

*“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*

**July/August 2020**

## **FROM GANGSTER TO SERVANT**

**By inmate Benjamin B., now Balavan Nitai dasa**

I was born in 1974. My father was a second generation seventh-day Adventist (SDA), but really just in name, as his actions betrayed his true beliefs. My mother was a fourth generation SDA; she was quite active in the church. We always seemed to be moving; the only real constant was my mother’s love. She tried to overcompensate for my father's violence by spoiling me. Because of my mother, I grew up with a strong attraction to God. I understood that God is great, but not really why He was great.

When I was five years old, my elder brother began to get me high on various illegal drugs and drank liquor and beer. That introduction to chemical abuse at young age led to a life-long journey of doing drugs in whatever form I was able to come across.



When I was teenager, I was drinking whatever alcoholic beverages I could get my hands on, and I was

doing as many drugs as I could speed. I was self medicating myself to try to ease my pain, but when I sobered up I felt even worse. I was at war with myself and with the world. That is pretty much how my teens went.



At the age of eighteen I was given a maximum sentence of ten years for being involved in an accidental shooting, and I started running a violent prison gang. After release from prison I had a rough time in finding a job due to my criminal past. I started making more money in the criminal world selling drugs in quantity and dealing weapons. I know; another bad decision in the midst of a lifetime of bad decisions. I did lot of bad things, and none of them am I proud of; actually I am ashamed of my sins. I again got in to prison and this time I got death penalty.



In 2006, somehow, I managed to come across a group called ISKCON Prison Ministry. I didn't know what it was all about, but the name caught my attention. I felt a strong urge to write to them. I put it off for a bit, but actually I got down and wrote to them. Chandrasekhar wrote back to me. I started corresponding with him to pass my time and to learn more about the Hare Krishna movement. What Chandrasekhar shared with me literally blew me away; it all made so much sense. He kicked down any and all of my foolish thoughts that I had. I began to read *The Science of self Realization* and the *Bhagavad-gita*. The more I read, the more I wanted to know. Krishna just kept right on attracting me.



Eventually I was convicted of first degree murder and kidnapping. I was sentenced to natural life for the murder and twenty years for kidnapping. But along the way, my life was drastically changed. For the first time in my adult life I am drug free, and I have left the gang. The writings of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada had a profound effect on my life. The verse BG.10.11 stood out for me:

*“Out of compassion for them, I dwelling in their hearts destroy with the shining lamp of knowledge, the darkness born of ignorance.”*

That is so true; Krishna continues to kick away whatever ignorance I am standing on. He has mercifully taken away all things which I used to surrender myself to, which lead us to next verse Bg. 18.66:

*“Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.”*

Here Krishna tells us to fearlessly surrender at His lotus feet. He tell us that we have no need to worry about all of sinful things we have done, as long as we surrender unto Him fully, trusting in Him. He says that He will take care of everything. So there I was, in deep despair, wallowing in my ignorance, when Krishna shined the bright light of knowledge into my pitiful life, cutting through the utter darkness of all my ignorance. He did this with the potent words of His pure devotee Srila Prabhupada, the guru of Kali-yuga, this age of lies and hypocrisy.

Srila Prabhupada's auspicious words pierced through the fog that covered my eyes. Now for the first time in my life I can see things as they really are. I am no longer doing drugs, nor am I involved with the gang. I now have a rather nice relationship with Krishna (God). I am trying to become the servant of His servants. Daily I chant a minimum of nice sixteen rounds of Hare Krishna maha mantra. I read and re-read Srila Prabhupada's books, pass out prasadam to my fellow inmates in the form of hard candies. There is great deal of seva to do for the inmates in here. I aspire to become a devotee of Lord Sri Krishna and to receive initiation. If not in this lifetime, there is always the next.

This is my humble story; I have gone from a gangster to a servant.

The following are some excerpts from my correspondence with IPM volunteers:

[At one point, in prison] things were too rough where I was, so I was moved to new cell by the mercy of Lord Nrsimhadeva. I prayed to Him for protection and next morning I was moved. Ha! The Sergeant, who didn't know that with the Lord, all things are possible, had told me that move was not possible.

I feel a very strong attraction to Lord Nityananda Rama; I have surrendered myself to His lotus feet; I surrender myself to Him daily.

Oh, yes, Lord Nityananda's mercy is what has changed me from a pride-filled, hateful gangster to a person who aspires to be a bona fide devotee of Sri Sri Radha and Krishna! I have no desire to return to my past sordid lifestyle again! The taste for such debauchery is no longer part of me.



I do know that Lord Nityananda Rama is in full control of all! If I am ever initiated in this life or the next

is all up to His desire. Rather than worry about it, I will just press forward as I continue now—doing my seva. I am but a lowly gardener here in this prison village, planting the seeds of Krishna Consciousness wherever I can, indiscriminately. Race plays no role at all! We are all just spirit souls in different vehicles. It is not up to me to choose who is and who is not worthy of the seeds. It is all up to Lord Nityananda! Jaya!

I found the path of Krishna Consciousness [while I was] in distress. If I had not gone to prison, I would have still been a drug dealing gangster, but Krishna kicked me down and took all of that foolishness away from me. Now He tells me to fearlessly surrender unto Him, and that He will take care of it all. *Ma Sucha* - There is no room or need of my worries - do it fearlessly! Maya is very thick! Krishna has mercifully bestowed upon me a great boon. And now it is my duty to preach and teach to any inmates I come across who is interested in Truth. Haribol! My daily needs are taken care of. In reality I am quite free behind these walls. Now I have plenty of time to chant and read Srila Prabhupada's books! So all is well.

At the moment I do not have anyone to preach to in here, as the few inmates who were interested have been moved. So although I do not verbally preach, I am preaching by example. After all, I have to show others that I follow what I teach. I am in the middle of a struggle with the Chaplain here. *Ma sucah* is what I say. Krishna will handle it all. I think that Krishna is teaching me a lesson in patience, tolerance and I am placing my full trust in him. So rather than becoming disturbed I just continue on with my seva, ma sucah. Jaya! 🌸



## Chaplains' Appreciation

Dear friends,

I am in receipt of the materials you sent for inmate Randy A. and he has been given access to all this material. It is also available to our inmate population as they access it through the chapel.

My space here in the chapel is limited and this affects how much material we can store and distribute for any group, but I am pleased to assist you in making inmates aware of your faith group.

Thank you for your concern for us.

Patrick McCown, Unit Chaplain

North Central Unit

Calico, Arizona

## Inmate Letter Excerpts

As far as how I am doing in the practice of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I am doing the best that I can while being in prison. I'll do much better when I get out of prison. I do not gamble, use drugs, have sex, or drink alcohol. I am not able to practice vegetarianism the way that I should be, because I am in prison. But when I get out I will be a vegetarian. I am ready. I have always wanted to be a vegetarian and this is very important to me. I pray to Krishna all the time. I might still be materialistic, but not as much as other people. Other people, their ways and habits and behaviors scare me. I try to avoid certain types of people. They act worse than animals in my opinion. Not everyone acts in a negative way. I accept people from any background or religious faith as long as they present themselves in a respectful manner. But even still, I really like Hare Krishnas the best.

I used to sit through Christian services once a week just to be able to check the chapel bookshelf after, for Krishna consciousness books that I could take and keep. Within a few months I joined the Hare Krishna class/service on my unit. It was nice to have the association of other Hare Krishnas back then. I miss it. But I look forward to new association in the future.

**Brandon F.**  
**Beeville, Texas**

I hope you enjoy the picture I drew for you! I can't draw that good but I tried my best to describe the concept of the giving of bhakti-lata bija by Kṛṣṇa to the devotee. [see picture on the next page] Once again, thank you for the Srimad-Bhagavatam. Jaya! I haven't stopped reading them yet. I've been neglecting sleep just to keep reading them!!! Can you send me some BTG magazines? So that I can distribute some around the dorm. A few people loved the first couple ones. Hare Kṛṣṇa.

**Yogesvara dasa**  
**Oglethorpe, Georgia**

I really liked "A Lifetime in Preparation". I love him [Prabhupada] even more after reading it. I

am looking forward to seeing him in the afterlife. I have been getting realizations from reading the books and also chanting. I am not God. For so long I thought I was. Only Kṛṣṇa is God, and I must serve Him. I am still struggling with bad association. Please pray that I fully give myself to Kṛṣṇa so I can taste the nectar of devotion wherever I am. I realize I write a lot but you guys are the only good association I get. So please forgive and keep praying for me. You are my God family. [Sean used to visit the Los Angeles temple every day when he was younger and very much regrets not becoming a devotee then.]

**Sean C.**  
**St. Peter, Minnesota**

I hope you find somebody who can translate this words for you [see below]. Also I feel in my heart that you are my Guru and we know each other for a long time I promise you something Ms. Bhakti-lata Dasi I will take care of Krishna books in the library with my all my attention I will monitor every single book make sure nobody destroy them. I see I look at this books like you said Krishna put me in this position. For that specific reason and I always read my Gita every morning at 4:30 AM, chant my maha mantra is exactly like you said I don't know about the Guru part but there we go, please if my English is bad I am so sorry Ms. Bhakti-lata Dasi. Love and respect always. Your servant, brother, soldier for Krishna's army.

**THE FOLLOWING IS TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH (his mother tongue):** "Your words are so beautiful and they touch the deepest part of my soul. Every time my heart beats it says "Hare Krishna". All I want in my life is to breathe Krishna, I wake up in the mornings and all I can think is to chant Hare Krishna. I go to bed listening (on my tablet) to Prabhupada chanting the Holy mantra. I'm free, thanks to Krishna, I'm happy, thanks to Krishna, I love everyone, thanks to Krishna who lives in my heart."

**Eloy M.**  
**Monticello, Florida**

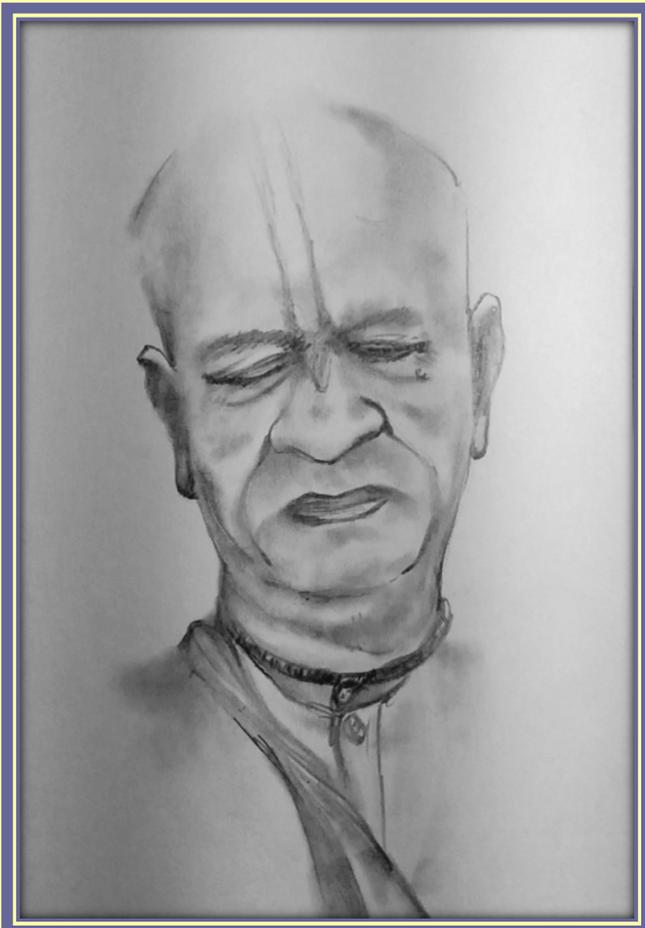
# Inmate Art!

**Right:** drawing by Yogesvara dasa, from  
Oglethorpe, Georgia  
“The giving of the bhakti-lata bija”

brahmāṇḍa bhramite kona bhāgyavān jīva  
guru-kṛṣṇa-prasāde pāya bhakti-latā-bīja



Brahmaṇḍa bhramite Kona bhāgyavān Jīva  
Guru-Kṛṣṇa Prasāde Pāya bhakti-latā-bīja  
Chaitanya-Chaitanya, Madhya Līlā, Ch. 19, Text 151



**Left:** drawing of Srila Prabhupada, by inmate  
Ryan B. — from Tucson, Arizona

## POEM CORNER

### SURRENDER, O MY SOUL

By Jason M.—Fairfax, South Carolina

O Lord Nrsimhadeva, I am often so afraid—  
It's dark, even in the shade.  
Wandering alone in this material prison  
Scored for bad decisions, an object of derision

O Srila Prabhupada, I humbly seek refuge at your lotus feet;  
Offering dandavats in the transcendental dust soft and sweet.  
Looking up I see your Divine Grace smiling upon me  
Then I realize there is nowhere else I'd rather be.

Slowly I rise to my knees, palms together and my head bowed.  
The sea fades and for my pride I am no longer proud.  
I sigh in disbelief, thinking of so many wasted years.  
Intense emotion overwhelms me and I shed so many tears.

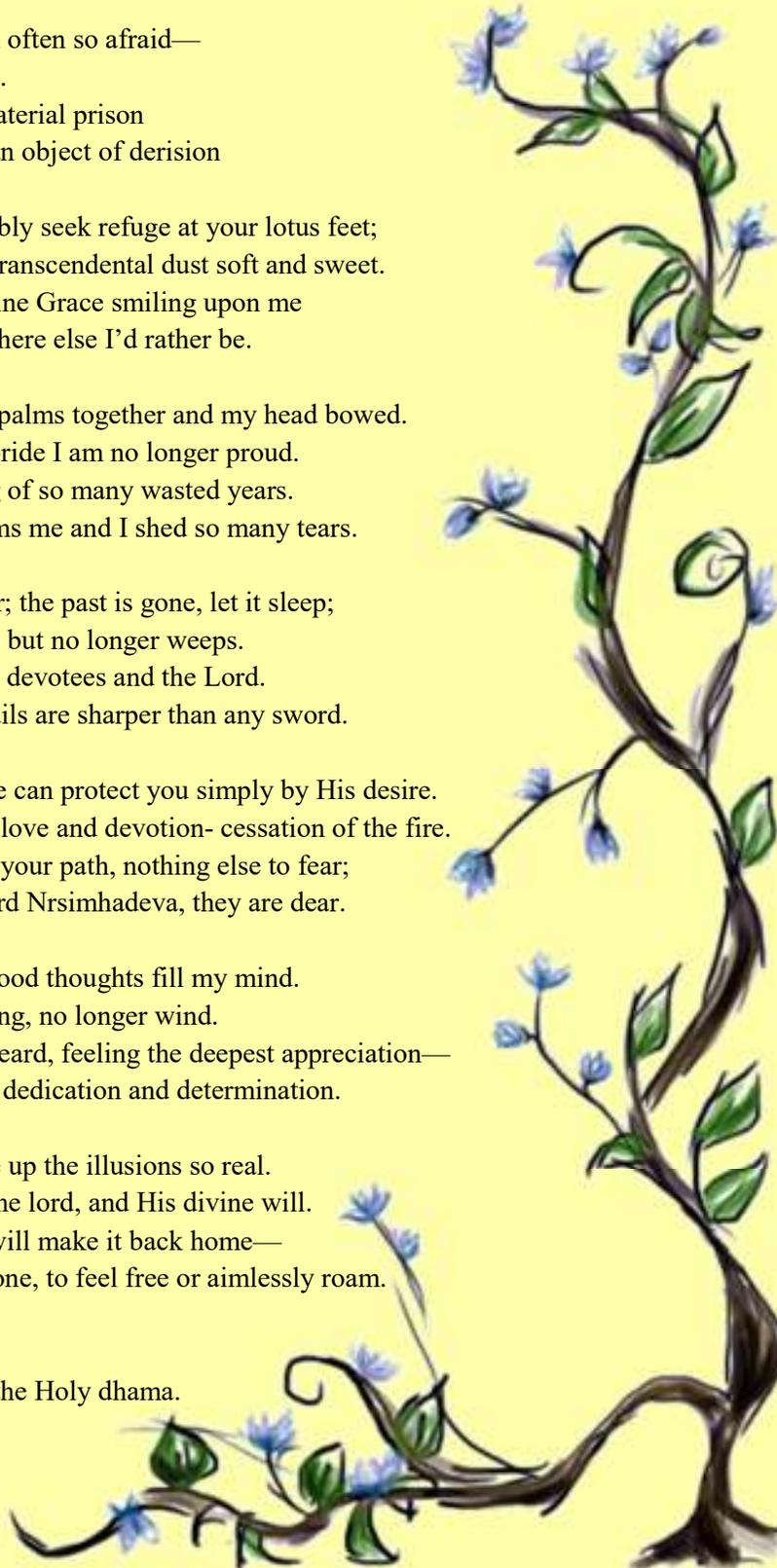
From your lotus lips, I hear; the past is gone, let it sleep;  
Your heart aches, it is true, but no longer weeps.  
Enter into a new life, serve devotees and the Lord.  
He will protect you, His nails are sharper than any sword.

But you will soon know He can protect you simply by His desire.  
So serve Sri Nrsimha with love and devotion- cessation of the fire.  
Light will then shine upon your path, nothing else to fear;  
Even the most fallen to Lord Nrsimhadeva, they are dear.

A heavy burden is lifted, good thoughts fill my mind.  
Spiritual sight a true blessing, no longer wind.  
Gratitude flows from my heard, feeling the deepest appreciation—  
Dissolving the ego a must, dedication and determination.

Surrender, O my soul, give up the illusions so real.  
Embrace the lotus feet of the lord, and His divine will.  
Gradually, step by step, I will make it back home—  
There, never isolated or alone, to feel free or aimlessly roam.

Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Rama!  
I am chanting eternally in the Holy dhama.



# 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:

Chris Roschbach  
Daruka Dasa  
Inmates Ankney Douglas and Charles Bailey  
Lalita Sakhi Dasi  
Mark Barnett  
Pradyumna Dasa  
Shrikrishna Radkar  
Yashna Huree  
Shrikrishna Radkar  
Sivananda Dasa and Madan-Mohan-Mohini Dasi

## On a personal note....

I want to express my gratitude to the devotee (anonymous) who sponsored two of the deep tissue massages I needed to be able to start using my injured arm again and thus continue to share Prabhupada's mercy with the inmates. I deeply appreciate this very personal touch.



I am in need of a few more treatments in order to regain full range of motion; if you desire to sponsor one or a few, please contact me at: [iskconprisonministry@gmail.com](mailto:iskconprisonministry@gmail.com)

## And our monthly Donors:

Amala Gaura Dasa  
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Raina Dasa  
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Vikram Kumar  
Vraja Kishore Dasa  
Yudhisthira Dasa  
Anonymous (you know who you are:  
thank you!

## 3 Donation Options

- 1) Send a check or postal money order to:  
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- 2) Donate using the PayPal link: [www.paypal.me/IPM](http://www.paypal.me/IPM) or through your own PayPal account
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