



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

Srila Prabhupada in London, March 10, 1975

May/June 2017

PRISON MINISTRY: *Romanticism* versus Realism

By Bhakti-lata Dasi

For many years I have wondered why it is so difficult to find devotees who are inspired to not only correspond with inmates but to do so steadily as well. It's been quite a bottleneck since there are far more inmates who write than there are volunteers to reply to them.

It seems that often the devotees who volunteer with IPM have an unrealistic, romantic view of what this service is and they get discouraged when reality turns out to be different. I am wondering if, in some way, this IPM NEWS itself contributes to this misconception. Why?



Bhakti-lata Dasi

Maybe because, naturally, only the best letter excerpts are published. It may give the impression that *every* letter we receive is ecstatic and that *every* inmate is that introspective and enthusiastic. But it's not a fact. Not every inmate becomes a long term bhakta. Far from it. For every letter of substance we receive, there are a dozen more which are shallow. Comparatively few are the inmates who correspond for years on end. Many will write for a year or two and many will write for a few months only. Some will not even write twice. It is a bewildering reality that some inmates, even if deeply touched by Krsna consciousness, will nonetheless stop writing.

I remember a Bhakta Mark who wrote me for about four years; his sincerity was palpable, his questions insightful, and his realizations powerful. I had absolutely no doubt that he would keep in touch after his release. Wrong. I never heard from him again. I was surprised, concerned, and really, really disappointed by his sudden silence. I still think about and pray for him regularly. But his case is not unique. So what to make of this? Is this preaching not "working"; is it worth our time, energy and resources?

Many IPM volunteers get discouraged and feel their efforts are in vain. Or they conclude that they are not good at this service. They couldn't be more wrong.

IPM is very much like book distribution on the street. We've all heard the stories, right? You give a book to someone, knowing you will probably never see him again. Some will receive a book and put it on their bookshelf; years later, they may pick it up, read it, and visit a temple. Or one of their friends might end up with the book and *he* becomes a devotee. Or the book may be left on a bench or even thrown in the garbage and someone else finds it and it changes his/her life.

Interestingly enough, these *same* scenarios are applicable to inmates, albeit in a prison setting. Just as with regular book distribution, we are rarely privy to what happens next; once the book is given and the letter sent, we are often left in the dark. That is because we are entitled to doing our duty but not to enjoy its fruit. Sounds familiar? It's Bhagavad-gita 101; we've all read it. This IPM service is a wonderful opportunity to apply and realize this instruction. *Being detached is at the*

core of this challenging service. However, from time to time, because Krsna is so kind, we are given glimpses of Krsna's transcendental touch in the inmates' lives. These glimpses fill us with bliss, deep within our heart; they strengthen our faith, and keep our enthusiasm alive.

A few inmates write on and off. Sometimes there's a "radio silence" for one, two, three years and then, they write back, once again seeking Krsna's shelter. One inmate told me that he had to go in and out of prison *three* times before he finally realized that Krsna consciousness was *really* important. As Prabhupada said many, many times; it's a *gradual* process.

Prisons are notorious for being "revolving doors"; many go in, are released, and come right back in again. That's because people tend to keep the same kind of association and activities, which lead them to commit the same crimes (environment is stronger than will). The good thing is that these repeat offenders know they can always reach out to IPM and get more mercy. I know, for example, that the Bhakta Mark I was talking about earlier may pop up again at any time; even if he doesn't, I know he can never forget the precious experiences he's had in Krsna's service.

Each time inmates practice Krsna consciousness, they make a little bit more progress. It is the principle of the drop of water falling on a hard rock; little by little, it makes a dent. Each time they chant, read Prabhupada's books, offer their food, and tell someone else about Krsna, they make deposits in their spiritual bank account. Every deposit counts and is eternal.

"That I have already explained. You are coming here, even though you are not initiated. That is also service. If you deposit one cent daily, one day it may become \$100. So, when you get the \$100, you can get the business." (Laughter.) *"So you come here daily, one cent, one cent. When it will be \$100, you will be a devotee."*

Prabhupada Lecture, Melbourne, 5/22/1975

Even when the inmates don't seem to stick around we *know* that the seed has been planted. Whether in this life or in the next, this seed *will* fructify; there is absolutely no doubt about that.

Wanting to personally see the seed sprout into a plant is my own personal desire, my own sense gratification. What matters is *Prabhupada's* pleasure and desire. Whatever happens in the heart of those conditions souls (who happen to be inmates in this lifetime) is *completely* between them and Krishna.

I for one simply feel fortunate, grateful, and thrilled just to be allowed to do this service; to be given the *chance* to play this very little part in Srila Prabhupada's huge mission. The real satisfaction is to do one's service to the best of one's ability, even if it sometimes seems like it's going nowhere.

Inmate Letter Excerpts

I received the material last week and I've become completely absorbed in reading it! Thank you so much for such a wonderful gift. It is truly amazing to find in words the message of Love that I've felt in my heart for so long. After my incarceration, many years ago, I vowed to change for the better and began my own spiritual journey. It was a struggle for many years because I felt so alone in the physical sense; nobody to truly turn to for advice, opinions or support. You and Ramaniya are the first to cross my path with sincere interest in spiritual development, and with a faith structure so very close to what I have already felt in my heart is the Truth. Thank you for giving me hope and re-affirming that I'm on the right path.

Louis S.

Sandstone, Minnesota



I pray that more devotees will be inspired to assist Prabhupada in planting the seed in the heart of some of the most unfortunate souls. I hope more will be willing to tolerate what appears like a lack of results, while praying to Lord Caitanya on behalf of the inmates, and having faith that Krsna is completely in control.

If you are called to give this service a try, you can reach me at:

iskconprisonministry@gmail.com

Your grateful servant, Bhakti-lata Dasi

Your gift to the world is immeasurable and felt by more people than you know.

Justin M.

Danbury, Connecticut

Without Prabhupada and his desire to fulfill his gurudeva's wishes, none of this amazing knowledge and life-changing information would be in our lives. Not a pleasant thought to give ourselves to. We can never repay that debt. As these bodies age [Randall is now 68 years old], coming closer to the age Prabhupada was at the start of all this, how much deeper my respect develops and my realizations deepen about his life, his age, and all the obstacles he had to face. I'm finding, as well, a greater regard and intimate core desire toward devotional awareness and a greater clarity is blossoming as well. This age progression and years of being involved in devotional service are maturing into qualities, and I'm becoming more like what I had imagined I wanted to be. In 1981 I was at a federal prison in Oklahoma and every Saturday the Dallas temple devotees would come for a long program. It was a perfect introduction to this amazing journey. I didn't know then how truly unique and special this whole new experience was going to be. Took me years to

figure this out. It also took years for my family to come around and appreciate my commitment. My daughter once said,

"It's easy to like your devotee friends."

I told her that's how I also feel when I am around them and added,

"Someday I'd like to be more like them."

Shen smiled and I saw agreement in her expression. She tells me, as do my other children, that I am much different now and I am filled with gratitude because they mean this in a positive way. Thank you for your part in this mataji.

Randall S.

San Quentin, California

I wish I was free so I could work as an IPM volunteer. Much can be done to assist prison bhaktas. Kṛṣṇa was the original prison bhakta. ☺ I ought to be able to help even in my current circumstances. Lord Caitanya urges us to do our best for rendering devotional service according to time, place, and circumstance.

Kalki W.

Corcoran, California

I find it absolutely Kṛṣṇa's mercy that the bhakta the Lord helped me make at Elkton C.I., the only one in that short two months and a half I was there, wound up here at Petersburg with me. As you might have guessed, "Rooster" is somewhat developmentally disabled. It is Kṛṣṇa's mercy though that he was led to this path. He took to devotional service so quickly that there's no doubt in my mind that he had been on this path in a previous life. His karma is heavy however; he lost all the fingers of his left hand as a young child, so his left second toe was connected to his hand. You can only imagine the cruelty he has to endure on a daily basis. He's very much like a young child in

terms of his mental and emotional maturity so it's often quite frustrating trying to teach him something. But Kṛṣṇa put him on my path for a reason and I will foster to his Kṛṣṇa consciousness as gently yet persistently as possible.

There is so much power and freedom in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The answers to everything are contained within the pages of the Gita and Bhagavatam and we have access to those secrets, this most confidential of all knowledge. The maha mantra contains within it the answers to anything we could ever seek to know. So sweet is the nectar of devotional service, there does not exist any sacrifice too great to endure for this transcendental opportunity to be a devotee of our sweet Lord Gopal. If you had told me ahead of time that I would have to trade twenty-five years of my freedom on earth in order to discover the bliss of bhakti, knowing what I know now, I would have said, "Lock me up for life; anything to serve Govinda."

The Petersburg Kṛṣṇa program has really been steam rolling ahead with a solid 20+ inmates attending kirtan each week, as our group continues to expand in spite of a chaplain who is biased and prejudiced against any non-Judeo-Christian path—and even some of those!

If there is any way I can be of service, do not hesitate to ask. Your servant,

Richard C. (Krishna Kirtan)

Petersburg, Virginia

I am looking for and would like to find internal peace. Being locked up can become a dark and lonely place. Doing yoga keeps my mind outside these prison walls. It's refreshing.

Eric G.

Amarillo, Texas



Inmate Art!



Yantras painted by bhakta Dale, North Dakota

Chaplains' Appreciation

March 2017

Wow, thank you so much. We will use these materials well and our Hare Krishna guys here at the FCI will be very happy!! I will wait until the packages arrive before I tell them.

Again, thanks for helping us in this great manner. With our budget limitations at a smaller FCI it is wonderful when donations like this can come :)

Talk soon,

Chaplain Matthew Thompson
Danbury, Connecticut

ASSISTANCE NEEDED

95% of inmates who correspond with us are men and I would like to give the opportunity to more women to take up Krsna consciousness.

To do this, more books need to be placed in women's prisons.

Due to time restrictions, I need help to call chaplains and ask if they are willing to receive free material. If you feel it's something you'd like to do, please contact me. It is very simple and I will give you all the information you need to make these calls.

Contact me at: iskconprisonministry@gmail.com

THANK YOU to ALL our SUPPORTERS!

Your generosity is what keeps this program going! 😊 If I forgot anyone, please forgive me and let me know so I can include your name in the next IPM NEWS.

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