, too.”

Keith Ham earned a bachelor's degree in history from [Maryville College](#) in Maryville, Tenn., in 1959, graduating first in his class of 118. As a senior, he received a prestigious Woodrow Wilson fellowship for graduate study.

He entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to pursue a doctorate in American religious history. But in the early 1960s, his brother said, the university asked him to leave after a love affair he had with a male student came to light. He settled in New York, where he did graduate work in history at Columbia.

Like many young people then, his brother said, Keith Ham became an experimenter and a seeker, dabbling in LSD and above all looking for a spiritual haven. In 1966, after leaving Columbia without a degree, he met Swami Prabhupada, who was running a storefront mission on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He joined the Hare Krishnas and was initiated as a swami in 1967.

Mr. Bhaktipada rose quickly in the nascent movement. After seeing a notice in an alternative newspaper from a West Virginia man offering land to anyone willing to start an ashram there, he secured the property for New Vrindaban, named after a holy site in India. Work began there in 1968.

New Vrindaban's initial costs exceeded half a million dollars. The money was raised largely by Mr. Bhaktipada's followers, who sold caps and bumper stickers adorned with counterfeit team logos and cartoon characters, including Snoopy, at shopping malls and sporting events.

Sales of these products would ultimately generate more than \$10 million for the community, according to court documents.

New Vrindaban opened in 1979, and by the 1980s the community had more than 500 members.

Mr. Bhaktipada appeared to have created an earthly paradise at first.

"I think most of the residents found him extremely charismatic, like a loving father," said Henry Doktorski, who was a member from 1978 to 1994 and who is writing a book about New Vrindaban. "That's how I saw him, at least until I left. At that point I became convinced that he was not actually what he was claiming to be."

In the mid-'80s, former members began to accuse Mr. Bhaktipada of running New Vrindaban as a cult of personality. The Hare Krishnas' governing body excommunicated him in 1987 and New Vrindaban itself the next year. But, proclaiming the community independent of the larger movement, he refused to step down.

In May 1990, a federal grand jury indicted Mr. Bhaktipada on six counts of mail fraud, including using the mail to send followers the counterfeit souvenirs they were to sell, and five counts of racketeering. The most serious racketeering charges centered on the murders of the two devotees: Charles St. Denis, killed in 1983, and Steve Bryant, killed in 1986.

According to court records, Mr. St. Denis was believed to have raped the wife of a New Vrindaban member and to have been killed in retribution. Mr. Bryant, the most vocal critic among the community's ex-members, had publicly accused Mr. Bhaktipada of condoning the molestation of New Vrindaban's schoolchildren and of having had sex with under-age boys.

A New Vrindaban member, Thomas Drescher, was convicted of murdering Mr. St. Denis. (Another member, Daniel Reid, pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter in exchange for testimony against Mr. Drescher.) In a separate trial, Mr. Drescher was convicted of murdering Mr. Bryant.

The indictment against Mr. Bhaktipada charged that he had engaged his followers to commit the murders. At trial, prosecutors argued that he had considered both of the murdered men threats to his multimillion-dollar empire.

In 1991, Mr. Bhaktipada was convicted on all six counts of mail fraud and three of the five counts of racketeering. He was sentenced to 30 years in prison.

In 1993, an appeals court vacated his convictions and ordered a new trial on the grounds that testimony about child molestation, Mr. Bhaktipada's homosexuality and his mistreatment of the community's women had been prejudicial.

In 1996, three days into his second trial, Mr. Bhaktipada accepted a plea bargain under which he pleaded guilty to one count of racketeering — which included mail fraud and conspiracy to commit both murders — while simultaneously denying his involvement in the murders.

He was sentenced to 20 years, later reduced to 12. After his release, Mr. Bhaktipada lived in Manhattan at the headquarters of his splinter group, the Interfaith League of Devotees, before moving to India.

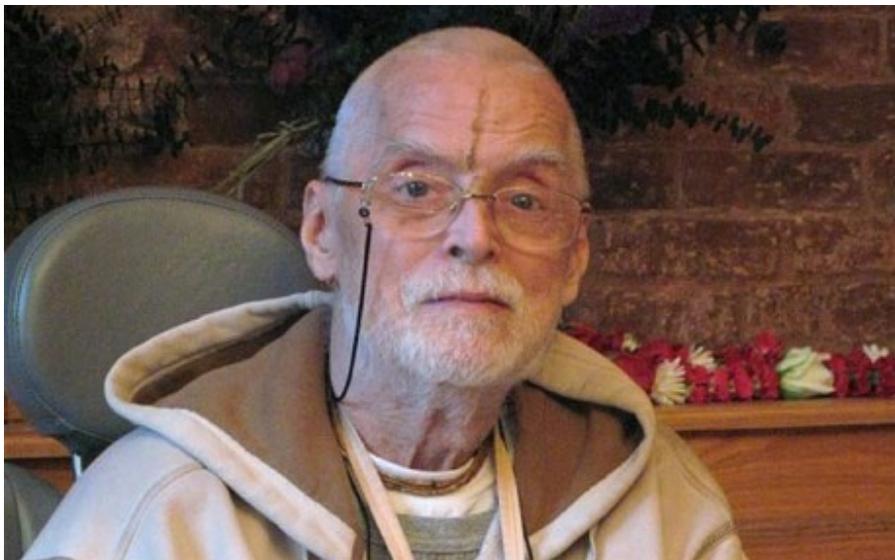
Besides his brother, Gerald, a retired state archivist of Wisconsin, Mr. Bhaktipada is survived by two sisters, Joan Aughinbaugh and Shirley Rogers.

New Vrindaban was accepted back into the Hare Krishna movement in 1998. Today the community endures, though with fewer than 250 members. The elephant is long gone.

Visitors are always welcome, according to the [Web site for the Palace of Gold](#), at \$8 for adults and \$6 for children. A snack bar serves Indian food, pizza and French fries.

Disgraced former leader of US Hare Krishna community dies at 74

Swami Bhaktipada, who built a massive farm community and a Palace of Gold that became the crown jewel of the US Hare Krishna movement before scandals and criminal charges led to his downfall, died on Monday in India, his biographer said. He was 74.



Also known as Kirtanananda Swami, Bhaktipada had been born Keith Ham in Peekskill, New York

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Bhaktipada had been hospitalised in July in Thane, India, with a collapsed lung and a bleeding brain, said spokesman, former disciple and biographer Henry Doktorski. His kidneys began to fail last week, and Bhaktipada died on Monday morning.

Under Bhaktipada's leadership, New Vrindaban grew into what at one time was America's largest Hare Krishna community. But the community's membership waned after the swami was convicted of racketeering and sentenced to prison time in the 1990s.

"Although he played a positive role in the Krishna movement's earliest years, he later severely violated the strict standards expected of a Krishna devotee, especially a leader," said community spokesman Anuttama Dasa.

Also known as Kirtanananda Swami, Bhaktipada had been born Keith Ham in Peekskill, New York, the son of a Southern Baptist minister, who became a Krishna swami in 1966.

Without the permission of his leader in India at the time, Doktorski said, Bhaktipada set out to "westernize" the religion by eliminating some traditional elements and chanting prayers in English at a New York City temple. He was evicted from the temple and left New York in 1967, but was later forgiven.

In the late 1960s, Bhaktipada and his lifelong partner, the late Howard Morton Wheeler, formed New Vrindaban, the community with a famed Palace of Gold. They started with about 132 acres (53 1/2 hectares) and eventually acquired nearly 5,000 acres (2,024 hectares), becoming a destination for pilgrims in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON.

Bhaktipada took over the community in the 1970s but was in trouble with ISKCON by 1987, when the governing body expelled him for "moral and theological deviations," Doktorski said.

Sankirtana Das, a New Vrindaban member for more than two decades, told The Associated Press in 1999 that the community had flourished in the late 1970s and had more than 600 members by 1985. That year, Bhaktipada was attacked by a visiting devotee and hospitalized in a coma for a month.

In 1987, the FBI raided the community, seizing records and computers, Das said. Bhaktipada and New Vrindaban were excommunicated from ISKCON, and members began to leave as Bhaktipada formed a new League of Devotees.

Prosecutors later accused Bhaktipada of ordering the killings of two devotees who had threatened his control of New Vrindaban. One dissident, Charles St. Denis, was killed in 1983 at New Vrindaban. Another, Stephen Bryant, was killed three years later as he sat in his van in Los Angeles.

Bhaktipada denied any involvement in the killings, though another man was convicted of the murders and testified that the swami ordered him to commit the slayings.

Prosecutors also alleged that Bhaktipada had amassed more than \$10 million through illegal fundraising schemes, including the sale of caps and bumper stickers bearing copyrighted and trademarked logos.

He appealed his 1991 racketeering conviction, then pleaded guilty at a second trial in August 1996 and was sentenced to 20 years. A judge reduced the sentence to 12 years in 1997, citing Bhaktipada's poor health. He'd suffered with severe asthma and complications from childhood polio.

Bhaktipada was freed four years early from a prison in Butner, North Carolina, in 2004, but he was barred from returning to New Vrindaban and eventually moved to India in 2008.

Dasa said Bhaktipada eventually lost the support of his New Vrindaban followers and left the community entirely in 1994. Shortly afterward, the community petitioned to rejoin ISKCON, and it was restored to full membership in 1996.

The conditions for rejoining ISKCON included adhering to traditional worship and new accountability standards, and demonstrating a willingness to work with about 50 other North American temples, Dasa said.

Today, New Vrindaban has about 200 members living on or next to the property.

It remains a destination for pilgrims, drawing crowds for festivals, major holy days, and weekend or weeklong retreats. About 25,000 people visit annually, enjoying the ornate palace, a rose garden with more than 100 varieties, and an organic farm and dairy.