

Stepping Out

By Urmila Devi Dasi

STUDENTS LOOK forward to—field trips! They're a chance to learn by direct experience, a chance to apply or expand what one has learned in the classroom or at home.

Actually, whenever Krsna conscious adults take their children or students out, in effect we take them on a learning field trip. By going with adults, children can learn how to deal with the world in practical errands, how to tell others about Krsna consciousness when opportunities arise, and how to act properly in public as devotees of Krsna.

Every Saturday evening (unless it pours) our family and our live-in students go into the local college town with a group of devotees to chant and introduce people to Krsna consciousness. Our twelve-year-old son, Kesava, sometimes walks up to strangers with popcorn and an invitation to a temple program. Other times he runs and jumps with other boys as the sound of Krsna's name, paced to drums and cymbals, dominates the atmosphere.

Naturally, we're all dressed traditionally as devotees—saris for women and girls, dhotis for men and boys. The *tilaka* that marks our bodies as Visnu's temples stands out on our foreheads. Beads made from *tulasi* wood decorate our necks like jewelry. The children are learning to display proudly the signs of Krsna's servant.

When we leave the chanting party, the sound of the cymbals still competes with the noise of traffic and people for a block or so. Still dressed as devotees, we head for the food market, where we act as ordinary citizens who choose and buy groceries. Then on we go to the department store, or the hardware store, or maybe we buy gasoline. At every stop our children learn to feel comfortable openly representing the Supreme Lord Krsna.

As the evening moves on, the younger children become silly and need reminders—"You're representing Krsna! We have to behave like yogis, who control their senses. Let's attract people to Krsna by our example."

"What beautiful clothes!" an elderly woman in Wal-Mart remarked to our teenage girls. Our daughter, Yamuna, and her friends invited her to the temple, gave her a book, and talked to her about Krsna.

Our grown son, Madhava, sold a book to a man standing behind us in the check-out line.

Every shopping trip, our children learn how to select the best foods to offer the Lord. They learn how to calculate the cost of purchases and how much change they're supposed to get back. They learn how to plan their time. And they constantly learn how to present Krsna consciousness.

I remember a former student now approaching adulthood as a serious devotee. Soon after he enrolled in our *gurukula* at age eleven, he joined our annual field trip to the Ann Arbor

(Michigan) Art Fair, where the local ISKCON center had a book booth. Our *gurukula* students would chant and distribute books, but he would do neither. Sitting as far under the shade of a tree as possible without merging into the trunk, he sought to avoid the eyes of all.

"What's the problem?" I asked the next day.

"I don't like people staring at me. Some of them laugh. I feel really uncomfortable. I'd rather just go in public dressed like everyone else. I don't like it!"

"What do you think people say or think when they see you?" I asked.

" 'There's a Hare Krsna.' Maybe, 'There's a weird Hare Krsna.' "

"Maybe that'll be the only time in their life they say or think of the Lord's holy name," I said. "That might get them a human body next life, or a chance for devotional service. It's hard to get people to chant Hare Krsna. The magic of dressing as we do is that when people see us they chant and think of Krsna without feeling we're forcing them or bothering them. And when they see that we're pleasant—even saintly—they naturally become interested in our philosophy and way of life. It's such a simple way to spread love for Krsna!"

"But I feel, well, embarrassed."

"That's your austerity. Don't you think Krsna will be pleased that you can tolerate some trouble or dishonor to spread His glories? And by pleasing Him you'll feel so much happiness you won't care what others think."

Gradually the student became more confident. He found, like all of us who've adopted an attitude of not caring so much what others think, that we have to be tolerant. All but a few people come to appreciate Srila Prabhupada's teachings.

Sometimes our school goes on a major excursion. The main purpose is often to spread Krsna consciousness, as with the trip to the art fair. Or sometimes the main purpose is to teach the children about skills that can be used in Krsna's service, as when we visit people who show us cottage industries such as weaving or blacksmithing. Still, we try to give people Krsna consciousness in all circumstances.

For example, when we took our *gurukula*—kindergarten through high school—to the cottage industry exhibit at the North Carolina state fair, our students spread Krsna consciousness constantly simply because they dressed as devotees. Many people remarked on their discipline and behavior, and many asked them questions about Krsna consciousness.

Children are always learning something. Children who take part in their parents' activities learn life skills; children left at home or with friends learn incompetence. Krsna conscious parents can teach their children to show themselves easily and happily as Krsna's servants, or to hide in shame or embarrassment behind the clothes of Western fashion. We should teach our children to step out for the pleasure of the Lord.

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"Baggy Pants" at the Mall

I HAVEN'T BEEN a devotee for a long time—just a year. So the first time I heard we were going out in public for shopping, I asked Mother Urmila whether I should change into pants from my *dhoti* and *kurta*. When she told me we were going in *dhotis* and *saris*, I freaked out! What would people think when they saw a teenage boy wearing a white "skirt" and with "mud" on his forehead?

When we reached the mall, I made sure I was the last person out of the van. I followed the devotees, crouching as low as possible so as not to attract attention from the devotees or the nondevotees. I listened for sounds of laughter and criticism but didn't hear any.

After gathering up enough courage, I slowly picked my head up. Nope—no one was laughing yet. The devotees looked like any other normal American people going shopping, except for the attire. The confidence with which they walked past the shops made me feel at ease.

I thought, "What is the worst thing people could do? Stare at me or laugh at me? Staring doesn't bother me; I like attention. And if they laugh, I'll laugh with them. I love laughing."

So I relaxed. After all, baggy pants were the latest fashion. You sure couldn't get baggier than a *dhoti*! It's not what you wear; it's how you wear it—with confidence.

—Prajwal Kalfe, age 15