

“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

March/April 2020

PRISON PROGRAM IN PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA— OCTOBER 16, 2019

By Candramauli Swami



Picture from a previous visit to Petersburg— Upper middle is Maharaja. To the right is Krishna Kirtan. To the left is unknown. Bottom row left is Bhakta Lewis, center Bhakta Joshua, and on the right is Bhakta Tom.

[Notice part of the altar on the right, with Lord Nityananda]

After a weekend filled with programs I left Charlotte NC by car for Apex NC for a quick visit to the home of Karuna Sindhu and his good wife Arcana Siddhi. It was the last days of the Kartik month and so my hosts decided to invite many of the local devotees for an evening of singing the Damodarastakam prayer. Naturally in association with the devotees the gathering transformed into a full program of Kirtan and a talk. I had planned an early rest but was now speaking the entire pastime of Kṛṣṇa stealing butter.

Next day we are on the road to Richmond Virginia a 4 hour ride by car. Hoping to rest and get ready for the prison program the following day I was informed by my hosts just after my arrival they had arranged a program a one hour drive from their home. It's the last day of Kartik and the family who are hosting the program are new to Kṛṣṇa Consciousness and very eager to host a program. Surrendering to the situation meant taking rest very late around mid-night.

Up the next day and very tired I somehow struggle to complete my 16 rounds. I decide to forgo breakfast and accept an early lunch. The program in the prison was scheduled to begin around 2PM. The inmates are headed by Krishna Kirtan Prabhu a former Mormon who has taken to Kṛṣṇa Consciousness like a bird takes to flight. He is always enthusiastic to preach Kṛṣṇa Consciousness to his fellow inmates. On Janmastami the devotees arranged a showing of the movie "Hare Krishna! The Mantra, the movement and the Swami who started it." Approximately 60 inmates came for the showing and it was reported to have been very well received and greatly appreciated. The movie resulted in an increase in the amount of inmates coming to the regular jail programs.

My host drives me to the prison located about 25 miles from their home and left. Greeted by the desk-in-charge I am told the Chaplain will come and personally to escort me to the program. As I waiting I begin to look for my personal ID. To my chagrin I am unable to locate it. Then I understood "O! NO!" it was left at the house and not having the contact # of my host I sank into despair thinking how disappointed the inmates will be. Jail

rules are strict across the board and no one enters without personal ID even the prison staff members must always carry their ID.

What to do? All I could think was Kṛṣṇa please save the situation and somehow get me in to do the program. Soon Chaplain Houston arrived and with a big smile welcomes me with a handshake very happy I could come. In my mind I chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa and praying I hope they don't ask for my ID. After a brief conversation the Chaplain escorts me through the metal detector and now I'm on the inside. So-far-so-good-thank you Kṛṣṇa. As we are about to enter the inner chambers of the prison to meet the inmates the thought comes I must seriously take shelter of Kṛṣṇa and as soon as I thought like that Chaplain Houston remarked; O yes, by the way we need to see your ID. "Kṛṣṇa what happened!"

I responded not by saying I forgot but acted like I didn't know I should bring it. Chaplain Houston is calm and says wait here until I return. I am waiting, chanting with full attention. Time seemed to stop and all the while I'm thinking how I'll be able to explain my stupidity of forgetting my ID to Krishna Kirtan.

Twenty minutes passed and the Chaplain returns with a camera and takes my picture again and disappears. Things are looking better. Soon he returns with two big pieces of paper with my photo name included which he put together on the spot this now becomes my ID. A little more official but still friendly the Chaplain explains that only the prison Warden could allow me to enter in this situation but what's amazing is that very rarely is he in his offices at this time but today he was. Thank you! Kṛṣṇa. I understood that Kṛṣṇa always helps his devotees but at times He does it in a way that we least expect.

As Chaplain Houston and I are walking to the room where the program is to be held I'm feeling a great sense of relief that now I can offer service to the devotees and simultaneously very much appreciating how favorable and supportive Chaplain Houston is making sure the inmates are having their scheduled program.

Soon we are at the area where the program is to be held. Then one by one the devotees lead by Krishna Kirtan to come greet me, 5 in number each one offering obeisances. I am surprised and yet very happy to observe such wonderful Vaisnava etiquette. For many years by God-brother Sarva Drik Prabhu has cultivated Krishna Kirtan and held regular scheduled programs driving an average of 4 hours each way to perform a program. The results are laudable as now there are 9 inmates holding regular program twice weekly.

As I enter the room immediately my attention goes to quite large and nicely arranged altar with porcelain deities of Gaur Nitai, Radha Kṛṣṇa and Lord Nrsimhadeva standing about 6 inches high and a smaller deity of Srila Prabhupada. Sitting in the front of the altar is fairly larger sized deity of Ganesh with flowers and plants adorning every area of the altar. After offering obeisances I'm offered a place for sitting as Krishna Kirtan introduces each inmate. My last visit 13 months ago there was 5 steadily practicing inmates now it's up to 9 regulars. Other inmates came just for the program as these programs are open for anyone who wants to attend.



Inmate Letter Excerpts

Someone here gave me the Jul/Aug BTG. It is very moving and reading it eased my mind. I don't have any funds nor do I have anyone who can help me with money. My family lost their home and everything they owned in a fire last year. Since reading BTG I've been longing to read more and get to know Krishna. I want to be close to Krishna and serve Him any way I can. This prison though has no books, newsletters, packets or

The program begins with Krishna Kirtan offering a greeting by performing Kirtan. He leads the singing on his guitar alongside is a fairly good mrdanga player. The Kirtan is upbeat yet filled with devotion.

Next I requested to speak on how I came to Krishna Consciousness as this topic is always interesting to new people. Mixing in the philosophy along with my personal experience the inmates are intently listening. My 40 min. talk was followed by a few nicely presented questions along with a discussion with the inmates on their daily practice of Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. We loss a little of the time allotted because of the delay in getting in yet the program went very well. Some of the inmates had previously arranged for a camera person to take photos as most wanted individual photos along with some group shots. The inmates pay in advance for this service and they all were very enthusiastic about the picture taking. The altar is taken down repacked and kept in storage for their next program.

All glories to His Divine Grace Srila Prabhupada, whose compassion flows everywhere, flooding into the iron prisons of the world!

magazines about the Vedic techniques of spiritual life. The Vedic culture or anything to help one remember and serve Sri Kṛṣṇa. Please if you can send me any books, magazines, or papers to help me serve and better know Krishna. Respectfully,
Gideo G.
Techachapi, California

[The following is a description of a program inmates hold on the yard]

I was astounded that ALL the bhaktas took our commitment for Wednesday study on the yard seriously, as everyone was there and ready to participate. The only difficulty was they were having an amplified rap contest on the basketball pavilion and instead of the small yard, where there was the most inmates congregating, we had to go by the volleyball court where the noise from the rap contest wasn't as loud. There were still inmates that could hear us going around the track and benefitting from the Holy Name. We had kartals and guitars and an acoustic bass for instruments. It was record heat that day but there was a gentle breeze and the sun was setting so it wasn't too intense. The kirtan sounded WONDERFUL, everyone singing loud and people noticing and stopping to listen. An interesting thing happened. A grasshopper flew next to the group at the start of the kirtan and we commented that there was an auspicious grasshopper. Right after the kirtan ended, it flew away. And we thought, "There was a spirit soul that was headed for a much higher form after it is done with its current one." We studied 18:66 from the Gita and after our sangha was finished, the Lord rewarded us with the most stunning sunset, as if He were pleased with our seva. The group was so enthused by the yard study and kirtan, they suggested we do it more than once a week. We'll see. For now, Wednesday 6 PM seems to fit everyone's schedule. Next Wednesday, if they're not doing the rap contest, we will have it in a spot where many more inmates congregate and therefore turn more people on to the Holy Name. It was all pretty awesome. Our group has donated a lot of material to the group of the other facility (Low) because they had nothing and they have some of Prabhupada's books, a few murtis, and other devotional items like BTGs etc. Hope all is well. Full dandavats, your servant,
Krishna Kirtan das
Petersburg, Virginia

My name is Wesley and I am currently incarcerated. I came across an issue of BTG and decided to write to find out more information on

the Hare Krishna movement and perhaps get answers to the many questions I have been searching for since childhood. I studied several different areas but still the answers elude me. I welcome any and all information you may send me. I am unable to purchase anything because I am exiled from my family due to my actions in the past. Thank you in advance for your cooperation. . I have so many questions that need answered but I will wait for a reply before asking them. I look forward to your correspondence. Many blessings.

Wesley V.

Marianna Arkansas



Hare Kṛṣṇa. I received the beautiful Kṛṣṇa art calendar and BTG last night. Thank you so much. The beauty of Kṛṣṇa in any form is so awesome. ☺ Life is very good. I stay focused. I always continue on the road with our Lord, strictly, though easily, follow our four principles along with love, compassion, empathy and purpose. My life is finally peaceful and fulfilling. Haribol! You've been an awesome teacher and friend. I greatly appreciate you and your service to Srila Prabhupada. Thank you very much prabhu.

Your servant,

Kalki das

Corcoran CA

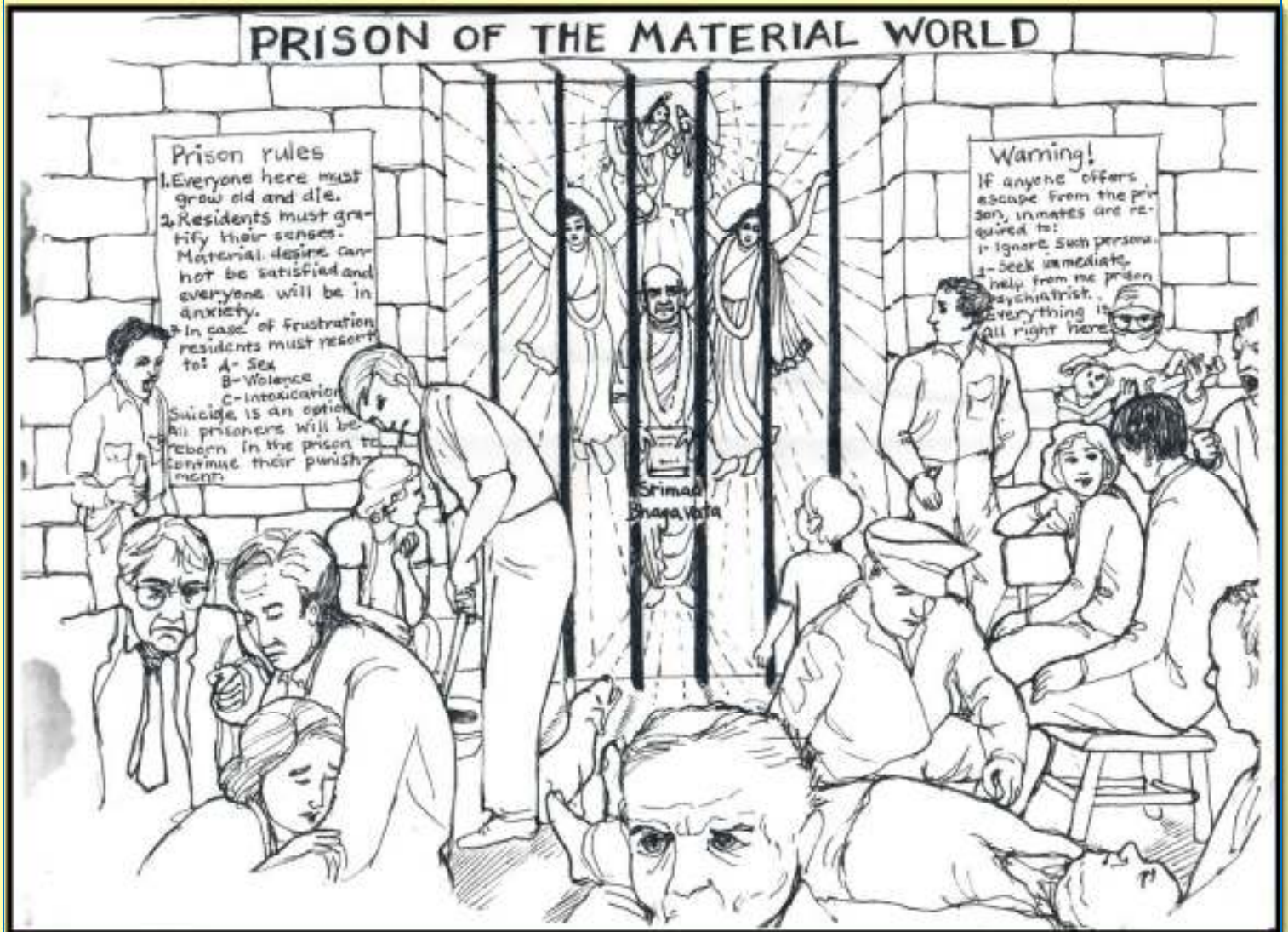
I fell "head over heels" for this belief system and kept an open mind even when things seem weird, foolish, and not in line with what I thought I knew of the material world around me. Yet, most of it just clicked, like someone flipping on the light switch in a darkened room. It all mostly makes sense to me and even being as fallen as I am, I wonder if I was once again seeing more clearly like new wipers on a windshield finally being flipped on in the rain and wiping away the grime

and dirt that had accumulated. I am realizing though that everyone's experience to initially being reintroduced to the Absolute Truth is different. Each one of us approaches and walks the path differently. It can be saddening when I see other aspiring devotees slip and fall and I can do little but be there for support and perhaps gentle nudges but otherwise I can only beg the mercy of Kṛṣṇa to help them. I live with one such aspiring devotee and I acutely feel his struggles and slips with the old behaviors, and see the

material world beckoning him. I also have to remind myself that he is not me and to be there to help him as best as a fallen soul like myself can do. I feel I let him down sometimes as I am not that strong to hold us both up, so when he pulls me down too far I feel I have to step back. I can only beg forgiveness and hope Nrsimadeva can give us both strength.

David B.
Danville, Connecticut

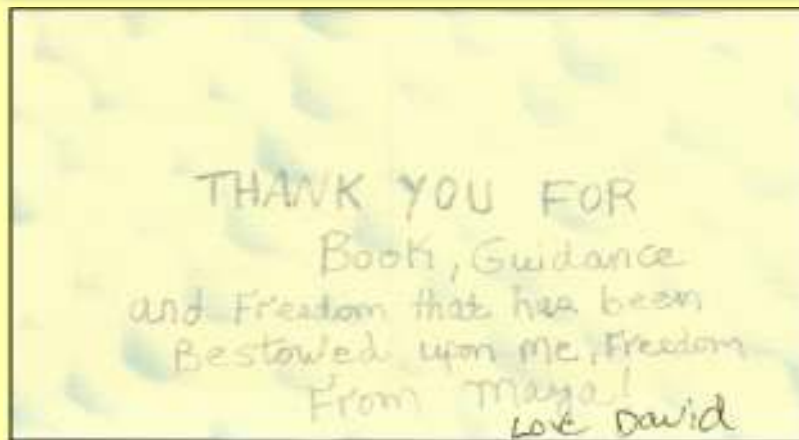
Inmate Art!



Above: "The Prison of the Material World" —by unknown artist



Two oil paintings above: Srila Prabhupada, by inmate David Burkman



Above: Thank you card from inmate David R., from Pine Bluff, Arkansas

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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