

Dedicated to His *Divine* Grace
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
Founder Acarya of ISKCON

IPM NEWS

ISKCON Prison Ministry / DBA of Vaisnava Outreach, INC.



“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

Nov/Dec 2017

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MY SERVICE WITH IPM

By Govindanandini Dasi

In 2012, I was casually looking at Dandavats.com when, for the first time in my life, I came across the words “ISKCON Prison Ministry”. I felt curious to know what it was all about. I began to read their article, appealing the readers to become volunteers to correspond with prison inmates and send them Srila Prabhupada’s books! I was instantly attracted to the concept of Prison Ministry and to their appeal. I was attracted because I could see in it a great opportunity for a genuine service, a selfless service, and also a humbling one.



Genuine, because it would help a most helpless and desperate person. Selfless, because there was no way my mind could find a possibility of any subtle benefit in return from the inmates. And humbling, because no one would know of my service unless I mentioned about it and thus there was no scope for my mind to find pride. Plus, with its flexibility, it would perfectly work for my schedule!

The Prison Ministry director, mother Bhakti-lata, approved me, but there was one other approval I needed –my spouse’s. I was concerned that he would oppose the idea of me corresponding with criminals, but eventually he got convinced that it was safe using the spiritual name and a post office box address.

In the past five years, I was able to write to about three dozen inmates, at least once. The turnover is high. Some of the inmates do not continue to write and read for long, while others correspond for many years. A couple of inmates who were enthusiastically corresponding, reading, and asking questions suddenly stopped and never wrote back, mostly because they were released and got busy with their world. Initially that disappointed me.

But gradually, my disappointment was replaced by compassion. Through their letters, I got some understanding about their prison conditions, their struggle to obtain and store books, limitations on food choices and an extremely negative surrounding for pursuing spiritual practices. Understanding and considering all this, even if they attempted to read one book and responded, that now seemed incredible.

This understanding kept me going. I reminded myself to be just an instrument and nothing more. Here I was learning a practical lesson from Bhagavad Gita’s teachings—“be detached from the fruits of your labor” and “do not expect anything in return”. Over time, I am

able to maintain a serious and continual long-term correspondence with 5-7 of them.

Many times rewards come in many pleasant and sometimes unexpected ways. Sometimes, inmates write back saying he/she was able to overcome a negative feeling, was able to chant and feel peace, or was moved by a recent reading of a book. They express their gratitude in the simplest way, yet it is so touching. Sometimes they write poems or draw beautiful artwork which reflect their meditation. Some inmates crochet or knit items and mail them just to express love and gratitude for Prison Ministry volunteers. Sometimes, someone asks such nice questions upon their readings, questions that show they really read and meditated on the subject matter.

Looking back, I feel that through these exchanges, I am more benefited than I am helping them. The reason is that I get to closely analyze destiny and human nature thus helping me learn my own lessons. Here are a few examples:

When we take birth, we carry along a blue print of our destiny that we created in our past lives. In that blue print, there is a package deal of some good and some bad fortune. As we go on, the destiny simply unfolds. As I get to study the variety of destinies of the inmates, I ask myself, “If I don’t try to maintain the mode of goodness, if I don’t adhere to the principles of bhakti, could I end up building an unfortunate destiny for my next life?” I shudder at that thought and I get more fixed up in my devotional practice.

In this material world, it is natural that we all, as embodied souls, make mistakes and get reactions. Even though on the absolute level they are all mistakes, our reactions are seen as mild or strong in a social system. Due to their misfortune, the prisoners pay dearly for their errors. I ask myself, “Do I want to live a life full of reckless mistakes? Just see, I may end up in a serious reaction like them.” I again shudder at this thought

and become serious about the moral principles I learn from the Gita. I also share a few examples with my teenage daughter and ask her to learn the same lessons I learn. These examples become thousand times more effective for the young than theoretical teaching.

The stories from the rich Vedic literature suggest that a wise person learn from the pains and mistakes of others, so that he does not have to experience them himself. While corresponding

with inmates, I get a realistic understanding of their blunders and pains, and I tell myself to become more fixed in devotional practice to Lord Krishna, so that by Krishna's grace I may not have to experience some of them in the journey of my soul. I feel that this is a priceless benefit, which keeps me motivated to continue this humble service.

Govindanandini lives in Plainsboro, New Jersey with her husband and daughter.



Inmate Letter Excerpts

Currently I am reading the Gita front to back. I have decided it will be an ongoing mission to read the Gita front to back nonstop and to repeat this behavior.

I am currently awaiting books and my very first japa beads. I have never prayed with japa beads so I am so excited that every day I look for my chaplain to see if they are in yet. It's been like three weeks. Some people are kidding me about how I wait; it is really funny. I am steady in my reading.

I am teaching myself to draw. I am hoping to send the prison ministry my poorly drawn art. Actually, I'm getting better. I am in chapter three of the Gita. Though that is not all I have read. Bali Maharaja dasa is shooting me notes and I go to where he's directing.

You know he knew my brother before he died. What a comfort to know my brother heard the transcendental vibrations of the greatest pleasure. And it was from my friend Bali.

Krsna has been my very own miracle. It's so strong and beautiful. I finally feel like I can make it in this miserable ole' world. It took 40 years, but I have arrived. Well I will be 40 in April on the 16th. Now all I got to do is roll down the hill. Ha! I haven't seen my mother yet, I'm waiting to tell her everything face to face. I'm sure she will be curious about the "ponytail" I'm growing. Ha!

Anthony Aguirre
Pine Bluff, AR

I would like to know more about the "Hare Krsna Movement," and I was wondering if you can please send me a "Bhagavad Gita" and any other literature you could spare. I have been a Christian most of my life, but I continue to feel empty on the inside, like something is missing. I can't explain what it is, or what it is that I am truly seeking. But recently I read an article in the "Back to Godhead" Magazine by Prabhupada-Priya Devi Dasi.

Like her I was also born in 1970, Orlando Florida, and was raised to believe in Jesus Christ as

my lord and savior. So as I got older I studied many different forms of Christianity and went from one denomination to another; but yet my search for God has brought nothing but empty promises to my life. And the Inner Peace and Happiness I seek is not there, but yet she found it. I was moved by the article, even though I don't have the type of education she did, I could still relate to how she felt in her search for the truth. However, I am not saying that the Hare Kåñëa Movement is right for me, but like her I have decided to dedicate my life to serving God in some way or another; but yet I am confused with an endless river of unanswered questions, disgusted with materialistic culture, disappointed by superficial relationships, and lost in a seemingly pointless existence.

I want to have a more personal relationship with God. That way I can share it with other like-minded people. I just don't know where I am in my walk with God. I pray to Him, but yet I hear nothing, and my prayers continue to go unanswered. Has He forgotten about me, what is His will for me, and where do I stand? What is my purpose in this life? Those and many other questions I ask myself. Maybe one day my search for understanding will be over, but until then, I must continue to seek out the truth wherever it can be found. So if you can, please send me a "Bhagavad Gita" and any other literature on the "Hare Krsna Movement," it would be greatly appreciated and I thank you very much for your time and effort concerning this matter, and look forward to hearing from you personally.

Jordan B.
Jasper, Florida

Hare Krsna! It is a pleasure to write you! My sincere apologies for taking so long to respond, I was very limited on how much e-mail time I could afford. Thankfully that has been rectified. And thank you so much for putting me in contact with Ramaniya. She has been a phenomenal help and is

a truly wonderful woman. I thank Krsna daily for bringing you both into my life.

There is still a tremendous amount that I need to learn, but I look forward to it with great eagerness and excitement! The Maha-Mantra has become a daily ritual, filling me with peace, strength and love. And thank you again so much for sending me the reading material. The Bhagavad-Gita is by far my favorite and the fact that it is pocket sized makes it perfectly suited to always have with me.



Spirituality is nothing new to me but attaining Krsna consciousness is something different entirely. It is beautiful. I will need to do some further research but, honestly, I believe it is only a matter of time before I become a devotee. I fear that because of my offense (downloading pornography involving minors) I probably won't be welcome to celebrate with others once I go home next year and that saddens me. But I understand the burdens of my karma and I have Krsna in my heart now, and even when I am alone I am not truly alone. Krsna has shown me a better way. Thank you so much for everything! Hare Krsna!

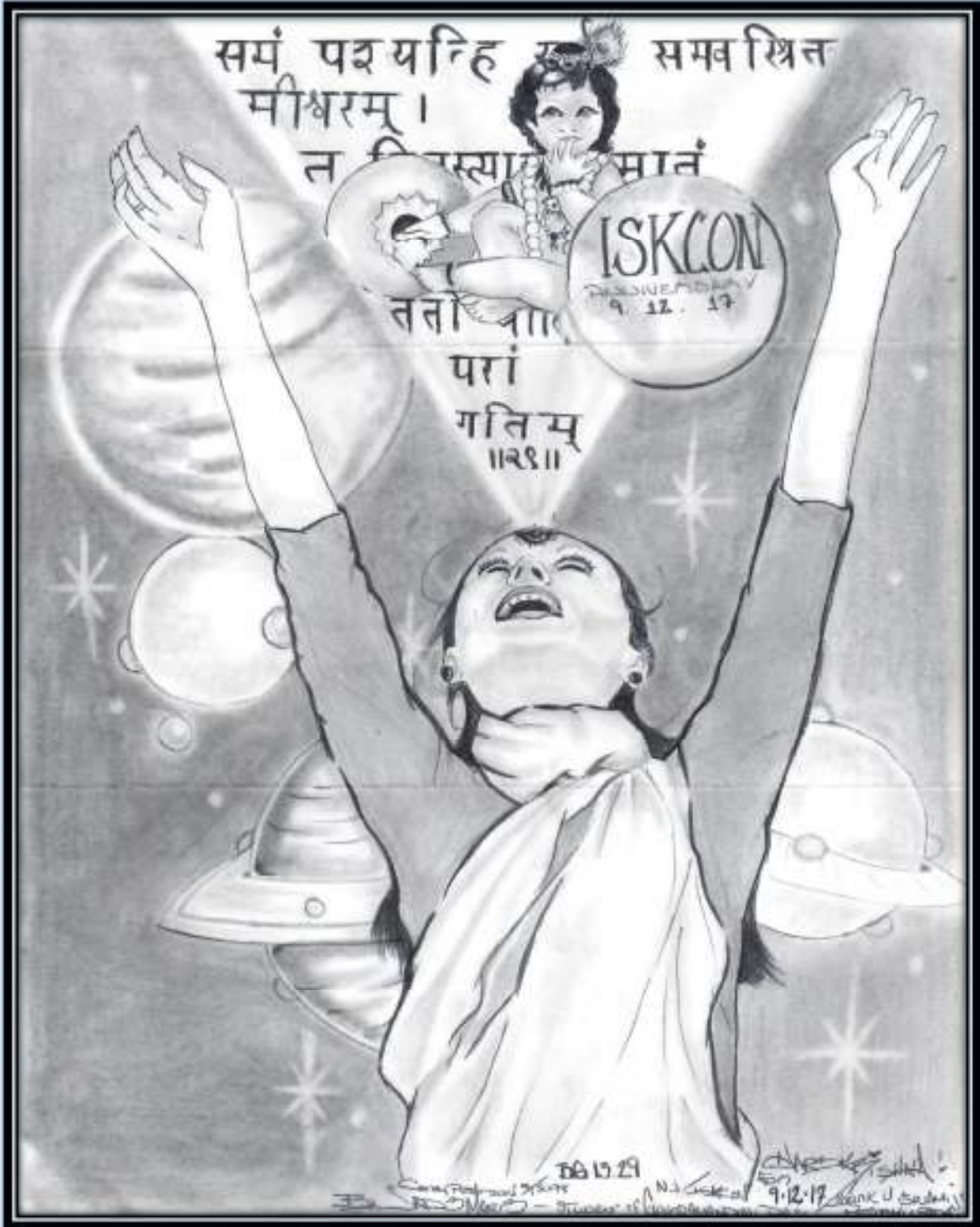
Louis S.
Sandstone, Minnesota

Thank you for all the material that are opening my mind and heart to a new freedom in prison.

Robert M.
Safford, Arizona



Inmate Art!



Drawing from Bhakta Corey P.

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.

Our donors since last newsletter:

Dr. & Mrs. Chandra Modi
Inmate Dennis Law
Inmate Joseph Powell
Mrkanda Dasa & Radhika Rani Dasi
Ramai Nitai Das & Radharani Lila Dasi
Sarana Dasi

And our monthly Donors:

Amala Gaura dasa
Aritra Nath
Bhavananda dasa
Deepali Mittal
Dina Sharana dasa
Gene & Claudine Moore
Kalindi dasi (Hopping)
Jitarati dasa
Maya Sudana dasa
Mickey Singer
Radha Vinod dasa
Ravi Jadhaw



Rene Waisvisz
Richard House
Sahadev dasa
Satyanarayana dasa Shashi
Shefali Majmudar
Raina dasa
Vishal Thakur dasa
Yudhisthira dasa
2 anonymous (you know who
you are: thank you!)

3 Donation Options

- 1) Send check or postal money order to:
ISKCON Prison Ministry
PO Box 2676
Alachua, FL 32616
- 2) Donate through PayPal at: www.paypal.me/IPM
- 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.

ISKCON Prison Ministry

PO Box 2676

Alachua, FL 32616

IskconPrisonMinistry@gmail.com

www.iskconprisonministry.org