



IPM News



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

MARCH 2010 ISKCON Prison Ministry Newsletter

Changing Lives From the Inside Out!

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Meet Akhilananda dasa, IPM volunteer in Ohio

by Bhakti-lata Dasi

On Nityananda's appearance day, I had the honor of meeting Akhilananda dasa, an IPM volunteer from Ohio. The following is the story of how he came to do prison preaching and a description of his present program.

Around 1998, an old friend of Akhilananda, IPM veteran Candrasekhara dasa, asked him if he would like to write inmates. Although he tried his hand at it, somehow writing was not coming naturally to Akhilananda, and he decided that he would rather visit inmates in person. He visited an inmate in his area for a few years (when this inmate was later released, Akhilananda kept contact with him and met him a few times at the temple in Washington DC.)

One day, while leaving after a visit, he said "*Hare Krsna, namate*" to a Hindu inmate in the visitor area. This inmate was very excited to connect with a devotee. The inmate explained that a group of 12 men were meeting once a week and they discussed the possibility of Akhilananda coming to lead them in a spiritual program.

The chaplain was very supportive and told Akhilananda that "*This is the nicest experience you can have*". Having a true Christian spirit, he was happy to assist Akhilananda and guided him to become a volunteer by taking a 6 hours course the prison is offering (course that he has to re-take once a year). This is just what he did, and, once a week, for the last 4 years, he has been steadily leading a group of inmates in a 2 hours Krsna conscious program.

For this program, the inmates spread a large madras and sitting mats on the floor of the room they are assigned to. Sometimes Akhilananda brings small Gaura-Nitai deities that he puts on a marble slab, and recently they are allowed to have a stick of incense lit for Them. Akhilananda also brings a harmonium,

mrdanga and kartals. The first half hour of the program consists of a very enthusiastic kirtan; the inmates love it! They participate eagerly, shouting “*Haribol!*” and “*Jaya!*” intermittently. After kirtan, there is a 20 minutes Bhagavad-Gita discussion. Most men in this inmate group are Hindus, but there is also a Muslim who has been coming and earnestly participating in kirtan.

As the inmates of this particular jail are not allowed to have regular japa malas, Akhilananda kindly and patiently makes them malas out of *Sculpty* a kind of baking clay. He painstakingly rolls beads, makes a hole in each, and bakes them. Next, he strings them into malas. He even mixes yellow and brown clay, to give the beads a grainy, wooden look!

Six years ago, he was a *guardian-ad-litem*, a children advocate in the family court system. In the course of visiting the children’s parents, he would sometimes go to the county jail. He would take advantage of this situation to distribute Prabhupada’s books.

In 2004, Akhilananda heard about a young man from his hometown, known to his family but not to him, who was now in jail. He visited him, bringing some books and plenty of compassion. The young man was at first doubtful of his intentions, thinking he might just be one more minister coming to “save” him. In this young man’s own words, “*I didn’t know if Akhilananda was a minister, a doctor, or a therapist. I realized later that he was all of those.*” He was willing to hear about Krsna and began to avidly read the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Akhilananda kept visiting him wherever he was, as he was moved from prison to prison. He got to know his family, who appreciates very much his visiting and giving Krsna consciousness to their son. With Akhilananda’s steady and caring guidance, this inmate gradually advanced in Krsna consciousness, changed his ways, became vegetarian, and was eventually initiated by Bhakti-marga Swami in October 2008.



Akhilananda Dasa

The Initiation of Arjuna Das

by Akhilananda Das

With only a few days remaining before the much anticipated arrival of Bhaktimarg Swami Maharaja, I was rushing around and calling devotees who were helping with all the arrangements that would culminate in the long awaited initiation of Bhakta Aaron. I was reflecting on all that had led up to this point.

I was fortunate to have met Aaron over four years ago. While attending to my regular duties as a volunteer, I would visit the county jail. It came to my attention that Aaron had just recently entered the system there in the county jail. I had heard of him through the newspaper and since he was from my home town, it dawned on me that I might be able to visit him and take him some literature on Krishna consciousness. Our first meeting went very well and soon he was reading BTG's, Mahabharata and Ramayana, which are timeless epics of Lord Krishna's and Lord Rama's unrivaled heroic victories over evil. Aaron asked for more articles and books on Krishna consciousness and soon became truly immersed in *The Science of Self Realization* by Srila Prabhupada. We have kept in regular contact since then by visits and letters which are always filled with live discussions about Krishna Consciousness and life as a devotee of Krishna.

While living in incarceration, Aaron has increased his focus on self realization and self introspection. Krishna consciousness has been the serious goal of Bhakta Aaron Prabhu now for over four years. His intense desire has been to deepen and strengthen his relationship with Lord Krishna and Srila Prabhupada by chanting Hare Krishna and becoming a duly initiated disciple in the line of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu.

So it was during the monthly visits with Bhakta Aaron that we discussed the many topics concerning taking initiation from a bonafide Spiritual Master. Srila Prabhupada is coming in the line of disciplic succession from Lord Krishna and has given His mercy and instructions to his qualified senior disciples to follow in His footsteps and initiate bonafide candidates into the chanting of Hare Krishna and the path of Bhakti Yoga. Now that the year long planning and back and forth of e-mails to the prison chaplain had come to a fruitful conclusion, Bhakta Aaron's initiation ceremony was finally in sight. I explained that even though I am a senior disciple of Srila Prabhupada, I am not an initiating Guru. I am simply a humble servant passing along the preaching message as best as I can. I encouraged Aaron to think about Bhaktimarg Swami as someone he could take shelter of and become a disciple in the line of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada and Lord Sri Krishna Caitanya Mahaprabhu.

Bhaktimarg Swami very kindly agreed that he would gladly accept Bhakta Aaron as a disciple, upon my recommendation, followed by a period of establishing a persona relationship with him through correspondence. Bhakta Aaron enthusiastically took up this opportunity and even made a beautiful art box elaborately decorated with intricate designs and drawers with velvet linings. I was able to present his gift of loving devotion to Bhaktimarg Swami at the Festival of Inspiration in New Vrindaban, West Virginia. Even to this day Bhaktimarg Maharaja tells me that he keeps his important personal documents safe in Bhakta Aaron's gift box. While reflecting on all that had led up to this joyous occasion I prepared for the arrival of Bhaktimarg Swami, After picking up Maharaja from the airport we traveled to Cleveland for the weekly program held at the home of our dear friend's Dayal Nitai and his wife Tanya. There was a lively kirtan and class on the Bhagavad-Gita followed by wonderful Prasad(vegetarian preparations offered with love to Lord Krishna). Bhaktimarg and I received many wishes of good fortune and blessings from all the devotees there at Dayal's home as we told of the next day's initiation ceremony that would be for Aaron inside the prison.

Rising early at 4:30 am the next morning for the Mangala Arti, Bhaktimarg Swami and I prepared for what was to be a historical event in the Trumble Correctional Institution; a Vaishnava initiation ceremony. We were blessed with a beautiful morning sunrise as we traveled the fifty miles to "the Center of the world", a tiny one store village just outside the large prison grounds, I had received the okay from the prison Chaplain, that Bhaktimarg Swami and I would be permitted to enter the facility on our traditional robes, Bhaktimarg Swami in his saffron and I in my kurta and dhoti, along with the flower garland, milk sweets, neck beads, and japa beads that would be presented and kept by Bhakta Aaron.

We were pleasantly surprised that entrance into the facility went smoothly. Bhaktimarg Swami even had a nice discussion with another visitor, a Philippino man who was acquainted with devotees and the chanting of Hare Krsna.

We were soon escorted across a small courtyard to the visitation area and were given a private glass-walled room just off to one side of the larger room where all the other visitors were sitting with their relatives and friends. Bhakta Aaron arrived wearing the blue kurta and bead bag which had been sent to him. He very carefully offered obeisance's to Maharaja reciting the Sanskrit versed. He respectfully received and put on the flower garland which Bhaktimarg Swami had been wearing. I applied the clay Tilak marking to Bhakta Aaron's forehead while reciting the proper mantra "Om Keshavaya Namaha". After some informal conversation Bhaktimarg Swami said we should begin the initiation ceremony.



From left to right: Bhaktimarga Swami, Arjuna Dasa, and Akhilananda Dasa

Since we were not permitted to have a traditional fire sacrifice, Maharaja explained the process and significance of taking initiation, Bhakta Aaron listened intently and finally was asked to recite the four prohibitions that an initiated devotee must strictly avoid: no meat eating, no gambling, no intoxication, and no illicit sex. Bhakta Aaron also repeated the vow to chant at least sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna Mahamantra daily as well as reading Srila Prabhupada's books faithfully. Maharaja had been chanting on the new set of japa bead that would be given to Bhakta Aaron.

Bhaktimarg said that it was now time to give Bhakta Aaron his new spiritual name. I knew that Bhakta Aaron had been very interested and perhaps a little nervous about what his new name would be. So when Bhaktimarg Swami leaned forward, handed him the new japa beads and said "Your spiritual name will be Arjuna Das". Bhakta Aaron folded his hands with great gladness and amazement. He looked at me with emotion and recognition that once again Lord Krishna had fulfilled al desires!

We very happily shared the milk sweet burfy Prasadam and then became immersed in chanting together "Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare , Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare". this marked the conclusion of the ceremony and we came out of the small meeting room to have our photo taken together.

The officers and other visitors seemed pleased to see this unusual sight of Hare Krishna devotees wearing flowing colorful robes, flower garlands and Tilak in such a place as the TCI visitor area. We were also very happy to see a sincere soul receiving the mercy of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu and Srila Prabhupada.

Bhaktimarg Swami and I gave and received a heart-felt farewell to now Arjuna Das Bhramacari. We parted company reluctantly still feeling the bliss of Krishna Consciousness and the association of devotees of Krishna. Arjuna Das later wrote me that the entire campus at TCI was abuzz about what had taken place and he experienced new interest from others about the path of Krishna Consciousness.

Bhaktimarg Swami and I reflected on all that had taken place that day and were reminded how Srila Prabhupada had come to save us all who were imprisoned by our illusion to material sense gratification and sinful activities. We both felt very happy to have a new devotee of Krishna to associate with and to encourage from now on to always remember Krishna and never forget Him.

Thank You to Our Donors!

Our sincere thanks to our February donors: Bhavananda, Shashi Raina, Kanvadas, Dwarkadisa, and Ekanatha.

We also want to thank our BTG sponsor; Sacred Threads for helping with the shipping; and Pancaratna for helping with the website.

Our donors make this preaching program possible. Please consider helping us reach out to inmates and change their lives!

Feel free to contact Mukunda or Bhakti-lata at:

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What inmates have to say



“I really do not know how to thank you. Honestly, I am so very grateful that anything I say only comes off sounding foolish. So, I’ll keep it simple.

Thank you, Bhakti-lata. And thank you IPM. What you have given this prisoner of the Lord is beyond measure, that is, the light of knowledge in the words of our spiritual father, Srila Prabhupada. I can assure you that this scripture will be studied, and not simply read and set aside. It will be absorbed as far as it is in my poor ability to do so.

I am so pleased with all that you have sent. But I was especially thrilled with the Srimad-Bhagavatam. I know in my heart, deep inside, that these words hold the key to everything, that is, Lord Krishna. I know that we are supposed to reject “desire”, but my thirst for knowledge of the Absolute and the real truth behind this existence of ours is one desire that I cannot shake or deny. I desire to know more of Krsna and this path and I am not ashamed to admit my failing in this regard.

I wish to thank you too for your kind letter. Your words are very much taken to heart, and I read and re-read them many times to make certain that I glean as much as possible from the lessons that you impart. Nothing is wasted on this prisoner.”

Mark Davis, Iowa Park, TX

“While talking about chanting, I often use the analogy of annoying telemarketers calling at inopportune times. I’m just trying to “take the phone off the hook” so to speak and strengthen my focus so I can hear the Holy Name even while I’m emptying or filling trucks on the loading dock at work.

I rise around 4 AM and do six or eight rounds. Then when I return from work (or sometimes in the evening) I chant eight or ten rounds.

Sister Margaret Graziano is “hipper” than your average nun. She knew who Prabhupada was and helped one me get vegetarian meals (you should’ve heard the Jell-O argument – “*Whadda ya mean Jell-O’s not vegetarian?!*” The food coordinator boomed. “*Can he just have cottage cheese instead?*” Sister Margaret insisted. “*Sure*” he replied.

I told these guys the story of the first time I saw a guy attempt to break out of jail to illustrate the difference in trying to escape from whatever prison we’re imprisoned by – whether the obvious steel and stone of the penitentiary here or the prison of one’s own choosing like liquor, cocaine, money, debt, greed, lust or any of the infinite prisons that shackle most of the world – and true freedom or liberation, which I pointed out is available here behind these walls and this Constantine wire- and offered free tickets to it in the form of maha-mantra on cards. Ethan has been back every week since. He first came for chapter 12 of the Bhagavad Gita and has been a part of our KC religious activity the past four weeks. And my cellie’s friend, Sage, locked eyes with me while we were watching “*The Simple temple – Chowpatty*” and said, “This is the Great Spirit; this is good. I say ‘*Creator*’ you say ‘*Krishna*’. Then he invited me to come to sweat lodge with them.”

Bhakta Gary Griffin, Salem OR

February 2010 Book Report !



Srimad Bhagavatam set: 1
Maha-Big: 14
Big Hard: 7
Big Soft: 59
Medium: 2
Small: 72

BTGs: 223
Freedom Newsletters: 85

BOOKS written by devotees other than
Prabhupada: 23

Other Material (beads, CDs, etc.):
Calendar 2010
Neck Beads
5x 2010 BBT Calendars

This is the activity report of, Bhakta David, Bhakti-lata Dasi, Candra Dasa and Candrasekhara Dasa.

Want to help?

ISKCON Prison Ministry has a variety of needs you can help with:

1) We need enthusiastic **pen-pal preachers**. You can write one or more inmates: if you are interested, please contact us and we will discuss it with you!

2) You can become part of our **Adopt-an-Inmate** program by:

- becoming a regular IPM monthly donor.
- Giving an occasional or even a one-time donation (every dollar makes a difference in an inmate's life).
- sponsoring the postage for the *Freedom Newsletter*: \$100 a month

3) Donate:

- **books**
All books are welcome. At this moment, we especially need:
Bhagavad-Gita; Krsna Book; Nectar of Devotion; Nectar of Instruction; Science of Self-Realization
- Krsna conscious **CDs and DVDs**: give the gift of transcendental sound!
- Krsna conscious **pictures**, so inmates can look through these windows to the spiritual world.

4) Have a little bit of time and know how to type?
Please contact us: we have a lot of quotes from inmate letters that need typing.

If you are inspired by this preaching program and desire to help in any way, please contact Mukunda Dasa or Bhakti-lata Dasi at:

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