

“In this age, Kali-yuga, to kill the demons means to stop their demonic activities by the weapon of kirtan, hari-sanklrtan, which is spread by Lord Caitanya's associates.”

Srila Prabhupada in London, March 10, 1975

March/April 2016

TRANSCENDENTAL POSTMAN

By Kirtan Rasa Das

A few months after I started working with ISKCON Prison Ministry, I received a letter from an inmate which helped drive home to me the nature of this service and just how important it is.

“I only know what I read in your letters and Prabhupada’s books,” was part of his response to me, regarding my reply to a question he had posed. His words brought me a sudden, clearer understanding and. I’ve often since reminded myself of them.

Although I had some idea of the nature of this service when I began, this particular letter made me acutely aware of how isolated and cutoff these men and women can be and how critical is our role as one of their few, if not only, avenues of inquiry and discourse.



Kirtan Rasa Dasa

As a devotee, I've naturally come to understand association as a fundamental element of the bhakti-yoga process. I also have practical, personal experience of what it can be like to lack this association.

I first became aware of Krishna consciousness by coming across Srila Prabhupada's books in a used bookstore. For years I carried around some very vague notions of Krishna and Bhagavad-Gita and had decided to pursue some deeper understanding. I eagerly began studying, but much of what I was reading remained impenetrable, as it was so far beyond the scope of anything I'd ever encountered. It would be several more years before I met devotees and it was only then that I began to gain some real clarity through inquiry and the give and take of realizations. Although I now understand that I already had the association of a pure devotee through Srila Prabhupada's books, I understand that it is also through the day to day, incidental direct association with other devotees that we gradually gain the qualification to receive what Krishna is sending us. So when I read the inmate's words it struck me that for this man, at least for the time being, I was *it*. This impressed upon me both the importance of being there and of getting it right.

It was not too long before this that I had even first become aware of ISKCON Prison Ministry (IPM). While taking prasadam with a friend at the Dallas temple, our conversation had somehow turned to the troubled state of our correctional systems in the United States. This subject had always been of interest to me but had been weighing particularly heavily on my mind because of some news articles and books I had recently read. When my friend mentioned the ISKCON Prison Ministry it was the first I'd heard of it and it was as if a light had turned on in my mind and I knew immediately that I must try to be part of it. As far as I can remember I've had a fascination and empathy for the incarcerated. Anytime I passed a correctional facility I would find myself haunted by thoughts and questions about the souls inside- who they were, how they must feel, and how they came to be there. Now the thought of transcendental knowledge being made available to them seemed like one of the rightest things I'd ever heard.

However well-prepared I may have felt this life-long fascination and empathy had made me for this service, dealing with these issues in theory and in reality are two very different things and I was soon to encounter some surprises. Among them was the unexpected strong emotions I quickly found welling up in me as I began to get deeper into correspondence with certain of the inmates. For instance, I encountered an overwhelming sense of anger and revulsion when I began corresponding with an inmate who had committed a particularly heinous crime. The man had gotten my contact information through another inmate and had written me out of the blue. I did a quick web search in an attempt to get some sense of who I was working with and quickly came across information about his crime and subsequent trial. At one point I found my hands literally shaking as I labored to write him back. Some part of me felt compelled to write "monster!" on the page and have done with it, but I worked my way through it and soldiered on. As much as writing him bothered me, moreover it bothered me that it bothered me (who am I to say who is or isn't qualified to receive mercy? How solid is my own grasp of this philosophy if I'm seeing this man as anything other than another conditioned soul?). In struggling to deal with this, I found myself recalling one of Prabhupada's lectures in which he likened preaching Krishna consciousness to a postman delivering a money order. Srila Prabhupada made the point that it is not the postman's money (he may be penniless) and it is not the postman's place to judge the worthiness of the recipient. It is the postman's duty to deliver the money to whom it has been addressed exactly as he has been entrusted to. I no longer encounter the strong emotions I did early on but whenever I do experience some trouble I remind myself that I am only a postman.

(As a side note, this "monster" to whom I had so much trouble writing, has since become very dear to me. I've come to know him as a very sincere, steady and sweet devotee and I've actually found myself worrying if I go some time without hearing from him.)

Ultimately though, as big a lesson as these sorts of things have been, the bigger growth opportunities this service has given me personally have come simply from having the opportunity to witness over and over again the profound effect that this transcendental knowledge and process have,

even in the most brutal and harsh of environments. As devotees we naturally come to possess some awareness of the power of the Absolute Truth but there is a keen perspective that can be gained by seeing it cast in stark relief to such a dark backdrop. I've come to liken it to the difference between seeing the light of a candle in broad daylight or in a cave. Same light, vastly different perspective. And I

would have to say that of all the surprises I've encountered in this service, perhaps most surprising has been how much I have personally learned and grown through working with these inmates as we both struggle to gain understanding. I had no idea how much they had to teach me.



Inmate Letter Excerpts

The other day I was walking around our building dayroom. I looked at someone's cell door window and saw a small picture of Lord Caitanya. Haribol! A lil' back story; this inmate suffers greatly from mental issues. He screams numerous times a day, telling Satan to leave him alone. Sometimes I hear him screaming at 2:00, 3:00 AM. He does not talk to anybody. Anyway, I shared a few of the Krsna calendar pictures with him. He lit up with great appreciation. From time to time I share foodstuffs, noodle soup and crackers; I hand them to him and bow whenever I see him. He always bows back with a big smile.

By the way, the Srimad-Bhagavatam set has arrived. I'm freaking out; I've been waiting twenty years to read it! Thank you!

Kalki W.

Corcoran, California



I'm finding more in Krsna consciousness than I have been able to find in the religion I was raised to follow. I would appreciate anything you can send.

Nicole Brianne B.

Gatesville, Texas

Been three years incarcerated and just had the opportunity to read BTG. It's the only one I found and can't stop reading the articles. Been through the whole magazine three times already and totally love it. It has helped me a lot for I'm currently in segregation [solitary confinement] and it has lifted my spiritual side towards Krsna. I have just found Krsna in 2015 and started taking part of the religious services for the Hindu group held here in prison. I have never experienced a more elevated religion before. Though I grew up Christian, I never felt spiritually satisfied as I feel now that I have found Godhead, or Krsna. He has helped me a lot through this whole incarceration process, to get real spiritual support and purport in my life. Hare Krsna.

Manuel M. S.

Washington, Mississippi

Hare Krishna. I just started reading the fourth volume of Prabhupada Lilamrta. After reading this much I conclude that Srila Prabhupada Himself had a special ability to bring all people to Krishna. The people who came to him were also special people

with great benedictions of God upon them to find and serve such a Guru. They loved him so dearly. The heat and the impoverished living conditions in India did not deter them. These folks were all alien to the Vedic culture and the country.

These devotees of Srila Prabhupada were themselves very special people. You have to have the mercy of God to be able to see goodness; and to see and appreciate goodness of Srila Prabhupada was their destiny. I am amazed at everything I read. Thank you so very much.

Meera S.

Tallahassee, Florida

Sarva-drik dasa prabhu,
I chant "Sri Krishna Chaitanya, Prabhu Nityananda" and then sixteen rounds or Hare Krishna every day without fail and have in a very short amount of time experienced an inner peace and improved condition that is so dramatic I cannot explain it in words. I am tasting a teardrop of Vaikuntha. A new kind of pleasure has emerged and I am in hot pursuit!

Bhakta Walter

North Carolina

Dear Bhakti-lata,
I didn't want the Krishna pictures just to liven up the cell (dull gray concrete, no paint), but also to exchange vibrations with. As you once pointed out, they are actual, have and emanate energy. Energize the environment in here for some good, steady progress. Just from that and japa, I already feel different, better. My japa 'beads' are 108 knots on a loop of string I spun from nylon. It works. ☺ I've begun to economize my time, out of necessity. Yes, the hole [solitary cell] can be a monastery... Time was also a factor in my ultimate

decision to come to Krsna. I saw that I was sixty years old already; how long was I going to stall? Each time I tried just one more time to find the right partner or whatever else, I crapped out, snake eyes. Time finally ran out for me. I even stopped wearing a watch. ☺ I'm on Krsna time now, which is endless. And it's *always* Krsna time.

I've begun to say the Panca-Tattva mantra and the Sri Prabhupada pranam each day, first thing, in front of pictures of them you sent.

I'm wondering if a temple would be willing to provide prasadam to devotees in prison, if the prison will pay for it. It's not like there's a lot of devotees in these California prisons. There are religious diets of Jewish kosher, Muslim halal; so why not prasadam? The prison can't say no, it's really up to the local temple.

The other book, *The Perfection of Yoga*, is new to me and really moved me cause I didn't know all that; even as I've done yoga hatha off and on since a teen. I thought meditation was the highest level among the seven or eight yoga aspects, but Prabhupada set that aright, that bhakti and mantra yoga are the ultimate. Awesome!

See, I'm still learning. I got the books yesterday evening, and as I fussed over them I began to chant without thinking, and I read and chanted to late night, and of course the tears came too, never fails, just rolling and rolling, till I fell asleep. Then this morning I read more in bed, and cried and chanted more. Wow - you know how to touch my spirit. I've been reading and highlighting the yoga book. I'm real impressed with it.

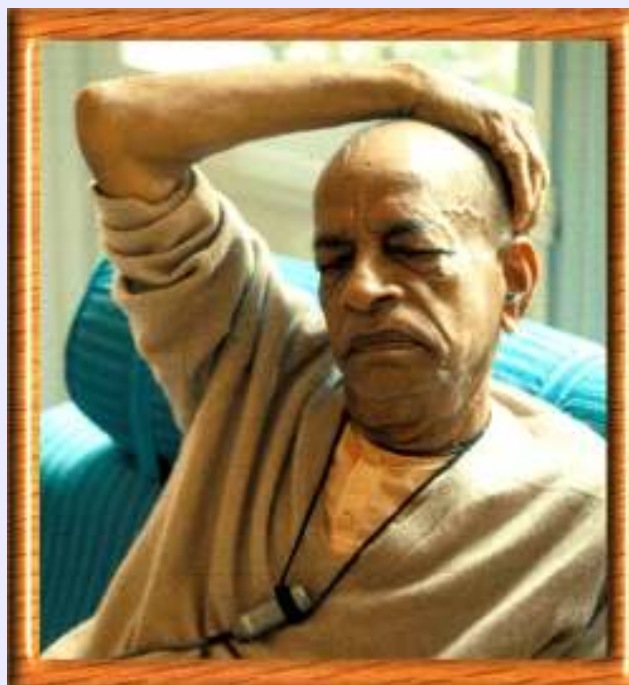
Eva C.

San Diego, CA



A Bit of Nectar!

Saranga Thakur, Madan-Mohan, and Krishna Kesava prabhush, three of the Alachua devotees visiting the Union Correctional Institution in Raiford, Florida, have recently created diplomas for some of the inmates who have been coming to their Krsna programs in the prison. This was a very thoughtful gesture on the part of the devotees. These diplomas are in recognition of their dedication and steadiness in studying the Bhagavad-gita As It Is. The inmates were very happy to receive this acknowledgment.



IPM OFFICE RELOCATED

We are still in New Vrindaban, but have moved in ISKCOWP's former house, now renamed the "Garden House." It's a beautiful location. The IPM office is on the second floor.



Inmate Art!



Above is a necklace made by Kalki dasa, from **Corcoran, California**. He whittled a piece of scrap wood and covered it with crushed beads and lackered with floor varnish. One side is a picture of Srila Prabhupada and the other is an OM sign.



On the left, is another little rock from **Leland D., from Chino, California**. He has glued and varnished a picture of Krishna on the rock. I placed a quarter next to it so you can see the actual dimensions.

THANK YOU to ALL our SUPPORTERS!

Your generosity is what keeps this program going! 😊 Please forgive me if I forgot anyone and let me know so I can mention you in the next IPM NEWS.

Our donors since last newsletter:

Guruprasad and family
Elizabeth Joan Elson

And our monthly Donors:

Ravi Jadhaw
Amala Gaura dasa
Bhavananda dasa
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Radha-Jivan dasa
Kalindi dasi (Hopping)
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Radha Vinod dasa
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Shashi Raina dasa
Stava Mala dasa
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Deepali Mittal
Aritra Nath
Satyanarayana dasa
Thomas Nicholson
Vishal Thakur dasa
Sahadeva dasa



Your Opportunity for more Service!

Many devotees feel inspired by this prison program and want to know how to participate. Here are a few ways:

- give a one-time or a monthly donation (we provide tax-deductible receipts)
- donate new **DVDs** and **music CDs** (bhajans, kirtans)
- You have BTGs lying around the house? Send them to IPM; the inmates love them!
- Correspond with one or more inmates:
To be successful in this endeavor, you need to be motivated, to feel truly inspired by this service, and, also, to like/love writing. Of course, you also need to practice Krsna consciousness yourself, so your words have potency. If you would like to correspond with inmates, please email Kirtan Rasa Dasa at: kirtanras108@gmail.com



3 Donation Options

- 1) Send check or postal money order to:
ISKCON Prison Ministry
PO Box 2676
Alachua, FL 32616-2676
- 2) Donate through PayPal at: www.iskconprisonministry.org
- 3) For automatic, monthly donations, you can do so on our website (with the PayPal button), or through your bank "Automatic Bill Pay" option, which is free and easy.

We can send you a **tax deductible receipt** at the moment of the donation or at the end of the year, as you wish.

Questions? Inquiries? Please contact Mukunda Dasa or Bhakti-lata Dasi at:

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