



# IPM News



Dedicated to His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

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**November 2012** ISKCON Prison Ministry Newsletter

**Changing Lives from the Inside Out!**

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## **IPM Volunteer Leaves His Body in August 2012**

by **Bhakti-lata dasi**

Hare Krsna dear devotees,

On August 24, 2012, long time IPM volunteer, Bhakta Jerry, left his body in Chicago. IPM is nothing without his volunteers and supporters, and Bhakta Jerry was very attached to this service, despite his personal challenges. For many years he was putting together and mailing the monthly Freedom Newsletter for the inmates. He was also corresponding with and sending books to many inmates. Below is an article that Bhakta Jerry wrote about how he came to Krsna consciousness. Following his article, you can follow a link to read about his passing away and the positive impact he had in his short life.

### **The Answer to the Mystery of Life**

By Bhakta Jerry

Growing up, I always tried to make sense out of life. I thought life was a mystery to solve and everyone else knew the answers except me. I searched for answers in different religions, esoteric and conspiracy literature and even cults. But everywhere I searched, no one had a satisfying answer to my questions. I have always had a very passionate propensity to enjoy life and material pleasures, so, unable to find answers, I started experimenting with alcohol and drugs at a young age.

When I became intoxicated, I thought I was experiencing a higher state of consciousness, but all I experienced was a conscious state where the pains of this world were temporarily mitigated. This

mitigation was more pleasurable than any other religion, philosophy or endeavor I had previously experienced. But “pleasure” of this kind comes with a dangerous price.

By the age of 18 I was an alcoholic, a cocaine addict and addicted to any other form of illicit activity. Somehow, I was able to keep good grades, good jobs and other external fronts to make my life look orderly, but on the inside I was suffering very badly. Without spiritual happiness, I hurt so much.

For several years I experienced drastic highs and lows in life. One month you might find me wearing a suit and tie to an office job and the next month I was in Cook County Jail. I thought life would be perfect if I could just obtain an abundance of money; that way I’d be able to do drugs and also maintain the material status quo I desired. And like a dream come true, it all manifested.

The late 1990’s found me part of the Internet boom working for start-up companies. I was the sales manager for a nation wide Internet Service Provider. I was directly responsible for twenty employees, a \$75,000.00 monthly budget and a monthly quota of \$25,000.00. I excelled at what I did and soon assumed responsibility for our network expansion. Our vendors lavishly gifted me with an endless variety of perks. This, added to my salary of over six figures a year, meant I had finally achieved the status quo I had always desired.

I sacrificed two years of my life doing nothing but working and was rewarded with a greater fortune than I could have ever imagined. In 1999, we sold our company for over \$150 million. So, at twenty-two years of age, even with my small portion of stock, I was able to enjoy semi-retirement.

I traveled the country in a Lear jet, staying at the fanciest hotels and golfing at the most privileged courses. If someone wanted me to work for them, I demanded a company-owned BMW and a company-rented apartment. I had apartments and cars in Miami Beach and other cities. In spite of all these material facilities, I could find no peace of mind and, hence, no happiness.

My frustration with not being able to enjoy life reached a new low. At this time I did not have to work and I had more money than I knew what to do with, but I still did not know how to find fulfillment. I continued to pursue spiritual happiness through meditation classes, performing bizarre “religious” rituals, and attending many different types of churches, yet alcohol and drugs provided the only form relief, so, I tackled them with abandon. The problem was that this time I did not have to stop using drugs to go to work or because I ran out of money. Instead, I ran out of sanity and entered a state of madness.

In the summer of 2000, I remember spending a day crying, praying to God - whoever He was, begging for mercy. I needed answers, I needed peace and I needed His help. He then proceeded to remove me from a situation I could not remove myself from. In a very deluded condition I entered the state of Texas, ignoring the sign that says, “Don’t mess with Texas,” and decided to start committing crimes. Among other inexcusable acts, I walked into a gas station and demanded money. For this, I was sentenced to seven years in prison.

So there I sat in prison, in a demented condition, but still hopeful that I could find the spiritual answers to life that I was always seeking. Here, I renewed my quest to find happiness by searching through Eastern and New Age philosophies, and any other self-help material I could find. All these schools of thought were beneficial because they helped me to uplift myself from a fallen state, but there was still something missing. There was still a purpose to life, an absolute truth that I could not seem to discover.

One day I saw a book with beautiful artwork on the cover. There was a chariot driver speaking to a warrior. The artwork was like a magnet forcing me to take hold of the book. The picture on the cover was so attractive; I could only imagine what lay inside.

This book belonged to an eccentric gentleman, Sri Manta dasa, whom I had spoken to a few times. I approached him to find out if he knew anything about the secret of life.

*“What do you believe in?”* I asked.

With a quick laugh, he said, *“We believe in a lot of things. But first you must understand that you are not this body. The reason you suffer in life is that you are trying to please the body while you neglect your spiritual self.”*

In a matter of seconds, the mystery of life was solved!! It only took me twenty-three years to find someone who knew the solution! I suffered through so much trying to find the answers to life and this gracious gentleman mercifully told me the answer as if it were common knowledge.

I was immediately attracted to the philosophy of Krsna consciousness. One of the first things I remember reading was sat, chit, ananda. In my natural condition I was eternal, knowledgeable and blissful, but, in this temporary world, I could not experience these states. Instead, in the temporary world everything has to come to an end.

I could understand this concept of the temporary when I reflected on my life. All my wealth was temporary: the stock market pretty much wiped me out. The friendships I had acquired based on money were now gone. Through the years, all the highs I had experienced from alcohol and drugs had to come to an end, usually with bad results.

Even in prison, I could see this perverted reflection of our spiritual selves. For example, grown men would fight over a table or a spot in line just to try to enjoy something that would soon be over. On the other hand, the Bhagavad-gita was presenting the everlasting philosophy which provides eternal bliss and knowledge. This was not a religion based on sentiment or a philosophy with no conclusion, but was the eternal duty of the soul which was practical and required me to put forth action.

I started to develop sadhana and gradually learned how to incorporate Krsna consciousness into my life. I would wake up at 4:00 a.m., not because it was mangala-arati time, but because it was the only time it was quiet enough to chant my rounds. Unlike most inmates who bitterly complained about working for the state, I would eagerly go to work because I worked for Krsna. I would happily make prasadam in the dorms and share with other inmates. They were always amazed how vegetarian food could be so good. My spiritual disciplines included reading Srila Prabhupada’s books. I would read them over and over again. Even though I did not understand much of what I read, I did it because my contaminated intelligence needed and wanted more. The books ISKCON Prison Ministries sent me became the foundation of my spiritual life.

There were many challenges in prison. Just existing in such an environment is a burdensome task. Trying to be a devotee in such an environment, without devotee association, is almost impossible. The letters IPM volunteers, such as His Holiness Candramauli Swami, wrote were my instructions on how to live. The encouraging and merciful devotees who worked with the IPM were my life and soul. They kept me engaged in Krsna consciousness in every capacity possible. They kept books flowing my way

and transcendental letters in the mailbox. They were the reason I was able to start and maintain any type of sadhana and, so, begin the long and grueling process of purifying my contaminated consciousness.

Throughout five years I spent five years in prison I was shown so much mercy. Mother ShyamaPriya and Mukta Kesa Prabhu sent me so many books that purified my intelligence. Chandrasekar Prabhu and Jagannivasa Prabhu sent the most heartwarming and philosophical letters. Just reading these letters brought me out of the hell of prison and to the place of no anxiety, Vaikuntha. Candramauli Swami gave me direction and deepened my faith in the holy name. And that devotee who told me that I'm not the body was with me the whole time. Besides his countless talks about Krsna consciousness, his wife would send me japa beads and performed the austerity of dealing with the prison administrators and their politics. Sri Manta and Cookie treated me like their own son.

During the last three years I followed the four regulations and chanted sixteen rounds daily. Finally, on an Ekadasi in October 2005, I was unexpectedly released. I returned to my home town of Chicago, where His Holiness Candramauli Swami is based.

When I was released from prison I felt like I did not have a choice but to reciprocate with these devotees but trying my best to distribute the mercy of Srila Prabhupada's books to inmates. After everything they did for me, I had to do something to show my appreciation. After all, they helped free me from a world of hell that so many inmates and people in general, are suffering through.

For the first few months I spent a couple of nights a week at the temple and the other days with my family. While all my friends and family were encouraging me to engage in another business venture and pursue family life, I was quickly becoming attracted to the bliss of Sunday kirtans and prasadam. Although getting up at 4:00 a.m., serving devotees and other challenges were difficult, there was still the indescribable pleasure of practicing Krsna consciousness in the presence of devotees. These are some of the pleasures I had spent so many years searching for.

In January 2006, by the mercy of Kishore Kishori, I became a fulltime resident of the Chicago temple. I am engaged in service with IPM and have helped to revive the Food for Life program. The decision was a simple one; I spent my whole life working very, very hard to make economic progress so I could gratify my senses, but these endeavors only brought me misery. I have discovered that ISKCON is the vehicle for using this same energy to engage in Krsna's service, and, hopefully, to perfect my life.

I am a very fallen soul. Although I know I am not this body, I am naturally attracted to the pleasures of this world. In only a few short decades of life I created an attachment so strong that sometimes I feel that I do not have a choice in what I do. The modes of material nature control me. It is only by the mercy of Srila Prabhupada and the devotees of ISKCON that I have a chance to prevent myself from being a menace to society. Even better, now have a chance to make spiritual advancement. Maybe one day I will be able to resume my eternal duty in the spiritual world.

Since I have been engaged in service for IPM realizations come forth on a weekly basis for me. At first I was judging the success of IPM by material standards but I soon realized that devotional service is not something to be judged materially. I have been in the middle of praying to Lord Nityananda for help on an IPM project and at that very moment some devotee will ask me if they can help IPM in any way. That was such a clear sign of the existence of Lord Nityananda's mercy. When I have been in need of laksmi to mail the newsletter or books, I have received donations from devotees that I do not even know personally. The more I do this service the more I see that I am not the controller but only the middleman to help spread Lord Caitanya's sankirtana movement.

IPM is such a practical service to do. After a long day of work and material commitments to keep this body together, I can come home and spend 20 or 30 minutes writing letters to inmates sharing what I have recently read or watched on a Srila Prabhupada DVD.

Prison is the perfect environment to preach. Suffering is abundant, most of the inmates have spiritual inclinations because they have been searching for pleasure in this world but have not found them yet and the environment is austere forcing one to control his senses. So many devotees are reaching out for the mercy Srila Prabhupada gave us. We have a responsibility to give it to everyone, especially inmates.

This knowledge, this process of Krsna consciousness, is amazing. It is the means and the ultimate goal of life. It is the bliss I had always wanted, but could never find. Devotees know that anyone not chanting Hare Krsna in this day and age is suffering. We have a responsibility we must take very gravely. If a rascal like me can be sent to a prison somewhere in the big state of Texas and be turned into a devotee, ISKCON has a chance to save the whole world.

ISKCON Prison Ministry is engaged in preaching on the “front lines” of Kali-yuga. If it was not for the many IPM devotees who spent their valuable time guiding me, I would still be living in the darkest of ignorance. I therefore offer my most humble thanks to Sri Manta dasa and his wife Cookie, Chandrasekar Prabhu, Mother Shyama Priya, Jagannivasa Prabhu and Mukta kesa Prabhu. I am eternally indebted to all of you. And to His Holiness Candramauli Swami, I beg to be your devoted servant for the rest of this human sentence and for the rest of eternity.

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To read about Bhakta Jerry’s passing away, please follow the link:

<http://www.iskconprisonministry.us/node/366>

You will find a wealth of excerpts of letters and also artwork from the inmates on our website:

[www.iskconprisonministry.org](http://www.iskconprisonministry.org)

If you want to receive IPM NEWS, our monthly electronic newsletter, please send us an e-mail with “*Subscribe to IPM NEWS*” in the subject line.

To help with this prison program (laksmi, books, typing, corresponding, website), please contact Mukunda Dasa or Bhakti-lata Dasi at:

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