

**VOLUME XI**

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## **My Spiritual Brothers**

Volume 11, Chapter 1

November – December, 2009

With the hustle-bustle of Hong Kong behind me, I boarded a plane and settled in for the long haul to Sydney. Twenty-eight devotees from my summer festival program in eastern Europe had arrived in Australia the previous week. We would be touring the country for three months.

I had brought several books to read, including an early volume of *Diary of a Traveling Preacher*. I wanted to look at it again with a view to improving my writing skills. I had just put the book in the pocket of the seat in front of me when a stewardess asked if I would change seats with another man, whose family was sitting across the aisle from me. So I picked up my things and moved a few rows back. The gentleman who was taking my seat thanked me profusely.

After getting comfortable again, I realized I'd forgotten the diary. "Don't worry," I told myself. "I'll get it later in the flight." But other things kept me occupied, including falling asleep for a number of hours, and by the time I woke up we were landing in Sydney.

As I was taking my hand luggage out of the overhead compartment, the man who had taken my seat came up to me, diary in hand.

"Fantastic reading," he said. "I almost finished the entire book. I didn't sleep all night. I hope you don't mind that I didn't bring it over to you."

"No," I said. "It's not a problem. In fact, you can keep it."

"Can I?" he said. "Thank you so much."

"By the way," I said as we struggled with our luggage, "I hope you didn't have any difficulty with some of the words or concepts."

"I did find some of it difficult," he said, "but most of it came through. I'm an avid reader of travel diaries, and I noticed the book was Volume 9. I haven't seen the series in the bookstores."

"It's mainly for our congregation," I said.

"That's interesting," he said. "I do feel that with a little editing your books could join the mainstream."

"You do?" I said.

“Sure,” he said. “But change the title. You’re practicing an Eastern tradition, but the title rings a bit Christian evangelic. How about Diary of a Traveling Monk? I’d buy that.”

As I walked towards immigration I remembered how Srila Prabhupada had taken the advice of a friend. Srila Prabhupada was busy writing, publishing, and distributing his Back to Godhead magazine in New Delhi. “I think it would be better,” said the friend, “if you wrote and distributed big books. They have a long-term effect.”

Srila Prabhupada took those words to heart and turned to translating the Srimad-Bhagavatam.

I checked my watch for the time in India, and as I continued walking to passport control, I called Advaita-candra das, the owner of Torchlight Publishing. “Advaita,” I said, “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we see if we can get my diaries in the bookstores?”

And that was how Diary of a Traveling Monk came about, along with a new website, [travelingmonk.com](http://travelingmonk.com).

I collected my bags and headed for customs. I was nervous because Australian customs is never easy. The officers are serious about protecting the country from incoming diseases. Passengers arriving by plane are not allowed to bring in any foods, mineral, or seeds. Wood in any form is closely inspected. Often a wooden article is impounded and fumigated before being returned. Everything must be declared in writing, and if customs officers find something not declared a large fine is likely.

I was nervous because I was carrying a number of wooden articles, like large japa beads, sandalwood for my deity worship, neck beads, and most important, old Tulasi beads from the coat of Madhu Pandit in Jaipur. I also had many items that could be considered exotic and questionable, like aguru oil, blocks of camphor, boxes of saffron, and my salagrama-silas.

As I got closer to customs I began to sweat. I recognized an officer who had grilled me for more than an hour two years ago. He went through everything I had at the time and confiscated a few articles. As I pushed my luggage cart with two large bags forward, I remembered how customs had once impounded the sacred Siddha Bakula japa beads of my friend Bimala Krsna das, and I wondered if they would take my two-hundred-year-old rudraksa beads given to me by a Siva bhakta in South India.

There was a long line of people waiting, and a woman was directing the line and sending the people to the different inspectors. The customs officers were checking everyone’s luggage, and a number of passengers looked frustrated with the way they were being searched. Finally I came to the front of the line. “Next!” shouted the woman. “Stall four!”

As I rounded the corner into the stall, the officer had his head down and his back to me. Then he turned around. He was a burly Sikh with a blue turban. I gasped with surprise.

“Hare Krsna, Swamiji,” he said. “Are you coming to visit your temple in North Sydney?”

“What?” I said. “Oh yes...huh... well, yes, yes I am,” I said.

“Have you to been to the ISKCON Juhu Beach temple?” he said.

“Oh, uh... yes... yes I have,” I said, “I’ve been there a number of times. Um... Would you like to see my declaration?”

“Swamiji,” he continued, “did you eat in the restaurant at Juhu temple? Very good food. I recommend it.”

I noticed one or two of the other customs officers staring in our direction.

“I’ve also been to the North Sydney temple with my wife,” the Sikh continued. “Very nice bhajanas.”

“That’s nice,” I said, and I put the declaration on the table in front of him. “Here’s my form.”

He picked it up but didn’t look at it. “Have you anything to declare?” he said nonchalantly.

I had a long list ready and decided to start with my japa-beads. I took a deep breath. “Here,” I said, “We can start with these meditation beads.”

“Oh,” he said, “they are sacred wood aren’t they, Swamiji?”

I cleared my throat. Uh... Yes, sir,” I said. “Yes they are.”

“That’s fine,” he said. He stamped the form and put it in the drawer in front of him. “You can go now.”

“I can go?” I said.

“Yes, Swamiji,” he said with a big smile, “and all the best!”

As I walked out I looked back and saw customs inspectors going through the bags of the passengers in front of them. There were big piles of clothes, electronics, and other things all over the tables.

When I came to the arrival hall, I heard someone say, “Haribol, Gurudeva.” I looked over and saw my disciple Sundarananda-gopal das.

As we walked along I asked him for an update on the festival tour. “All the tour devotees from Russia and Ukraine have arrived,” he said. “They’re at the temple practicing their performances. We have a festival here in Sydney tomorrow, and then we’re off to the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne.”

“The Parliament?” I said. “You mean we got accepted?”

“Yes,” he replied. “There were more than two thousand applications to lecture, hold workshops, or perform, but only 500 hundred were accepted. We’re quite lucky.”

I smiled. “It’s not luck,” I said. “It’s Krsna’s mercy.”

The Parliament of World Religions dates back to 1893, when representatives from Eastern and Western spiritual traditions met in Chicago for inter-religious dialogue. The Parliament is now held every five years and strives to foster understanding and cooperation between spiritual cultures. ISKCON was also represented at the Parliament in Barcelona five years ago.

Now in Melbourne, some devotees had been invited to speak on a variety of topics, and our festival program had been chosen to entertain some of the ten thousand expected visitors.

I turned to Sundarananda. “This is a great opportunity to network and connect with other spiritual traditions,” I said. “Our GBC supports interfaith dialogue. Several years ago Saunaka Rsi das set up the ISKCON Interfaith Commission in Oxford, England, so people of different faiths could work together for the benefit of society.”

Sundarananda nodded. “Your festival program is scheduled to perform on the second day of the Parliament at prime time in one of the main auditoriums,” he said.

Two days later our festival troupe flew to Melbourne. On the opening day of the Parliament, I went to the large convention and exhibition center to see what was taking place. As I walked in with a young devotee, I saw thousands of people dressed in all sorts of spiritual clothes, going here and there to the lectures, seminars, and workshops.

“Maharaja,” said the young devotee, “There’s a big hall where all the different religions have booths. You can meet their representatives and get books on their teachings.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

As we walked into the exhibition hall, I saw hundreds of booths, all nicely decorated. The crowds were milling around them. In the midst of it all I saw our own booth, “The International Society for Krsna Consciousness,” with Srila Prabhupada’s books on display. The booth was full of people browsing through the books and talking to devotees.

As I headed in that direction, a gentleman in Arab clothes came up to me. “Swami,” he said, “I am Sheikh Abdul from Jerusalem. I am giving a seminar on Religion, Conflict, and Peace Building in the Middle East. I was speaking to some of your members here, and I find your philosophy very interesting.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“I notice you are wearing a ring with Arabic script on it,” he continued. “That is the language of my people. But you are a Hindu. Why are you wearing an Islamic ring?”

“It was given to me by a Muslim holy man,” I said. “I defended his faith in an argument with another man, and in appreciation he gave me his ring. He said the script on the stone is three hundred years old.”

I took the ring off my finger and handed it to him. “Do you think you could translate the inscription for me?” I asked.

He studied the ring then read the inscription: “Allah, the merciful one, bestows longevity and a healthy life to the bearer of this ring.”

He handed the ring back to me and smiled. “Swami,” he said, “what are your views on the many conflicts we have in our world, particularly in the Middle East?”

“Such conflicts are due to our being in the bodily conception of life,” I said. “Because we identify with our bodies we think ourselves American, Israeli, Palestinian. But we are not these bodies. We are spirit souls. In reality, we are children of one God. People are fighting over their differences, but peace will come only when we focus on what we have in common. On the spiritual platform we are all brothers and sisters.”

“Yes,” said the sheikh. “Our Koran advocates peace, even when one is wronged. Chapter 3, verse 172 says: ‘For those who responded to the call of Allah and the messenger after the wound had befallen them – those among them who do good to others and guard against evil shall have a great reward.’

“It’s that message I am trying to preach in Jerusalem. Swami, why don’t you visit my center some time? You could share your beliefs with our people, and I could enlighten you about Islam.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” I said. “If I am able I would like to take you up on it.”

We exchanged business cards, and as the sheik was leaving he turned to me and smiled. “Swami,” he said, “I’m planning to come to your show tomorrow.”

At the ISKCON booth I took the time to speak to several visitors, and then I went with a young disciple to the area where the seminars were being held. Many people were standing around discussing what they had heard in the various lectures. In the distance I saw an elderly Buddhist monk of Eastern origin dressed in flowing robes sitting with a number of his followers, also in robes. They were worshipping him

with incense, flowers, and a yak-tail fan. As my disciple and I came closer, the master saw us and immediately rose to greet me.

“Welcome,” he said. “We are honored that you have come.”

“Honored that I have come, Your Holiness?” I said. “I am only an aspiring transcendentalist. Seeing the faith your followers have in you, I can ascertain that you are a realized soul.”

He smiled and began telling me a story: “A student once asked the Buddha, ‘Are you a God?’ ”

“No, my son,’ said the Blessed One.

“Are you a saint?’ the student asked.

“No, my son,’ said the Blessed One.

“Are you a magician?’ the student said.

“No, my dear one,’ said the Blessed One.

“What are you then?’ the student asked.

“I am awake,’ said the Buddha.”

I smiled. “Words of wisdom,” I said. “Most of us are asleep, unaware of the true purpose of life.”

“Yes,” he said, “but your eyes show that you are not asleep.”

I laughed. “It’s your kindness that you can see the potential for something that has not yet come,” I said.

I reached forward to embrace him, and his students reacted with alarm. One moved forward to stop me.

“No!” said the master. He put his arms around me, and we embraced for a long time.

“I have enjoyed meeting you, my brother,” he said.

“And I you,” I said as we stood holding hands.

“I would like you to visit our monastery in Thailand,” he said. “You will be my guest for three months. I will teach you about Buddhism, and you will enlighten me about your faith.”



We exchanged cards, and I promised to try to find an opportunity to attend his asrama. I slowly walked away with my disciple. "Srila Gurudeva," my disciple said, "what will you benefit by learning the teachings of Buddha?"

"Buddha is an incarnation of Krsna," I said. "Surely there is something to be learned. Just look how controlled these young monks are. See how they are sitting so composed and serene. Surely that is favorable for the practice of bhakti yoga."

I quoted a verse:

"vaco vegam manasah krodha vegam  
jivha vegam udaropastha vegam  
etan vegan yo visaheta dhirah  
sarvam apimam prthivim sa sisyat

"A sober person who can tolerate the urge to speak, the mind's demands, the actions of anger, and the urges of the tongue, belly, and genitals, is qualified to make disciples all over the world."

[Sri Upadesamrta, verse 1]

The next day we held our two-hour festival program in a hall with four hundred seats. The place filled up well before the program started, and we were turning people away when I saw Sheikh Abdul walking toward the entrance. I ran from the side of the stage and reached the sheikh before the devotees could block his path. "Come with me," I said, out of breath. "I've reserved a seat for you."

As we passed by the sound desk I grabbed the engineer's chair and carried it with me to the front-row aisle. Apologizing to the guests seated there, I squeezed in the chair and asked the sheikh to sit down. The program began immediately, and as I surveyed the audience I understood that many important people from around the world, like the sheikh, were there to see our show.

Twenty minutes into the program I saw a woman making a call on her cell phone. I walked up to her. "Please don't use your phone during the performance," I said.

She looked up. "This show is so amazing I'm calling one of the directors of the Parliament to come down from his office and see it,"

"No problem," I said with a smile. "Continue with your call."

I asked the devotee at the door to make sure that when the director arrived he would be given a seat.

The crowd roared in approval after every performance. During my twenty-minute talk I spoke from the Bhagavad-gita. I knew that these profound truths would impress many in the audience. After the show we sold twenty Gitas from the book table.

The sheikh loved the show, and afterwards he shook my hand repeatedly, while glorifying all the performers. "May I have the honor to invite you to my seminar tomorrow in room 104?" he asked.

"It would be a privilege to attend," I said.

Just as we were about to leave the hall a director of the Parliament came up to me. "I would like your group to perform at the closing ceremonies in four days," he said. "Your show is astounding, like a spiritual Cirque du Soleil."

"Thank you," I said. "Your comment means a lot to us."

"There are going to be several four-minute performances," he said. "There will be four thousand people attending. I'll slot you into second spot right after the invocation."

The next day we were scheduled to do harinama on the outskirts of Melbourne. I had to tell Gaura Hari das I wouldn't be on the harinama. "I promised a good friend I would attend his lecture at the Parliament of World Religions," I said.

"What's the lecture about?" Gaura Hari asked.

"Representatives of Jewish, Christian, Druze, and Muslim faiths will share stories of peacemaking and hope in Jerusalem. My friend is the coordinator and main speaker."

"That's impressive," Gaura Hari said. "How many people will be there?"

"Most seminars are attended by thirty to fifty people," I said.

That afternoon I arrived at the sheikh's seminar ten minutes late. As I pulled open the door I got a real surprise. More than three hundred people were crammed in. There wasn't a seat free, and people were standing alongside the walls. Spectators four deep lined the back of the room. Sheikh Abdul was lecturing when he noticed me standing awkwardly at the entrance.

"My spiritual brother has come," he said into the microphone with a big smile. "Please make way for him and give him a seat in the front row."

Two or three people immediately stood up in the front. As I made my way forward the crowd respectfully parted for me. I felt humbled and honored to be in the sheikh's presence.

“My spiritual brother is thinking to visit me in Jerusalem,” he said with a smile. Everyone looked at me as I nodded my head. The sheikh went on to give a moving appeal for peace in the Middle East.

“People are fighting over their differences. But peace will come to our region only when we focus on what we have in common. On the spiritual platform we are all brothers and sisters,” he concluded, glancing at me with a twinkle in his eye.

“Isn’t that exactly what I said!” I thought, I was touched, sensing the power of our newfound pledge to work together for enlightening people. Recalling a poem I had read that morning in one of the Parliament brochures, I made a vow then and there to visit the sheikh’s center in the Middle East.

Your friends are very special things,  
Their love is like the rarest gem  
But friends are hard to find and keep  
Unless you are a friend to them.  
[Anne Cragg]

When the lecture ended I filed out with the other guests and looked at the brochure to see if there were any other interesting seminars taking place. “A Panel Discussion on the Goal of Religion” caught my eye. There would be speakers from Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist faiths.

I quickly made my way to the room and found it almost as well attended as the sheikh’s seminar. This time I myself managed to find a seat close to the front. Everything went smoothly as the speakers shared their perspectives on the goal of religion. Then the floor was opened for questions.

Someone asked why women were not allowed to play more significant roles in world religion. Most of the panel said their faiths were open to women taking leadership roles, but when a Roman Catholic cardinal said that women had no role in the priesthood because it was not the church’s tradition, he was booed.

After the seminar people surged forward to meet the various religious leaders, but no one approached the cardinal. As people gradually filed out he was left sitting alone. I went up to him. “I admire your courage in not compromising your tradition,” I said.

“You do?” he said looking up.

“Yes,” I said. “There’s always room for adjusting things according to time, place, and circumstance, but we can’t compromise the word of scripture. It’s a delicate balance.”

He looked at me closely. “What group are you from?” he said.

“The Hare Krsna movement,” I said. “Our tradition is based on the Bhagavad-gita spoken five thousand years ago by Lord Krsna in India.

His face darkened. “I see,” he said. “You believe in many gods.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “Our philosophy is monotheistic. We believe in one God, just like you.”

“Really?” he said. “That’s not what I was told.”

“You would have to try hard to find any significant differences between our faiths,” I said. “Ultimately we follow the same commandment as you: to love and honor the Father with all our hearts and souls.”

“That’s in your scriptures?” he said.

“Yes,” I said, “but expressed in a different way.”

“How?” he asked.

I quoted the Bhagavad-gita:

“man-mana bhava mad-bhakto  
mad-yaji mam namaskuru  
mam evaisyasi satyam te  
pratijane priyo si me

“Always think of Me and become My devotee. Worship Me and offer your homage unto Me. Thus you will come to Me without fail. I promise you this because you are My very dear friend.” [Bhagavad-gita 18.65]

He looked at me. “Please bless me,” he said,

“Father,” I said, “how can I presume to bless you? You are my senior, much older than I. It is you who are in a position to bless someone like me.”

“No,” he said. “You came to comfort me. Now please bless me.”

“No, Father,” I said. “I can’t do that.”

Suddenly I thought of Poland, where I do most of my preaching. There, a priest – what to speak of a cardinal – would never think of such a thing.

“Please, my brother,” he said, “I am asking you.”

An idea came to me. "Father," I said, "I will bless you if you bless me."

We took each other's hands and sat alone in that empty room, our eyes closed, blessing each other.

I went back to the Melbourne temple to practice our presentation for the closing ceremony with the devotees. We had chosen to do hip hop artist MC Yogi's song Krsna Love. We devised a performance that included all parts of our normal two-hour show: bharata-natyam dance, yoga, artistic martial arts, and kirtana. Although the presentation would be only four minutes long, it took a couple of hours to put it together.

Sri Prahlada das smiled when I told him about this, and he quoted the writer Blaise Pascal: "I have made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter."

When our troupe of twenty-eight devotees arrived at the Parliament three days later, we were whisked backstage. As I looked out from behind the curtain, I was amazed to see the huge crowd. When the lights dimmed the master of ceremonies addressed the audience. He welcomed everyone, especially the spiritual leaders from different traditions around the world, and announced the dignitaries who would be speaking.

As he stepped back behind the curtain, Buddhist monks came onstage and beat a huge gong while playing large brass horns as other monks chanted spiritual incantations. It was beautiful and mystical and lasted for ten minutes. As they came offstage, the stage manager pointed to us. "You're on," he said. "Good luck."

As the sound system bellowed forth with Krsna Love, the Hare Krsna mantra filled the auditorium. I could hear the audience gasp at our beautiful clothes and costumes, and as we went through our routine I saw that everyone was enthralled. When we came forward dancing in a straight line and threw large bunches of flowers into the audience, everyone cheered. Then it was over almost as soon as it had begun.

The crowd kept cheering as we exited the stage. Backstage the stage manager complimented us. "That was wonderful!" he said. "Listen to that applause. They can't stop."

Spiritual dignitaries spoke, and there were other performances as well. When the ceremony ended, our troupe went quickly to the foyer, where people were exiting. A large crowd formed as people took their photos with us. But after an hour, I had to stop it.

"Let's move on," I told the devotees. "We've have another show in sixty minutes just outside the city. The organizers phoned me ten minutes ago and said eight hundred people are already seated in the hall. We can't be late."

As we drove off quickly, I looked back at the huge crowd still pouring out of the convention center.

I smiled at Gaura Hari. “And we didn’t even have time to relish our success,” I said.

“True” he said, smiling back, “But we made a deep impression on many of the spiritual leaders and participants at the Parliament, and you met a few new spiritual brothers as well.”

“We have been spreading this sankirtana movement in the Western countries, and in our recent tour of European cities like Rome, Geneva, Paris and Frankfurt, many learned Christian scholars, priests, philosophers and yogis came to see us, and by the grace of Krsna they agreed that this Krsna consciousness movement, the bhakti cult, offers the topmost conclusion. Following in the footsteps of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, we are trying to convince everyone that the devotional service of the Lord is enjoined in every scripture ...It is not a question of being Christian, Mohammedan or Hindu ... Due to our solid logic and scientific presentation, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s prediction that Krsna consciousness will spread in every town and village throughout the world is gradually being realized.

[Sri Caitanya-caritamrta, Madhya-lila 25.20, purport]

## Lessons from the Road

Volume 11, Chapter 2

February 14 - 23, 2010

As my flight to Los Angeles took off, I looked through the window at the disappearing Australian landscape and thought about my three-month visit to the country. "Our festival tour was intense," I thought, "but it went by in a flash. When you enjoy what you're doing, time passes quickly."

I was exhausted, but I forced myself to stay awake as a stewardess demonstrated the safety procedures. When she finished I drifted off to sleep, offering a prayer to my spiritual master: "Srila Prabhupada, please accept the results of our service. Our troupe of thirty devotees did forty-eight festivals, practically without a break. Twenty-seven thousand people came to the two-hour cultural programs. We sold thirty-five hundred books and twenty-one thousand plates of prasada."

When I arrived in Los Angeles fifteen hours later, I gathered my hand baggage and walked towards passport control and customs. The different environment of America made the Australian tour fade into the distant past. I handed my passport to the immigration officer.

"Where are you coming from?" he asked.

I was groggy from the long flight, and I had to think for a moment. "Oh...uh... Sydney," I said.

He chuckled. "Don't worry," he said. "Long-haul flights affect everyone."

I slung my hand baggage over my shoulder and walked towards the luggage carousel. "This tour of the United States will not be easy," I thought. "This year I'll be doing it by myself without help. But not to complain: It's the duty of a sannyasi to travel alone and learn to depend on Krsna."

I remembered a purport of Srila Prabhupada that's been close to my heart since I embraced the renounced order of life thirty-one years ago:

"It is the duty of a mendicant to experience all varieties of God's creation by traveling alone through all forests, hills, towns, villages, etc, to gain faith in God and strength of mind as well as to enlighten the inhabitants with the message of God. A sannyasi is duty-bound to take all these risks without fear, and the most typical sannyasi of the present age is Lord Caitanya, who traveled in the same manner through the central Indian jungles, enlightening even the tigers, bears, snakes, deer, elephants and many other jungle animals."

[Srimad-Bhagavatam 1.6.13, purport]

Three days later in San Diego, barely recovered from jetlag, I prepared to board a flight for Vancouver with a transit in Seattle. I was going to attend the wedding of my disciple, Sudevi-sundari dasi, and her

fiancé, Trikalajna dasa. Normally, sannyasis don't go to weddings, but being Sudevi's spiritual master, I wanted to encourage her in the grhastha asrama. She and her husband-to-be were good devotees, and I knew they would work well together spreading Krsna consciousness.

As I approached the check-in counter, my mind went blank and I had to think hard to remember where I was going. No doubt it was due to my being tired. As I handed my ticket to the woman behind the counter I asked her to check my bags only to Seattle, from where I'd be transiting to Vancouver.

"I have a two-hour layover," I said. "I'll give the bags to a friend. I'll just be in Vancouver for the day, and I'll get a ride back to Seattle in the evening. I won't need the bags in Vancouver."

Immediately I realized I'd made a mistake. Some time back it was a terrorist tactic to have a bag of explosives off-loaded from a flight through one city while continuing to another.

Her face darkened. "What's that?" she said. "Only to Seattle?"

"Well, I was thinking to have my bags dropped off in Seattle, but now I realize..."

Before I could finish the sentence she picked up the phone and called a security officer. Seconds later he appeared and asked me to follow him. People stared at me as we walked away.

Soon I was seated in a room as he leafed through my passport. "You have a lot of visas for Muslim countries," he said, "Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Bahrain, and Oman, to name a few. What business do you have in those countries, sir?"

I was starting to feel nervous. "I'm a missionary, sir," I said. "I travel around the world."

"What sort of missionary are you?" he said.

"I'm from the Hare Krsna movement," I replied.

"That's Hindu, isn't it?" he asked.

"Well, yes," I said.

"Oh?" he said. "A Hindu missionary in Muslim countries?"

"I know it sounds odd... " I started to say.

He looked me straight in the eye. "If you're on an international flight," he said, "why check your bags to a city you're transiting through?"



"I'm only spending the day in Vancouver," I said. "I won't need the bags there."

"That doesn't sound quite right," he said.

Then a call came through. They had checked my bags and found no explosives.

"You can go," he said coldly.

I felt foolish and slightly shaken, as I walked back to the counter and finished checking in.

As the flight to Vancouver took off, I thought about the incident. "That was a stupid mistake," I said to myself. "And being tired is no excuse."

Because of the delay checking in, I'd been given a middle seat in a row of three. A few minutes into the flight the man on my left turned to me. "Isn't it great how America is doing in the Olympic Games in Vancouver?" he said.

I knew the games were taking place in Vancouver, but I knew nothing of the results.

"Yeah," I said, "just wonderful."

"What did you think of the performance of Bode Miller?" asked the man on my right.

"Bode Miller?" I said.

They both stared at me in disbelief.

"Yes, Bode Miller," the man on my left said, "the skier Bode Miller."

"Are you American?" said the man on my right.

"Well, yes I am," I replied.

"And you don't know Bode Miller?" he said.

I was silent.

"What about Shaun White?" he continued, "America's best bet for a gold in the half pipe."

"The half pipe?" I said.

Again they stared at me.

"How about Lindsey Vonn?" said the man on my left. "She injured her shin recently, but she's still going to ski. You know her, right?"

"Uh... Can't say that I do," I replied.

"Man, what planet are you from?" he said.

I didn't answer.

"If you're American you'd better get your act together," he continued.

"America's gonna kick butt up there in Vancouver. We'll cream those commies from Russia."

"What?" I said. "Commies? Russia's been a democracy for years. Why do you call them communists?"

"Whatever they are, they ain't Americans, and we'll pulverize them," he said.

"Yeah," said the other man, "along with those Chinese wimps."

"Wait a minute," I said. "That's not the spirit of the Olympics."

I thought for a moment. "Tell me," I said, "do you guys travel much? I mean, have you ever been out of the United States?"

"Nope," said the man on my left. "This is my first trip."

"Me too," said the other man. "I'm going to the Olympics."

"Well," I said, "if you'd traveled more widely you'd see that people are pretty much the same everywhere. We're all spirit souls struggling in this material world."

They looked at me blankly and fell silent.

I settled back in my seat. "As difficult as it is to be a traveling monk," I thought, "it has its advantages, one of which is seeing the true equality of all living beings."

As I drifted off to sleep, I remembered the words of the writer Mark Twain:

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

In Seattle I caught my connecting flight. Upon landing in Vancouver, I grabbed my hand baggage and raced to immigration. The wedding was scheduled to start in just ninety minutes. I came to the immigration counter and handed my passport to an officer. He typed my name and passport information into his computer, paused, and then looked up.

"Please step to the side for a moment," he said.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He didn't answer. After a minute another immigration officer arrived.

"Follow me," he said. As we walked away people were staring at me as they'd done in San Diego.

Two minutes later I was sitting in an office, this time in front of three immigration officers. I sensed the officers in San Diego had contacted them.

"Why have you come to Canada?" the first officer said.

"I'm here to attend a wedding," I said. "I'll be leaving for Seattle soon afterwards."

"What are the names of the betrothed?" he asked.

I froze. I didn't know their legal names. "I'm sorry officer," I said. "I don't know. I only know their baptized names."

He shook his head. "What is the address where the wedding will take place?" he asked.

Again I hesitated. I had no idea of the address. "I'm not sure," I replied. "I'll look it up on my iPhone."

He leafed through my passport. "I see you spend a lot of time in Russia," he said.

"Yes, officer," I replied.

"Why?"

"I'm a traveling monk in the Hare Krsna movement," I said. "I was in Russia before the fall of communism, and I've been helping to take care of our congregation ever since."

"Have you ever worked for the U.S. Government?" he asked.

"No, sir," I said.

"Have you ever served in the armed forces?" he asked.

"The armed forces?" I said. "Well, yes I did. I was in the Marine Corps. But what does that have to do with anything? I have come here for a wedding, and I'm leaving tonight."

"A wedding!" he shot back. "And you don't know the names of the couple or the address of the ceremony!"

"Usually I just get picked up and driven..." I started to say.

"Send him back," the officer said to another officer.

"What?" I said. "You're going to send me back to San Diego?"

A third officer took my arm firmly and started leading me to the door.

Suddenly I had an idea. I turned around. "Wait a minute, officer," I said. "Let me give you a number you can call. It's my secretary. She can vouch for me. She's at the wedding. "

My disciple, Rasika-siromani dasi, who arranges my tours in the United States, had driven to Vancouver with several other devotees from Seattle.

He called Rasika and grilled her for fifteen minutes.

"All right," he said after hanging up. "Looks like you are going to officiate at that wedding."

He picked up his pen to sign a report, but first he looked at me. "Is there anything else you're planning to do while you're here?" he said.

Another idea came to me. "If there's time," I said, "I might catch some of the Olympics. I mean, Bode Miller, Lindsey Vonn, and Shaun White are all favorites for gold medals."

A few minutes later I walked out of the terminal. A devotee came running up to greet me. "What happened Maharaja?" he asked. "Did you lose your luggage?"

"No," I said, "I didn't lose my luggage. I just made a stupid mistake. It happens sometimes. But I learned a lesson, a good lesson from the road."

That evening, I remembered some words from the Prophet Mohammed: "Don't tell me how educated you are. Tell me how much you've traveled."

## Greatly Rewarded

Volume 11, Chapter 3

March 1 - 18, 2010

After my unsettling experiences in the San Diego and Vancouver airports, where I was interrogated by security officials, I again considered wearing non-devotional dress while traveling in the United States.

Airport security measures have been heightened throughout the country because of terrorist threats. Passengers who arouse suspicion are often subjected to extra searches, and there is concern that people of various racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups are being singled out. And no doubt, the flowing saffron robes of a sannyasi draw attention.

But I decided against changing my dress. "Experience has shown that the advantages of wearing my robes far outweigh those of pants and a shirt," I thought, "if only because of the number of people who approach me to ask about spiritual life."

My decision was to be greatly rewarded. Two weeks into my tour I checked in for a flight from Boise, Idaho, to Salt Lake City. Sure enough, I was pulled aside for a special search while going through security.

"Stand with your legs spread and your arms out to the side while I do a body search," said the officer.

I smiled. "No problem," I said. "I'm used to it."

Starting from my arms his hands slid down to my waist. "Is this sheet tied on tight?" he asked.

"It's called a dhoti, sir," I said. "And yes, it's tied tight."

"Just thought I'd ask," he said. "The last time I patted down one of you guys the sheet fell off. He was standing there in the strangest underwear I ever saw."

I chuckled.

After the pat-down he led me to a table to search my hand luggage. "Actually, I'd like to ask you a question if I could," he said softly as he started to open my briefcase.

"No problem, officer," I said. "That's what you people are supposed to do. I appreciate these security measures. They keep us safe."

"No, I mean another kind of question," he said, looking around to make sure no one was taking notice.

"You're a spiritual person," he continued, "and you look so happy. Can you tell me why I'm suffering so much in life?"

"Well, sir," I said, "Suffering will always be there in material life. You can alter it somewhat, but you can't change the fact that we all get sick, grow old, and die. You have to go within and discover your spiritual self, which is eternal and full of knowledge and bliss."

"What does the spiritual self look like?" he said as he picked up my printer.

"We're spiritual beings," I said, "with a spiritual body and spiritual senses and emotions. That body is eternal. It never grows old."

He looked up. "Does God really exist?" he said.

Just then another security officer called out. "Hey, Bill," he shouted, "is there a problem? What's taking so long?"

"No problem," Bill yelled back. "Just double checking." He then looked at me for the answer to his question.

"Of course God exists," I said, "and you can see Him. But you need the necessary qualifications."

"Which are?" he said as he slowly continued going through my things.

"Bill," the other officer shouted, "move that person on! The line is backing up here!"

Bill was obviously taking his time so he could ask me questions.

"What is the qualification for seeing God?" he said.

"Love," I replied.

"But how to..." he started to say, when the other security officer walked over.

"Bill," he said, "does this gentleman pose a security threat?"

"No, sir," Bill replied.

"Then move things on," said the officer.

"I wanted to ask him one more question," said Bill.

"Then ask," said the officer.

"I mean about life," Bill said.

The officer stared at him for a moment. "Bill, this is not the place," he said.

The officer turned to me. "You can go now, sir," he said.

"But I need to know..." Bill started to say.

"Back to work," the officer said sternly.

"Can I give him my card?" I said to the officer as I started to walk away.

"No," the officer said. "He's on duty."

After walking twenty meters, I looked back to see Bill getting a scolding. I headed to the departure gate still thinking about him when a young woman came up to me.

"Are you a Hare Krsna?" she said.

"Yes I am," I replied.

"Do you have any literature?" she said with a big smile. "I've always wanted to know something about your faith."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't have any on me, but if you send me your address I'll mail some books to you."

The card I had wanted to give Bill was still in my hand, and I gave it to her.

"Great!" she said. "Don't forget."

I smiled. "I won't forget," I said.

By dint of my frequent flyer points, I was traveling business class. Twenty minutes into the flight, a woman walked up to the aisle next to my seat.

"Are you a Buddhist?" she said.

"No," I said. "I'm a monk in the Hare Krsna movement."

"I'm a Buddhist," she said. "Can you tell me the difference between Hare Krsna and Buddhism?"

The man seated next to me put down his Wall Street Journal to see what was happening.

"The basic difference is that Hare Krsna accepts the absolute truth as a person," I replied. "Buddhism states that ultimately everything is void."

The man went back to reading his newspaper.

"Yes," she said, "that's true. So what do we have in common?"

"A number of things," I said, "beginning with our belief in reincarnation."

"Just a minute," she said and turned to the man next to me. "Sir," she said, "do you think you could change seats with me? I'd really love to talk to this monk."

The man lowered his newspaper. "Are you in business class?" he said.

"I'm not," she said. "I'm in economy. But I have an aisle seat."

He looked at her incredulously. "It would mean a lot to me," she said. "Please. I need some spiritual association."

He still couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I really need this," she said.

The man thought it over. "All right," he said to my surprise, "if it means so much to you." He gathered his things and taking her boarding pass walked to her seat in economy.

She sat down next to me. "So," she said, "you were saying something about reincarnation?"

We then discussed the differences between Vaisnavism and Buddhism throughout the ninety-minute flight.

At Salt Lake City I was walking through the airport to the baggage carousels when a woman stopped me.

"Excuse me, sir," she said, "may I ask what faith you are practicing?"

"I'm from the Hare Krsna movement," I said. "I follow an ancient spiritual tradition from India."

"I see," she said. "And is there a special significance to the clothes you're wearing?"



I smiled. "Yes, there is," I said. "We dress like this so people will ask us questions."

She laughed.

"Seriously," I said, "One's outer appearance reflects one's inner nature. Before becoming a monk I led a degraded life. My dirty and unkempt clothes were an indication of my unclean heart. Now I'm striving to understand God, and these clothes are a sign of my pure intentions."

"Beautifully put," she said. "Are you going to visit the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City?"

"Sure, if I have time," I said.

"Visit Brigham Young University, too," she said. "Most of the students are nice young Mormons."

"I'll try," I said.

We shook hands. "Safe travels," she said.

As I struggled with my hand-trolley up some steps to another level, a young man behind me put his hand on my lower back and gently pushed me up.

"Thanks a lot," I said when we got to the top of the stairs.

He laughed. "Figured it'd get me some kudos from above," he said.

While I was waiting for my bags at the carousel, a woman in her fifties approached me. "You're American, right?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"But you're following an Eastern path. Why is that?"

"This tradition answered all my spiritual questions," I said.

"And how many years have you been practicing?" she said.

I had to think for a moment. "Forty years," I said.

"Forty years!" she exclaimed. She lowered her voice and leaned closer. "And have you been faithful all those years?" she said. "Are you keeping your vows?"

I nodded my head. "Yes, ma'am," I said. "I've been faithful and I've kept my vows."

“George!” she called out to her husband waiting at the baggage carousel. “Bring me twenty bucks.”

Her husband reached into his pocket, walked over, and handed her a twenty-dollar bill. The wife put the money in my hand. “Keep up the good work,” she said and walked away.

I spent four wonderful days with Caru das and his wife, Vaibhavi dasi, at their temple in Spanish Fork, south of Salt Lake City. The night before leaving, I received an e-mail from the US State Department. It must have been sent as a result of the number of times I've been taken aside for screening in airports.

“Dear Sir," it began.

“We are reaching out to your organization on behalf of the US Department of Homeland Security to obtain information about issues or concerns regarding religious expression or exercise during airport security screening. For example, do individuals of your faith who wear religious dress believe they are treated differently in the airport screening process because of the clothing they are wearing or religious symbols they possess? Your assistance in helping us address religious exercise and expressions issues at airport security is welcomed.”

I replied:

“Dear Sirs,

“It appears that I am sometimes singled out for screening because of my religious dress. But I have no complaints. Considering the apparent threat of terrorism in our country, such security measures are acceptable. What's more, it gives me an opportunity to share my faith with all of you.

“With best wishes,

“Indradyumna Swami”

The next morning I took a flight to Dallas, Texas. I was seated next to a gentleman who was absorbed in reading what appeared to be the Bible. When he put it in the pocket of the seat in front of him I asked if I might borrow it to read for a while.

He smiled. “It's The Book of Mormon,” he said.

“Fine,” I said. “I'm always interested in learning about other faiths.”

“Me too,” he said gently. “Do you have a copy of the Bhagavad-gita?”

“Do you know the Gita?” I said.

“Well, no I don't,” he said. “But I know it's the scripture of the Hare Krsnas, and from your dress I can see you're a Hare Krsna.”

With that exchange began a pleasing, in-depth discussion about religion that lasted the entire two and a half hours till we arrived. As the plane was landing, the gentleman smiled. “You can keep the book,” he said.

It was large and ornate, obviously a special edition. “Thank you,” I said. “I consider it a very special gift. If you give me your business card, I'll send you a Bhagavad-gita.”

“I'd be honored,” he said as he handed me his card.

That evening I looked at the gentleman's card. My eyes opened wide as the bold letters at the top jumped out at me. It read:

"Dean, Brigham Young University, College of Fine Arts and Communications"

"Well," I thought, "that's a nice surprise at the end of a nice day."

Srila Prabhupada writes:

“In the country known as Mayuradhvaja, the lower-caste people who are considered less than sudras are also initiated in the Vaisnava cult of devotional service. And when they are properly dressed, with tilaka on their bodies and beads in their hands and on their necks, they appear to be coming from Vaikuntha. In fact, they look so very beautiful that immediately they surpass the ordinary brahmanas.”  
[The Nectar of Devotion, Chapter 5]

## Cover Me

Volume 11, Chapter 4

April 1 - 10, 2010

After two months of preaching and fundraising in the United States, I was ready for a break, so when Swarup Damodar dasa, president of the Durban temple in South Africa, asked me to come in April for Ratha-yatra, I jumped at the chance.

After checking in for my flight at the Atlanta Airport, I was walking to the boarding gate when I passed a group of young marines. "Hey, pretty boy!" one called out. "Where you off to?"

I turned toward him. "Pretty boy?" I said.

"Yeah, sweetheart," he said. "I mean the dress. It's just awesome." The other marines broke out laughing.

I walked over to where they were sitting. "These are my robes, soldier," I said. "I'm a monk."

Another marine laughed. "A monk?" he said. "In a pink sheet?"

"Is this is how they train you boys?" I shot back. "You're part of an elite fighting force, serving one of the greatest countries in the world."

"Huh!" sneered a marine. "What do you know about serving your country?" he said with a thick southern accent.

I glared at him. "First Battalion," I said, "Alpha Company, Platoon 2066. I graduated from Camp Pendleton on March 16, 1969."

"Really?" one of them said. "Did you fight in 'Nam?"

"No," I said. "I was sick when my unit shipped out. All the boys in my platoon were wiped out in an ambush their first week in combat. I received further training stateside and became an instructor."

The boy who first called out to me was about to say something when another marine stopped him. "Leave him alone, Mark," he said. "He did his time."

The others nodded in agreement.

I turned to Mark. "This is what you're fighting for, leatherneck," I said.

"Democracy means to have a choice. We can choose our leaders, our ideals, and our religion. I choose Krsna consciousness."

"My cousin is a Hare Krsna," said one of the boys. "I know a little bit about your beliefs. One of the first guys in your religion was a soldier. He fought on a huge battlefield."

I smiled. "Arjuna," I said.

"Yeah, that's his name," said the boy.

I sat down. "I have a student who's a Marine and has served two tours in Iraq," I said.

"We're off to Afghanistan next month," said one of the boys as they gathered around me.

"What's your student's name?" said another.

"Captain Anthony Alexander," I said. "He's a commanding officer with three hundred men under him in Communications Company, First Marine Division."

"What's he like?" said one of the marines.

"Like Arjuna," I said.

The boy put his hand up in a high-five gesture, which I met with my own hand. I looked at my watch. "Sorry boys," I said, "but I gotta go."

"Hey," said one of them, "stay a little longer,"

"My flight leaves in twenty minutes," I said as I got up. "Keep your heads down over there."

As I walked away, Mark ran up and put out his hand. "Sorry, sir," he said. "I was disrespectful."

I shook his hand tightly. "No problem, soldier," I said. "Semper Fi!"

The Marine who knew about Arjuna waved. "Hare Krsna, sir!" he called out.

Sixteen hours later, I arrived in Johannesburg and caught a connecting flight to Durban, where I was met by a small group of devotees. "How are the preparations for Ratha-yatra going?" I asked Swarup Damodar.

"Very good," he said. "Thanks for coming."

"I needed the break," I said, but I knew I would not get much of a break during the festival.

As we walked out of the airport, I noticed a lot of advertising for the upcoming Soccer World Cup.

"Looks like South Africa's gone all out for the Cup," I said. "Is everything ready?"

"Pretty much," said Swarup. "Of course, there's always the issue of crime. South Africa has a very high rate of murder, rape, and assault. There's a lot more here than in most countries."

"Will that affect the decision of foreigners to come for the Cup?" I said.

"I don't think so," he said. "This year they're expecting sixteen million tourists. Statistics show that most crime happens among South Africans. If tourists are targeted, it's usually just petty theft.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "many of our devotees have experienced some type of crime or another - burglary, carjacking, theft, or the like. One family had a very close call just two days ago."

"What was that about?" I said.

"A sophisticated, well-coordinated gang of criminals posing as policemen pulled a devotee over on his way home from work," Swarup began. "They were brandishing high-caliber firearms. They said he was being investigated for fraud and they needed to search his home. They handcuffed him, put him in their vehicle and drove him to his home.

"When they got there, other criminals, also posing as police officers, were waiting outside. They took him into his house and quickly tied up his mother, his sister, and her six-month-old baby. Then they began ransacking the house looking for cash, jewelry, and firearms. When they found nothing they threatened to kill the whole family if they didn't say where they kept their valuables.

"The devotee man said they didn't store valuables in the house and pleaded for their lives. The crooks pointed their guns at the family and put a plastic bag over the baby's head. Meanwhile, the leader continued searching the rooms when he came across the family altar with pictures of Srila Prabhupada, Krsna, and Lord Caitanya.

"He shouted to the others, 'Don't harm them. They're Hare Krsna devotees. They feed our people in the townships. They give our children food. Put down your weapons.'

"One of the gang took the plastic bag off the baby's head and slapped his back to get him breathing again. The leader then ordered the others to leave, and he said, 'Put back whatever you've taken.'

"On their way out the gang dumped a few watches, several appliances, and assorted coins on the floor. As the leader stepped through the front door, he turned and said, 'Sorry. We didn't know who you were.' Moments later they sped away in their cars.

"Our Food for Life program has been distributing prasada in the impoverished areas around Durban for more than twenty years. It's much appreciated by the poor Africans. What do you think, Maharaja?"

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "Srila Prabhupada had the perfect vision when he started prasada distribution in the early 1970s. He called it Lord Caitanya's secret weapon."

"Actually," Swarup said, "the Food for Life team was hoping you'd go out with them while you're here."

"It'd be an honor and a pleasure," I said.

"You'll have a police escort," he said.

"Is that necessary?" I said. "I thought the Africans liked us."

"Most of them do," he said, "but there is always the criminal element. And they may not always be as accommodating as those who tried to rob that devotee's house. Two of our congregation members were murdered in similar burglaries."

Three days later as the Food for Life team loaded big pots of freshly cooked prasada into a van, a police constable picked me up in his squad car. Minutes later we all took off to pass out prasadam in rural Kwazulu-Natal, home to almost nine million Zulus.

"Thanks for coming along," I said to the constable.

"Paul's my name," he said, putting out his hand. "It's a pleasure."

He looked at the large Canon EOS camera hanging around my neck. "You'll need me," he said, "if only for that fancy camera you're carrying."

"Yes," I said. "It does stick out a bit." I squirmed a little.

"Don't you worry," Paul said.

I looked him over. I could see I had nothing to fear. He was a tall black African in his forties, and he looked as strong as an ox. Hanging from his belt were a handgun, two cans of mace, and a pair of handcuffs. On the panel behind his head rested a shotgun, locked and loaded.

I couldn't take my eyes off the little armory. "Do you ever use that stuff?" I said.

"All the time," he said without taking his eyes off the road.

My eyes turned to a wide, six-inch scar on his forearm. "Where did you get that?" I said.

Paul smiled. "All in a day's work," he said.

An hour later, we turned off the highway onto a winding road into the Valley of a Thousand Hills, and another half hour later we came to a picturesque but rundown village.

"There's a lot of criminal activity out here," Paul said. "They'll use an AK 47 assault rifle to rob a store for a few packs of cigarettes."

Just then his police radio starting crackling. Paul listened carefully and shook his head. "There's a robbery taking place at this very moment," he said, "just three hundred meters ahead."

I felt my throat tighten. "Are we going there?" I said.

"No," he said calmly. "We never go in alone. There has to be at least three of us in a squad car. Even then we have to assess the situation. If they have superior firepower, which they often do, we hold off."

A hundred meters before the scene of the crime, we drove up to a small group of houses. There were just a few people milling around. As soon as we stopped, a devotee jumped out of the van and picked up a megaphone. "Prasada!" Prasada! Prasada!" he called out.

Suddenly people began pouring out of the houses, even running from the other end of the village. Children were running along the street with cups, bowls, plates, and even pots.

The kids smiled and laughed as they pushed and shoved their way into a long line waiting for the distribution to start. Then the devotees piled out of the van with drums and karatalas and began a kirtana. All the Zulu children started dancing and singing along.

My eyes opened wide. "They even know the words!" I said.

Paul was looking over the crowd and the surrounding area to see if there was trouble. He turned to me. "And why not?" he replied. "You people were passing out this food and singing this song to their parents when they themselves were youngsters."

Pandemonium broke out as the devotees started distributing the stew of rice, beans, and vegetables. I saw a number of children get their bowls filled and then immediately return to the back of the line. I smiled as I watched them eat all the way up to the front and then present their empty bowls for more. Some came three or four times.



Paul kept his eye on the crowd and his hand on his gun. "This is an especially bad area," he said. "A few months ago I chased a criminal into the bush in the next village. He suddenly jumped out just two meters in front of me and fired off four rounds at point-blank range."

"What happened?" I said.

Paul chuckled. "He missed," he said.

Then his face became serious. "But it wasn't luck," he said. "It was the Lord above watching over me."

"So you're a religious man," I said.

Paul smiled. "Yes sir, I am," he said. "Every time I go into action, I look up at the sky and say to the Lord, 'Cover me.'"

"That's very nice, constable," I said.

"It's the only explanation for why I'm still here today," he said. "I know that for a fact."

A group of young men started walking toward me. "Watch your camera," Paul said looking over the valley. "We do what we can out here, but these people are very poor, so crime is always on the rise. Not many folks take the risk to come here and help them like you do."

"Nowadays it's gotten so bad the villagers take justice into their own hands. When they catch a thief or a drug runner, they tie him to a telephone pole and beat him to death. Then they place all his weapons around him on the ground. Nobody dares take those weapons."

"Tell me," I said, "when you're out here, do you always get your man? Do they ever get away?"

"Sometimes they get away in the bush," he said, motioning toward the thick foliage surrounding the village. "When that happens we call in the dog squad. The criminals are terrified of our dogs, so they try to shoot the animals from where they're hiding. That's when we go in and arrest them. But it doesn't always work."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Last week I was heading into the bush to get a man when suddenly I bumped into a beehive," he said. "Within moments the bees were all around me and stung me from head to toe. The guy got away, and I spent a few days in the hospital."

Two hours later the devotees packed the empty prasada containers into the van and jumped in with their musical instruments. Only when everyone was inside did Paul indicate that we could get back in the squad car. Soon we were winding our way down the hill to the main highway.

"They love you folks out here," Paul said. "I heard you've given out three thousand plates of food every day for many years. One day it will all pay off."

"It already has," I said, thinking of the gang who had spared the devotee family.

"Anytime you guys need my service just give me a call," Paul said as we turned onto the highway. "I'm always happy to do my part."

"Thank you, constable," I said.

An hour later, as we neared the temple, Paul turned to me. "Sir," he said, "do you mind if I ask, what is the meaning of that song you all sing out there? You know, the Hare Krsna one?"

I thought for a moment. "It means 'Cover me,'" I said.

Paul smiled from ear to ear.

That evening I remembered something Nelson Mandela had said when he spoke at a large Food For Life gathering many years ago:

"Another important building block for new democracy is the love and good will we show to each other. That is the spirit of *masakhane*, of bringing one another together. It is also the spirit of today's festival organized by Hare Krsna Food for Life."

## Victory Day

Volume 11, Chapter 5

May 7, 2010

A few days ago, early in May, I boarded Flight 677 from Warsaw to Moscow. As I looked around, I marveled at how times had changed. The Aeroflot plane was a brand-new Boeing 737, a marked difference from the one I took from England to Russia in the spring of 1989. In those days every plane in Aeroflot's fleet was well over twenty years old.

And gone were the grumpy old stewardesses who wouldn't give you the time of day. Now the crew consisted of good-looking young women and men, fluent in Russian, Polish, and English.

"Please be seated, sir," said a stewardess as she took my boarding pass. "May I take your coat? Would you like some juice?"

"No thanks," I said, "I'll be fine."

She looked at her roster. "I see you've been upgraded to business class," she said.

I smiled. "Well, I've been flying with you for more than twenty-one years," I said. "I've racked up the miles."

Soon there was a party atmosphere in the plane as passengers began socializing with one another. I settled in my seat and closed my eyes. My thoughts went back to my first flight to Russia with its dark mood in the cabin.

Russia was a communist state then, the ruling country in the USSR. People's lives were controlled by the government, and they were poor in spite of working hard, mostly in factories. I remembered the many probing questions the immigration officials had asked me as I entered the country.

In the days and weeks that followed then, I took great risks meeting devotees at secret gatherings in apartments, basements, and attics. Religious movements were banned, and rumors persisted that foreign missionaries got fifteen years in prison if caught.

I opened my eyes and looked around. "Yes," I thought, "Russia's a democracy now, and things are so much easier and secure, but I do miss the old days, the struggle and adventure, always having to depend on Krsna."

After twenty minutes it appeared that the passengers had all boarded, but the door was still open.

"Are we waiting for someone?" I asked the stewardess.

"Yes, we are," she said politely.

Five minutes later a very old man came through the door assisted by two stewardesses. They directed him to the seat next to mine. But I was the only passenger in business class, so there were many empty seats.

"Shall we seat you elsewhere?" said one of the stewardesses to the old man.

He glanced at me and then at the empty seats. "No," he said, "I'll be just fine next to this gentleman."

With some difficulty he adjusted himself into his seat. I noticed five rows of brightly colored medals on his coat. There were a few moments of silence before he turned to me and spoke with a thick Russian accent. "I assume you're going to Moscow for the victory parade," he said.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"It's the parade in Red Square to celebrate the sixty-fifth anniversary of our victory over the Nazis in the Great Patriotic War," he said. He paused for a moment. "Of course, Russia played the major role," he said, "but you people did assist. Are you British or American?"

"I'm American, sir," I replied.

"Your government is sending over a contingent of soldiers for the parade," he said, "as are France, Britain, and Poland. Twenty-five foreign leaders will join Russian President Medvedev to watch the procession."

"Oh, I see," I said.

He turned his head and looked off into space. "We fought hard," he said, his voice showing emotion. "We lost many soldiers, and many more were wounded. But we won. And we're glad that you Americans fought alongside us. The motherland is grateful."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"You know," he said in a tone of pride, still looking away, "the parade will feature some of our newest and most capable weapons. They'll have the Pantsir S1 and the Buratino rocket launcher, also the Topal-M intercontinental ballistic missile, the Yak-130 trainer jet, and the Mi-28 and Ka-52 attack helicopters."

"He really knows his military hardware," I thought.

He turned toward me. "A total of a hundred and sixty-one tanks and missiles will roll through the square," he said, his voice getting louder and full of excitement, "and a hundred and twenty-seven aircraft will soar through Russian skies above. At this very moment the foreign troops are training with 10,500 Russian soldiers. It's a special honor for your soldiers to perform on Russian soil."

"Yes, yes it is," I said.

"It was the greatest victory of all time," he continued. Then his eyes became misty. "But we lost so many men," he continued, "and civilians too. The Germans were good fighters. We fought them hand to hand."

I was silent.

"Your Sergeant Beyrle was a good soldier," he said. "You know of him, yes?"

"No sir, I'm afraid I don't," I replied.

He looked a little disappointed. "'Jumpin' Joe Beyrle we called him," he said. "He was captured by the Germans after parachuting into Normandy on D-day. Later he escaped from Stalag III prison camp and joined up with our Russian forces. He won our trust by using his demolition skills to blow up German tanks. Later he was severely wounded, and our Russian commanders had him transferred to the US Embassy in Moscow. He's been called a hero of two nations, and we thank you for that."

"You're welcome," I said.

"But if you're not going to Moscow for the parade," he said, "then why are you going? And why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm a monk," I said.

"We have our religion," he said. "We are Russian Orthodox. It's our tradition, our history."

"I understand," I said, "but the movement I'm serving has been established in your country for thirty-nine years. In that sense it can be taken as part of Russian history as well."

He thought for a moment. "Thirty-nine years," he said. "Well, you have a point."

"Yes," I said, "we were able to share our ideals with your people because men like you fought against oppression sixty-five years ago."

"Yes!" he said. "We beat back the Nazi regime."

"And we're grateful for that," I said, putting my hand on his arm, "truly grateful."

"Thank you," he said. "But I'm still not convinced that your group, or whatever it is, can be accepted as a significant part of Russian history. What is your movement's name anyway?"

"It's called the Hare Krsna Movement," I said.

"Hare Krsna!" he said excitedly. His face lit up and he smiled broadly. "Why didn't you tell me? We have lots of Hare Krsnas in Russia. They are everywhere. They sing in the streets, sell books, and give food to homeless people in Moscow. They are all good Russian boys and girls."

I was speechless.

"You are right," he continued, "for all you people have done I consider Hare Krsna an important part of Russian history."

Just then a stewardess came by. "Would either of you like some juice?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "We will celebrate. I will take this gentleman to the victory parade tomorrow. I have seats."

"Thank you for your invitation," I said.

As the plane started down the runway we raised our glasses of juice in a toast. "To Victory Day!" the old veteran said.

"And to Hare Krsna!" I added.

"Yes, yes, to Hare Krsna," he said, "to Hare Krsna."

And as the plane took off, I thought about what Lord Caitanya said about victory some five hundred years ago:

ceto darpana marjanam bhava maha davagni nirvapanam  
sreyah kairava candrika vitaranam vidya vadhu jivanam  
anandambudhi vardhanam prati padam purnamrtasvadanam  
sarvatma snapanam praram vijayate sri Krsna sankirtanam

"Let there be all victory for the chanting of the holy name of Lord Krsna, which can cleanse the mirror of the heart and stop the miseries of the blazing fire of material existence. That chanting is the waxing moon that spreads the white lotus of good fortune for all living entities. It is the life and soul of all education. The chanting of the holy name of Krsna expands the blissful ocean of transcendental life. It gives a cooling effect to everyone and enables one to taste full nectar at every step."

[Siksastaka Prayers, Verse 1]

## In Memoriam

Volume 11, Chapter 6

July 21, 2010

Dearest Aindra prabhu,

Please accept our most humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada!

We, the members of the Festival of India in Poland, would like to express our extreme sorrow and lamentation over your untimely departure from this world. We know that the Lord has a plan for all His devotees, but nonetheless we are finding it most difficult to accept that you are no longer here.

For many of us, especially the ISKCON youth, you were a shining example of a true kirtaneer: one who relishes chanting the holy names. You nurtured that attraction by careful and attentive japa throughout your devotional career. You further increased your ardent desire to chant the holy names by engaging in many years of sankirtana before coming to Vrndavana in 1986. In the holy dhama you took Srila Prabhupada's desire as your life and soul, and you took charge of the twenty-four-hour kirtana in front of your beloved Sri Sri Radhe-Syama.

Because of your purity of purpose, those kirtanas became legendary. Each year, during the month of Kartika, devotees would come from all over the world to chant with you and your kirtana crew. It is said that the main purpose of visiting the holy dhama is to associate with the saintly persons living there. You were one of those saintly persons because you relished chanting and you made others chant and become mad after the holy names.

During the early days of our movement, whenever you and I would meet we would talk about our favorite activity: the loud chanting of the Hare Krsna mantra, and we would enjoy sharing the new melodies we had learned along the way. I remember sitting in your room in the gurukula one morning as you taught me a melody you had just learned from a visiting sadhu. You told me to lead the kirtana that evening and introduce the melody to the devotees.

Sometimes I would visit your room and talk with you about deity worship. Because of your eagerness to serve and your pure heart, the Lord came to you in many forms: Gaura-Nitai, Govardhan silas, and an uncountable number of Salagrama silas. Devotees would often bring you silas, sometimes because they had lost the taste for worshiping them, and you would never refuse. You accepted each and every one that came your way, and what's more, you worshiped each and every one with undivided devotion.

I admired you for your zeal in sharing the holy names with others, but also for your internal mood of awakening your own Krsna consciousness. You were absorbed in Vraja bhakti and were never too shy to say that you wanted to serve the Lord one day in the mood of a gopi. Some may have said that it was

premature, but I could see that you had understood the siddhanta of our process and were determined to achieve it.

And I miss you especially because you showed yourself to be a kind and loving friend. When my disciples celebrated my Vyasa puja several months ago in the Krsna-Balarama Mandir, you went and spoke for a long time about my service and my success in Krsna consciousness.

I assure you that I am not at all the devotee you thought me to be, but I thank you for encouraging me to become so by your kind words. I heard that you then led a long and blissful kirtana to honor me.

Now it is my turn, and the honor goes to you, but the circumstances are different. Never again in this lifetime will any of us have the good fortune to see you in your rightful place: at the lotus feet of Sri Sri Radhe-Syama, singing your heart out to Them in intense devotion. My dear godbrother, the month of Kartika in Vrndavana will never be the same without you and your rickety old harmonium, surrounded by an expert group of kirtaneers hanging onto your every note of the mahamantra.

My dear Aindra prabhu, how we all miss you! Though you were often outspoken, even fiery on issues within our movement, you were detached from management and politics. You were loyal and independent - very much an ISKCON man, very much a Prabhupada man - with an understanding of the essence of Krsna consciousness: that after all is said and done, ISKCON and Krsna consciousness means chanting the holy names with every fiber of one's body, with as much devotion as one can muster, for as many hours as possible each day. You embodied that spirit in your kirtanas, and that is why the young people looked up to you so much. That is why we all looked up to you so much. That is why we are all lamenting today.

I have no doubt that you are now in Goloka Vrndavana. You once told me that someone who is born in Vrndavana, lives in Vrndavana, or dies in Vrndavana is immediately transported to Goloka upon leaving the body. Because you yourself lived and died in that holy dhama, you have surely achieved the highest destination.

But I know you have achieved that goal mostly because you made the Hare Krsna mantra so popular all over the world. And you did it by sitting in one place. That's the amazing thing: you made kirtana and bhajana popular just by sitting on the marble floor of the Krsna-Balarama Mandir, not far from the sacred tamala tree in the courtyard. You inspired us all with your endearing melodies, along with the intense drumming and kartala playing. Because of your devotion-filled voice, the whole world became captivated by those kirtanas. I know, because I hear your kirtanas in temples all over the world.

You have left a void in our hearts that can never be filled in this lifetime. We can only pray to have the good fortune to serve with you again if you decide to take another birth. In the meantime we will try to follow in your footsteps and develop a genuine attachment for the holy names, our worshipable deities, and the holy place of Sri Vrindavan dhama.



Please look kindly upon us devotees here on the Baltic Sea Coast this summer. We too are trying our best to give the holy names to others. If you, from your transcendental position, are merciful to us, we may succeed in our efforts.

We submit this letter to you, confident that it will reach you through some transcendental medium, and we hope you have heard our glorification and prayers.

Your servants,

Indradyumna Swami and the members of the Festival of India in Poland 2010.

## **A Living Gita**

Volume 11, Chapter 7

Aug 5, 2010

When I flew from the United States to Warsaw at the beginning of July, Poland was still grieving the loss of President Lech Kaczynski, who had died in a plane crash in Russia in early April. His wife and scores of other senior Polish figures died with him. The run-off to the election to replace him was to be held on July 5, the day of our first summer festival on the Baltic Sea coast.

The next day I boarded a small plane for the town of Szczecin, near our base on the coast. It would be an eight-hour journey by plane and car, and I was suffering from jet lag, so I had put on non-devotional clothes, hoping to avoid discussions on the plane. As I sat down, I could feel a somber mood among the passengers.

About fifteen minutes into the flight, the man seated next to me spoke. "Are you aware that people are staring at you?" he said.

I looked around and made eye contact with several passengers, who were indeed staring at me. They quickly looked away.

"I wasn't aware of it," I said.

"Just who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Tibbitts, sir," I said. "I'm on my way to the coast for a little vacation."

"You're not on vacation," he said. "I've been watching you too. You're a man with a purpose. What are you really up to?"

I couldn't help smiling at his intuition. "Actually," I said, "I'm a Hare Krsna devotee and a participant in the annual Festival of India along the coast."

"Oh, the Festival of India," he said. "I know it well. I went to three of your festivals in the 1990s. They were very nice."

"Thank you," I said. "We've come a long way since then. You should visit us again."

"I will," he said.

"But tell me," I said, "how did you know I have a purpose in life, as you put it?"

He smiled. "I've been a lawyer for forty years," he said. "It's my job to know people's real intentions."

In Szczecin I was picked up by Amrtananda dasa and driven to our base, which was a beehive of activity. I immediately searched out Nandini dasi, whom I hadn't seen in ten months.

We exchanged greetings and then got down to work. "I haven't received any urgent emails from you," I said, "so I assume everything is going smoothly."

"I didn't want to bother you," she said. "You have enough on your mind with so many other responsibilities. But we have had some very close calls in organizing several of this year's events. It was only this morning that we were given a venue in Dzwirzyno for our first festival of the season."

"What?" I said. "The festival in Dzwirzyno is this evening."

"There were a lot of politics in the towns along the coast this year," Nandini said. "Many of the people who used to help us lost their jobs or moved on."

"Last month," she continued, "when I visited the town hall in Dzwirzyno, no one knew me and they showed little interest in hosting this summer's festival. I kept trying, but to no avail. This morning I tried one last time. I sat among a throng of people waiting for the receptionist. Two hours had passed when a man walked out of his office and recognized me."

"'Oh hello,' he said. 'What are you doing here?'"

"I said, 'I'm trying to get permission to put on the Festival of India.'"

"He turned to the receptionist and said, 'This lady and her associates have been staging events in our town for many years. You should immediately help her.'"

"Suddenly I was at the front of the line. The receptionist said, 'How can I help you?'"

"I said, 'We need a venue for our program. It's quite large. We average five thousand people a show.'"

"She stared at me in amazement. Then she checked her computer and said, 'I'm sorry. All the venues are taken.'"

"It seemed I'd hit another brick wall, but I decided to make one last try. I said, 'Could you ask the director of cultural affairs in the town?'"

"Just to appease me she picked up the phone and called the director. She said, 'I'm sorry for disturbing you, sir, but there's a lady here who wants to hold a show for five thousand people.'"

"She looked at me and said, 'He wants to know what show.'

"I said, 'The Festival of India,' and she told the director, 'It's the Festival of India.'

"Her face went white. She told the director, 'Yes, immediately. I'm so sorry. Here she is.' And she handed me the phone.

"The director knew me from a previous visit, and he started apologizing. He said, 'I'm so sorry for the inconvenience, so sorry. Your event is one of the highlights of the summer in my town. I was wondering why we hadn't heard from you this year.'

"I said, 'I've been trying to arrange a venue for a month, but no one in the administration seems to know us anymore. The receptionist here says there are no venues available.'

"He paused for a moment, and then he said, 'We'll give you the small park right in the center of town. You won't even need to publicize the event. Everyone will walk right into it.'"

Nandini smiled. "So that's how it went, Srila Gurudeva," she said.

"That's an amazing story, Nandini," I said. "At least the director remembered us."

That evening it seemed the entire town came to our festival, well above our normal crowd of five thousand.

"Just see, Srila Gurudeva," Nandini said as we walked around the site. "Look how Lord Caitanya is helping us."

"I've often witnessed His mercy on this tour," I said, "but it never ceases to amaze me."

Nandini laughed. "Something else happened this morning," she said. "I've been battling for a venue in Ustronie Morskie for a long time. We're supposed to have a festival there next week. The site we use every year was purchased by a disco bar. They plan to put tables there so people can sit outside the disco and drink beer. I approached them many times asking if we could rent the place, but they just laughed at me."

"Last night I made my final attempt," she continued. "I spoke to the man who had bought the site. He laughed and said, 'A cultural event? You've got to be kidding. Our culture is drinking beer and dancing with sexy women.'

"This morning I got a call from him at six a.m. He said, 'You can have the venue.'

"I was stunned. I said, 'Thank you so much. What made you change your mind?'

"He said, 'I had a dream last night, an amazing dream. When I woke up I told my wife I wanted to have that spiritual festival in our town. She said we'd lose money, but as far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter.'"

Nandini shrugged her shoulders and looked upward. "So you see, Srila Gurudeva," she said, "it's only by inconceivable mercy that it's all going on."

Ten days later we presented the festival in Ustronie Morskie. I relished it more than the others, knowing that it was only by higher decree that it went ahead. Thousands of people poured in throughout the evening enjoying our stage show, the tents, and the vegetarian restaurant.

As I walked around the grounds a man came up to me and started telling me a remarkable tale.

"Thirty years ago," he began, "I was traveling through India. I was on my way from Delhi to the Taj Mahal in Agra when my taxi driver turned off the road to a small country town. As we drove around I was attracted to the many temples and holy people and asked him to drop me off.

"I wandered about and came to a temple with three large altars. There were lots of people, Indians and Westerners, singing and dancing in front of the statues on the altars. The mood was very nice. I just couldn't pull myself away. I returned to that temple every day for a week. The whole atmosphere was heavenly. I even considered living there for a while, but family and business took me back to the West. I've thought of that temple and the atmosphere there ever since.

"Then the strangest thing happened today. I saw you people singing on the beach, handing out invitations to your festival. Somehow, your singing reminded me of that temple in India. I decided to come to your event, and now I'm overwhelmed. I'm feeling the same happiness and joy here that I experienced at that temple in India. I can't understand it."

"Do you remember anything specific about the altars in that temple?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," he said. "On the altar furthest to the left were statues of two young men dancing with their arms upraised. On the middle altar were two boys standing in a relaxed pose, one black and one white, and one had a flute. On the altar to the right was a beautiful couple. The man also had a flute."

"That temple is called the Krsna-Balarama Temple," I said. "It's one of our most important centers. This festival is an expansion of that center. Ours is like a traveling temple."

He put his hands to his head. "Amazing!" he said.

I smiled. "Maybe you shouldn't leave this time," I said.

A moment later a devotee came along and introduced me to another man.

The man shook my hand. "I still can't believe it," he said.

"Believe what?" I said.

"I'm a professor of philosophy," he said. "Several months ago I became interested in Eastern religion. I came across the Bhagavad-gita online and ordered a copy. I brought it with me on my vacation and was reading it on the beach, when suddenly you people appeared chanting along the sand. When I first saw you I just laughed. I thought you were a cult. I said to myself, 'These people should read the Bhagavad-gita and learn what Indian culture is really all about.'

"As you passed by I was given an invitation to your festival in Dzwirzyno last week. Just for laughs I decided to go. But I got the shock of my life when you came onstage to give your lecture. You started by saying that your movement is authorized because it's based on an ancient scripture, the Bhagavad-gita. I almost fell over when you held up the very same book I had purchased online: Bhagavad-gita As It Is by Swami Prabhupada. I came to Ustronie Morskie just to tell you that your festival is like a living Gita."

"Thank you very much," I said. "I can't think of a higher compliment."

Just then Braja Kishor dasa, our stage manager, came running up to me. "Maharaja," he said, "you're late for your lecture and the final kirtana."

I rushed to the stage with the professor in tow, and as I began my twenty-minute talk, he made himself comfortable in the front row. When I finished, the large audience applauded, and I sat down to lead the final kirtana.

"Thank You, Lord," I thought. "These people almost missed their chance to hear the holy names. Thank You for intervening."

I started off slowly but picked up the rhythm as devotees and guests began dancing on the field with abandon, young and old swaying in a circle in front of the stage. It was nothing new - it happens every night - but somehow it always gets better.

I was unaware of how long we'd been chanting when Jayatama dasa came in front of the stage and motioned to his watch. "It's past ten p.m.," he mouthed. "We have to stop."

I brought the kirtana to a close and watched sadly while the crowd left the grounds. As I came down from the stage, a man came up to me.

"I have to speak with you," he said. He paused for a moment, and then pressed fifty zlotys into my hand.

"Can you give blessings?" he said. "Please, I beg you, take this money and bless me that I will never forget the words to that song you were singing. I want to remember it and sing it every day of my life so I can be happy like you people. I've never experienced such joy as when I sang along with you tonight."

A small crowd started to gather.

"Bless him!" said a man.

"You can't refuse him!" said a woman.

I smiled. "OK, sir," I said. "I bless you to always chant the holy names of Krsna and be happy forever."

The onlookers applauded.

As I drove back to our base with several devotees, we were silent. Everyone was absorbed in remembering the mercy that had flowed that evening. Finally, Amrtananda spoke. "Srila Gurudeva," he said, "were you satisfied with the festival?"

"These are Mahaprabhu's modern-day pastimes," I said. "There's no other way to explain the incredible transformation that is taking place in the hearts of so many people. It's only by special grace that we are assisting Srila Prabhupada in this way."

I went to bed that night feeling deep satisfaction in my heart.

Srila Prabodhananda Saraswati writes: "The splendid path of pure devotional service, which bewildered the great sages in the past, which material intelligence has no power to enter, which Sukadeva Goswami was not able to understand, and which merciful Lord Krsna never revealed even to His closest friend, is the place where the dear devotees of Lord Gaura happily enjoy pastimes."

[Sri Caitanya-candramrta, Chapter 4, Text 1]

## **Fulfilling Your Desires**

Volume 11, Chapter 8

Sep 3, 2010

Dearest Srila Prabhupada,

Please accept my most humble obeisances in the dust of your lotus feet. All glories to you!

On this auspicious day 114 years ago, you appeared in this world to bestow causeless mercy on the fallen souls of this age. At the time of your appearance your glories were unmanifest like a lotus flower that remains closed in the darkness of night. But by the time you left this world your glorious deeds heralded an age of enlightenment and were applauded, just as everyone appreciates the beauty of the lotus which opens at the light of dawn.

I feel greatly fortunate to have been part of your pastimes both then and now. In the beginning I had the chance to hear from you personally, to join your morning walks and to render you personal service. Such is your merciful nature that once when I gave you a mere \$10 bill, you responded by writing me a letter encouraging me to chant the holy names, remain strict in my vows, and follow in the footsteps of advanced devotees.

In the short note that accompanied my donation I mentioned how I would feel intense separation from you as you continued your travels around the world. In response you wrote: "I am also feeling separation from my Guru Maharaja, but I feel that he is always watching over and protecting me." How prophetic those words were and how much they've come to mean to me after your inevitable departure from this world.

In the naivety of my spiritual youth I somehow assumed you would always be physically present amongst us. Your visits to the temples in which I served in those days were momentous occasions and I thought they would go on forever. In June of 1974 the temple president in Geneva promised that the winner of the upcoming book marathon would have the privilege to lead kirtan at the airport upon your arrival the following month. Eager for such mercy I distributed books twelve hours a day throughout the competition and won by a large margin. I can still see your face as you acknowledged the enthusiasm of the kirtan party and our love for you upon your arrival at the airport. We continued the kirtan in our van all the way back to the temple, arriving just before you. Jumping out of the vehicle we greeted you again with a kirtan that seemed to shake the heavens. As you passed by, you paused for a moment and smiled at me. At that very moment my life became perfect.

Knowing your heart - how you intensely desire the deliverance of fallen conditioned souls - I have continued with the spirit of that kirtan to the present day. For twenty one years we have held a festival tour along the Baltic Sea coast in Poland that attracts literally hundreds of thousands people each summer. Well-organized, professional and attractive it has truly made Hare Krishna a household word in Poland. We have introduced a smaller but no-less-potent form of the festival in three other continents



around the world. And this year we will take the program in full force to Brazil! You often spoke of your desire for a World Samkirtan Party. I pray this festival program has indeed fulfilled that dream.

Srila Prabhupada, your International Society for Krsna Consciousness is first and foremost a missionary movement. It is our duty as your followers to keep the flame of that mission burning for the next 10,000 years. As your disciples we cannot ask anything more of you until we successfully execute the instructions you have given us to spread Krsna Consciousness all over the world. By fulfilling your desires in this world, we qualify ourselves to serve your desires in the absolute world.

“O all-merciful spiritual master, representative of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, when will my mind be completely surrendered unto your lotus feet? At that time, only by your mercy, I shall be able to get relief from all obstacles to spiritual life and I shall attain spiritual bliss.”

[Srila Sridhar Swami, quoted in Krsna Book]

Srila Prabhupada, I know the path of pure devotional service is not easy and that there are many challenges along the way. But I want you to know that I am fully satisfied in my service to you and I feel more enthusiasm as each day passes. I love fulfilling the prophecy of Lord Caitanya that Krsna's holy names will be heard in as many towns and villages as there are on this planet. Is it wrong then to say that I sometimes feel more Krsna conscious standing on the asphalt streets of Kali Yuga loudly chanting the holy names, than I do singing and dancing on the marble floors in our temples? Have those streets not become hallowed ground due to the constant presence of Sri Nama Prabhu? And isn't it ironic that the waves of pedestrians and rush hour traffic with its toxic fumes and blaring horns seem like nectar to my senses, for all of these remind me of the many blissful years I spent spreading your message in such surroundings.

Some may consider me mad. In my youth I would hanker for the calm and peaceful atmosphere of a charming countryside. Now I favor brothels, bars and discos in cities teeming with the darkness of ignorance. Why? Because these are the places where people are suffering the most and, as a result, they are the places where people are ready to hear the timeless wisdom of Vedic knowledge. How is it possible that such fallen souls addicted to sinful activities can even begin to understand the higher values of life? It is possible by the causeless mercy of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu who takes special pleasure in redeeming fallen souls through the sublime process of chanting, dancing and feasting on food offered to the Lord. To observe such daily miracles while preaching is to experience the highest pleasure that life can afford. No one should be amazed by this fact, for it was predicted in the words of our acaryas centuries ago:

“Everywhere saintly men and women are laughing, the stone-like hearts of the materialists are melting, and the uneducated are defeating a host of learned atheists. All this is happening now that the most wonderful and glorious Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu has descended upon the earth.”

[Srila Prabhodhananda Sarasvati, Sri Caitanya-candramrta, Text 120]

Dearest Srila Prabhupada after diving into the nectarine ocean of Sri Krsna Samkirtan for as many births as you desire, I pray one day to surface in the eternal realm of Sri Vrindavan Dhama where you now sport in a land of love and bliss far beyond this world of birth and death. It is a lofty goal and surely fraught with the many dangers of this mortal world. Nevertheless, I have firm faith that by following the words that flowed from your pen into my heart to always chant the holy names, remain strict in my vows, and follow in the footsteps of advanced devotees I will be assured of success.

Srila Prabhupada in all honesty I do not feel myself to be a very competent servant of yours. I am not an advanced devotee like Sivarama Swami; I am not a devout scholar like Kesava Bharati Goswami. I can't lead kirtan like B.B. Govinda Swami, nor can I give a class like Niranjana Swami. Nevertheless, I can assure you there is no risk too great for me to accept in my desire to please you, no challenge so daunting that I will refuse your order and no danger so ominous that I will ever abandon my duties to you.

On this auspicious day my thoughts are deeply immersed in your divine personality, your noble deeds and your sublime message. I am missing you Srila Prabhupada just as I was many years ago when I handed you a token of my budding appreciation, only now the feelings of separation are stronger. Such is the result of service to a saintly person who is indeed always watching over and protecting me.

My dear spiritual master, savoir of my soul, my promise to you on this auspicious day is that I will continue to do my best in helping you reclaim the fallen souls of this age. In so doing I beg just one favor of Your Divine Grace: please be so kind as to pause for a moment and smile at me again, just as you did on that very special day in Geneva many years ago. Surely such a benediction will allow me to continue my blissful service to you now and forever more.

Your grateful servant,  
Indradyumna Swami

## **Your Name Will Be There**

Volume 11, Chapter 9

Sep 25, 2010

My dear godbrother Sridhar Maharaja,

Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

Today is the auspicious celebration of your appearance day. Numerous godbrothers, disciples, friends and well-wishers have gathered around the world and are enjoying sweet memories of your glorious activities in spreading the samkirtan mission of Lord Caitanya. In recounting these memories they will speak for hours, for by the grace of Srila Prabhupada your service record was outstanding. I know this because I was fortunate enough to spend some time with you and to witness your preaching activities in India, America and Canada.

I am happy that today you will receive the glorification you deserve. But I'm sad as well, for I feel your departure was premature. "Untimely" was the word Srila Prabhupada used when hearing of the demise of one of his disciples in the early days of the movement.

I sometimes wonder why the Lord takes away devotees like you so early, leaving the responsibility for spreading Krsna Consciousness to your younger godbrothers. It can only be because of His love for servants such as yourself who exhibit all good qualities and an intense desire to spread the holy names around the world. One of our godbrothers, Bimal Prasad das, explained this nicely:

"We all love and trust those great souls who achieve perfection in relishing the holy names. Unfortunately such success often means that the Supreme Lord Himself becomes eager for their association and thus we feel the loss when He takes them Home to be with Him."

I miss you a lot. I miss the times we spent traveling together in the early days of the movement. It was fun and enlivening to be in your association. No matter how difficult the situation, you always said something humorous to make us laugh. And the next moment you could speak so candidly about the illusory nature of material life that it would make me cringe.

Maharaja, no one can replace you. Like so many of Srila Prabhupada's disciples you were unique in your own Krsna conscious way. I remember towards the end when you were lying on your deathbed in Mayapura, one devotee turned to me and said, "How is this happening? What will the movement be like without Sridhar Swami?" I had no answer. I have learned the answer in time as I watch the world become a little dimmer each time an enlightened devotee like you departs.

After you left I felt I had lost one of my closest friends on the battlefield. Srila Prabhupada often compared preaching to a battle in which devotees have to fight both the illusory nature and those who oppose the samkirtan movement, such as mundane scientists, atheists and oppressive governments.

ISKCON has a long and glorious history in this battle to spread the message of Mahaprabhu in the Western world. Srila Prabhupada once said, "One day historians will note how this Krsna conscious movement saved the world in its darkest hours." No doubt when they do your name will be there, counted amongst those who were the first to go forward in the battle armed with the holy names and faith in their spiritual master.

Your faith made you fearless. I never once saw you back down from any opponent. No one could defeat you in argument, for you combined sastric knowledge with intense conviction. I saw numerous times how your conviction alone convinced others. Devotees of your calibre will be remembered, perhaps even more so in the future when people begin to appreciate the real value of what this movement has to offer.

You were one of the first to go forward, but you were also one of the first to leave. It's getting a little lonely out here on the battlefield, Maharaja. It's not that there aren't others present. There are plenty, even new sannyasis who are rising to the challenge. But it's not exactly the same. There is something to be said for those devotees who have spent thirty or forty years practicing and preaching Krsna consciousness as their life and soul. You were just such a personality. But now you have left and others are leaving as well. Soon the world will be bereft of the association of those men and women who were fortunate enough to have taken the dust from our Guru Maharaja's lotus feet upon their heads.

Certainly another generation of devotees will arise, unique in their own way and able to effectively preach in times to come. Due to their glorious efforts the movement will go on as it has for centuries, for millennia. But despite this, something will be lost that will never be seen again: that generation who came by chance or good fortune to help Srila Prabhupada in the very early days of the movement. Srila Prabhupada once said: "In the beginning Krsna sent me a few good men." No doubt, you were one of them.

And so for now we serve in separation carrying on as best we can. It's the same movement, the same process, the same teachings, but the ranks of Prabhupada's dedicated disciples are wearing thin. The solace will come when we join you and others like you in the next great chapter of preaching Krsna consciousness somewhere else in this material world where Srila Prabhupada has gone to continue his mission. Or perhaps His Divine Grace will invite us all back to the spiritual world to serve Radha and Krsna alongside him in an enchanting land of eternal bliss.

"Happy trails until we meet again" were your last words to me. I keep those words close to my heart and long to be with you again.

Your servant,

Indradyumna Swami

## **I Never Cry**

Volume 11, Chapter 10

Oct 11, 2010

Life on the festival tour in Poland this summer was austere - the cramped living facilities, the long hours, and the hotter-than-normal weather - but our three hundred devotees kept their spirits up all the way through. Many said that it had been our best tour, as proved by the largest crowds ever.

But mostly it was the appreciation that the guests showed, saying it in many loving ways, that set this year's tour apart from all the others. It was never more obvious than at Rewal, our last festival.

As we had only one harinama to advertise the event, I gave the devotees a little pep talk before we started.

"It's a beautiful day," I told them, "and everyone is on the beach. At this moment not a soul in town knows we are having a program tonight. Over to the right you can see the setup crew starting to put up the tents on the field. There's a German word, 'blitzkrieg,' that refers to an army invading a town with lightning speed. So we're going to blitzkrieg Reval this morning and let everyone know about the festival tonight."

The devotees cheered and quickly set about readying all the sankirtana equipment: the accordions, mrdangas, djembe drums, karatalas, flags, banners, and festoons. Within minutes, a hundred and sixty devotees descended onto the beach joyfully chanting and dancing.

As we wove our way through whatever little space was left on the beach, people grabbed invitations right out of our hands. After half an hour we stopped, and Tribhuvanesvara dasa gave a short talk to invite everyone to the festival. Afterwards people raised their hands and asked questions. People who had never seen us before stood dumbfounded by the keen interest others showed.

"Do you have a new theater this year?" asked a man.

"Is the Sankhya dance group from Mumbai performing again?" said another.

"Will there be a dance contest for the children to win a sari?" a woman called out.

The kirtana party continued down the beach, and I walked a little behind to be with some of the devotee children.

"Guru Maharaja," a boy said, "we have a question. We want to ask if you ever cry."

I stopped. "What?" I said.

"We want to know if sometimes you cry," he said. "We always hear how devotees are supposed to cry for Krsna. You know, like the gopis cry for Krsna or how tears should come to our eyes when we chant Hare Krsna."

I laughed. "I'm not on that level," I said.

"So you never cry?" a girl said.

"Never," I said.

As we continued down the beach, a middle-aged woman jumped up from her sunbathing and ran over to me. She wore a respectable swimsuit, and her jewelery and watch looked expensive.

"Excuse me, sir," she said. "May I speak to you for a moment?"

"Sure," I said, glancing at the children who gathered around us to hear what she had to say.

"I wanted to thank you for helping me so much," she said. "I feel very much indebted to you."

I tried to remember where I might have met her.

"I attended your lecture at the festival in Kolobrzeg the other night," she continued. "My psychiatrist recommended that I go hear you. He had heard you speak earlier this summer and told me that listening to you would solve the problems I was having."

I could feel my face blush.

"Oh, thank you," I said.

"After listening to your talk," she said, "I feel I can cope now with the problems I am dealing with in life. In particular you inspired me when you spoke so convincingly about the spiritual world. I truly believe now that it exists."

She took my hands. "I just cannot thank you enough," she said. "I'm so grateful."

As she returned to her spot on the beach, I was overwhelmed by her appreciation, and I felt so grateful to my spiritual master that my eyes become moist and one or two tears rolled down my cheek.

I quickly brushed the tears aside and turned to continue following the kirtana party, but the children had seen me. "You do cry Guru Maharaja!" a boy shouted. "Just see! You're crying! Look!"

That evening over five thousand people came to the festival. As they poured in and wandered through the tents, a young couple approached me panting for breath with their little daughter in tow.

"We made it!" the husband said. "We finally made it!" I chuckled.

"It's only fifty meters from the beach to the festival," I said.

"No," said the husband. "Let me explain. Last year we came to your festival here. Our daughter was four years old, and she had the time of her life. Since then all she talks about is your festival. She talks about it constantly."

"It's true," said his wife. "She talks about the Indian dancers, the puppet shows, the singing, the magic show, the food, and the saris, especially the saris. Each night before she goes to bed she insists on practicing her dancing so she can win a sari at the next festival."

"That's right," said the husband, "And every morning when she wakes up, her first question is, 'How many more days until the Festival of India?'"

The wife laughed. "So you can just imagine how relieved we are to finally be here," she said.

As the stage show began I made my way around the festival site watching people enjoy themselves in the tents and at the outdoor attractions. I was soon joined again by the same group of devotee children. As we strolled around, a young girl ran up to us.

"Hare Krsna!" she said excitedly. "I'm Ania. I'm happy you're all back."

"Hare Krsna, Ania," I said. "So you've been to our festival before?"

"Yes," she said with a big smile. "The first time I came I was only two weeks old. I'm nine now, and I have come here every year since."

"Huh?" I said. "You were two weeks old the first time you came to our festival?"

"Yes," she said. "My house is just across the street. The first time you came here I had just been born. My mother saw your festival from the window and brought me along. I got my first gopi dots at that festival when I was a tiny baby."

"And you even know the right name for the face painting," I said.

Just then another girl came running up. "This is Dorota," Ania said. "She's my best friend, and she lives next door to me. She's been coming to the festival since she was two."

"And I win a sari every year," Dorota said proudly. "I've won seven of them, but I gave four to my grandma because she likes to wear them around the house."

"That's interesting," I said. "And what do you like best about our festival, Dorota? The dancing? The puppet show? The food?"

"No" she said. "The best part of the festival is your lecture at the end. That's my favorite part. Grandma likes it too. She hardly ever goes outside now because she's too old, but when it's time for you to speak at the festival she has my mommy bring her. She said you're her favorite priest in the whole world because you know how to make religion fun."

I was about to continue my stroll when another girl ran up.

"This is Ewa, my other best friend," said Ania. "She's been coming to the festival since she was three years old."

"I see you every day on Facebook," said Ewa, shaking my hand.

"You do?" I said. "Your mother lets you go on Facebook? You're so young."

Ewa laughed. "Yes," she said. "She lets me use Facebook because I only have one Facebook friend: that's you. You gave me your garland when I was four, and it's still hanging on the wall of my room. When I was six I broke my arm and you signed my cast, and that's also hanging on my wall. I love my mommy, daddy, uncle and aunt, my grandpa, and even my music teacher, but you're my favorite person in the whole world because you've shown me the most love, even though I only get to see you once a year."

"Oh really," I said, my voice quivering slightly and my face flushing.

The devotee children looked at each other.

"See?" a girl said smiling at another. "He's going to cry again."

I scratched my head and cleared my throat. "What do you like most about the festival, Ewa?" I said.

She thought for a moment. "Krsna," she said.

"Amazing," I said. "And you, Ania?"

"Radharani, Krsna's girlfriend," she replied.

I started to say, "How do you know about Radharani?" but I stopped.



"Why don't we all walk over to the restaurant and have something to eat?" I said.

"Yeah!" Ania shouted. "Some burfi!"

"And samosas!" shouted Ewa.

After our little party at the restaurant I finished my tour of the festival grounds and went backstage to see how the performers were doing. I thought I could use a little nap, so I lay down. Forty-five minutes later a devotee was shaking me. "Haribol, Maharaja," he said, "You're on. Time for the lecture."

I jumped up, threw some water on my face, and walked onto the stage just as the master of ceremonies, Tribhuanesvara, was introducing me. The audience of five hundred looked at me in expectation.

Though I'd just woken up I had no difficulty speaking. I'd given the introductory lecture a thousand times before, but each time it felt as fresh as the first. It was the highlight of the evening for me: everything about the festival culminated in this opportunity to speak the sublime philosophy of Krsna consciousness to our guests.

After the talk, we had a rousing forty-five minute kirtana and gave away saris to the best dancers (Dorota won her eighth). The show ended, and as I walked slowly down the stairs I saw a woman waiting for me with a Bhagavad-gita in her hand.

The devotee children were waiting for me as well, and they surrounded me as the woman stepped forward to hand me her Bhagavad-gita.

"You said in your lecture if we bought a Bhagavad-gita you would sign it," she said.

"Yes," I said, "and I will."

"And could you also write down your email address?" she said. "I have many questions I'd like to ask you."

"Yes, of course," I replied. "Everything I know I've learned from this book and my spiritual master."

I started to sign the inside cover, then looked up. "May I ask what your profession is?" I said.

"I'm a judge in one of Poland's high courts," she said.

I slowly and carefully signed the book and wrote my email address.

The children were walking with me towards my van when a young couple stopped me and asked me to sign their newly purchased Bhagavad-gita.

"I have been waiting seventeen years to buy this book," the man said.

"Seventeen years?" I said.

He chuckled. "Yes," he said. "Your festival came to our town fifty kilometers from here in 1993. I was seven years old at the time. I was running around your event with the other kids, having a good time, but when you came onstage and spoke I remember how the whole atmosphere changed. Even all the kids stopped to listen.

"I didn't understand a thing you said, but I remember that it was a special moment. I remember seeing so many people buying the book afterwards, and I thought someday I'd like to get one too.

"My future wife was at the festival as well, but we were just children and didn't know each other. Years later, when we married, we were talking one day and discovered that we had both been at your festival and that we both remembered the special moment when you came on stage with that book. Just yesterday we heard your festival was being held here in Rewal, so we came to see it again and buy the book after all these years."

I wrote a long dedication in their Bhagavad-gita.

"Amazing," I thought. "Something wonderful happens at just about every step on this tour."

But the wonderful things were not yet finished.

As the children were helping me into the van, a young man in his early twenties ran up. "Excuse me," he said. "I know you're busy and you must be tired, but I wanted to share something with you before you leave."

"No problem," I said and stepped out of the van. "My time is yours."

"Last year I came to your festival with my younger sister," he said. "She was sixteen. It was our first time at your event. My sister was especially attracted by the singing of Hare Krsna at end of the program. She memorized the song and would often sing it around the house.

"Six months ago we found out she had cancer. It was at a very advanced stage and nothing could be done. She had already started dwindling away. I was at my university when she called me one evening. She could no longer talk properly, what to speak of singing, so she asked if I could sing Hare Krsna to her each night as she fell asleep.

"Every evening I would call and sing the Hare Krsna song to her from six o'clock until nine. It went on like that for two months. One night she passed away as I was singing. I didn't even know until I heard my

mother on the other end of the phone saying that she had died. I cried for days. My sister was my best friend, and now my whole world has become gray.

"My sister loved that song, and it was the last thing she heard. I have a feeling deep in my heart that it took her to a very special place, a place far beyond this world of suffering and pain, a place where people are happy all the time like all of you are. Do you think it could be true?"

I tried to answer, but my voice choked up, so I nodded to assure the man it was true. I closed my tearful eyes and embraced him.

Then I remembered the children and waited for them to tease me again. But they did not say anything. When I opened my eyes I saw they were crying too.

Sri Prabodhananda Saraswati writes:

prema namadbhutarthah sravanapathagatah kasya namnam mahimnah  
ko vetta kasya vrndavanavipina mahamadhurisu pravesah  
ko va janati radham paramrasacamatkarmadhuryasimam  
ekascaitanyacandrah paramkarunayah sarvvamaviscakara

"Had anyone even heard of something known as prema, as the ultimate goal of life? Did anyone know of the divine power of the holy names? Had anyone entered the sweet charming forest of Vrndavana? Did anyone know Sri Radha, the embodiment of the highest ecstasy? Only because of the unfathomable compassion of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu were these rarest gems discovered, found shimmering in the darkness of Kali Yuga, lit by the moonlight of His benevolence."

[Caitanya-candramrta, verse 130]

## The Sacred Necklace

Volume 11, Chapter 11

Dec 11, 2010

One morning in Vrindavana, I was sitting in my house chanting my rounds when my disciple Narottam Das Thakur Das came to see me. He offered his respectful obeisances and then "Guru Maharaja," he said, "it's been a long time since I have visited Govardhana Hill. If you don't have any service for me today, I would like your blessings to go on Govardhana parikrama."

"You're free to go," I said. "Just be back in time for the program tonight. I would go with you, but I have some important things to do."

As he was leaving I had another thought. "Keep your eyes open," I said. "You never know what special mercy might come your way during parikrama in Vrindavana."

Early the next morning he burst into my room as I was chanting my rounds.

"Guru Maharaja," he said excitedly, "the most amazing thing happened to me yesterday."

It seems that Narottam had taken a taxi to Govardhana Hill and begun his parikrama at Kusum Sarovara. He set a quick pace and reached the southern tip of the hill in a few hours. He felt tired, so he wandered into a forested area to take a short break. Suddenly he saw a sadhu sitting and chanting on japa beads. The sadhu was thin and lean, with matted locks tied neatly on top of his head, dressed only in a loin cloth with a chadar around his shoulders. His eyes were closed, and he seemed peaceful and equipped, absorbed in his meditation on the holy names.

Narottam went up to him. "My dear sir," he said, "may I ask who you are?"

The sadhu opened his eyes. "I am the servant of Giriraja," he said.

Narottam was attracted by the sadhu's saintly bearing, so he sat by him and began chanting. After thirty minutes the sadhu rose and turned to Narottam. "I am on Govardhana parikrama," he said. "Would you like to join me?"

"Yes, of course," Narottam replied.

They soon came to Apsara Kunda, a sacred lake at the foot of Govardhana and stopped for a moment to enjoy the beautiful scenery.

"Where do you live, sir?" Narottam asked.

"I live around Govardhana," the sadhu said. "And each night I stay in a different asrama."

"And how do you get food?"

The sadhu smiled. "It's never a problem," he said. "No one goes hungry in Vrindavana. I beg from the villagers, and they always give more than I can eat. Usually I end up sharing my meals with the cows or the monkeys."

At that moment they passed a group of pilgrims on a picnic. "Jai ho Babaji!" a man called out. "Please come take prasada with us."

The sadhu smiled again. "You see?" he said. "Giriraja provides everything for His devotees."

After having lunch with the other pilgrims, Narottam and the sadhu washed their hands in a nearby pond and continued walking. As they passed into an area of thick foliage, the sadhu gazed affectionately at Govardhana.

"This hill, Giri-Govardhana," he said, "is the best devotee of Krsna. Radharani, Krsna's beloved, once said to Her friends: 'Of all the devotees, this Govardhana Hill is the best. O my friends, this hill supplies Krsna and Balarama, as well as Their calves, cows and cowherd friends, with all kinds of necessities - water for drinking, very soft grass, caves, fruits, flowers, and vegetables. In this way, the hill offers respect to the Lord. Being touched by the lotus feet of Krsna and Balarama, Govardhana Hill appears very jubilant.'"

They walked only another fifty meters when the sadhu stopped.

"Let me show you a special place where I sometimes go to chant," he said.

They turned left off the parikrama path and made their way into the forest, then stopped just behind an asrama. The sadhu pointed to an opening in a rise on the ground.

"Just over there is Raghava Pandit's cave," he said. "Raghava Pandit was a great devotee of Lord Caitanya and would do his bhajana in this cave whenever he visited Vrindavana. It is a very sacred place. Let us go there and chant at the entrance."

While they were sitting near the cave chanting on their beads, Narottam turned to the sadhu. "Baba," he said, "how old are you? You're obviously not young, but you do have a youthful bearing."

The sadhu chuckled. "I'm ninety years old," he said.

"And do you spend much time here?" Narottam asked.

"I've lived here my entire life," he said. "And I've done Govardhana parikrama every day since I was ten years old."

Narottam was amazed. "That's every day for eighty years," he said. "How many Govardhana parikramas is that?"

"The number is not important," the sadhu said. "When one circumambulates Govardhana Hill, the heart is purified and gradually one's devotion for Krsna is awakened."

Narottam thought about the sadhu's words. Then he spoke. "My spiritual master," he said, "is a disciple of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, who left Vrindavana at an advanced age to spread love of Krsna all over the world."

"I know of Swami Bhaktivedanta," the sadhu said.

"My spiritual master is helping to advance his guru's mission," Narottam continued. "He tells people about the glories of Vrindavana in places like Eastern Europe and Russia. Every year during the month of Kartika he takes groups of devotees on parikrama around Vraja."

The sadhu's eyes opened wide. "Oh that is very nice," he said.

"And he carries a Govardhana-sila with him wherever he travels," said Narottam.

The sadhu's eyes opened even wider. "That really is very nice," he said.

As they continued chanting japa, Narottam studied the sadhu and noticed he was wearing two strings of large Tulasi beads around his neck. One consisted of dark-colored beads that appeared polished through years of being worn, and there was a large silver kavaca on it. The second set of beads was smaller and newer.

Narottam suddenly had an idea. He took a deep breath. "Babaji Maharaja," he said, "I've noticed you are wearing two sets of large Tulasi beads around your chest." He paused for a moment. "Do you think I could have one to give to my guru as a present?"

The sadhu stopped chanting and thought for several minutes. "Yes," he said, "I can give."

Narottam was stunned. He hadn't expected the sadhu to give the beads.

The sadhu put his chadar on the ground and then carefully placed his japa beads on it. He then removed the newer set of beads.

"I carved them myself," he said as he dropped them into Narottam's hands.

Narottam couldn't believe his good fortune as he looked at the beads, but when he looked up, he noticed the older beads now hanging in plain view on the sadhu's chest. The finely carved beads were made from knotted wood and appeared as if from another era. There was something mystical about them.

"Babaji," Narottam said, almost pleading, "my spiritual master would be most appreciative of the older set."

The sadhu's eyes opened wide. He fingered the beads. "I received this set from another sadhu forty years ago," he said. "He got them from his guru when he was a small boy, and his guru had received them from his own guru many years before that. They are more than a hundred years old."

Narottam lost all hope.

"They have circumambulated Govardhana Hill thousands of times, bathed in Radha Kunda every day I have lived here, and are imbued with the spiritual potency of all the prayers and mantras I have chanted in my appeals to Giriraja," said the sadhu.

Narottam nodded and returned to his chanting.

Then the sadhu spoke again. "But I will be happy to give them to your guru," he said. "Tell him to continue spreading the glories of Vrindavana wherever he goes."

Then he took off the old Tulasi beads with the silver kavaca and carefully placed them into Narottam's trembling hands. Narottam sat staring at the beautiful necklace, a transcendental work of art permeated with the devotion of a saintly person.

"But you must give me back the other necklace," the sadhu said with a chuckle. "What's a baba without beads?"

Narottam handed back the newer set and placed the older one in his bag.

"All right," the sadhu said with a smile, "let us continue our parikrama. Giriraja-Govardhana, ki jaya!"

He stood up and began walking so quickly Narottam could hardly keep up with him. "This sadhu has so much energy," he thought.

The sadhu's japa got louder as his pace increased, and after a while Narottam fell behind. Gradually the saintly person, intent on his daily ritual of circumambulating Govardhana, disappeared.

Narottam stopped and checked in his bag to see if the sacred beads had really been more than a dream.

"Gurudeva will be so happy," he thought.

I sat in my room spellbound, listening to Narottam's story. He stopped talking and finally took out the beads and placed them in my hands. As I looked at them, I realized I had received a gift of unlimited mercy.

I slowly placed them around my neck and turned to Narottam. "How do they look?" I asked.

"Well, they're quite big, Guru Maharaja," he said. "Not what the general devotee wears."

"Nevertheless, I must wear them," I said. "They are a gift from a saintly person. Besides, they're saturated with spiritual potency. I'm leaving for Brazil in a few days for a seven-week festival program. These beads will be my inspiration as I leave this holy abode of Vrindavana. I'll be carrying Vrindavana with me."

"Yes," said Narottam. "The benediction was timely."

As I studied the beads I asked Narottam what was in the kavaca.

A look of embarrassment came over his face, and he blushed. "I forgot to ask," he said.

"Huh?" I said. "You didn't ask the sadhu what was inside the kavaca?"

"No, Guru Maharaja," he said. "I was overwhelmed by the moment."

"That's all right," I said. "It adds to the mystery of the pastime. For sure, whatever is in the kavaca is spiritually potent and precious."

I pressed the necklace close to my chest and then went back to chanting my rounds.

"I will wear this sacred necklace for the rest of my life," I thought, "and one day, like the sadhu, I will pass it on to another devotee who will benefit from its charm."

My mind went back to 1972, when Srila Prabhupada kindly handed me a dhoti from his suitcase. "A gift from a Vaisnava is a very special thing," he said. "It should be treated with all respect."



## **There Are Too Few Like You**

Volume 11, Chapter 12

Dec 19, 2010

Dear Purnacandra Goswami,

Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

It was with great sorrow that I heard about your sudden departure from this world. Although we regularly hear about these things in sastra and are constantly preparing ourselves for such inevitable events, somehow when they actually happen we seem totally unprepared. And so it is that I can hardly believe you are no longer among us.

Your departure leaves a deep sadness in my heart. It is said that time heals all wounds, but this maxim does not hold true with the departure of Vaisnavas. In fact, the wound only becomes deeper as we remember their personalities and the contributions they made to this historic movement, which is establishing the teachings of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu all over the world.

No doubt your departure was auspicious because you have gone back to Godhead. Be that as it may, you have left us - your godbrothers, disciples, and friends - lamenting. Your return to the spiritual world is a gain for the devotees of that transcendental abode but a tragic loss for us. Not only for us, but for all the conditioned souls who might have met you, had you stayed a little longer.

A devotee of your caliber is always focused on the mission of his spiritual master: to shed light on the science of Godhead for the benefit of others. When such a preacher departs, that light goes out, and the world becomes a little darker.

You and I were friends. Some people say such things casually: "Oh, so and so is my friend," or "Yes, I know him. He's a friend of mine." But friendship in Krsna consciousness is not a casual thing. It is a special blessing of Krsna to be cherished as dearly as life itself. It is not based on shared material desires but is established on and matures through service to guru and Gauranga. It goes deep and is relishable because of the blissful experience of preaching Krsna consciousness together.

The camaraderie that you and I shared in our preaching in England, Russia, and India was always enlivening for me. We seemed to have a natural attraction to each other, even though we were different in many ways. But it is said that opposites attract. I tend to be outgoing and social, whereas you, because of your humility, were often shy and reserved. Still, as different as we were, we shared many interests, such as kirtana, lecturing, and annual visits to Sri Vrindavana Dhama.

In fact, it was your strong attraction to Vraja bhakti and your determination to achieve it by spending as much time as possible in Sri Vrindavan Dhama doing bhajana that endeared you to me. You would spend many a Kartika in the dhama studying sastra and chanting the holy names with fixed attention.

Because you were well read, you had a deep understanding of the scriptures and a unique ability to communicate this to others. That was evident in the classes and seminars you gave, which were always popular with the devotees. Because of your limited preaching field, you were not well known within our ISKCON movement, so I was happy when the GBC acknowledged your abilities and had you convene and chair the Sastric Advisory Committee.

I'll never forget the time your sastric knowledge saved my lowly self from embarrassment. One Kartika I joined a large parikrama party going to Visrama Ghat on the border between Vrindavana and Mathura. It was headed by Radhanath Swami and attended by many other illustrious godbrothers: Deena Bandhu Prabhu, Bhakti Caitanya Maharaja, BB Govinda Maharaja, and others.

Hundreds of devotees from around the world had filled the many buses that took us on the parikrama. By Krsna's arrangement I was sitting next to you. At one point we received a message from Radhanath Swami saying that all the godbrothers would be asked to speak for a few minutes. I immediately became anxious because I knew little or nothing of the pastimes that took place at Visrama Ghat.

When I mentioned this to you, you smiled. "Write down what I tell you as notes," you told me, "and you can use them when you speak."

You went on to describe the pastimes at Visrama Ghat in great detail with many anecdotes and realizations as revealed by Visvanath Cakravarti and others. You suggested I read the notes until we arrived at the holy place so that when I spoke about the knowledge you'd shared with me it would seem natural. Just before we arrived you quizzed me on everything to be sure I knew it all by heart.

When we arrived at Visrama Ghat, some seven hundred devotees sat down at that auspicious place, with the godbrothers facing them in front. I was called on to speak first. As I took my place at the microphone I glanced over at you, and you winked, giving me assurance that everything would be all right. I began to speak, and because I had read my notes repeatedly the lilas and pastimes flowed easily from my mouth. It was a wonderful, transcendently satisfying experience.

Afterwards many devotees complimented me on my talk, even Radhanath Swami. "I had no idea," he said, "that you were such a rasika devotee with such deep realizations and understanding of sastra." In all honesty, I had no choice but to tell him the truth, that I had learned these things from you just an hour earlier.

So I was saved from having to show my lack of knowledge, and I thank you once again. Though younger than me and with fewer years of devotional service in this lifetime, you were in fact more advanced than me in every way.

I find it regrettable that you did not receive the recognition you deserved during your lifetime. Sometimes such acknowledgement places a devotee in a better position to share his knowledge and realizations with others, who benefit from his saintly association.

There are too few like you, Maharaja, too few willing to sacrifice anything and everything for preaching the mission of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Especially after taking sannyasa, you were busy all day every day in various ways, sharing your good fortune with others.

I will miss you. Your godbrothers and godsisters will miss you. Your disciples will miss you. And the people of Bosnia, Croatia, and Russia will miss you though they know it not. In reality, a great catastrophe, a great calamity, has befallen society: a capable and faithful Vaisnava who was doing the highest welfare work has departed. Hundreds of billions of ignorant souls cannot compare with one humble Vaisnava like you.

The world does not know what it has lost. We know, however, so we are remembering you and keeping you close to our hearts. But I do not feel that we are alone. The service rendered by you and by other devotees like you will be recognized by the denizens of the higher planets. Why not? Surely your spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, recognized you, and he is the sum total of all the demigods.

On the day of your samadhi ceremony, I, like many others, offered you my final respects and my most humble prostrated obeisances. I would consider it my great fortune should I serve alongside you in a future lifetime.

Your servant, friend, admirer, and godbrother,  
Indradyumna Swami

## **An Offering of Love**

Volume 11, Chapter 13

Jan 21, 2011

Dearest BB Govinda Maharaja,

Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

I'm sorry I can't be with you in Moscow at the auspicious celebration of your sixtieth birthday. I'm far away, but I want you to know that I am thinking of you and remembering you throughout the day. How couldn't I? You are the best friend I've ever had, and you have demonstrated that time and again throughout the many years we've known each other. Any close relationship requires deep loving reciprocation and I feel that we have achieved that in our twenty five years of friendship. Most important, we have simultaneously advanced to the point of appreciation for the holy names, the sastra and the transcendental abodes of the Lord. Therefore we have genuine substance to our relationship which makes it real and unbreakable.

Honestly, much of what I've come to love in Krsna consciousness I have imbibed through your association. Your kirtans are legendary and will never go out of style. Just as Visnujana Maharaja's unique style of chanting the holy names remains popular after several decades, so I firmly believe that your bhajan and style of kirtan will remain famous for hundreds of years to come.

When you speak from your favorite book, Brhat Bhagavatamrta, you illuminate the words of Srila Sanatana Goswami. It is obvious to many of us that you have his blessings and those of other acaryas as well.

And your cooking? Well, these days only a few rare souls get the opportunity to taste your excellent preparations. I am one of them, and I know that you can take a simple potato, add a few spices, mix it around and somehow make it taste just like it's come straight from Vaikuntha!

And your friendship: I am a fortunate recipient of that, but so are many others. You charm people with your personality and inspire them to serve the Lord as best they can. Many people consider you their friend. They wait eagerly for your association each year and value your kindness, humor and care for them. Lucky are those who have your association, for although you do big things you remain always available for those of us who need you. And in the midst of it all, your humor makes even the most difficult moments light.

Some fortunate devotees have experienced just how far you will go to help and inspire them. A good example of this is our godbrother, Bhuddhimanta das, a dedicated book distributor who came to Vrindavan to leave his body in the late 1970s, his brain ravaged by cancer. You came forward spontaneously to help him in his bedridden state even without being asked. You lived close to him, nursed him, fed him, cleaned up after him when he relieved himself and silently tolerated his delirious

abuse of you by his words and fists. I don't know if anyone ever approached you and with heartfelt appreciation thanked you for such loving and selfless service. May I take the opportunity now on behalf of our spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, the assembled devotees and our entire movement for such an amazing display of concern and love for another Vaisnava.

Your example in this regard is par excellence and serves as a milestone for those concerned with devotee care and maintenance. I will consider it my extreme good fortune if you could also be by my side when I depart this world. Not only because I know you would kindly nurse my decaying body, but more so for the chance to hear the holy names chanted purely and most sweetly from your lips.

I would also like to thank you for the love and care you have given the devotees of the Kazakhstan yatra over the years. Like a lioness guarding her cubs, you fearlessly protected your little flock of devotees from the dangerous and sometimes violent attacks of your enemies in that country. And you never gave up. You didn't want to leave those devotees to the merciless dealings of our antagonists there. Now it is doubtful if you will ever be able to return there as the government has adamantly refused to give you any kind of visa to do so. Though it is sad it is also a compliment. It means they are afraid of your potential and your ability to continue the fight and win. In rejecting you they have indeed praised you. How fortunate I am to have such a brave warrior as a friend!

Another one of your unique qualities is your amazing ability to interact with and become friends with people in high positions in society. When you were campaigning to defend your Kazakhstan project you came into contact with many influential personalities such as ambassadors, leaders of respected NGO organizations, people concerned with human right and others. Meeting with such important people is often formal, dry and inconclusive. But by your amiable personality and good nature you cut through any unease that might have accompanied such meetings and made everyone feel relaxed and happy in your association. I hate to even say such a thing because you are the best of devotees, but if you weren't a devotee then you would make a most excellent ambassador for any country in any part of the world. You could easily be the Secretary of State in our good old USA and represent the country in an amicable yet efficient way. But because you are a devotee of the highest order Srila Prabhupada has chosen you and other qualified sons and daughters like you to represent him and our acarayas as an ambassador for spreading the message of Krsna consciousness all over the world.

I am proud to be your friend. You often say that two devotees always remain on either side of you: HH Sivarama Swami on the left side and my lowly self on the right. I never really understood how I got this service. My faults are many and like a true friend you are quick to point them out. I thank you for that. But just what you see in me that would give me the position to be always beside you is beyond me. Nevertheless, I will accept it as "mercy which comes of its own accord" and through your association try to develop the same taste you have for chanting the holy names and appreciating the association of Vaisnavas.

I wish you a long life. If my wish comes true it will mean many, many persons — both devotees and non-devotees — will be inspired to take up seriously the process of devotional service.

You are, in fact, an inspiration for more devotees than you can possibly imagine. All of them take this opportunity along with me to thank you on your sixtieth birthday for all you've done and are doing for us.

And last but not least, thank you so much for watching over and protecting me during the last six months. As soon as you learned my health was being compromised, you jumped in and gave me more advice than is contained in a medical dictionary. It was simple and common sense advice, and given in a concerned and loving way. I will do my best to follow what I can to ensure I stay around as long as possible to benefit from your precious association.

Thank you my dear friend and godbrother.

I remain, as always, on your right side,  
Indradyumna Swami

## **Ghee Lamps in a Bag and the Lord in My Hands**

Volume 11, Chapter 14

Feb 27, 2011

In India I am always on the lookout for interesting puja items, so the other day in Jaipur, I visited the antique shop of Mr. Sharma, an old friend. As I walked in he greeted me and we sat down to talk.

"Do you have anything interesting for me?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I've kept aside a few small items you can use for puja."

"Great!" I said.

As Mr. Sharma looked through the desk drawers for the items, my eyes were drawn across the room to what looked like a salagrama-sila sitting on a dusty shelf. I walked over and found it to be indeed a beautiful salagrama-sila, smooth and shiny with an indented reddish mouth.

"Looks like Lord Nrsimhadeva," I thought, "Nrsimhadeva in a peaceful mood."

Mr. Sharma started showing me the puja items — lamps, achman spoons, and plates. They were interesting, but my mind kept wandering back to the salagrama-sila.

"Mr Sharma," I said, "I noticed a salagrama-sila on the shelf over there."

"Oh that," he said, looking toward the deity. "It's not for sale."

"He's not an 'it,'" I said. "According to scripture, salagrama-silas are deities. They are directly the Supreme Lord."

Mr. Sharma shrugged. "Perhaps that's why that stone was worshiped in the royal family of Jaipur for several hundred years."

I gasped. "What?" I said.

"That salagrama was in the royal family for hundreds of years," he said. "Priests would worship it on behalf of the royal family. One of their distant relatives brought it in the other day along with a number of silver items. She had come into difficult times and was selling some of her valuables. She mentioned that her great-grandmother had told her how special the stone was when she was young. But it hadn't been worshiped in many years."

"Mr. Sharma," I said, "that salagrama is just sitting on that old shelf gathering dust. He should be worshiped."

Mr. Sharma shrugged. "I keep it there for good luck," he said.

"But He's a deity," I said. "He's Krsna. If you invite an important guest to your shop or your home, it's your responsibility to serve him properly, to offer him a seat, a place to rest, something to eat, what to speak of the most important person in the three worlds—Lord Krsna. If He somehow comes to your shop, you can't just leave Him sitting on a shelf."

Mr. Sharma thought for a moment. "I never thought of it like that," he said. "When the salagrama came I knew it was an important item because of its history. And it had a special aroma about it, like musk or aguru. There was an old flower embedded in the dried sandalwood paste on top of the salagrama."

He paused. "The best I can do is to dust it off regularly," he said.

"It's not enough to dust Him off," I said. "The royal family didn't do that. Obviously they worshiped Him in the proper way with aguru oil, sandalwood paste, and flowers."

Mr. Sharma just shrugged again.

"If you don't want to worship Him," I said, "at least give Him to a local temple or a priest. I could ask my friend the Goswami at the Radha-Gopinath temple if he would take the deity. Shall I do that? They have a little altar of salagramas at the entrance of the temple."

"No," said Mr. Sharma. "Let me think about it more."

"OK, fine," I said. "I'll be back tomorrow for one or two of the puja items."

The next day I went back to the shop. Mr. Sharma was busy with another customer, so I looked around to see what other treasures he had. First, though, I wanted to see the salagrama, but when I came to the dusty shelf, He wasn't there.

Mr. Sharma finished with his customer and came over to see me.

"I've decided to give the salagrama-sila to you," he said.

"To me?" I said.

"Yes," he said.

He walked back to his desk, opened a drawer, took out the salagrama-sila, and handed Him to me.



"I thought about what you said yesterday," he began. "It made perfect sense, especially the part about taking proper care of a guest. I may not know much about the worship of deities, but I do respect the members of the former royal family. They are very much a part of our history and traditions. If they thought it was important to worship this salagrama, then so do I. I've known you for years. I'm confident you'll take proper care of the salagrama."

"Thank you Mr. Sharma," I said.

Mr. Sharma smiled. "And don't forget about the puja items you were interested in," he said. "You'll need them to worship this deity."

Ten minutes later I walked out of his shop with the puja items in a bag and the Supreme Lord in my hands.

"It can only be causeless mercy," I said to myself, shaking my head as I walked down the street.

Srila Prabhupada writes:

"Out of His causeless mercy, the Supreme Personality of Godhead presents Himself before us so that we can see Him. Since we have no transcendental vision, we cannot see the spiritual sac-cid-ananda-vigraha ... We can only see material things like stone and wood, and therefore He accepts a form of stone and wood and thus accepts our service in the temple. This is an exhibition of the Lord's causeless mercy."

[Srimad Bhagavatam, 5.3.9 Purport]

## **The Atheist and the Wind**

Volume 11, Chapter 15

April 7, 2011

I spent most of the winter chanting and studying in Vrindavan. Then, in the early spring, I headed for South Africa for a number of preaching programs, including the Ratha-yatra festival in Durban.

I was also looking forward to writing again. In Vrindavan I had been sitting in one place, so there had been little material for new chapters. Several devotees had written to ask if I'd stopped writing.

"As much as I love to write," I replied, "I have to wait for something to happen."

After leaving India, I didn't have to wait long.

As soon as I arrived in Johannesburg I caught a connecting flight to Durban. On the plane I was struck by the diversity of the passengers. "Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Jews," I thought as I made my way to my seat. "People of African, European, and Chinese descent. It's all here. I'm happy to be back in the Rainbow Nation."

The weather was perfect, typical of South Africa in April, and we enjoyed a smooth one-hour flight down to the coast. But as we circled to land at Durban's new airport, twenty kilometers north of the city, a strong wind shook the plane.

"Wow!" I thought. "That's unsettling."

I heard some people gasp. I looked around. The other passengers were talking excitedly to each other or sitting up tensely. A man was wiping his forehead.

"They're unsettled too," I thought.

Moments later we were on our final approach, but the closer we got, the stronger the wind became. At one point the plane shook violently. I took my japa beads and began chanting softly, and then louder as the wind became even stronger. Suddenly the man sitting next to me spoke up.

"You really think praying is going to save you?" he said.

I turned toward him. "Yes sir," I said. "I do."

He turned his nose up a little bit. "Hmm," he said. "So, there's a God somewhere up here in the sky listening to you, right?"

"Yes there is," I replied.

"Has he ever saved you before?" he asked.

"A number of times," I said. "Twice in the Amazon jungle, once in Sarajevo, and several times on the streets of Poland, to name only a few."

"That's ridiculous!" he shot back. "It was just good luck. God's a figment of your imagination."

As we neared the ground the wind picked up and the plane trembled so strongly that a number of passengers grabbed their armrests. Suddenly the wind hit the plane with terrible force.

"Hare Krsna!" I shouted.

"Jesus!" screamed the man across the aisle.

"Allahu Akbar!" shouted the woman behind me.

"Oh God! Oh God Almighty!" shouted people in the back of the plane.

The pilot turned the plane sharply to the right and upward. Within moments we were above the wind. Obviously, it was too dangerous to land.

The man next to me heaved a sigh. "That was close," he said.

I smiled. "Yeah," I said. "Lady Luck saved us."

"Very funny," he said sarcastically.

As we circled the airport waiting for a chance to land, the man turned to me again. "It's not prayer," he said. "It's science and medicine that save people from disease and suffering."

"But eventually everyone dies," I said. "Science only prolongs the process. Only by going back to the spiritual world can we rise above suffering altogether."

Minutes later, as the pilot maneuvered for another try at landing, I began chanting japa again, this time even louder.

"Why waste your breath?" muttered the man.

As we came in for landing the wind suddenly picked up and began shaking the plane again. I started to wonder if the pilot was taking too much risk. Suddenly, a hundred feet above the tarmac another huge gust of wind hit the plane, and people screamed again.

"Hare Krsna!" I yelled.

The pilot quickly turned the plane upwards again. I looked at the man next to me. He was shaking and was as white as a ghost. He touched my arm. "Is there a bag for vomit?" he asked in a trembling voice.

I took a bag from the seat-pocket and gave it to him. He remained silent, holding on tight to the seat in front of him.

"This is the captain," came the voice over the loudspeakers. "Please remain calm. There's nothing to worry about. We'll try to land one more time, but if it doesn't work, we will have to return to Johannesburg."

People shifted uneasily in their seats. Ten minutes later the plane began its descent again. The man was sweating and turning and rubbing his head.

"Okay!" he blurted out. "What name of God should I say?"

"Any one will do," I said. "They're all absolute."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," he said. "But what's the one you've been mumbling? I mean it worked for you a bunch of times."

"Oh," I said. "It's Hare Krsna."

"Just Hare Krsna?" he said.

"Well, there's more to it," I said. "There are thirty-two syllables."

The wind started shaking the plane again.

"Hurry up," he said. "Tell me the whole thing."

"Here it is," I said. "Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare - "

"Wait!" he interrupted. "How am I supposed to remember all that?"

"Then just say Hare Krsna," I said, "and try to - "

Before I could finish, another strong blast of wind hit us.

"Hare Krsna!" screamed the man.

Others screamed too, but suddenly we touched down and everything became peaceful. Moments later we were taxiing to the terminal.

"Welcome to Durban," said the captain over the loudspeakers. "Sorry about the rough ride."

I waited until we had almost arrived at the gate, then turned to the man.

"See?" I said with a smile. "It works."

He didn't say anything, just stared out the window. I remained silent for a moment.

"Well?" I said. "Now do you believe there's a God out there?"

"Maybe," he said, still looking out the window.

"Well," I said, "a maybe is better than a no."

"I'll think about it some more," he said as we pulled up to the gate.

"Here's my card," I said. "Anytime you want to talk it over, just give me a call."

"Yes," he said. "Maybe I will. That was quite an experience."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Remember," I said with a wink, "soldiers say there are no atheists in foxholes."

## A Greater Reward

Volume 11, Chapter 16

May 25, 2011

I boarded an Aeroflot flight from Kiev to Moscow and quickly went to my seat. After the austerity of flying hundreds of times with Aeroflot throughout Russia, I had finally been upgraded to business class.

I assumed that my servant, Uttama-sloka dasa, who had been on many of those difficult flights with me, had also been upgraded. "Sit here, Uttama-sloka," I said as I settled in, "here, on my left."

Uttama-sloka looked a little surprised as he sat down next to me. Passengers continued to fill the plane when suddenly a well-dressed gentleman came before Uttama-sloka. "Excuse me," he said, "you're in my seat."

"How is that possible?" I whispered to Uttama-sloka. "We're together in business class."

"Actually, I'm in economy," said Uttama-sloka, "but let me see what I can do. I know you'd prefer that I sit with you."

Uttama-sloka turned to the gentleman. "Sir," he said, "would you mind changing seats with me? This is my spiritual master, and I'd like to accompany him on the flight."

The gentleman looked around the business-class section. "Which seat do you have?" he said.

"I'm in economy," said Uttama-sloka, "but it's a window seat."

The gentleman looked at him and then at me. He stood there for a moment. "Well, all right," he said finally. "Give me your boarding pass."

Uttama-sloka handed him the card and he slowly made his way back to the stuffy economy section.

"That was amazing," I said.

"Yeah," said Uttama-sloka. "I wasn't sure he would do it. It's a three-hour flight, and there's a world of difference between economy and business class."

"Yeah," I said sarcastically, "tell me about it." I thought about the flights I'd taken on Aeroflot's infamous TU-154s.

"It was very courteous of him," said Uttama-sloka.

"Ajnata-sukriti," I said. "Unknowing devotional service. The Lord will reciprocate."

Throughout the flight Uttama-sloka and I were offered the usual business-class perks: a warm cloth to wash our hands, some juice, some nuts. At one point, Uttama-sloka asked the stewardess if she could offer some of the same service to the man who had exchanged seats with him. "At least could you give him some juice?" he said.

"I'm sorry," the stewardess said. "He's in economy. If he wants juice he'll have to pay."

I would have been happy to buy the gentleman a glass of juice, but neither Uttama-sloka nor I had any cash. I was traveling with just my credit card.

Exhausted from an intense travel schedule, I soon fell asleep and awoke just as we were landing in Moscow, where I went through the hassle of another Russian Immigration routine.

"They always ask me so many questions," I said to Uttama-sloka afterwards.

Uttama-sloka laughed. "You've been coming every year since 1988," he said. "No tourist or businessman has ever done that. They're keeping an eye on you."

As we approached Customs I noticed a group of officials surrounding the gentleman who'd given Uttama-sloka his seat. They were going through his belongings and seemed to be interrogating him. He was obviously in distress, and even from a distance I could see he was sweating.

There were several lines for Customs, and Uttama-sloka and I ended up in the line next to the gentleman. By now the officials were talking among themselves, and as we passed by the gentleman he turned to Uttama-sloka.

"Help me," he said in a hushed voice. He sounded desperate.

"What's the problem?" whispered Uttama-sloka, looking around to make sure he wasn't being watched.

"I've brought more money into the country than is allowed," the man said. "They want to arrest me and confiscate the money."

"Wow!" said Uttama-sloka. "That's serious."

The man looked nervously at the officials still absorbed in their discussion and then back at Uttama-sloka and me.

"There is only one way I can get out of this," he said, "and that's if I split the money with the two of you."

"Is that legal?" said Uttama sloka.

"Yes, it is," the man said. "Anyone is allowed to bring in ten thousand dollars or less without making a declaration."

"How much do you have?" said Uttama-sloka.

"Thirty thousand," said the man softly.

After a short pause he went on. "They'll put me away for a long time," he said. "Please help. There is absolutely no risk on your part."

Uttama-sloka looked at me for an answer. I knew about the ten thousand dollar limit. It's posted in all the international airports in the country, so there was no apparent risk. I also thought about how the gentleman had put himself out for us.

I nodded. "OK," I said. "Go for it."

Uttama-sloka took a deep breath. "Excuse me officers!" he called out, "But this gentleman is carrying money for me and my friend here. It's not all his."

The officials stopped talking and looked at Uttama-sloka and me.

"Since when have you come into the equation?" said an officer. "This man never mentioned you."

"He was nervous," said Uttama-sloka. "He got overwhelmed. It happens."

The officials walked over to us. "If the money belongs to all of you," said one, "then explain why he's carrying all of it."

"No particular reason," said Uttama-sloka. "He just ended up with it."

It wasn't the best answer, but it worked.

"OK," said an official as he handed the money back to the man. "Divide it up now and leave the airport immediately."

The gentleman quickly counted the cash, divided it into three, and gave me and Uttama-sloka big wads of hundred dollar bills.

Outside the terminal the three of us gathered in a quiet area, and Uttama-sloka and I handed the gentleman his money.



The gentleman heaved a sigh of relief. "That was close," he said.

"It certainly was," said Uttama-sloka.

"I'm grateful," the gentleman said. "Thank you."

I smiled. "We owed you a favor," I said.

The man laughed. "Actually," he said, "I gave up my seat because your friend told me you are a spiritual master. Believe it or not, I practice yoga and I like to read Eastern philosophy."

"That's very interesting," I said. "And what is your profession?"

"There are some things we can't discuss," he said quietly.

As he secured the money in his attaché case he looked up. Thank you again," he said. "I won't forget how the Hare Krishnas helped me."

We watched as he got into a large black limousine and sped away.

Uttama-sloka turned to me. "Looks like he was a pretty important guy," he said, "and he appreciated how we helped him with that money."

I smiled. "Yes," I said, "but he doesn't understand the real benefit he has achieved."

"What's that?" said Uttama-sloka.

"By giving up his seat," I said, "he performed devotional service. That little service will reap a far greater reward than all his money. It guarantees he'll get another chance for devotional service in the future, that he'll take a human birth again."

"As you know," I continued, "the greatest danger is to lose the chance to become a human being, because only in a human form can we revive our lost relationship with Krishna:

"nehabhikrama-naso 'sti  
pratyavayo na vidyate  
sv-alpam apy asya dharmasya  
trayate mahato bhayat

"In this endeavor there is no loss or diminution, and a little advancement on this path can protect one from the most dangerous type of fear."

[Bhagavad-gita 2.40]

"Yes," said Uttama-sloka. "And maybe that chance for more service will come in this lifetime because he mentioned he wouldn't forget how we helped him."

"Very likely," I said. "Maybe one day some devotees will be surprised when he uses his influence to get them out of a difficult situation or unknowingly helps them or gives a donation. The Lord works in mysterious ways."

We walked a little further and met some devotees who were waiting for us.

Srila Prabhupada writes:

"Here is an example of giving service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead even without knowledge. Such service is called ajnata-sukriti. King Satyavrata wanted to show his own mercy, not knowing that the fish was Lord Visnu. By such unknowing devotional service, one is favored by the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Service rendered to the Supreme Lord, knowingly or unknowingly, never goes in vain."

[Srimad-Bhagavatam 8.24.16, purport]

## **Your New Mayor Is Wonderful**

Volume 11, Chapter 17

June 30, 2011

In the spring, Nandini dasi built up a full itinerary for our summer festival tour along the Baltic Sea coast in Poland. All the town officials were cooperative, even vying to have the festival at peak times during the tourist season. In many cases Nandini simply e-mailed or telephoned the town administrations. But for some of the larger places, she had to visit the offices.

One morning, however, she awoke and realized she'd missed her appointment with the mayor of a large town.

"I've never done such a thing before," she told me over the phone.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"I've been calling the mayor's office all day, but no one's picking up the phone," she said. "I may have to drive up north and see what I can do."

Early the next morning she began driving the six hundred kilometers from southern Poland to the Baltic, arriving late at night. The next morning she was at the town hall when it opened. She ran up the stairs to the mayor's office and went in.

"I had an appointment with the mayor three days ago," she told the receptionist, panting for breath. "I completely forgot about it. I'm so sorry. Can I see him now?"

"There are a lot of people with appointments," said the receptionist. "You can wait and see if he becomes available."

"OK," said Nandini, "I'll wait."

The receptionist began looking through Nandini's file. "I see it's about getting permission for the Festival of India," she said. "I wouldn't get your hopes too high. This is a new mayor, and I can tell you he's not friendly."

"What happened to the other mayor?" said Nandini.

"We had elections this year," said the receptionist, "and the previous mayor lost, although he had served for twenty-six years."

"He was a good friend of our festival," said Nandini.

"Well, this one's a friend of nobody," said the receptionist. "I can't believe he won the election. He doesn't even say hello when he walks into the office in the morning. And he gives only five minutes of his time to each visitor when he's supposed to give ten. He just asks what they want and provides a quick reply, which is usually a no, hardly ever any discussion. Good luck, lady."

There was a long line of people at the mayor's door. After an hour Nandini became impatient, as she had also made arrangements to go to two other towns on this trip. So while smiling and explaining her situation, she made her way to the front of the line. Most people were sympathetic.

Soon the current visitor emerged from the mayor's office with a scowl on his face. "He hardly listened to me," he mumbled.

Nandini hurriedly went into the mayor's office.

"Yes?" said the mayor, without looking up.

"Mr. Mayor," said Nandini, "we desperately need your help. We had planned to do our Festival of India in your town in July, but we've heard nothing back from your administration."

"We're not interested," said the mayor, while signing his name to a document.

Nandini just stood there, not knowing what to say.

"Just what would our city stand to gain from your festival?" said the mayor, still not looking up.

"Our festival is a cultural event," said Nandini. "People will get to learn about India, in particular its ancient spiritual tradition."

The mayor finally looked up. "And how much money do you hope to make?" he said.

"That is not our objective," said Nandini. "Of course, we sell food and other things, but our main purpose is to enlighten people about the higher values of life."

The mayor looked at her for a few moments, then put his pen down. "Sit down," he said. "Tell me more about your event."

"Well," said Nandini, "there's an exhibit with photos and in-depth details of Vedic marriage, the four social classes, astrology, cow protection, the process of creation, the spiritual world, and much more.

"There are tents with ancient Sanskrit texts translated into Polish. There are yoga demonstrations, explanations of reincarnation and karma, face-painting, and a restaurant with vegetarian food. And we have a five-hour stage show, including singing God's name in Sanskrit with musical instruments. Also..."

"That's enough," interrupted the mayor. "Now tell me something about your philosophy."

For more than an hour Nandini talked about Krsna consciousness and answered the mayor's many questions. Suddenly he looked at his watch.

"Oh my!" he said. "It's almost lunch time. We'll have to continue our discussion another day."

"Mr. Mayor," said Nandini, "before you go, may I ask if we have permission for our festival?"

The mayor smiled gently and nodded. "Yes," he said, "of course you do."

"Thank you," said Nandini.

She paused for a moment then continued, "But there is a problem," she said.

"What's that?" said the mayor.

"Our event is quite large, Mr. Mayor," she said, "and there's only one place in town big enough. It's a prestigious piece of land just off the boardwalk near the beach. But the land is in five titles and not one of the owners is eager to let us use it for our three-day event."

The mayor's face became serious. "Don't you worry about them," he said. "Consider it done. You have that place for your festival."

"Uh... Mr. Mayor," said Nandini, "I know I'm asking a lot, but well, would you consider becoming a patron member of our tour?"

"Yes, of course," said the mayor. "And what's more, the town hall will promote it."

"Well, uh, there's one last thing, said Nandini. "I'd like to..."

"You don't have to ask," said the mayor. "I will definitely open the event. Here's my card, and if there's anything more you can call me any time. "

Nandini stood up to leave. "Mr. Mayor," she said, "you have been very kind to us."

"Yes," said the mayor, "because everyone else comes here to take something from us. But you people have come to give, and to give something very valuable."

As Nandini left the room the people who were still waiting looked at her. As she walked by the desk, the receptionist leaned over. "Why were you in there so long?" she whispered. "Was he scolding you?"

"No," said Nandini. "Your new mayor is wonderful. He's now an official patron of our festival tour."

Everyone jumped as the receptionist's phone fell from her hand with a crash onto the table.

Nandini smiled. "See you at the festival," she said.

Srila Prabhupada writes:

"Our only hope is to chant Hare Krishna and rectify the whole situation. I think this is possible. It has been proved in Calcutta that the Naxalites were very much against us holding our Hare Krishna festival, but still later on they became sympathetic and did not cause any harm for us. If we follow the same principles everywhere... [governments] all over the world will come forward sympathetically for advancing this movement."

[letter to Madhudvisa dasa, September 15, 1971]

## The Signs of Change

Volume 11, Chapter 18

July 5, 2011

We were about to start our first harinama of the summer festival season. The devotees were busy preparing the musical instruments, banners, and flags, when a young Russian devotee walked up to me.

"Maharaja," he said, "my name is Slavik. I'm twenty years old, and it's my first time on your tour in Poland. I have to admit I'm a little nervous about going out on harinama because when I was younger I used to read about all the trouble you had here."

"Times have changed," I said. I turned and handed a stack of invitations to some devotees.

"After twenty-three years," I continued, "we've silenced most of the opposition. Now the people in this country know us well, and many are showing an interest. It's the result of being consistent for so long."

"But they don't seem interested," Slavik said as he watched people walking past us.

"They will when we start chanting," I said. "The holy names quickly purify the atmosphere. Stick with me today, and I'll show you the signs of change."

I picked up the microphone and looked over the group of seventy-five devotees. "It's some distance to the beach," I said, "so we'll walk there quickly to save time and start kirtana when we get there."

We hadn't gone more than thirty meters when a fruit vendor called out to us. "Hey!" he shouted, "Why aren't you guys singing and dancing like you always do? Come on! Brighten my day!"

I winked at Slavik. "There's your first sign," I said.

Then I turned to Tribuanesvara dasa. "Begin the kirtana," I said.

Within seconds the holy names filled the air and people began smiling and waving, as they accepted invitations to our festival that evening. As we passed along the main street, a devotee called out to me. "Maharaja," he shouted, "Get a load of that store!"

I couldn't believe my eyes. Right there for sale outside a store were beautiful large color prints of Lord Krsna playing His flute. A man was buying one.

"There's a second sign," I said to Slavik.

Devotees were excited to be back on harinama and distributing the mercy of the holy names. The kirtana got louder as we neared the wide beach full of holidaymakers. From a distance I could see

people getting up from the sand to see what all the noise was about. Just as we stepped onto the beach, a ten-year-old boy came running forward. "Look, Mom!" he yelled. "It's the Rama Ramas!"

"Well, that's a first for me," I said to Slavik. "I've heard them say the Hare Krsnas or just the Hares, but I never heard anyone call us the Rama Ramas."

As we stopped to take off our shoes, a woman called out to us. "Don't move!" she shouted.

I went to the front of the party to see what was happening. "Please!" she shouted, "All of you, don't move. Your group is so beautiful, so colorful, so attractive. Just stop for a moment so we can all look at you."

A few devotees picked up their instruments and flags to start kirtana again. "Stop boys," I said. "The lady wants to get a good look at Lord Caitanya's sankirtana party. We can't refuse her."

The devotees stood motionless with sweet smiles on their faces as more people gathered to look. I waited a full minute. "OK!" I shouted. "Let's move on!"

"A sure sign times have changed," I said to Slavik.

As we chanted along the beach and danced in choreographed steps, fifteen devotees fanned out in a line spreading across the sand and walked alongside the kirtana party, distributing invitations. Glancing back, I could see that practically everyone on the beach held an invitation.

After three hours we had covered eight kilometers of beach. I called out to Kinkari Dasi on the other side of the kirtana party. "How many invitations have we given out?" I shouted.

"About twelve thousand so far," she shouted back.

"Good work," I shouted. "Keep moving in unison."

Suddenly, a large man with tattoos all over his body jumped up from the sand. "Stop!" he screamed. "What is this nonsense? What are you singing about? This is a Christian country! Who is this Krsna anyway?"

Slavik cringed. I motioned to the kirtana party to keep moving. Then a woman shouted back at the man, "You moron!" she yelled. "Haven't you been to their festival before? The guru always says in his talk that Krsna is another name for God. Just like the sun has different names in different languages, so God has different names in different parts of the world. Now sit down and shut up! And get educated. Go to their festival tonight."

The man was shocked into silence.



"That was an interesting analogy about the sun," said Slavik.

"It's from my stage lecture," I said.

After a good hour of kirtana I took the devotees to the festival site. The crew was just finishing their five-hour marathon setting up our massive stage and numerous tents.

"It looks like the spiritual world," said Slavik.

"It is the spiritual world," I said.

As the kirtana ended, a group of twelve teenagers ran up to us. "We want to know where we can sign up for the parade tomorrow," said a boy.

"Yes," said another. "We saw you on the beach and we went to the tourist information center in town to ask if there was going to be another parade tomorrow."

"I see," I replied, smiling at Slavik.

"They told us to come and see you and ask if the parade will be every day," said another.

I smiled. "We're here for three days," I said. "We'll be doing the parade every day. You are welcome to join us."

"We don't know how to play the instruments," a boy said. "But we'd love to wave the flags."

"Sure," I said. "No training needed for that. And we'll teach you the song too. It's the most important part. Be here at 11:00 a.m. sharp tomorrow."

"OK," they replied as they ran off towards town.

"Need more proof than that?" I said to Slavik.

"The more the better," he said.

After lunch our entire crew of two hundred fifty devotees took their positions onstage or in the tents. Opening time was approaching, and the first guest appeared - with a large cup of frothing beer in his hand. Ten steps away from me he suddenly stopped. "Whoops!" he said. "I can't bring this in here. It's a sacred place."

He did an about-face, walked to the edge of the festival grounds, threw his cup of beer into the bushes, and came back. He sat down in the middle of the benches in front of the stage, waiting for the show to begin.

As I walked around the festival site, a woman came up to me. "Where is the shop selling things from India?" she said.

"Over there," I said, pointing to the Fashion Tent.

"I'm looking for something specific," she said. "I'm wondering if I can find it there."

"Just what is it you're looking for?" I asked.

"Well, one of your people showed me what you all keep in those little bags around your neck," she said.

"You mean our chanting beads?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "I want to get one of those small cloth bags in the store."

"What for?" I said.

"For my rosary beads," she said, pulling out a beautiful set of reddish beads from her purse. "I want to keep them in one of those bags and chant on them like you do."

I looked at Slavik. "Now that really is something new," I said.

My last stop was the Book Tent, where people were already buying Srila Prabhupada's books, even before the festival had begun.

"Guru Maharaja," said Caitanya-lila dasi, "could you sign a few books before you go? People remember how you were signing them at last year's festival."

Almost immediately a distinguished-looking woman came up and asked me in English to sign her copy of the Bhagavad-gita. I wrote a dedication in the book and signed my name.

"What is your profession?" I asked, handing her the book.

"I'm the head of the Philosophy Department at one of Poland's largest universities," she replied. "I was at your festival here last year when you spoke about the Bhagavad-gita in your lecture, but I didn't have my purse with me, so I couldn't buy one. I came to the festival early this year hoping to get a copy. I've been waiting all year to read this book."

"I bought one last year," said a woman standing nearby, "but I didn't get it signed by you. I've been reading it for eight months. Do you think you could write a dedication with your signature on this paper plate for me? When I get home I'll cut it out and paste it into my Bhagavad-gita."

A man came up to me. "I've watched you singing on the beach every summer for fifteen years," he said, "ever since I was a small child. I never really had an interest in what you were doing, but somehow the accumulated effect of hearing your song has brought me here. I strolled into this tent an hour ago, saw this Bhagavad-gita and can't stop reading it. I decided to buy it. Can you sign it for me?"

As I signed the book he picked up *The Teachings of Queen Kunti* and started leafing through it. "Maybe I'll buy this book too," he said. "It looks really interesting."

I gave him the Bhagavad-gita, and he took my hand. "My soul is trembling," he said and turned to leave.

Slavik and I started walking out of the tent. "This is the real result of our preaching," I said, "when people come forward to buy Srila Prabhupada's books. Prabhupada once wrote in a letter: 'If he reads one page his life may be turned.'"

The benches were already full, and a large crowd was forming behind them. I was scheduled to lead the first bhajana, but it was with difficulty that Slavik and I made it through the crowd to the stage. At the foot of the stage we met a teenage girl dressed in an unusual sari, with something resembling a bindi dot on her forehead. I could see she wasn't part of our tour.

I turned to her. "Excuse me," I said, "is this your first time at our festival?"

"No, not at all," she said. "I live nearby. I've been coming for eleven years, every summer since I was eight."

"That's wonderful," I said. "Did our festival introduce you to this culture?"

"Not exactly," she said. "My grandmother practiced yoga all her life. When I was five she began teaching me too. When I was six she sewed this sari for me by hand, made me a bindi, and gave me some bangles. I used to wear the sari every summer as a little girl. One day I was riding my bike and I ran into your festival here. I couldn't believe my eyes. I always tell Grandma that this is my festival, this is me."

I was speechless. So was Slavik.

"My parents are a little worried about my involvement," she continued, "especially because I'm chanting sixteen rounds a day. But Grandma says I can join the festival tour when I'm twenty-one."

"Did someone here give you beads and show you how to chant?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'm quite shy. I've never spoken to any of you before. I bought the beads in the shop years ago and read how to chant on them in one of the books. I love the books. Besides my school books they're all I've ever read."

A stagehand called out. "Hurry up, Maharaja," he said. "You're on."

I looked up and saw devotees sitting on the stage waiting for me to begin the bhajana.

"Slavik," I said, "get this girl's email address."

Then I ran backstage, up the stairs, and onto the stage. I could see more than fifteen hundred people on our festival grounds.

After twenty minutes I brought the kirtana to a close and left the stage so the main program could begin. Within moments fifteen members of the dance group Sankhya, whom we'd brought from India, were dazzling the audience. Dina-dayal Das was in the wings waiting to go on with his South Indian martial arts performance, complete with flashing swords and a powerful soundtrack.

As I left the stage a man came running up to me. "Maharaja," he said, "do you remember me?"

"I'm sorry, I don't," I said. "You'll have to excuse me. I meet so many people every day."

"I'm from Zary," he said, "where the Woodstock festival used to take place. I would go to Krsna's Village of Peace to eat the food and watch the performances."

"What I liked most," he continued, "was your singing. Just now my wife and I and our two daughters were walking on the beach on the other side of the forest, and we heard you singing. My wife said, 'That's Maharaja,' and we all came running. We got here just in time to see you finish."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm humbled by your appreciation."

He gave me a hug and then started to cry. "It's like seeing an old friend again," he said.

I hugged him back. "Why don't you take a walk around the festival site," I said. "It's just like the old days in Zary, only a little smaller."

As Slavik and I continued walking we saw that the Restaurant Tent was packed, there was a long line for yoga classes, and many people were browsing through the various exhibition tents. People were crowding to get into the Questions and Answers Tent.

The pleasant weather added to the charm of the event, and the evening went smoothly as people constantly went to and fro. After my lecture I again signed books in the Book Tent, and at one point enjoyed serving prasada.

Toward the end of the evening the devotees presented our puppet show, Krsna's Pastimes in Vrindavan. Even from a distance I could see the life-size puppets. The Krsna puppet had recently been redone and was especially beautiful with big lotus eyes, red lips, cute smile, and long black wavy hair. The crowd was cheering as the play began, and many of the children ran to the front of the stage to get a good view.

I came closer to watch the fun as Balarama killed Dvidida Gorilla, who was more than two meters tall. After a minute or two I sensed a woman standing close to me and turned to see it was our old friend the mayor.

"Oh, Madame Mayor," I said. "What an honor it is you've come to our festival."

"Is it such a surprise?" she said. "I've been coming every summer for ten years. All the citizens come as well, and the tourists too."

She turned around. "Look at the crowd you have this time," she said. "There must be two thousand people here."

"Yes," I said. "It's very satisfying."

"It's a tradition in our town," she said. "But let's not talk now. Let's just sit here and watch the show. Old friends don't always have to talk. They can enjoy just being in each other's company."

Seeing the mayor looking for a seat, the crowd immediately scrambled to give us places to sit. Slavik came with us. Forty minutes went by, and we sat through almost the entire production. At one point she leaned over to me. "Maharaja," she whispered, "there's something I've wanted to ask you for many years."

"Really?" I whispered back, "What is it?"

"Can you give me a spiritual name?" she said.

"What?" I said.

"I've known you people for more than a decade," she said. "Everything about you is so beautiful. I've done everything I can to promote your festival. I even went to court one time to defend it. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I do," I said. "We wouldn't be here today if not for you."

"After all these years I feel like part of the family," she said. "That's why I want to have a spiritual name. I will ask my family members and the citizens of the town to call me by that name from now on. I like the name Radhika."

"How do you know that name?" I said.

"Radhika is Krsna's girlfriend," she said. "I've been watching your puppet shows for years. But one of your tour members is named Radhika. So maybe you could give me a name connected to Radhika."

"OK," I said, "we'll call you Radha-lila."

"But there's something missing at the end," she said.

"You mean Dasi," I said. "Your name is Radha-lila Dasi, servant of the pastimes of Radhika."

Slavik spoke up. "Good name," he said. "The mayor's done so much to promote these festivals."

"I know it's not exactly like getting baptized," the mayor said, "but I appreciate it just the same. And who knows? Maybe one day I will get baptized into the faith."

Just at that moment the puppet show finished and another surge of children headed for the stage as the puppets took their bows. Suddenly, a piercing scream came from the front row of benches. The mayor and I jumped up and ran toward the sound. As we got closer I saw a little girl screaming. "Mommy! Mommy!" she shouted. "I want Krsna! I want Krsna, the blue boy!"

The whole audience was looking at the little girl. "Mommy, please!" she kept screaming. "I want the blue boy! I want Krsna!"

Her mother, looking embarrassed, turned to the onlookers. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've never seen her like this. I don't know what's gotten into her."

An elderly woman spoke up. "Give her Krsna," she said. "Give her the puppet."

"Yes," said another woman. "Give her the blue boy."

"Yes," said a man. "Give Him to her."

I turned to a devotee, "Run and get the Krsna puppet," I said.

Within moments the puppet was there. The little girl lunged forward and hugged the puppet, who was almost as big as she was. She settled down. "Krsna, I love you," she said over and over to the puppet. For the rest of the evening no one could separate her from the puppet.

As we walked away I turned to Slavik, "In order to go back home, back to Godhead," I said, "we must have the same intensity of love for Krsna that that little girl showed for the puppet."

No sooner had I said that than a loud crash of thunder startled us. Lightning streaked through the sky as the rain started pouring. People ran for shelter in the tents. Slavik and I ran for cover on the stage. But I was surprised to notice a sea of umbrellas covering the benches.

"They don't want to leave," said Nitai Das, one of the stagehands. "They're under their umbrellas, but we'll have to cancel the final kirtana. The kids will be disappointed. Many of them were waiting for the contest."

"What contest?" said Slavik.

"The dance contest," I said. "We invite all the children to dance in front of the stage during the last kirtana. Afterwards we pick the ten best dancers, bring them onstage and give saris to the girls and sweets to the boys. It's always a big hit."

"It won't happen this time," said Nitai.

"I have an idea," I said. "I'll announce that because it's raining so hard we'll have to cancel the kirtana. I'll invite all the children onstage and we'll give each of them a sari or a sweet. That way they'll be satisfied. We'll finish the program like that."

"That'll be about a hundred saris and fifty sweets, Maharaja," said Nitai.

"It's OK this one time," I said. "We can't expect all these kids to dance in the rain. Their parents will be furious."

I turned to a devotee standing nearby. "Run and get a hundred saris from the Fashion Tent," I said, "and a bowl of sweets from the restaurant."

I took the microphone and stepped forward. "Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls," I said, "may I have your attention. We have enjoyed sharing this wonderful festival with you today, but unfortunately, because of the sudden storm we'll have to cancel the final part where we sing onstage and the children dance in front. As a concession, all the children can come onstage now for a free sari or sweet."

A huge number of children headed for the stage, many breaking loose from their parents.

"No, no," they screamed in the rain. "We want to sing! We want to dance! Please, let us sing."

I looked at Nitai. "What's going on?" I said.

"I don't know, Maharaja," he said. "None of them are coming onstage."

"We want to sing," the children screamed as their numbers increased to over a hundred. "We want to dance."

"But it's pouring rain," I said over the microphone.

"Sing, sing, sing," the children chanted in unison. "Sing, sing, sing."

I sat down to play the harmonium and the other members of the bhajana group quickly joined me. As I began the kirtana I turned to Mangala-vati Dasi. "Get this on video," I said, "or no one will believe it."

The children chanted and danced along with us. In no time they were soaked, but even through the dimness I could see their joyful, smiling faces. The area in front of the stage soon became muddy, but nothing could stop them. Every once in a while one of them would shout "Hare Krsna," and after some time they formed a long line that snaked its way in front of the stage and back near the benches. To my amazement, their parents encouraged them.

When I brought the kirtana to a close, the children cheered and their parents applauded. I invited all the kids onstage to receive their saris and sweets. Not long afterward the rain subsided.

That night I stood and watched all the families leaving the festival grounds. And what a sight it was! Many of the parents had Srila Prabhupada's books tucked under their arms while their sons happily munched on sweet balls and their daughters proudly displayed their elegant saris. Such is the mercy of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, who causes the whole world to dance in ecstasy at the sound of His holy names. And we are part of those pastimes. How fortunate we are!

\*\*\*\*\*

He makes a song of the names 'Hare,' 'Krsna' and 'Rama,' and by giving it to the mass of people destroys all obstacles such as sorrow, delusion, greed, and suffering. He grants devotional service to the multitude of devotees who are eager for the shelter of Lord Krsna's lotus feet. I fall down swiftly to offer my prostrated obeisances to the Lord in His golden form, who holds a string of meditation beads."

[Srila Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, Susloka-Sastakam, Text 23]



## **Fulfilling Your Mission**

Volume 11, Chapter 19

August 23, 2011

Dearest Srila Prabhupada,

Please accept my most humble obeisances in the dust of your lotus feet. All glories to you!

Today on the occasion of your Vyasa Puja it is with great pleasure I report to you that once again hundreds of thousands of people have received the great mercy of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu on the Baltic Sea coast in Poland. That mercy has taken the form of your books, the holy names, prasadam distribution, and the blissful association of many wonderful devotees. I try to document the great success of the samkirtan movement in Poland in my diary chapters, but the wonders taking place are far too numerous and extraordinary to capture in language. We witness great miracles on a daily basis as people receive your mercy through our humble efforts.

Like the people who come to our festivals, I too was entangled in the vicious cycle of birth and death before I met you. I also experienced the onslaughts of suffering in this material world and I thus understand the great relief people feel when they come into contact with you and your movement. I saw this relief recently in a well-dressed gentleman who approached me with a Bhagavad-gita that he had purchased after my lecture at one of our festivals. As he was asking me to sign it he spontaneously reached out and embraced me. As I put my arms around him to reciprocate, he began crying. He hugged me for a full minute, his body shaking with sobs. Then he stepped back and wiped the tears from his face.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I don't know what came over me. I never do things like this. In your lecture you posed all the questions I've ever had about life, and then you answered them one by one to my full satisfaction. I am so grateful and relieved to know that there are answers available to me in this book. I will read it with great interest."

I accepted his gratitude on your behalf, Srila Prabhupada, because I know that the relief he felt was a product of your mercy. The burden of suffering borne by those in the material world is gradually being alleviated by you, the greatest acarya of modern times. No doubt the Lord could have delivered all the fallen souls Himself 500 years ago in His incarnation as Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, but out of love He gave this sacred duty to you, and out of your infinite kindness you have entrusted it to us, your disciples and followers. I take my responsibility to this sacred duty very seriously, especially now in the autumn of my life. Each day I sharpen my focus on delivering as many conditioned souls as possible to your lotus feet before I leave this mortal frame.

It is said that a child's character is molded in it's first five years. This was certainly true for me in the infancy of my spiritual life. I imbibed your preaching spirit while you were personally among us. You made it very clear, both in your words and in your actions, that pushing this great movement forward

was the very purpose of your life. You lived and breathed your Guru Maharaja's order to spread Krsna consciousness all over the world. Since your departure, many of your disciples have tried to keep that flame burning. For my part, this determination is manifest in our festival program in Poland, the results of which we offer daily at your lotus feet.

Like anything in this world, those results are sometimes big and sometimes small, but even small achievements demonstrate your ongoing success in introducing lost souls to your Lord. Just the other day Prahlad Nrsimha das read the chart of a gentleman who visited his Astrology Tent at our festival. When he mentioned that the man had a strong propensity for law, the man laughed.

“You're right!” he said. “I'm the chief magistrate in Poznan, one of the larger cities in Poland.” He later left the Astrology Tent with a Bhagavad-gita and chanting beads in hand.

That same evening during the final kirtan, I watched a lady rush to our Restaurant Tent from a nearby apartment building in her pajamas and a long robe, her hair in curlers. For a moment I thought the building might be on fire, but a few minutes later she headed back to her apartment armed with two plates of prasadam. After the festival, our cook Rasikendra dasa told me she had just returned from a long business trip overseas. She had taken a nap early in the afternoon and was woken up at 9.30pm by our loud kirtan.

“I suddenly realized your festival program was in town,” she told Rasikendra. “I was so disappointed that I had slept through the entire event. I love Hare Krsna cooking so much that I didn't even stop to change out of my pajamas. I was afraid all that delicious food would be gone before I could get there!”

Srila Prabhupada, these small exchanges show how people are attracted to Krsna Consciousness when it is presented in an appealing way. You once said, “We will conquer the world with culture.” Here on the Baltic Sea coast, we conduct our festivals with this axiom in mind. Expanding on the basic principles of chanting, dancing and feasting, our festival tour has become a major attraction each summer. Resorts compete to have our event at prime times of the season and many tourists plan their vacations so that they can attend our festivals as we travel along the coast.

I pray that all the devotees on the tour will have the privilege to serve you in this way for many years to come. We often recount the words of the harbor-master of Mrzezyno, a port town we visit each year. Seeing the success of our festival in his town he pronounced a blessing: “May these festivals go on for 100 years!” But to be successful in this service, we need your mercy and help to convince the general populace of the foolishness of material life and the beauty of the Absolute Truth.

vasamy aham yatra jano vimugdho  
mugdhair matair loka ihaiva dukhhe  
krpamaye tvat karunena radhe  
sandarsayisyami janaya tattvam

“O Radha, I live in a world where the people accept a dozen different theories of the truth, foolish explanations that break apart at a moment's examination. Please help me show the people their mistake. Please help me show them the truth.”

[Sri-Radha-kirti, The Glories of Sri Radha, Kusakratha dasa, text 52]

Srila Prabhupada, I can't help but reflect that as much as I love this service, it will one day come to an end. This thought gives me great pain. I can only echo the sentiments of the great saint, Srila Prabodhananda Sarasvati:

saiveyam bhuvī dhanya gauda nagari velapi saivam budheh  
so 'yam sri purusottamo madhupates tany eva namani tu  
no kutrapi niriksyate hari hari premotsavas tadrso  
ha caitanya kṛpa nidhana tava kim viksyē punar vaibhavam

“The fortunate town of Navadvīpa remains on the earth. The seashore remains. The city of Jagannātha Puri remains. The holy names of Kṛṣṇa remain. Alas! Alas! I do not see anywhere the same kind of festival of pure love for Lord Hari. O Lord Caitanya, O ocean of mercy, will I ever see Your transcendental glory again?”

[Sri Caitanya-candramṛta, text 140]

With all honesty I can say that I will not be able to live in separation from these festivals which pour the mercy of the Divine Couple upon the conditioned souls. I pray that when this great event winds down, you will send me to another place, perhaps beyond this world, where even more fallen souls are drowning in the ocean of material existence. I do not mind if it is dark and cold, fiery hot, in heaven or in hell, for as long as we can organize another festival of love and bliss, the conditioned souls there will rise above their miseries and dance in ecstasy to the holy names. It has been done before; why not again?

mucyeta yan namny udite narako 'pi

“Simply by chanting the holy name of the Lord the inhabitants of hell became released from their hellish persecution.”

[ Nṛsimha Purana ]

Dearest Srila Prabhupada,

I know how much you desire this movement to be spread. Therefore, as your disciple, I promise to continue working day after day, month after month, year after year towards fulfilling your mission.

radhe jayety uktir aho pṛthivyam  
kada bhavisyaty ahaha karomi  
karyam tad artham ca tad artha praptau  
harsasru nadyam satatam plavisye

“When will this earth be such a place that every person greets every other person with the words 'Jaya Radhe'? I work so that time may come and when it arrives I will swim in the tears of my happiness.”

[Sri-Radha-kirti, The Glories of Sri Radha, Kusukratha dasa, text 84]

Your lowly servant,  
Indradyumna Swami

## **A Genuine Humble Soul**

Volume 11, Chapter 20

September 16, 2011

Dear Gopiparanadana Prabhu,

Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

It was with great sadness that I learned yesterday of your sudden departure from this world. Just weeks ago we were together on the festival tour in Poland. I considered it special mercy that you had joined us and that we could have your extended association for some time. As always, I listened in amazement to your deep and philosophical morning Bhagavatam classes, and marveled at how you touched the hearts of so many conditioned souls with your preaching at the evening festivals. Long ago I concluded that of all my godbrothers you gave the best discourses on the scriptures. I could listen to you for hours! Whenever I visited Vrindavan I would ask your son, Gaura Mohan dasa, to give me recordings of all the classes you had given throughout the year. I will greatly miss your preaching which gave me deep inspiration to spread the glories of the Holy Names far and wide.

Your contribution as a scholar in ISKCON was unmatched. Your translations and commentaries to the Brhad Bhagavatamrta and Krsna Lila Stava revealed the deep teachings of Srila Sanatana Goswami in a very clear and understandable way. Krsna consciousness makes sense and is real because our perfect philosophy comes directly from the Supreme Lord Himself. You mastered that philosophy and had a unique ability to present it to others. Yet despite your astute learning and your tremendous contribution to the Vaisnava literary world, you remained a genuine humble soul. I learned a lot about humility from you. I never once heard you speak about your own achievements, and when others did you would quickly change the subject.

You had such a command of the philosophy that I once told you I felt you were unconquerable, that no one could defeat you in a debate. Now death has conquered your body, but most certainly not your soul. Guided by our spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, you have gone on to serve elsewhere in this material world or you have gone back to Godhead by his grace. The fact that you departed this world at the foot of Govardhana Hill makes me think you have achieved the eternal service of Giri-Govardhana in the spiritual sky.

I feel very lonely today. Several times I have hidden myself from the devotees and cried. It is rare to meet such an exceptional soul as you. Often we only appreciate someone in full after they leave, but I fully appreciated you from the first day I met you. I feel very fortunate to have been a recipient of your mercy, and I will continue to listen to your discourses until the day I myself leave this world. I don't know if I'll be fortunate enough to die in Sri Vrindavan Dhama, but even if I don't I feel I can still reach the supreme abode by following in the footsteps of illustrious godbrothers like you who so expertly serve the mission of our spiritual master in this world.

As you were leaving the Polish festival tour a few weeks ago, you vowed you'd return again. Of course it's not possible now, but my humble prayer is that we'll serve together again, perhaps in some future life or best of all eternally at the foot of Govardhana Hill in the spiritual sky, far beyond this temporary world of birth and death.

I trust you will receive this letter through the transcendental medium of our spiritual preceptors, who always watch over and protect us.

Your servant,  
Indradyumna Swami