**Five days of Bliss at the Merciful Feet of Giri Govardhan:**

**Govardhan Vaisnavi Retreat 2013**

By Bhaktin Maira De La Cruz

Waking up early before dawn, chanting God’s names on my beads, and watching the sun rise behind Govardhan Hill…Wow! What a surcharging feeling! Just reflecting on the fact that this was the very same hill where little Krishna spent His childhood days playing with His cowherd boyfriends and had enticing meetings with His beloved Radha caused my heart to light up in joy. It is said that the name *Govardhan* has two meanings. *Go* means “cows”, and *vardhana* means “nourishment.” The second meaning of *go* is “senses”, and *vardhana* can also mean “to increase.” So in this sense, *Govardhan* means to draw the senses closer in devotion to Krishna and this is exactly the result of what happens when you reside at the lotus feet of Sri Giriraj Govardhan.

When a friend and I arrived in India about a month ago we were eagerly thirsting for the association of enlightened female devotees. We initially arrived in Mayapur during the Gaura Purnima festival. We were feeling destitute because it felt like the river of Vaisnavi association was running low there. Everyone seemed absorbed in their own dealings because of the festivities going on. One day we came across a huge flyer on the grounds of Sri Mayapur Dham that said, “International Vaisnavi Retreat”. Just what we’d been looking for! We were so excited that we immediately signed up. Before we knew it we were in Vrindavan, boarding the bus heading towards the king of all hills.

The Vaisnavi Retreat was started in 2011 by the Vrindavan Institute for Higher Education (VIHE) and the GBC Vaisnavi Care Sub Committee with the aim of facilitating spiritual association among aspiring women in bhakti. This retreat offers a wonderful opportunity to women from all over the world who are eager for sadhu-sanga. It was held from March 30 through April 3, 2013 and its recurring theme was “Celebrating Srila Prabhupada’s Mercy”. Indeed we felt the mercy all over!

We were received with a refreshing cup of lemonade, wam prasadam, and directed to our respective rooms. In such a loving and welcoming atmosphere, many of us felt at home right away. “I felt like I was coming back home.” “I feel like a fish in the water.” In fact some “newer” devotees, including myself and my travelling friend, were garlanded with Nrisimhadev garlands and welcomed into the ISKCON family—a moment I’m sure we will never forget.

The opening of the retreat started with a sweet Srila Prabhupada guru puja in a colorfully decorated temple hall and then we moved to the rooftop to watch a young devotee perform a delightful invocation dance for auspiciousness. Prasanta Devi led a nice kirtan and we all offered prayers to Giriraj to grace us with his blessings. We were reminded that Govardhan is the most confidential servitor of Sri Radha, Krishna, and Their cowherd friends and cows, as it provides all Their necessities in life. We also heard that Govardhan is non-different from Krishna Himself and that when Lord Chaitanya visited Vraja, He refused to step on Govardhan Hill because He saw it as the body of Sri Krishna. In this way our retreat began with the mood of gratitude to Giriraj for mercifully allowing us to stay in the playground of Krishna; and also with respect, as he served Krishna in providing a pleasant atmosphere in which to perform His childhood pastimes.

Our days overflowed with much inspiration and empowerment. Each morning we began with peaceful japa sessions and morning prayers. We were then showered with the pastimes of Krishna in Govardhan in a presentation titled “Krsna enters the forest of Vrindavan” given by H.G. Prasanta Devi. Her katha, “stories”, were so relishable because they included humorous sound effects and were so detailed that it painted our minds with colorful images of Krishna’s playful engagements with His friends and the unlimited opulences Giriraj provided. I felt like I personally entered the forest along with Krishna.

 Yasoda Mayi Devi was among the senior disciples who graced us with her association. She brought along her interactive program titled “Pilgrim’s Journey through Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam”. Here we were given basic skills and tools to easily study and memorize the scriptures in such an efficient way that the learner/student readily becomes a teacher. After her class, many of us felt excited to read and study right away!

Our afternoons were spent with Vrajalila Devi, absorbed in her discussion focused on deepening our Vaisnavi relationships with an attitude of gratitude. Always being in the mood of gratitude can increase our happiness by 25%! Keeping a gratitude journal can create a lasting effect. Being grateful improves our health, turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, failure into success, and mistakes into learning opportunities. What a powerful and truly inspiring lecture!

In the evenings we learned from Srila Prabhupada through his disciples’ remembrances. These disciples included Kusha dd, Parvati dd, Amritakeli dd, Yasomati dd, Kishori dd, Manjari dd, and Nirguna dd. Many deep feelings arose as devotees shared their most intimate stories of Srila Prabhupada. I can say that most of us felt Srila Prabhupada closer to us than ever before. I felt like I truly knew Prabhupada as a real live person who is still living today, and I really felt closer to him and to Krishna. And all the sweet Vaisnavi sanga will continue to benefit me as I start on the path of Bhakti. I realized even more how powerful and special Srila Prabhupada was to touch the hearts of millions. All glories to him!

Our nights were topped off with Kirtan and Chaitanya Lila, a perfect lullaby, sung by Yasomati Devi right before taking rest. The temple hall transformed into a warm, candlelit ship on which we drifted away into the sea of Lord Chaitanya’s ecstatic pastimes in separation from Sri Krishna. We were even allowed to lie on the floor in a deep meditative state as sweet nectar streamed into our ears and into our hearts.

Among these unforgettable moments were an impressive five-hour kirtan, and a lecture by Lavangalata Devi on Pada-sevanam: Serving the Lord’s Lotus Feet. We also had kartal and mrdanga lessons with Dayarupa Gopi, and free time to associate with senior and Prabhupada disciples on a deep-personal level. At the end of the retreat, we went on a small parikrama to Surabhi Kunda where we offered prayers for forgiveness of our offenses and witnessed a captivating Orissa dance. Endless gratitude and humility flowed into our hearts as we felt Prabhupada’s mercy shining upon us.

 As the retreat came to an end, we were left with so many memories, newly found knowledge, and friends. We felt most fortune to have been able to be a part of something so extraordinary and life changing. I was inspired by the entire program; however, the kirtans, the dances, the opportunities to meet and associate with the devotees, and the service attitude of all those who were serving to make the retreat a rewarding experience were most inspiring. We took with us enough mercy to spread and distribute to our beloved friends and family. After all, this is the example Lord Chaitanya has left us: to distribute love of Godhead everywhere we go, releasing every single drop of it!

Hare Krishna!

Retreat Picture Gallery: https://picasaweb.google.com/108723086666292087250/2013InternationalVaishnaviRetreat