

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*

**May/June 2021**

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF ISKCON PRISON MINISTRY —A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT OF HOW IT CHANGED MY LIFE**

**By Krishna Kirtan Dasa**

**B**ack in 2007, an inmate devotee [who wants to remain anonymous] slipped a *Back to Godhead* magazine underneath my cell door. That started my journey in Krishna consciousness. Saying ISKCON Prison Ministry (IPM) changed my life would be an understatement. IPM has transformed me, providing an understanding of life, Truth, and bliss I never thought possible.

If you ever thought you should show your gratitude to Srila Prabhupada for the bliss you've experienced in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, IPM seva is a



*Petersburg program in 2015 — Krishna Kirtan das. (circled in blue) To his left: Sarva Drk, his wife, Sudevi, Phalini and her husband Haripada prabhus.*

profound way that he will recognize and approve from his place at the lotus Feet of Lord Krishna. Think about it. Your service to us, the most fallen of the fallen, the most conditioned of the conditioned, the outcasts of American society, can be like the mercy Lord Nitai gave to Jagai and Madhai —and it will grow and expand exponentially. If you have any doubts, please read on, and find out for yourself.

Starting out, a new volunteer in IPM should know a few basic things: communicating and teaching inmates about Krishna Consciousness can involve many challenges. Postal mail rules vary depending on the facility in which the inmate is housed. It also depends on the stage of the legal process in which the inmate is at. For example, when an inmate is first arrested, sending regular mail to a jail facility may result in the mail being returned for reasons that may not make sense. A jail is the first stop and the most restrictive in terms of what an inmate may receive. Be sure you check with the inmate before sending books or other worship items. Some jails allow 4" by 6" postcards only while others may not allow postcards at all. The restrictions vary greatly. Most people on the "outside" don't realize there's a big difference between jail and prison. If a minor crime is committed (a misdemeanor), people are sentenced quickly and usually do their time at the jail. Most often it's less than a year. Serious crimes (felonies) involve longer pre-trial periods (even though actual trials are rare —usually a plea agreement is reached) depending on whether the State of the Feds are charging them. Pre-trial can last from months to years.

My pre-trial period lasted a very long four and a half years. Fortunately, there were no limits to the correspondence I could receive, which sustained me and allowed my bhakti to grow. A number of IPM volunteers buoyed my spirit during this dark period: Candrasekhara prabhu from Columbus, [anonymous] from Boise, and most notably, Bhakti-lata dasi from Alachua, Florida. She really lived up to her spiritual name and kept the bhakti-lata bija growing within me. Every single letter I wrote to her she replied in equal length and depth, sometimes as many as two a week! It was so amazing and meant so very much. She kept my hopes high, no matter what, always encouraging me to look to the future when I could start a Hare Krishna program at whichever institution I'd be doing my time.

This pre-trial period is tough. It pushes you to your limits, emotionally, mentally, and physically. It's ugly and depressing to see how cruelly a fellow human can treat another —both inmates and guards. You see a lot of suffering and sickness and it's so sad to watch a guard getting off on making someone miserable. It's disgusting. There's no doubt in my mind that most individuals who work in a correctional environment are of a demoniac nature —so it is SO important for IPM volunteers to safeguard their inmate pen pals, fortifying them with Prabhupada's books and lots of Krishna katha. These demons love exploiting an inmate's doubts and insecurities; during this time an inmate often obsesses about questions like —How much time will I get? Where am I gonna do my time? Will I be safe? Do my friends and family still love me? So many questions while being in limbo, in a state of suspended animation and treated worse than dogs in a dog pound. No kidding. Land of the free? It was really hard hearing the national anthem knowing how this government treats its citizens and the hypocrisy of those words. I'd have to plug my ears and chant.

In early pre-trial, during my first year in '06, as a Mormon, I was down on my knees every day and night, reading only scripture. When I found out I was getting a 25-year sentence, I was devastated, as if God had held up his middle finger at me. All my fellow church members turned their backs on me. So a few months later, when a devotee gave me that BTG and taught me how to chant, I was willing to try anything to be relieved of such an abject misery metastasizing inside me like a disease from rotting meat that was swallowed, but fighting digestion. THEN, this devotee also GAVE me his only copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*. I considered and appreciated this as an awesome gesture of goodwill that seemed to reflect those devotees I was reading about in the pages of the BTG. His kind and selfless act stood out. If this was indicative of how an INMATE devotee acted, what must they be like in the free world?! A big difference compared to the hypocrisy I discovered in those church members who professed to love me just a year earlier.

Chanting felt good. I was beginning to change and then something happened: I got to chapter 2, text 56 of the Gita and, reading in the purport, I learned that a person in Krishna Consciousness "*accepts all miseries as mercy of the Lord, thinking himself worthy of more trouble due to his past misdeeds; and he sees that all his miseries, by the grace of the*

*Lord are minimized to the lowest”* A powerful realization lifted me like a Saturn V rocket. I had found Krishna, which is an astounding blessing. When I dove deep, fearlessly, and in complete self-honesty, facing those ugly past misdeeds, it occurred quite plainly that if things in my life had been just a smidge different, down to the simple fact of where I laid my head at night, I could have wound up with a life sentence. Krishna gave me such extreme mercy when I could have been doomed to spend the rest of my life in prison. In the eyes of many, I probably would have deserved it, but Lord Krishna, Lord Caitanya, Srila Prabhupada...they had other things in mind for me. Now THIS was liberation. THIS was a paradigm shift in my thinking.

And THIS is how volunteering for IPM can affect another Spirit Soul. By fostering an inmate’s growth in Krishna Consciousness, you can be a catalyst of Srila Prabhupada to change a life from subversive to sublime. Read on and see how Bhakti-lata accomplished this with me. She views her own seva so humbly when it really is beyond profound. Her work has moved mountains and changed so many hearts steeped in nescience, hearts that were black and rotting, to transformed beings filled with light and Godhead. I wish there were more steady volunteers to assist her. I just know that Srila Prabhupada is very pleased with her service.

Back to my story. Freshly sentenced and having arrived at my first federal institution near Salem, Oregon, Bhakti-lata sent me my very first Tulasi japa mala and DVDs of Srila Prabhupada. I remember sitting by myself in a chapel room, viewing Prabhupada for the first time. Hearing his voice, watching him teach those early devotees, brought chills up my spine. I was ready and fired up to start a Hare Krishna service. I approached one of the staff chaplains, a Judeo-Christian, and in his exact words he informed me, “You will NOT practice that weird (*expletive*) in my chapel!” I was prepared to fight with the ferocity of Lord Narasimha, but after a few months that chaplain remained true to his word and orchestrated my removal from that facility.

The next facility was a small institution in Tucson and there, Bhakti-lata sent me more books, a bead bag, and my first neck beads. After only five weeks though, I was on my way to yet another institution. Destination Petersburg, Virginia. Lord Caitanya

took no time showing me this was the place He prepared for me. No sooner did I introduce myself to the Supervisory Chaplain that he threw his arms around me declaring to the chapel, “Here’s Petersburg’s first Hindu!!!” He gave me a job on the spot, working in the chapel, and gave me a budget to order whatever was needed to start a service. Tell me that wasn’t miraculous? With the help of Bhakti-lata we contacted a Hare Krishna vendor and two weeks later the service was equipped with two mrdangas, four sets of kartals, a harmonium, murtis, wall hangings, multiple copies of Bhagavad-Gita As it Is, incense, oils, and japa malas! I was allotted 2 ½ hours for a service and another two hours for a study group, each week in the chapel. Immediately, Krishna Consciousness at FCI Petersburg began to grow. I shaved my head and started growing a sikha and observed strict adherence to the four regulative principles. Every morning, rain or shine, sleet or snow, I went outside to the yard and chanted my 16 rounds. It felt in *Vaikuntha*, right there in Virginia.

So blessed was my sanga that Srila Prabhupada sent us his disciple of 40-years, Sarva-drk dasa. He blessed us with his association once a month for the following six years, before he moved to India. And finally, the most auspicious day of my life: Srila Prabhupada’s disappearance day, on November 15, 2012, with full *agni-hotra*, in the outside worship area behind the chapel, I was initiated into the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya and given the name Krishna Kirtan dasa, because of my very loud and enthusiastic singing of kirtan. Many members of our sanga, when they were transferred, started their own Hare Krishna services at other institutions and now, to this day, hundreds and hundreds of inmates have been blessed with hearing the Holy Name. All because a few devotees and IPM volunteers gave me their mercy and helped us do what those in our Parampara wanted us to do.

I now have about six years left to my sentence and I promised Bhakti-lata that I will devote my time, effort, energy, enthusiasm, and knowledge of the penal system in the U.S. to advocate for inmate bhaktas and be an integral part of ISKCON Prison Ministry.

Also I have a dream —a goal really: I want to find a rural setting somewhere in the U.S. and, with charitable funding, design a shelter for inmate bhaktas just getting out of prison. Applying Srila Prabhupada’s axiom of “simple living – high

thinking”, it could be a halfway house, a community reentry center, or even a prime destination for ex-felons to relocate. A place where the formerly incarcerated could be understood, where men and women could practice Krishna Consciousness in an environment where their spirituality would thrive and the general public would not have to be concerned because of ex-felons living near them. It would have a goshala, a farm, a temple, and run them like all the other Hare Krishna rural communities. It would encourage and mandate exemplary social behavior following the teachings of Srila Prabhupada, the Gita, the Bhagavatam, the Caitanya Caritamra, and the Vedas. Its name would be “*Jagai-Madhai Village*”

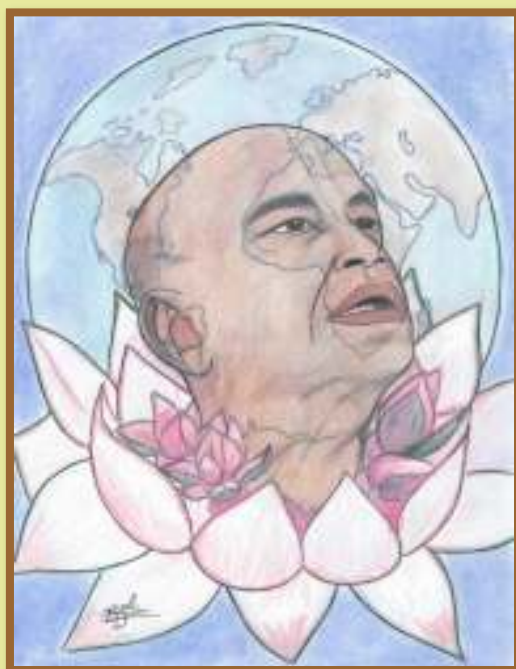
in honor of the former rascals and miscreants who were transformed into first-class bhaktas.

Do you see? It’s because of the mercy of Srila Prabhupada and his merciful devotees of ISKCON Prison Ministry that everything I just described came to pass. Make Prabhupada proud. Get involved in ISKCON Prison Ministry and help us, the MOST fallen of the fallen, and watch the blessings of Godhead be showered upon you.

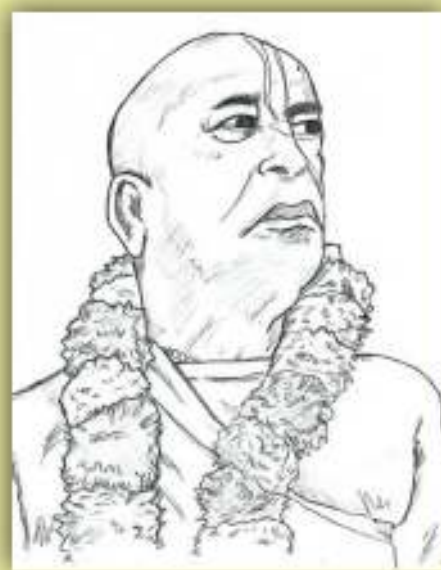
Dandavats and Vaishnava pranam to all of you and of course...

JAYA SRILA PRABHUPADA! 🌸

## Inmate Art!



**ABOVE:** “Echoes of Prabhupada”  
by inmate Burl D. —Florida



**ABOVE:** drawing of Srila Prabhupada by inmate Robert C.  
—New York

## First Visit to the Temple

I did go to the temple this past week. It was so great to touch the lotus feet of Srila Prabhupada, and to see the Deities. A nice devotee met us and talked with us for a while. We were offered a plate of prasadam from the Govinda restaurant; it was closed for a remodel but they just brought us out a plate. It was a wonderful experience and we will be back for sure. It was only an hour away and an easy drive.

I have received an email from Ramaniya dasi and I will respond. Thank you for the association and for the spark to get me to the temple.

**Dan G. —Colorado**

## Inmate Letter Excerpts

I would like to help others find the peace and freedom from fear and doubt that understanding the truth of the spirit soul has brought me in a few short months. The only volunteer coming here is a Buddhist. That's fine to learn mediation practice but not how to surrender fully to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Krishna, as they are Impersonalists.

**Louis DM —Raiford, Florida**

I especially like the section titled *The Origin of the Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement* [in the booklet]. I've always liked history so this appeals to me. I'm also a fan of pop music and pop-culture, so the book *Chant and Be Happy* appeals to me. In *On Chanting*, I can relate to the topic of māyā, as I struggle with materiality. But it's great to know that māyā 'can at once be stopped by "Revival of our Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.' I also like that *anyone* can take part in this. Even me! ☺

**Adrien E. —Florence, Arizona**

Hello Bhakti Lata Dasi. I have received your recent letters and I am sincerely thankful again for you taking time to write to me. I am currently reading *Sri Isopanisad* and studying the Gita with my new cell mate. I am teaching him about Krishna Consciousness at the moment and he is very receptive of the information, and wants to become Krishna Conscious. I am excited because he is one of the few people that are actually interested in the knowledge and we study every night. He would like to know if you can send him a Gita as well if possible, and I am sure he will take it serious, as he shows me already. I received the beads and they just got approved and they will be put to good use for chanting. I constantly study the transcendental knowledge and every time I read it, it speaks directly to my soul. I will definitely be going to a temple when I get out, that is on the top of my agenda.

If it weren't for me writing to you I would have very little knowledge on the subject of Krishna; divine order brought everything together so perfectly. So I want to thank you and Krishna for this opportunity to become more conscious and I will make it known and spread the knowledge to all those who have ears to hear. Mantra meditation is a

beautiful method of Self-Realization and to keep concentrated on God. Thank you for all your help and I will make sure this knowledge gets spread everywhere. Hare Krishna

**Vincente R. —Lake City, Florida**



When I was about 7-10 years of age, I saw a group of people singing & dancing thru the streets, in downtown Miami. I remember it just felt good and I asked my Grandma if we could join. Being a Baptist she advised me that it wasn't for us, "They are a cult; it's bad; they're different."

Twenty years later I saw the "Hare Kṛṣṇas" on Jacksonville Beach, in Florida. It was a special event; they had the beach flooded with vibrant colors and festive things. I was offered to join them. My heart wanted to but my ego declined. But later, in 2017, while in prison and searching for truth, I went to the chapel library and the Bhagavad-gita caught my attention. Ever since I've been Kṛṣṇa Conscious and I'm growing more and more.

The camp I'm at now had absolutely no books about Kṛṣṇa, so some of what I receive from you and read, I pass on to another inmate or donate to the chapel library. It makes me feel good to pass the books along. So in addition to the books I have also previously received, I would like Kṛṣṇa Book. One of my favorite stories is when Kṛṣṇa is tied down and then pull the thing between the trees. And I also like when He sucked the life out the demon who breastfed Him. I love reading the stories, pastimes of Kṛṣṇa. Thank you very much. Thank you All! Hare Kṛṣṇa!

[...] Well it has been some months since I received the books from you. I want to thank you very much for them. From Bhagavad-Gita I learnt to chant the Holy Names of Sri Kṛṣṇa. I have gone through the Gita and wrote the Names of Kṛṣṇa; Syamasundara, Paramātmā, Janardana, Purusottama, Deva-deva, Yogin, etc.... And of course I love the energy I get

from the Maha-Mantra. From Sri Isopanisad: the first mantra sums it up for me. *“Everything animate or inanimate that is within the universe is controlled and owned by the Lord.* And *Teachings of Queen Kunti* showed me how sincere and devoted one can be.  
**Isaac B. —Raiford, Florida**

## **THANK YOU** to ALL our SUPPORTERS!

Your generosity is what keeps this program going! 😊 Because of a senior moment, I may forget someone, so please forgive me, and let me know so I can include your name in the next IPM NEWS. 🙏

### Our donors since last newsletter:

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Anonymous (you know who you are: thank you!)

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