

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 2019

FAITH IS THE HOPE WE HAVE IN THINGS YET UNSEEN

By Sh. Dasa

[NOTE: The following account exemplifies the struggles of many inmate and how drugs, or any other allurements, can easily distract one from the spiritual path.]

I was raised in a military family, which finally settled in a small rural town in North Carolina, and was exposed to the Christian church in a casual way, attending the events for children, and even reading the entire Bible when I was around ten years old. However, the picture of God as a great old man, an unseen force, unforgiving, and beyond our comprehension, did not resonate with my soul at all.



And then came the psychedelic drugs of the 60's, which gave me a temporary view of a world beyond the reach of my blunt senses. I was hooked and just too naïve to know it.

I joined the US Navy and relocated to California where I found fertile ground for my growing drug obsession. I attended the Navy electronics school in the day and partied at night and weekends. I was transferred to San Francisco and met a girl who was into "spiritual experiences". We took LSD, vibrated mantras and tried to live a more "evolved" lifestyle. I kept reading the word "God" and tried to find Him.

I was transferred to San Diego and would go to the beach, take LSD and try to understand God. I meditated on various sound vibrations, saw glimpses of light and felt warmth in my chakras, but could not find the key to unlock the secrets of the spiritual existence I sought. There were just too many blanks left to fill in...

One day I walked by a group of strange looking people playing music on strange instruments and singing something I did not understand. I moved on but that stuck in my mind. Later, a few days after a horribly bad LSD trip I went downtown.

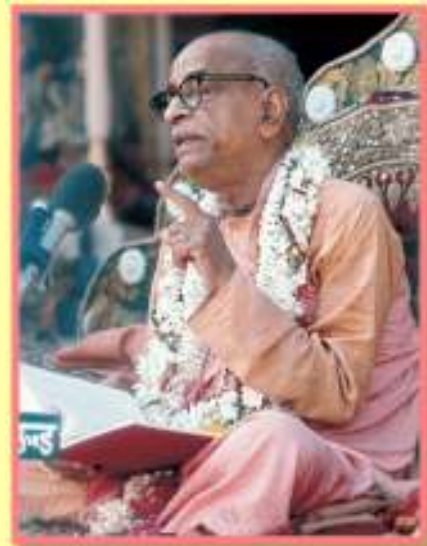


There I saw a bald-headed person dressed in orange robes, looking very much at peace and smiling at me with a most amazing sparkle in his eyes. In an hour-long conversation he proceeded to answer every question that I had regarding the existence of the spirit and God. He explained yoga, consciousness, the presence of the Absolute and

more. He gave me a *Bhagavad-gita as It Is* and brought me to the local temple where I tasted my first *prasadam* and heard my first lecture. This was far higher than LSD.

I began reading the Bhagavad-gita and found perfect spiritual instructions. I began chanting and eating a vegetarian diet and suddenly found myself at odds with the entire US Navy. I would visit the temple occasionally in San Diego, but when I was discharged early from the Navy, I relocated to San Francisco where my girlfriend lived and we pursued our version of "spiritual life". I continued to read the Bhagavad-gita though, and more and more I found that its sublime philosophy and message gave me a peace and an understanding by which I could genuinely experience my higher nature.

Then I heard of a Hare Krishna festival being held in Golden Gate Park, where the author of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, would give a lecture. I walked into the park and there, on the stage was the most wonderful person I have ever seen.



He appeared to be very tall while sitting, and his voice was very deep and grave, with a joyful note. When he spoke he literally vibrated the area. And then, when Srila Prabhupada

chanted Hare Krishna, you could literally feel the power of the Holy Name, just as you can feel and hear the ultra-high voltage transmission at a power generating plant. And with this power came the feeling of the most humbling kindness. I find it difficult to describe this, other than that you could tell that Prabhupada only wanted the very best for you.

And there I was, at home at last, with the devotees of Krishna. After some discussion I made the decision to surrender my life to Krishna. I left my girlfriend and became a full time resident of New Jagannatha Puri temple (in Berkeley) and was engaged in the bhakta program for over one year. In August 1976 I became an initiated disciple of Srila Prabhupada. I was really not a qualified candidate to become his disciple; it was his causeless mercy on an undeserving person. For better or worse I had been accepted as one of his own. Little did I know that he would only stay in this world for another short year. Even less did I know how seemingly minor indiscretions might turn into a major train wreck...

Life in the brahmachari ashram went on; mangala arati, chanting rounds, plenty of prasadam, classes of Bhagavad-gita and Srimad-Bhagavatam and association with devotees. We would go all over the San Francisco Bay area and perform congregational chanting of the Holy Name and distribute Srila Prabhupada's books as they came off the press.



In 1977 Srila Prabhupada left this world. It was devastating. The person who meant the most

to the devotees had departed. He was the substance that gave us hope in life, the salt of the earth, the light of the sun... He was the living example of what we wanted to be. I felt deep loss.

Then I made a serious mistake. There was a Ratha-yatra festival and I was the person selected to guard the carts at night. All alone, late at night, in my old hometown, an old habit reared its head and I obtained some hashish. It was not what I expected; the old "get high" feeling was not there anymore and what had replaced it was something hackneyed and artificial. This action of mine and its subsequent reaction would haunt me for a long time, even to this day, in ways I never considered. For the next several years I fell in and out of this habit which led to another, even more consuming and deadly one; cocaine. What started off as a casual deviation slowly but surely became a major upheaval. I struggled to break free of this downward spiral but eventually succumbed to a full scale drug addiction.

I did not suddenly crash and burn but gently smoldered over a couple of years. Eventually I left temple life and wound up living on the street in San Francisco; in and out of friends' houses, homeless shelters and even living under the stars, hidden deep in forest-like parks.



One day I had an irresistible urge to visit the Berkeley temple. I do not recall the exact emotional set; perhaps regret, desperation, curiosity.... Who knows? I arrived at the temple, disheveled and unkempt (but not high). I ran into

my old senior god brother, Hanumat Presaka dasa, who exhibited a remarkable gentle kindness toward me, welcoming me back and inviting me to stay. But the law caught up with me because of my having used a fictional name when previously arrested. The situation inside the walls [in prison] was always in turmoil and my solace was Bhagavad-gita. Finally the Berkeley devotees bailed me out.

I was delegated to reside at the farm in the Hopland California hills as the main cook and maintenance technician. I got married and we began raising a child. Being raised in a farming community and having a knack for fixing things (other than myself) I flourished there for a time. Only problem that came up was when I ran into the local pot growers. Derailed again.

I had an old back injury for which I took pain killers. I was also asked to procure sleeping pills to help another devotee; that left me with a steady supply of narcotics. This went on for several years until one day I, on a whim, ingested a couple of his sleeping pills in combination with the painkillers I was already taking. The next thing I know I am in a car with plenty of somebody else's money headed to San Francisco with one thing on my mind and it wasn't Krishna but cocaine.



I forsook a wife and child, a home, and association with devotees for drugs. This time it was serious. I think the appropriate term is "crashed and burned." I remember the cry that welled up from my heart and came out as a scream as I drove away, knowing that I was leaving my child and wife. I never saw either of them again.

It made no sense to me that I had such an excellent source of knowledge and such an amazing **inability** to apply it to my daily existence. One cannot stop the wind however, and I was dust in the wind, whisked away by the hand of providence, unable to come to grips with sanity.

Back in North Carolina I finally started a small electrical repair business. Needless to say there was an internal despair that just didn't turn off at the click of a switch. So it wasn't long until I had found some old friends who had the right connections and was back to using the drugs every chance I got.

Cocaine use has several side effects; paranoia, intense cravings, anxiety, as well as physical depletion similar to anorexia. These factors make it difficult to maintain any semblance of normal living. One needs more money, makes less money, and eventually does whatever it takes to get more of the substance one craves.

I sought help in a rehabilitation clinic but was back to using drugs the day I was released. I was still living at my parent's house but instinctively I knew my time was running out. I went on another binge and two weeks later the police found me wrapped around a tree when I went to sleep behind the wheel of my car.



I wound up in the hospital and was taken into custody as soon as I recovered and, after nine months in jail, got a three year prison sentence.

Once out of prison I was back on cocaine. More illegal activities, overdose, hospital, rehab, back on the street. This time I was penniless, hungry and lost, desperate, with nowhere to turn.



A Christian rehabilitation center took me in. I studied the Bible and, with the insight given by my education under Srila Prabhupada, found new meaning. Then the police caught up with me for past crimes. Six months later I was sentenced to a ten year sentence with five years intensive probation and was released to the rehabilitation center.

Within three months I was back using the drugs again and finally fell off the deep end and went on the run. I robbed banks. I really lost all sanity. I was arrested again.

Lying in the steel bed inside the thick walls of a maximum custody jail, I slipped into the darkest despair I had ever known. My entire life was a total failure; I had made all the wrong choices. I had offended the devotees, lost my family and home, disgusted my natural parents, broken the laws of the land and, most of all, disobeyed the orders of my spiritual master. I contemplated suicide. I crept deep within my heart and prayed to the Lord to please be merciful and take me out of this world. A small, still voice from deep within came up with these exact words: "Do you think that I cannot heal you?"

Suddenly everything was OK within me. I knew now that everything was going according to a plan that was beyond my control and that I would [eventually] be healed of my spiritual disease. I had forgotten that the fan blades take

some time to slow down. I had forgotten that we serve a very powerful, very loving, very wonderful Lord Who always has our best interest at heart, even when we neglect and forget Him and Who does not desert us despite all the things we have done. I had forgotten He was in me and that there was hope and greater possibilities. And faith is the hope we have in things yet unseen but far greater than we can comprehend.

I was fortunate to make use of my prison time to read the Bible several times over. Devotees were kind enough to send me a Bhagavad-gita and several others of Srila Prabhupada's books, and a devotee from New Vrindaban corresponded with me for a time. I learned to find the Lords blessings in each day, regardless of the external situation around me.



I was eventually transferred to a work release facility back in North Carolina for the hardest part of incarceration; re-integration into society with supervised probation. Looking back, it really wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, but I admit there were a few bumps in the road, at least internally. Hare Krishna!!!

[NOTE: This account doesn't have a nice ending that can be neatly tied with a bow. It is unfinished, as we do not know where Sh. dasa is at the moment. But it raw, and real. Please pray for this devotee and for all the other inmates who suffer countless miseries and are lost in this world.]



Inmate Letter Excerpts

Can you help me obtain books for my study? There is an author I like and his name is A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. I was interested in his translation of the Bhagavad-gita As It Is. This book should be very important for my studies. Thank you for any help I may receive from you.

Timothy N.
Monticello, Florida

I am interested in learning more about Vedic literature. My desire to understand and to love God is very strong. I would very much like to be a part of this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement. I have read *The Science of Self-Realization* written by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. This book has done much to enlighten me into pursuing a better understanding of God. I have been chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa maha-mantra as suggested in the book. I would also like to study the Bhagavad-gita and to chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa maha-mantra next to a picture of Lord Caitanya. Can you send that to me? Thank you very much for your time.

Andrus T.
Safford, Arizona

I wish I was more knowledgeable in the Vedas. Many in here ask me questions that while I can answer, I feel could be better explained by a more sincere devotee. I am frustrated that there is not such a devotee here for those curious, but at the same time the situation increases my drive to learn more and be a better aspiring devotee.

David B.
Danville, Connecticut

You see, Bhakti-lata, this is where I'm at- being in the world, but not of it. Even before my incarceration I was inclined spiritually, in church three to five times a week. Yet, as I matured, I could not connect with those of you who could and would mercifully guide me deeper into spiritual life. Consequently, I fell. Now I have, and would not hesitate to call on you kind and loving devotees to further assist me in making additional advancement along the pure path of Kṛṣṇa bhakti. In fact, I want to be in association with you devotees- life after life.

Jason M.
Fairfax, South Carolina

I am seeking help with Bhakti-Yoga, both study and practice. I want to help both others and myself in the quest to end suffering. Thank you.

David M.
Phoenix, Arizona

I would like you to know that I greatly appreciate the four books you sent to me. Thank you very much. I have already gathered several people who have taken an interest in and are now practicing Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. I will be sharing all literature and guidance you all are willing to provide. Personally, I have made the decision to devote myself to Lord Kṛṣṇa.

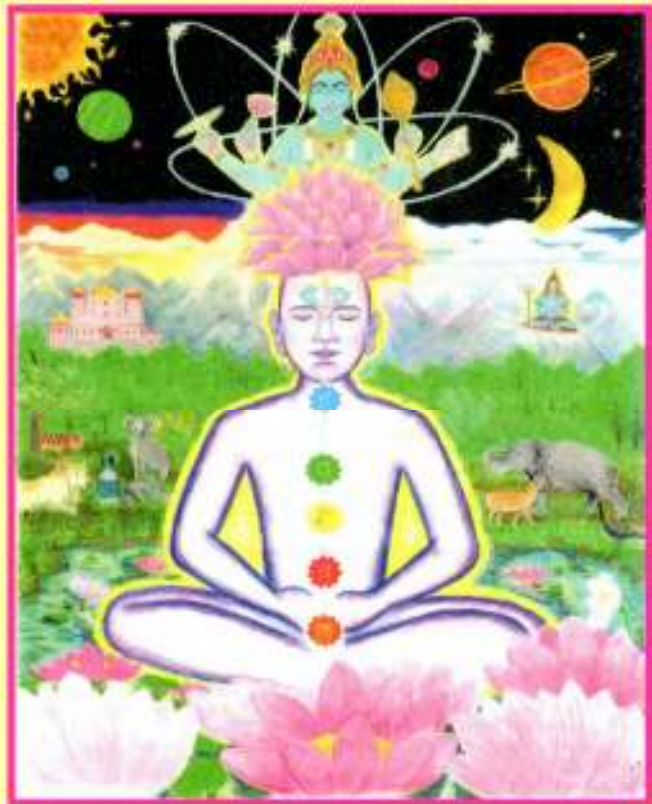
Reynaldo A.
Huntsville, Texas



Inmate Art!



ABOVE: drawing from ten years ago (left) and recent painting (right) of inmate Kṛṣṇa Kirtan dasa (Petersburg, Virginia)
Without any art classes, you can see how Kṛṣṇa guided him from within to develop his skill.



RIGHT: drawing by Jason B., Graceville, Florida

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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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