**International Vaisnavi Retreat 2012**

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As a combined initiative of the GBC Vaisnavi Care Sub-Committee and the Vrindavan Institute for Higher Education (VIHE), the International Vaisnavi Retreat aims at promoting sadhu sanga among the devotee women of ISKCON. Committed to nurture the devotees’ service attitude and focus on hearing and chanting, the retreat is fast becoming an annual feature devotees across the world look forward to.

This year the retreat again took place in the lap of Govardhana Hill from the 27th of February to the 2nd of March. Eighty devotees from 15 different countries attended.

A resplendent altar, prepared by the early birds under the able guidance of Prasanta Devi, hosted Sri Sri Radha Madana Mohana, Sri Sri Gaura Nitai, and Sri Sri Radha Giridhari. Above the altar, a colorful cloth painting of Srimati Radharani’s coronation inspired from Srila Jiva Goswami’s Sri Madhava Mahotsava blessed the retreat participants with the assurance of reaching their goal.

The retreat opened with a soulful kirtan full of ‘bhava’ and ‘bhakti’ by Bhava Bhakti Devi Dasi from South Africa, followed by an invocation dance by young Russian Vrajavasi Vrinda Rani Devi. Devotees were encouraged to pray for the Lord’s mercy and to be conscious of the potency of Sri Vrndavana Dhama. The assembly was decorated with humor, which made everyone comfortable and ready to embark on a journey of realizations and resolutions.

Prayers for mercy packed our days—first at mangala arati, and then during the exciting classes given by Malati Devi, Narayani Devi, Daivi Sakti Devi, Srimati Devi, and Prasanta Devi. Taking the participants on the road travelled by the disciples of Srila Prabhupada, Malati Devi imparted hope by saying that “we, souls in a woman’s body, must understand that there is no barrier to spiritual advancement.” Narayani Devi brought out the teachings of the Uddhava Gita, which center on how to change one’s vision from seeing matter all around to constantly perceiving oneself as a student and the various manifestations of nature as teachers, leading us to develop attachment to Krishna. Srimati Devi focused on “What’s so special about Srila Prabhupada?”—how to appreciate his greatness and purity. Through a number of interactive activities she made the devotees understand the difference between following and blind following. Her lively classes were punctuated with the many gifts she distributed. Last but not least, a realized presentation by Daivi Shakti Devi enlightened us about Vrindadevi—her glories and services in the Nitya Lila.

The sessions were interspersed with the singing of various selected prayers from Srimad Bhagavatam, Sri Caitanya Caritamrta, and the poetical works of Srila Rupa Gosvami, which aimed at opening our hearts for better chanting of the Holy Name. There were ample opportunities to bond with each other and develop a service mood. In their “free time” devotees gathered in small groups in the garden for learning how to play kartalas, shopping at the “Vaisnavi Market Place,” and appreciating the nectarine poetic rendition of “Gopala Champu” by Radhika Devi. Resounding with chatter and laughter, the Ganga Dham ashram became a haven for those willing to take on the challenges of spiritual life with surrender and enthusiasm. The participants made the most out of the opportunity to associate with the senior devotees who, by their gentle presence and speeches, made them feel indeed fortunate for being a part of the Hare Krsna movement. The atmosphere was charged with gravity, love, humility, and the retreat became truly “a celebration of Srila Prabhupada’s mercy.”

The most memorable event was the day-long tribute paid to Her Grace Yamuna Devi. As a number of devotees narrated their interactions with this elevated Vaisnavi, eyes moistened and hearts filled with appreciation. A booklet of offerings and memories was inaugurated, and each devotee present felt the awakening of a desire to someday follow in Yamuna Devi’s footsteps. All remained glued to their seats as the personality of this great devotee, truly surrendered to and in love with Srila Prabhupada, unfolded. But like all good things the retreat came to an end. On the final day we welcomed the sun at Surabhi Kunda, where Lord Indra had gained forgiveness for his offences. There we meditated on the glories of Sri Govardhana by singing Srila Raghunatha Dasa Gosvami’s astakam, paid obeisances to Sri Giriraja in the dust of Vraja, and filled the surreal divine atmosphere with kirtana. Monkeys and cows were lovingly fed, and the joyful Harinama sankirtana compelled us to break into a dance as we returned to the ashram. The closing ceremony had the seniors giving their parting advice. In the early afternoon, a very special presentation, an original play depicting the life of Srimati Ganga Mata Gosvamini, was put on. With over fifteen devotees assuming the various roles and about a dozen others helping with props, costumes, and background music, the play was acclaimed by all as a mega success. It is noteworthy that this production was put together in a matter of a few days. A great feast ensued, reluctantly followed by goodbyes.

With their luggage the participants also packed the resolution to come back for more sadhvi-sanga next year, and the determination to strive harder in their spiritual life. Judging by the numerous lessons learned, it had become clear to each and all that only by the mercy of Guru and Gauranga can one be blessed with such an enriching association and heart-changing experience. For myself, I learnt how in spiritual life, instead of waiting for a magical moment, we must take lessons from each day and everything. Association is what will keep me safe and secure. It is taking the essence or good quality of each devotee, it is our attitude, not aptitude, which will make us progress in devotional life. We must be grateful to Srila Prabhupada, and the perfection of our life is in celebrating his glories and mercy each day.

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