

DIARY
OF A
TRAVELING
PREACHER

VOLUME VI || *November 2004 - December 2005*

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INDRADYUMNA SWAMI



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shifting the paradigm

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DEDICATION

*To my brother, Pete, who was rescued from the depths of despair
by the all merciful sound of Lord Krsna's holy names*



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Introduction

It is now 9:00 pm in India, December 31, 2005. Soon the world will usher in a new year. As is the tradition in practically every city in the world, there will be celebrations. And we all know the kind of celebrations most people will have: partying and drinking, oblivious to the passing of time.

I too am celebrating New Year's Eve, but in a much different way. I am reading of the major events in the life of a dear God-brother, Indradyumna Maharaja.

*ya nisa sarva-bhutanam
tasyam jagarti samyami
yasyam jagrati bhutani
sa nisa pasyato muneh*

What is night for all beings is the time of awakening for the self-controlled; and the time of awakening for all beings is night for the introspective sage.

I am reading about Pete, whose saintly brother rescued him from suicide. I am reading about the recent tsunami, one of the worst natural disasters in our time, and the victims who were visited and given hope by our Traveling Preacher. I am reading about Dr. Kaya Ploss, an affluent and distinguished woman in American politics, who was excited to have our ambassador from the Hare Krsna's in her home. I am reading about the spring tour in Poland, and I feel Indradyumna Maharaja's deep commitment to seeing his Polish festival go on in spite of frightening opposition.

I am reading about Maharaja's visit to his Gypsy friends in Rostov, whose hearts were opened by this fearless and compassionate road warrior. I went to Rostov shortly after Indradyumna Maharaja's visit, and our Gypsy friends were still coming around the temple, hoping to see the effulgent Swami who had stolen their hearts.

I keep reading on and on and finally conclude with the predictions of a Brghu astrologer, who revealed a bright future for Indradyumna Maharaja, one that should give us all hope.

Time is passing. It is now 10:00 pm. The year 2006 will be with us shortly, and then 2007 and 2008. As each year passes we grow older and come closer to death. But one thing is for sure: As long as His Holiness Indradyumna Swami remains in this world, there will be many more diary entries, giving devotees throughout the world good cause for celebrating the passing of time. Each entry will be filled with new realizations, stories, and descriptions of souls whose lives have been touched by our Traveling Preacher.

We pray that this world may be blessed with his presence for many more New Year's Eves to come.

Niranjana Swami
December 31, 2005

CHAPTER ONE



Friend of the Shelterless

| NOVEMBER 17–DECEMBER 24, 2004 |

As my autumn preaching tour in Poland gradually came to a close, my thoughts began drifting towards Vrindavan and my forthcoming visit to that transcendental abode. Each year as the month of Kartika approaches, I hanker for the spiritual atmosphere of the holy dhama. It's the natural place for a preacher to rest, recuperate and, most importantly, go deeper into Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

As a devotee grows older and the attraction for material pleasures begins to fade (either because of spiritual advancement, or an aging body) he takes more seriously the opportunity to visit holy places. When I was younger I would go to India for the excitement of seeing an exotic land, associating with my devotee friends from around the world and participating in big festivals.

But these days I go to India mainly to take shelter of Vrindavan, to chant the holy names peacefully in her sanctified atmosphere, to pray to the previous acaryas for mercy, and to contemplate the Lord's pastimes. Well into the autumn of my life, the cherished goal

of pure love of God still eludes me. If there's any hope of achieving that miracle of love, it's in Sri Vrindavan Dhama.

Where do all people automatically and effortlessly obtain pure ecstatic love for Krsna? Where does the Supreme Personality of Godhead manifest His supremely wonderful pastime form? Where is the empire of the bliss of devotional service to Krsna's lotus feet manifest? O brother, listen and I will tell you a secret. All this is present here in Vrindavana.

[Srila Prabhodananda Saraswati, *Vrindavan-mahamrta*,
Chapter 1, Verse 24]

Attaining such an exalted stage of Krsna consciousness also implies broadcasting the message of Lord Caitanya throughout the world. Thus for many preachers the formula equates to 11 months of preaching in the West and a single month of bhajan in the holy dhama. I was eager for those few precious weeks in the land of Krsna.

What made the opportunity of going to Vrindavan even more exciting this year was that my younger brother, Pete, would be accompanying me. His story is miraculous in itself—how he came from the lowest depths of delusion and suffering to the land of love and bliss.

In August, Pete had decided to take his own life. A drug addict for more than 25 years, and destitute for five of them, he'd had enough. We had last seen each other six years ago at our mother's funeral in America. I had not heard from him since. Later I was to learn that the inheritance he had received from our mother had been embezzled by a devious accountant. He was left with no recourse but to literally live on the street. Nightly he would curl up to sleep on a cardboard box at the entrance to a store, or take refuge in the bushes near the railroad tracks in our hometown in California. He got food by rummaging through garbage cans on the street. He fell so much into the mode of ignorance that instead of washing his clothes he would wear them until they became filthy, and then before discarding them either steal more from clothing stores or obtain them as handouts from the Salvation Army.

Eventually he owned practically nothing. The child-size sleeping bag he had acquired (which went only up to his waist) and the clothes he had on his back all fit in into a small bag. He drifted from town to town, sometimes living with others in the same miserable condition as himself, or alone, where no one would notice the severe fits of depression that haunted him.

Often sick from living outside for years, even during winter, he contracted many infections and diseases. At one point a cancerous growth on his face became so prominent that a sympathetic doctor operated on it without charge, leaving him with a disfigured nose.

Daily he took shelter of the one thing that dulled the pain of his existence: drugs. His preference was amphetamines—or «speed» in street dialect. Because of his casual, happy-go-lucky nature he made friends easily, and drug pushers supplied him everything he desired for nothing.

But the apparent relief he experienced through drugs in reality only complicated matters, and so late last summer he decided to commit suicide. For the first time in years he was living in an apartment with a woman he had met several months earlier. Linda Sue had encountered a similar fate as Pete: a divorce had left her homeless and she, too, had turned to drugs. The government had taken away her two children, but returned custody to her when she managed to rent an apartment in a San Francisco ghetto.

One day she and Pete found an old computer in a garbage can on the street. Taking it to a local computer shop, they charmed the owner into repairing it as a favor. Pete was the first to use the computer. Linda Sue was shocked that night when she discovered he had ordered a number of deadly pills over the Internet. When she confronted him, he admitted he was contemplating suicide. Desperate, she asked him if he had any family, hoping one of them could convince him not to take his life. When he told her he had an older brother, she persuaded him to search the Internet to find me and ask for help.

The problem was that Pete couldn't remember how to spell my name—although we had spent time together when I was a devotee in France. In 1983, I had brought him to Paris to spend a few weeks

with me. It was a difficult visit. I had problems keeping him away from drugs and alcohol, and he had shown little interest in Krsna consciousness. Only on the last day of his visit did I see a glimmer of hope. He was late for his flight and I was looking anxiously around the temple for him. Eventually, I found him paying dandavats on the floor of the temple room in front of Radha Paris-Isvara. He lay there for a long time, and when he rose he stood respectfully before the Deities, his hands folded. I watched in amazement through a slightly opened door as he prayed feelingly to Radha and Krsna. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but it was obvious that he was taking shelter. After two or three minutes, he paid his obeisances again and left.

Now 21 years later, as Pete typed in various combinations of letters of my name in his Google search, nothing came up. Finally in the wee hours of the morning he typed in the correct spelling and came up with numerous hits. The first one he chose: www.traveling-preacher.com.

Amazed at what he found, he spent the rest of the night and



Sri Sri Radha Paris-Isvara

the next day reading the diary chapters. In the evening he told Linda Sue, "I'd like to contact my brother," before falling asleep exhausted.

Soon after I was downloading my email in Poland, unaware that Pete was still alive. I had searched for him for years through the police, friends in America and the Internet. Well aware of his drug addiction, I had concluded he was dead. Thus I was shocked when I received an email from Linda Sue:

“My name is Linda Sue DeLaney. Peter is my boyfriend. I met him last year. I was homeless and the government had taken my two children and put them in a foster home.

“Peter was also homeless. He had been living in a tent up in the hills for three years. This is where I ended up. Recently I got my children back. We live in a ghetto in San Francisco.

“I worry about Peter because he lived outside for so long and it was such a hard life. It is very difficult to get him motivated. He becomes depressed easily. Recently he has talked about suicide.

“He found your website and showed it to me. He was very happy to be able to read about your ministry and travels. I encouraged him to write, but he is too embarrassed. I am taking the liberty of writing to you myself. I would be grateful if you could email or phone him. Contact with you would mean everything to him.

Sincerely, Linda Sue.

I called back immediately. Linda Sue answered the phone and handed it to Pete.

“Pete, this is your big brother.”

There was no response. I could hear Linda Sue urging him on in the background.

“Pete,” I continued, “I’ve been looking for you for years. I never forgot you and I’m here for you now.”

I could sense he was working up the courage to say something.

“Pete!” I exclaimed loudly.

“Hare Krsna,” he said softly.

For the next hour we reminisced about our childhood and our brief association in France. I asked Pete to be frank with me and he told me of his life as a derelict.

“Why didn’t you call me?” I said after a while.

He paused. “I didn’t even have a dime to make a phone call,” he said, “that’s how bad it was. And I was embarrassed.”

“I’m your brother,” I said. “You can share anything with me.”

As he continued to narrate his story I could hardly bear to listen. He related how on several occasions he was robbed of his mea-

ger possessions and beaten. Several of his street friends had died before his eyes, due to drugs or exposure.

"How did you tolerate it all?" I asked.

Again he paused. "Whenever it got really rough," he said, "I chanted Hare Krsna."

I was dumbstruck.

"Although I acted crazily when I was with you in France, I was always hearing that mantra and it stuck in my mind. I understood it was a sort of shelter. And it protected me. For all practical purposes, I should have died a long time ago."

I couldn't believe my ears!

"So keep chanting," I said, "and don't take your life."

"I won't now," he replied. "Thanks for calling."

"It's only the beginning," I said. "Krsna's answered your prayers—and mine as well."

Lord Krsna, who is like a sun rising in the darkness, like a boat to the drowning, like a sweet rain cloud to those dying of thirst, like fabulous wealth to the poverty-stricken, and like an infallible physician to those afflicted with the most painful disease, has come to grant auspiciousness to us all.

[Sri Vyasa, Text 51, Rupa Goswami's, *Padyavali*]

The next day I phoned and told Pete and Linda Sue that I was flying them and her two children to Poland for the Woodstock Festival in 10 days. They were speechless.

"We don't have passports," Linda Sue said. "We don't even have money for a bus to the passport office to apply."

"I'll work everything out," I replied, "don't worry."

"It's a big gamble," my servant said as I hung up the phone. "He's a drug addict and so is she. It's very hard for people like them to give up drugs. It could turn out to be a waste of time and money."

"Where there's life there's hope," I said with a smile.

When Pete and his family arrived 10 days later, my servant's words echoed in my mind. And sure enough, as Pete and Linda Sue got out of the car I saw their eyes were red from taking drugs.

“I’ll give it my best and depend on the Lord,” I said softly as I walked up to Pete and gave him a big hug.

Over the next few days we smothered them in love and immersed them in an ocean of nectar: Krsna’s Village of Peace at the Polish Woodstock Festival. If they had any intention of taking drugs there was no time—not even a second! And why should they want to? We had brought them into the wonderful world of Krsna consciousness, where all walking is dancing, all talking is singing and there’s a festival every day.



Krsna’s Village of Peace at the Polish Woodstock Festival

They couldn’t believe their eyes: the huge tent, the prasadam distribution, the cultural exhibits, the devotee bands, the people, everything. My godbrother, BB Govinda Maharaja, kindly called it the greatest show on earth. It melted their hearts.

They stayed drug free throughout the festival and into the next week. Then we took them up north to the Baltic Sea coast for the

last two weeks of our summer festivals. It was a blistering pace—but to my surprise they had no difficulty.

“I have always been attracted to India,” Linda Sue said one day. “Can you explain more of the philosophy to me?”

“Sure I can,” I said with a smile.

At the end she said, “This is what I was always looking for. And you know what Maharaja?”

“No,” I replied.

“We were so down. We were suffering so much. You can’t imagine how grateful we are now.”

One day Pete came up to me and said, “Maharaja, do you think it would be a good idea if I started chanting on beads?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“I was thinking of doing two or three rounds a day,” he said.

“Nothing less than 16,” I replied with a smile.

His jaw dropped.

“You’re 53 years old,” I said. “You have to make up for lost time.” He hesitated.

“Do you remember how you prayed to Krsna to help you 21 years ago in Paris? You stood before Him with your hands folded, begging for mercy.”

Pete squinted and tried hard to remember.

“Well I remember,” I said. “And chanting Hare Krsna is the Lord’s answer to your prayer.”

Convinced, Pete said, “Okay, 16 rounds it is.”

But he couldn’t chant 16 rounds a day. Instead, he started chanting 32 rounds, experiencing so much relief and nectar from the holy names.

A few days later he came to me and said, “From this day onwards, I swear I’ll never take drugs, drink alcohol or smoke another cigarette.”

“That’s a tall order,” I replied. “Some people say that to make it, you’ll have to go through a rehabilitation program and join Alcoholics Anonymous. It’s rare to just stop all those things in one day and not revert to them.”

Pete became serious. Holding up his bead-bag, he said with conviction, "And rarer still to get the mercy of the holy names."

What could I say? To argue otherwise would mean I had less faith in the holy names than he. And I wasn't about to be outdone by my little brother!

At the end of the summer tour, Pete and Linda Sue went back to America, but not to San Francisco. They realized there was too much temptation there. Instead, I arranged for them to settle in the devotee community in Alachua, Florida. The devotees there kindly agreed to help them establish a home.

We maintained contact during their first month there and everything went smoothly. Then to encourage Pete I offered to bring him to India.

On the first day of Kartika we met in Vrindavan. He was still chanting 32 rounds a day and had read the Krsna book thrice, from cover to cover, to prepare for his pilgrimage. Walking around the village of Vrindavan, his eyes lit up as I showed him the transcendental places about which he had read.

After a few days, I asked him if it was too austere, referring to the early onset of winter and the unhygienic conditions in the crowded village.

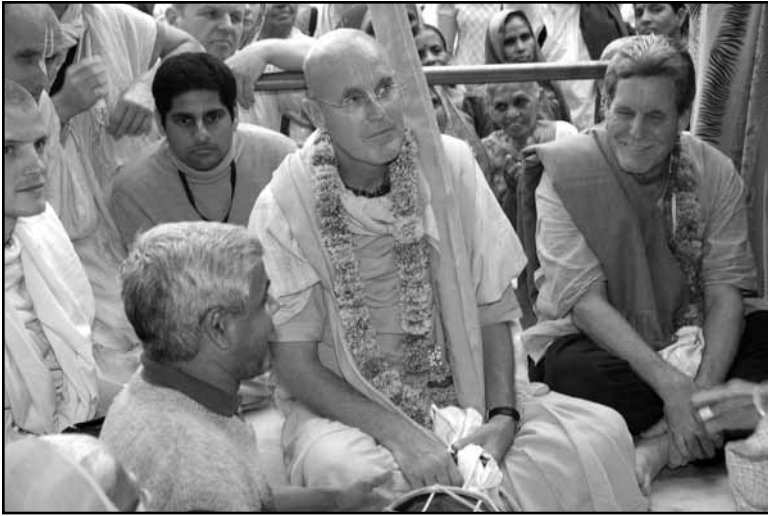
He smiled and said, "The austerities here are nothing compared with what I've experienced. I am much better off undergoing those here than I was those back home! And I have gained more being intoxicated by the holy names of Krsna here than on the substances I took in the United States!"

The month of Kartika went by quickly. I enjoyed sharing with my brother everything I'd learned in my 35 years as a devotee. He was a good listener. He'd suffered as much as any man could and was thus appreciative of the positive alternative of Krsna consciousness. A devotee from the day he surrendered to Radha and Krsna 21 years ago in Paris, his supplications to Them, though offered in the infancy of his spiritual life, were taken to heart by the Lord, who eventually made all arrangements to bring Pete home, to Sri Vrindavan Dhama.

Such is the power of a single prayer in desperation—and such is the benediction moon of Kṛṣṇa’s causeless mercy.

I am drowning in the painful, fathomless whirlpool of repeated birth and death. O Lord, O friend of the shelterless, O effulgent moon of mercy, please, just this one time, quickly extend Your hand to save me!

[Sri Rupa Goswami, Text 61, *Padyavali*]



Indradyumna Swami with bhakta Pete in Vrindavan

CHAPTER TWO

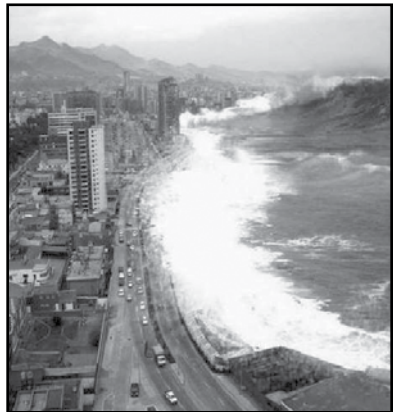


Tsunami!

| DECEMBER 25, 2004–JANUARY 11, 2005 |

Like most people, in the early hours of December 26, 2004, I had no idea what the word tsunami meant. Had I been a tourist on the beach at Phuket, Thailand, sunbathing on that ill-fated day the “harbor wave” (the Japanese translation for tsunami) hit, I probably would not have taken heed when a vacationing scientist, seeing the sea mysteriously recede several hundred meters, screamed out a warning to others, “Tsunami!” Tsunami!” and ran for his life. He survived, but most on the beach didn’t.

The death toll the deadly wave caused in 12 countries around the Indian Ocean may never be known, but it is estimated that more than 200,000 people lost their lives, with



Tsunami approaching

many thousands missing. 500,000 were injured and millions left homeless.

I had just arrived in Australia to participate in the Sydney temple's Christmas marathon festival. The day after Christmas we were returning from a joyous harinam on Sydney's packed streets when I saw the word tsunami in the headlines in the evening newspapers. "Huge waves devastate populated areas in the Indian Ocean!" screamed one.

Within hours the world was educated in the deadly phenomenon of a tsunami. The event was caused by a powerful underwater earthquake near Indonesia. The energy released by the quake was equivalent to 40,000 "little boys"—the atom bomb detonated over Hiroshima. It was equal to a billion bolts of lightning. The explosion was so strong that studies show the earth might have wobbled on its axis by as much as an inch and the length of the day altered by microseconds. So forceful as the earthquake that islands southwest of Sumatra (closest to the epicenter) moved by more than 20m.

The quake created 10m waves that fanned out and moved at speeds of up to 750kph across the ocean, eventually slamming into populated areas.

The rest is history, as the media was soon saturated with news of the destruction the waves caused.

Like millions around the world, I sat in disbelief as I read the news reports. Within hours rescue work began in all the countries affected, including Indonesia, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka. An unprecedented out-pouring of sympathy from people around the world would eventually raise over 5 billion dollars for relief work.

A devotee of the Lord is not callous to such catastrophes. He doesn't simply pass them off as global karma. By his very nature a devotee is sensitive to the suffering of others. Although Arjuna's concern for his family members and their suffering is often analysed as a weakness, it has also been described as characteristic of a pure devotee:

Any man who has genuine devotion to the Lord has all the good qualities ... as such, Arjuna, just after seeing his kinsmen, friends and relatives on the battlefield, was at once overwhelmed by compassion for them who had so decided to fight amongst themselves ... he was a crying out of compassion. Such symptoms in Arjuna were not due to weakness but to his softheartedness, a characteristic of a pure devotee of the Lord.

[*Bhagavad-gita* 1.28, purport]

The more the media revealed the suffering caused by the disaster, the more I began thinking of helping in the relief work. Although I am usually busy with various responsibilities, ironically, at that moment I had the time. Just after the new year, I was planning to go to Durban, South Africa, for a month-long break.

But the past 12 months had been particularly intense, and I sorely needed time to recuperate my health. I also hankered for time to read and chant. I had planned to do so in Vrindavan during the month of Kartika, but had sacrificed the time to take my disciples on parikramas. After giving the matter much thought, I concluded that because of my physical exhaustion and need to spiritually replenish myself, I would go to Durban as planned.



Parikrama with disciples in Vrindavan

On January 2, I arrived at Sydney airport to catch a flight to Mumbai, and on to Durban. While passing through the airport, I was bombarded with media coverage of the tragedy. Newspapers and magazines still carried front-page reports on the devastation. Televisions in lounges aired heart-breaking scenes of destruction and appeals for help.

I stopped briefly outside one cafe and joined a group of people watching a television newscaster describe how some remote areas and islands near Indonesia still had not been reached by relief workers two weeks after the tragedy. He said that entire indigenous tribes living in India's Andaman and Nicobar islands may have perished. Smiling slightly, he described how a hail of arrows, fired from the forest of one tiny island at an Indian coastguard helicopter hovering above, suggested there were at least some survivors. But as I looked around at the crowd watching the report, not one person smiled. They found nothing humorous in the tragedy.

By the time I checked in for the flight, I was again in duality. "People are suffering in vast numbers," I thought to myself. "The whole world seems to be reaching out to help them by offering welfare in one way or another. Surely devotees should be there as well, offering spiritual welfare in the form of prasadam and the holy names. I have time to help. Perhaps I actually should go."

After checking in, I proceeded towards a security checkpoint near to my departure gate. As I put my bags on the conveyor belt to be x-rayed, a security official on the other side smiled at me. After I passed through a body check, he called me over and asked me to open one of my bags. As I stood there he said, "It a wonderful thing you're doing."

A little surprised, I replied, "Excuse me?"

"Going over there to help those people," he said. "I know Hare Krsnas give out a lot of food here in Australia. But now it's really needed in those places hit by the tsunami."

"But I'm not actually" I started to say.

"If I could go, I would," he cut in, "but really it's the work of people like you. It's your business to help others."

I stood there speechless.

“God will bless you,” he said, patting me on the back.

I turned and walked towards my departure gate.

As the flight took off I looked out of the window. The security man’s words echoed in my mind. “It’s your business to help others.”

“But it’s my break,” I said to myself. “I need rest,” and my thoughts drifted off to Durban and the warm summer weather, the pool where I’d be doing my laps every day, the extra rounds I’d be chanting and the books I’d be studying.

“I’m doing the right thing,” I thought. “After all, Kṛṣṇa says in *Bhagavad-gita* that a yogi is balanced in his work and recreation.

*yuktahara viharasya
yukta cestasya karmasu
yukta svapnavabodhasya
yogo bhavati dukha ha*

He who is regulated in his habits of eating, sleeping, recreation and work can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system.

[*Bhagavad-gita* 6.17]

Only such a balanced program of study and preaching qualifies one to attain Vaikuntha, the spiritual world. If I was serious about achieving the perfection of life, I’d have to strike the balance.

Exhausted from the long festival in Sydney, I soon drifted off to sleep. It must have been an hour later that I heard someone address me.

“I’m sorry,” said the steward. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” I replied. “It’s OK. I was just napping.”

He sat down in the empty seat next to me.

“It’s people like you who will make a difference in the lives of those who are suffering from that horrible disaster,” he said.

My eyebrows went up as I looked at him in surprise.

“When I was younger I often went to your Crossroads center in Melbourne to eat,” he said. “I was pretty down and out at the time.

If it wasn't for your food, I don't know what would have happened to me. You must be going over to India to feed the victims of the tsunami. Or are you going to Sri Lanka?"

I hesitated to say anything. Taking my silence as an expression of humility, he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Thank you" he said. And then he got up and walked away.

The person across the aisle overheard his remarks and nodded his head at me, appreciating my supposed mission of mercy. Responding, I slightly bowed my own head—in reality hiding my guilt at receiving such undeserving praise.

I turned and looked out of the window again. It was getting dark. "Is all this just a coincidence, or is Krsna trying to tell me something?" I thought to myself. Then while looking at my reflection in the glass, I said softly to myself: "Putting the mystical aside, the writing is clearly on the wall. You're off to one of the areas devastated by the tsunami."

I took the in-flight magazine out of the seat pouch in front of me and scanned the world map at the back. Chennai, one of the areas hit by the wave, was closest to Mumbai, where I would be spending one day before heading to Durban. Upon landing in Mumbai, I sent an email to Bhanu Swami asking if he needed help with relief work. He wrote back quickly:

"For the moment we are doing prasadam distribution in Chennai where not so many lives were lost. Sri Lanka is bad and Sumatra is even worse."

Sri Lanka was obviously closer, so I called the temple in Colombo and spoke with the temple president, Mahakarta prabhu.

"We're not equipped to do any significant relief work at the moment," he said, "but we hope to build it up."

My last chance was Indonesia. But by evening I had learned that Gaura Mandala Bhumi, the devotee in charge of ISKCON there, had sent out a communication that for the moment there was not much he and the other devotees could do, as the affected area was 2,000km away and difficult to access.

With no relief work in sight, the next day I boarded my flight to South Africa.

Arriving in Durban early in the morning, I quickly settled into my quarters at the temple. Placing all my books neatly on a shelf near my desk, I thought, “I’ll start with *Caitanya-caritamrta* and after a few days I’ll begin the second volume of *Brhat Bhagavatamrta*.” While arranging my CDs in a drawer in the desk, I thought, “And I’ll listen to three lectures of Srila Prabhupada each day, and several of my godbrothers as well!”

At noon I gave instructions to the cooks: “I’d like simple healthy prasadam while I’m here. Lots of salads.”

And to my assistant, Anesh, I said, “Register me with the local gym. I’ll swim in the pool for two hours every day.”

By the evening I had made a schedule for myself, beginning with rising at 2am and going to bed by 8pm. “After six weeks I’ll be as fit as a fiddle,” I joked with Anesh.

“And well read, too,” he replied with a smile.

It was getting late and as I prepared to take rest, I said to Anesh, “Please download my mail before I go to sleep.”

As I dozed off I heard Anesh say, “You have four emails, Srila Gurudeva.”

“Who are they from?” I said half asleep.

“Well, the first one’s from Mahakarta das in Sri Lanka,” he said.

My eyes popped open and I jumped out of bed.

“I have been thinking about you since you spoke to me when I was at Trincomalee,” Mahakarta began. “We are doing prasadam distribution successfully there as we have some local support to help us.

“But during the past two days there have been many offers of help from devotees around the world who are willing to donate money and even volunteer for our relief work. Please, I am begging you to come and help us coordinate everything.”

I sat for several moments in the chair, thinking to myself.

“Gurudeva,” said Anesh. “It’s getting late. You should go to bed.”



Prasadam distribution in Trincomalee

“Maybe Krsna actually is trying to tell me something,” I said softly to myself.

“What’s that?” said Anesh.

I looked up. “Book me a ticket to Sri Lanka as soon as you can,” I said.

He was dumbfounded. “Gurudeva! Book you to where? Sri Lanka? You just got here!” he said.

Throughout the next few days, I solicited donations from local devotees for the work ahead. They gave generously, like people around the world were doing.

As the devotees drove me to the airport for my flight on January 11, my heart beat in expectation of the mission ahead. An historic opportunity was at hand. Much of the world was aiding the suffering of the people affected by the tsunami. Billions of dollars of aid was pouring into the area. All the main humanitarian organizations were mobilizing and tons of food, medicine and clothing were on their way. ISKCON could hardly match such resources. But we had our part to play. As humble as our effort would be—a little prasadam and some kirtan of the holy names—these things are of a spiritual nature, capable of delivering one beyond the world of birth and death.

As I boarded the flight to Colombo I knew I had taken the right decision. A devotee is duty bound to put others’ interests before his own.

But what about my striking the balance of sadhana and preaching in order to go back to the spiritual world?

If the words of the security official at the Sydney airport proved true, I had nothing to worry about.

“It’s your business to help others,” he’d said. “God will bless you.”

The self-effulgent Vaikuntha planets, by whose illumination alone all the illuminating planets within this material world give off reflected light, cannot be reached by those who are not merciful to other living entities. Only persons who constantly engage in welfare activities for other living entities can reach the Vaikuntha planets.

[*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.12.36]

CHAPTER THREE



When Will It End?

| JANUARY 12-20, 2005 |

As my flight made its descent towards Colombo, the capitol of Sri Lanka, I gazed out at the tropical scenery below. Sri Lanka looked much the exotic land described in the in-flight magazine. It seemed all the more so when, after landing, I drove into the city with the local ISKCON temple president, Mahakarta das. The humidity, the endless array of rich green foliage, the luxuriant swirls of the Sinhalese alphabet, the multi-colored Buddhist flags and the variety of fruits on sale all made for what seemed a paradise. Indeed, Marco Polo described Sri Lanka as the finest island of its size in the world.

But like anywhere in the material world, Sri Lanka also has had its fair share of misery, which recent events have only confirmed. Just two weeks before I had arrived, a tsunami, a 10m wall of water created by an undersea earthquake thousands of miles away, ravaged much of the country's beautiful 1,340km coastline.

I had come to assist local devotees in the relief effort, not to enjoy the beauty of the island, which attracts an annual 400,000

tourists. As we stepped out of the car and into our small temple in the center of the city, Mahakarta said, "Since the tsunami hit we have been distributing prasadam in several towns along the coast. But it's presently beyond our capacity to reach out effectively to the many victims of the catastrophe."

"How many people have been affected?" I inquired.

"More than 33,000 have died," Mahakarta replied, "and 835,000 have been made homeless, mainly in the southern and eastern coastal regions. The United Nations and numerous humanitarian organizations are working to give food, shelter and badly needed supplies in these districts, but relations between the Sinhalese government and the Tamil Tiger rebels is hampering aid distribution to some areas."

Researching Sri Lanka before arriving, I had an idea of the political situation. For more than 30 years the country has been embroiled in a civil war between the minority (18%) Tamils in the north and the majority (74%) Sinhalese in the south. More than 60,000 people had died until a ceasefire was agreed in 2002. The fragile truce has been threatened, however, due to Tamil dissatisfaction with alleged inaction over their demands for autonomy.

The tension evaporated with the tsunami. Although bickering broke out when the government was accused of giving more foreign aid to the Sinhalese, both sides are now preoccupied with burying their dead and caring for the survivors.

"We have to increase our prasadam distribution," Mahakarta said. "Donors are sending a lot of funds."

I agreed, but I was at a loss how to begin. Many relief organizations were already at work and the government had recently complained that some of the smaller groups were actually getting in the way. As destroyed roads were repaired and washed-out bridges rebuilt, tons of supplies were being shipped into the affected areas. Army personnel and doctors from around the world were setting up camps along the coast to help victims. Those that survived the tragedy were temporarily being moved into schools, sports stadiums, government buildings, or tents. Plans were already under way for the reconstruction of villages. But a law was quickly passed that no

structures could be built within 500m of the shoreline—a precaution against future tsunamis.

It wouldn't be easy to just jump into such a professional, well coordinated operation. It couldn't be the usual American Food for Life program of driving to a downtown area and feeding the homeless. In Sri Lanka we would be working in a disaster zone.

I phoned Priyavrata dasa, director of Food for Life Global in America. Together we came up with the idea of calling the Red Cross and offering our help. It seemed wise to join in already-successful efforts. I could understand that we weren't the first to offer help when the Red Cross secretary on the phone asked, "What particular contribution does your organization have to offer, Sir?"

I had to think quickly. "We're prepared to cook and distribute hot meals, Ma'am."

There was a short pause, then the secretary said, "Give me your number and I'll call you back in an hour."

Forty-five minutes later my cell-phone rang and the secretary said, "I have made an appointment for you with the president's secretary at 4pm today."

"The presidential secretary of the Red Cross?" I queried.

"No, Sir, with the secretary of the President of Sri Lanka."

"Oh, yes, of course," I replied, trying to hold back my excitement.

That afternoon, accompanied by Mahakarta das, I met the president's secretary, Mr Krishnan. Needless to say, he was a little surprised when we entered his office in our robes.

Standing up and shaking my hand, he said, "I am in charge of organizing the present relief work in our country. I am dealing with the main disaster relief organizations, such as Oxfam, Care, Red Cross, Medicine sans Frontier, UNICEF, etc."

Squinting at me, he said, "Which organization do you represent?"

"Food for Life—Global," I replied. "A branch of the International Society for Krsna consciousness."

"Food for Life—Global?" he said.

Again I had to think quickly. Seeing a computer on his desk, I said, "Yes, Sir. Please look at our website: www.FFL.org."

He typed in the address, and when the website came up he studied it carefully.

"I see," he said after a few minutes. "Very impressive. So your people can distribute hot meals to the victims of the tsunami?"

"Yes, Sir. We're experienced in the matter. It's vegetarian food—no meat, fish or eggs. Will people be inclined to eat that? I heard most of the tsunami victims were fishermen."

"For now it's not a problem," he replied. "At the moment, the fisherman are not eating fish because they say the fish are eating the dead bodies of their relatives washed out to sea by the tsunami."

"Oh, I see," I said grimacing.

"How many can you feed daily?" he asked.

"Five thousand to begin with," I replied. "And more later."

He picked up the phone and dialed a number. My eyebrows went up as he began to speak.

"Major-General Kulatuga? This is the presidential secretary. I understand you need help with food relief in the Matara district. I have a group of people here who can cook and distribute food for 5,000 people a day. They can increase that number as the weeks go by. Are you interested?"

The reply must have been immediate, for Mr Krishnan said, "Yes, Sir, I'll send them down immediately to discuss the details with you."

Foreseeing that any relief work we would do in Sri Lanka would be a major operation, I had requested several devotees from my Polish festival tour to join me. Tara das and his fiancée, Radha Sakhi Vrnda dasi, flew from Greece where they were distributing books, Santi Parayana das and Rasamayi dasi came from Mayapura, Niti laksa das from London, and Laksmi nath das (who runs Food for Life in Durban, South Africa) also made the journey. Dwijapriya dasi and her two sons, Dhruva and Devala, joined us from America. With several of the men, we set out the next day in a van along the coastal road south towards the district of Matara, one of the worst affected areas.

The mood in the car was upbeat. Within 24 hours of arriving in the country we had met the president's secretary, who had given us government authorization to distribute food in a designated area, and we were about to meet the military to discuss the logistics of distributing food to refugees. The mood switched from upbeat to light when a devotee mentioned the bad weather in Europe and how we were in the tropics. But we were soon reminded that this material world is a fool's paradise at best.

Forty-five minutes into our journey we rounded a bend on the winding coast road. Suddenly all of us became silent. An entire village had been reduced to rubble. As our driver instinctively slowed down, we saw the destructive power of a tsunami. Not a house in the village was left standing, the entire place a pile of broken concrete, twisted steel, and splinters of glass and wood.

"My dear Lord!" one devotee exclaimed.

"I can't believe what I am seeing!" said another.



*My heart broke seeing people sitting dazed in the
ruins of what used to be their homes.*

The worst thing I had ever seen was the destruction in Sarajevo, Bosnia, just after the end of the Balkan War. I thought I would never witness anything more terrible. An entire city had been ravaged. But

as we drove through more villages and towns leveled by the tsunami, I realized it was unprecedented in recent history: 33,000 people had been killed in just under 30 seconds. That's how long it took the 10m wave, moving rapidly as it hit the shoreline, to devastate the villages. Witnessing it first hand certainly had a more pronounced effect on me than seeing it in the media.

As we continued driving my heart broke seeing people, 20 days after the tragedy, sitting dazed in the ruins of what used to be their homes or businesses. Some were crying. We passed one home that was partially standing. The facade of the house had been ripped away revealing several bedrooms. Inexplicably, despite the force of the tsunami, children's clothes were neatly folded on shelves in one room.

Mesmerized, I hadn't even taken my camera out to take pictures for an article I had been asked to write for *Back to Godhead* magazine. Grabbing the camera, I now clicked away kilometer after kilometer, trying to capture the destruction. Suddenly, I stopped the photographic frenzy and put the camera away. "There's no hurry," I thought. "You'll be seeing scenes like this every day for the next month."

Every 2-3km I noticed fresh graves alongside the road. "There was no time to transport the bodies elsewhere," said our driver. "All of these roads were closed because of debris."

In some places we passed lines of survivors standing by the road. I inquired from our driver what they were doing.

"They've lost everything," he said. "They're standing there hoping people will stop and give them anything—cooking utensils, clothes, toys, some comforting words."

Although Kṛṣṇa says in *Bhagavad-gita* that a devotee does not lament for the living or the dead, at that moment I felt genuine sadness for those people. Unable to offer any practical assistance, I prayed to Śrīla Prabhupada that they would have the opportunity for devotional service, the panacea for all suffering in this material world.

*Struggle for existence A Human race,
The only hope His Divine Grace.*

[From Srila Prabhupada's Vyasa-puja offering, 1932]

After three hours of driving past crumbled homes, smashed cars, upturned boats and piles of rubble with untold pieces of household paraphernalia, I couldn't watch any longer. I took out my Bhagavad-gita and began to read. I thought, "From this day on, if you entertain even the slightest desire to enjoy this world you're simply a fool and the greatest hypocrite."

While passing through one village, our driver said, "In this town 11,000 people died and 230 cars were washed out to sea."

I looked up briefly to see a little girl crying next to her mother on the steps of what must have been their home. I also noticed that the traffic was moving slowly. There was none of the usual speeding and passing cars, the sound of engines roaring and the continuous honking that one generally experiences on Asian roads. Seemingly out of respect for the tsunami victims—living and dead—the traffic moved at a funereal pace.

A slight respite came sometime later, just before we turned off the road towards the army camp. Looking up from my reading, I saw a large black dog sitting in the ruins of a decimated house. I had noticed very few animals along the coast. Obviously some had been swept away, while many seemed to have instinctively anticipated the tsunami and run in search of shelter. Somehow this dog had survived and looked quite well. I asked the driver to slow down and I called out "Hare Kṛṣṇa!" to the animal. He heard me and ran excitedly towards the car. I waved as we passed him. A moment later I looked back and saw him sitting by the road wagging his tail—eyes still fixed on our car.

Somehow our little exchange in the midst of all the sorrow had encouraged us both. "In the worst of times," I thought, "a little love goes a long way."

A few minutes later we pulled into the army camp. The sergeant-at-arms was waiting for us and quickly escorted us into a room with

a large oval table surrounded by 12 chairs. A few minutes later Major-General Kulatuga entered, accompanied by six of his staff. Like Mr Krishnan the day before, he looked surprised to see our robes. As we stood to greet him, I shook his hand and remained standing until he was seated.

The mood was formal as the Major-General began his briefing. Standing with stick in hand, he pointed to the wall full of maps and charts.

"Here in Matara district there are 1,342 confirmed deaths, 8,288 people injured, 613 missing and 7,390 families have lost their homes and are living in camps for displaced persons."

Turning around and looking at me, he said, "We prefer not to call them refugee camps." Then, with emotion in his voice, he continued, "They are our people, not refugees. Do you understand?"

With scenes of people sitting hopelessly in their devastated homes still fresh in my mind, I replied, "Yes, Sir. I do understand."

Still looking at me, he emphasised the need of the hour. "We are professional soldiers. We fought the Tamil Tigers for years. But now we are busy clearing the roads of debris, cleaning wells and repairing buildings."

"And we are here to help you," I said.

Pausing, and with less formality, he said, "Thank you."

Turning back to the maps and charts, he said, "Our priorities are reopening the hospitals and schools, rebuilding the bridges, and restoring communication. Seventy-five percent of all telecommunication, 80% of all contaminated water supplies, and 87% of electricity have been restored."

Looking at me again, he said, "Your contribution will be to feed the people in camps for displaced persons. Mr Krishnan told me you can provide hot meals. Is that correct?"

"Affirmative, Sir."

Pausing again, he looked at me curiously and said, "You were a military man?"

"Yes, Sir," I said with emphasis, as a soldier does when addressing a superior officer.

Smiling, he nodded his head, obviously more comfortable with our cooperation.

“Now you will visit one of the camps so you can get an idea of what is happening.” Turning to one of his staff he said, “Major Janaka, take them to Rahula College. I believe we have over a thousand displaced persons there.”

Following in our van behind the Major and six armed soldiers in a truck, we drove for 30 minutes to the camp for displaced persons. Getting out of our vehicles, we walked into the camp and were immediately the object of everyone’s attention. Due to the humidity, only the children were active. Most adults sat about talking in small groups. I noticed a huge pile of clothes on the campus lawn, obviously donations, through which several women were rummaging. There was an improvised medical clinic in one classroom, where three members of the Red Cross were attending to a few infants. Five army soldiers, obviously present at the camp for security, sat casually nearby.

It was a sober scene. Though the horror of the devastation was kilometers away on the beachfront, the reality that these people had lost family members, homes and professions was close at hand in the looks on their faces. When I smiled at one elderly couple sitting on the lawn, they stared back at me with no emotion. I saw many such people. Others expressed their loss when I spoke with them. The Major told me that most people in the camp had lost one or more relatives—and everyone had lost their home. Once again the magnitude of the tragedy hit me.

“You can cook over here,” the Major said, pointing to a nearby shed. As we approached the site, I noticed a number of people cooking rice and subjis.

“Where are they getting their foodstuffs to cook?” I inquired from the Major.

“We are providing them,” he replied.

I was a little surprised. “Is that the case with all the camps in this area?” I asked.

“Yes, it is.”

“And throughout the country?” I inquired further.

“For the most part.”

I was taken aback. The media in the West had given the impression that victims of the tsunami were in desperate need of food.

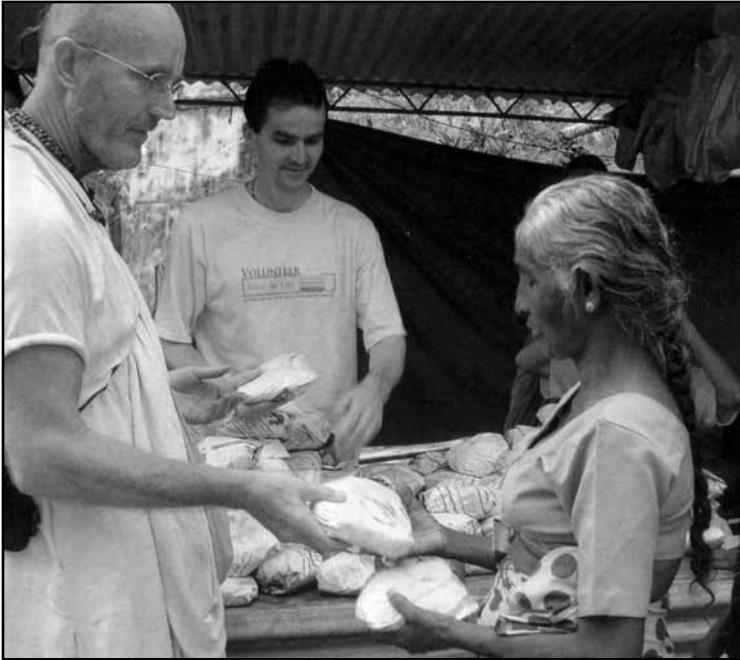
“I thought people here were hungry, Major.”

“They were in the initial stages of the disaster—for the first week,” he replied, “but we have things under control now. The world has given us ample food, medicine and other supplies.”

“Then what part do we have to play?” I asked.

“You can take some of the burden. My men are overworked delivering supplies to the 35 camps in this region. We’ve been here for three weeks. All relief organizations have a part to play and every effort helps in serving the people who survived the tsunami.”

As I reflected on his words, he stepped closer and said, “The government will be grateful for anything you can do, I assure you.”



“We’ll play our part.”

I looked around and surveyed the camp again. "It's no small thing if the government acknowledges our support in relief work at this difficult time," I thought. "It will surely bear fruit in the future. And, what's more, we'll be distributing prasadam, the mercy of the Lord. Such mercy is the best of all forms of welfare."

Breaking my meditation, I shook his hand and said, "We'll play our part. We'll begin in three days."

Quickly jumping into our van, we headed back to Colombo to pick up the rest of the team and supplies. Making a quick calculation, I realised we'd require tons of rice, dhal and vegetables. I called Mr Krishnan and requested a large truck to carry the goods south. He replied it was ready anytime.

As we journeyed, I watched again in disbelief at the destruction. At one point we ran into a huge traffic jam. As we waited, our driver pointed to an empty battered train with 15 coaches, standing still on the railway line just 30m away.

"That train was hit broadside by the tsunami," he said. "Over 1,000 people died. No one survived. They are still finding bodies in the area."

As I looked closer I could see men with white masks around their mouths and noses, digging in the mud nearby.

"The masks are for the stench of death," the driver said. "It's been almost three weeks and any corpses remaining are very deteriorated."

It was yet another stark reminder of the cruel face of material nature. I turned my eyes from the scene. I'd had enough for one day. Enough tales of death. Enough scenes of destruction. Enough of the tsunami.

"Move on!" I shouted at the driver as the traffic cleared.

He looked back at me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's been a difficult day."

As he accelerated, I thought, "Tomorrow will bring relief, for we'll begin distributing prasadam."

But just 2km down the road we witnessed yet another reminder of material existence: the aftermath of a head-on collision between two cars.

“Don’t look,” one devotee said turning from the scene.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” I replied as I closed my eyes and started to chant japa. “When will it end?” I thought.

It must have been only two minutes later that Kṛṣṇa showed me the final and most painful lesson of the day. We rounded a bend and suddenly a dog ran into our path, pausing just in front of our car. I immediately recognized it as the dog I had waved to earlier in the day.

“Watch out!” I yelled.

But the poor creature never had a chance. Just as he turned his face towards us, our van ploughed into him with a loud thud. Disappearing under the vehicle, I heard his body being crushed under the wheels. The driver had failed to slow down.

It was dusk, so no one saw the tear that glided down my face and dropped silently onto the floor of the van. But I guessed they could sense I was affected.

“It was just a dog,” the driver said.

“He was more than that,” I said softly. “He was a spark of life among all the death and destruction I saw today.”

“The day’s almost over, Maharaja,” one devotee said. “We’ll be home soon.”

“Yes,” I said under my breath, “I want to go home, to the spiritual world, and never return to this world of birth and death.”

*etam sa asthaya paratma nistham
adhyasitam purvatamair maharsibhih
aham tarisyami duranta param
tamo mukundanghri nisevayaiva*

I shall cross over the insurmountable ocean of nescience by being firmly fixed in the service of the lotus feet of Kṛṣṇa. This was approved by the previous acaryas, who were fixed in firm devotion to the Lord, Paramatma, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

[*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 11.23. 57—One of the sannyasa mantras given by the guru at the moment of initiation into the renounced order of life.]

CHAPTER FOUR



The Medicine of the Holy Names

| JANUARY 21–FEBRUARY 12, 2005 |

The day after returning to Colombo from our trip to Matara we quickly busied ourselves for the relief work ahead. We used funds donated from overseas to purchase the basics required for cooking: tons of rice, dhal, and vegetables, as well as spices, five huge new pots and various cooking utensils. Ten devotees loaded everything on a government lorry, piled in a van and returned to southern Sri Lanka, ready to begin serving daily prasadam to five thousand displaced persons.

The same day I took three devotees in another van to the east coast of Sri Lanka, scouting for opportunities to distribute prasadam there. The thirteen-hour drive would take us through a hilly area and across a 100km plain to the ocean.

Much of Sri Lanka's east coast is controlled by the Tamil Tigers. The rebel force had fought the Sinhalese government for thirty years before agreeing to a ceasefire three years ago. The ceasefire had held, but the government had recently warned that it could not guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers going into rebel-controlled areas.

“If you go to distribute prasadam and have kirtan they won’t bother you,” said Mahakarta dasa, the Colombo temple president. “In fact, they’ll welcome you. Most of the tsunami world aid given to Sri Lanka is being distributed in the southern region, controlled by the government.”

The horrors that I had witnessed in the southern coast seemed far away as we drove through the picturesque interior jungle. The winding road took us through some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever seen. The well-maintained road serviced the many tourists who flocked to Sri Lanka before and just after the war. An astonishing variety of colorful birds soared through the humid air, their beautiful colors clashing splendidly with the deep green jungle foliage. A tropical climate and diversity of habitats endow Sri Lanka with an abundance of bird life. “There are more than four hundred different species,” said our driver .

We passed nearby Kandy, the second biggest city on the island and the Sinhalese cultural and spiritual headquarters. In the center of the city is a beautiful lake, and on its northern shores sits Sri Dalada Maligawa, the Temple of the Tooth. This temple enshrines an original tooth of Lord Buddha, reputed to have been snatched from His funeral pyre in 543 BC and smuggled into Sri Lanka in the hair of a princess some nine hundred years later.

Driving further, we saw hills carpeted with the glowing green of large tea plantations. Two hours into our journey we passed a sign advertising an elephant orphanage.

“An elephant orphanage?” I asked in surprise.

“There are many wild elephants on the island,” our driver informed us. “Because of the war, many baby elephants were orphaned. So the government started an orphanage. It’s open to the public.”

“Let’s go see it!” one devotee suggested.

“That’s not what we’re here for,” I said. “We’re not tourists. We’re on a mission to help the victims of the tsunami; don’t forget that.”

Everyone in the van became silent.

After several hours I spoke up. “How do we know when we’re in Tamil Tiger territory?” I asked the driver.

"You'll know," he said with a laugh.

Hours later, as twilight was settling in and just as I had drifted off to sleep, I was rudely shaken awake by the jerking motion of our car bouncing up and down on the road.

"What's going on?" I asked the driver.

"We're now in Tamil Tiger territory," he grinned.

Sticking my head outside the widow, I saw potholes in the road every few meters. The asphalt was cracking everywhere and there were few road signs giving proper directions.

"It's a different world from here on," our driver said. "Some parts of the area are patrolled by government forces . . . and others by Tamil Tigers."

Sure enough, within minutes we came to a government army checkpoint barricaded in barbed wire. Soldiers came over to our van and shined their flashlights in. Not knowing exactly what to do, I simply smiled. To my surprise they all smiled back.

"They know you're here for relief work," said the driver. "Few tourists come this way anymore."

"I can understand why," I replied.

The soldiers let us pass. As we bounced along the road I strained my eyes to see the jungle outside. Suddenly, our driver slammed the brakes to avoid hitting a huge form laboring on the road before us.

"Hare Krsna! It's an elephant!" one devotee exclaimed.

Speeding up again, our driver calmly drove around the beast.

Some time later we descended out of the hill country and onto the plains that stretched towards the sea.

"How many more hours to go?" I asked. It seemed like we'd been driving for days.

"Five," he answered.

"Five! Okay, then pull over; I have to answer nature's call." As the driver pulled over I stepped out and started walking towards a field.

Just as I stepped on the grass a devotee screamed out, "Maharaja! Stop! It's a minefield!"

Immediately I stopped and carefully backtracked, only then noticing several red signs nearby painted with skulls and crossbones, reading, "Danger! Landmines!"

“Come back,” said the driver. “We’ll find someplace else.”

As we drove on he explained that many areas in the region were mined during the war by both government and Tamil Tiger forces. “Hundreds of thousands of land mines and tons of explosives are buried in this part of the country,” he said. “Be careful where you walk. Stick to the main roads. And watch out for snakes too. Sri Lanka has five venomous types.”

Reaching beneath his seat, he pulled out a vial containing some dirt. “You’ll be protected if you carry this,” he offered.

“What is it?” I asked curiously.

“It’s from the town of Madhu, up north,” he replied. “That’s where the statue of Our Lady of Madhu is located. She protects us from snakebites, just as earth taken from around her shrine protects us. Would you like some?”

“No, that’s okay,” I declined, waving my hand. “I’ll just stay on the beaten path.”

Darkness fell as we drove on through the plains. I noticed there wasn’t a single person on the streets in the small villages through which we passed.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Most of the fighting during the war took place at night,” the driver replied, “so these people are accustomed to going inside just after nightfall.”

“But there’s a ceasefire in effect now,” I said.

“Ceasefire doesn’t mean the war is over,” he said. “There are still skirmishes from time to time. Recently a top Tamil Tiger politician was assassinated nearby.”

Again silence prevailed inside the van, and I dozed off. I awoke in a village and saw a building with a sign that read, “Tamil Tiger Regional Headquarters.”

Surprised, I turned to the driver who in a serious voice said, “They’re in control here.”

Just after midnight we arrived at our final destination: a small village near Batticaloa on the far-eastern shore of Sri Lanka.

After being in the stuffy van all day, I wanted some fresh air. I was about to ask the driver if he could take me the short distance to

the beach so I could take a walk. Then I remembered that it would be a terrible scene of devastation, like most other places along the coast.

We soon met a local Hindu priest with whom we had a prearranged meeting. He took us to a wedding hall across from a Ganesh temple where we were to rest that night. Inside there was a small light shining, and I was surprised to see many men sleeping on the floor.

"They're fisherman who lost their homes and families in the tsunami," the priest said.

As I set up my mosquito net huge clashes of thunder pounded outside. Soon rain started pouring down. I quickly fell asleep, exhausted by the day's long journey.

I woke up late. The fishermen were already up and cooking their breakfast in a corner of the hall. When everyone was up we bathed at the well outside. After chanting most of our rounds we went with the local priest, our translator, to check the camps for displaced persons.

As we approached the first camp, I asked the priest if the people were getting enough food.

"Food is not the problem here," he told us. "Although the government has done little to help us, our people from the interior, unaffected by the tsunami, have been giving sufficient rice and dhal. The Indian government has also sent several shiploads of the same.

"The real problem here is that most of the victims of the tsunami are suffering from trauma. People are still in shock. At least twice a week rumors circulate that another tsunami is coming, and people panic. They grab their children and belongings and run out of the camps screaming.

"Are you trained in dealing with trauma?" he asked me.

"No," I replied, "but we have a special medicine for such things."

"A special medicine?"

"Yes, wait and see."

As we walked into the first camp I noticed a distinct difference

from those on the south coast. Some seven hundred people milled about. Things appeared much less orderly. There were no Red Cross representatives or army personnel. People seemed disoriented. A number had bandaged injuries. One woman's face was just beginning to heal from a bad burn. Sadness seemed to hover over the camp like a dark monsoon cloud.

Walking straight into the middle of the camp, I asked for a chair and sat down. The people, curious, started to gather around us. The devotees sat around me, and taking our mrdanga in my hands I started to chant Hare Krsna. Within moments the whole camp was listening carefully. As the tempo built up I indicated that the people should clap along, which they began to do enthusiastically. After ten minutes I stopped. Turning to the priest I said, "They're clapping, but they're not chanting."

He leaned over and whispered, "They don't know Krsna here. But they know Ramacandra. After all, this is Lanka, where Ravana lived."

Smiling, I began kirtan again, singing "Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram, Patita Pavana Sita Ram." Immediately the people responded by smiling and chanting along. As the kirtan got faster some people started dancing. After twenty minutes I brought the kirtan to a close. The atmosphere was like Vaikuntha.

Astonished, the priest said, "They all look so happy!"

Turning to him with a smile, I said, "It's the medicine of the holy names."

After the crowd settled down I began telling stories from the Ramayana. It was obvious by the way they nodded their heads that they knew the pastimes, but they drank the nectar of Rama-katha as if it was their first taste. After forty-five minutes I called all the children forward and asked a few simple questions: Who is Lord Rama's wife? What color is Lord Rama? Who is His most faithful servant? When a child answered correctly, I would give him or her a little card with a picture of Radha and Krsna and a calendar on the back. From the enthusiasm of the children, it seemed that those colorful cards were as good as gold.

Then I taught them the Hare Krsna mantra, and the blissful atmosphere expanded as they chanted along.



The blissful atmosphere expanded as the children chanted along

As we got up to leave, many of the women came rushing forward to put their babies in my arms. I wasn't exactly sure what to do, so I just chanted Hare Krsna in each infant's ear. There were many babies and it took quite some time.

As we walked toward the gate, the entire camp followed us. They appeared very grateful: everyone waved and some even cried as we got into our van to go to the next camp. It was more evidence for me that kirtan and Hari-katha are the panacea for all problems in Kali-yuga.

*aho ahobhir na kaler viduyate
sudha su dhara madhuraṁ pade pade
dine dine candana candra sitalaḥ
yaso yasoda tanayasya giyate*

One who daily sings the glories of Yasoda's son, Krsna, which are cooling as sandalwood and camphor, is not troubled by the days of Kali-yuga. For him every step is a torrential flood of the sweetest nectar.

[Sri Rupa Goswami—*Padyavali*, Text 41]

As we drove to the next camp I got a call from Tara das, who was directing the prasadam distribution in the Matara district to the south.

“It’s going well, Maharaja,” Tara said. “Yesterday we distributed four thousand plates. It’s just the beginning. Many people in the camp enjoy helping us gather wood for cooking, and they also help us cutting up vegetables. The major has arranged trucks for us to go out and distribute prasadam to several camps in the area each day.

“More devotees will be arriving from Russia soon,” he continued, “and we’ll begin distributing prasadam in other parts of the country as well.”

As we continued driving to the next camp the priest turned to me and said, “The most traumatized are the people still on the beach. Although their homes were destroyed, some won’t leave. Do you think you could visit there before we go any farther? They really need help.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go.”



Tara das, Laksminath das and the major



Russian devotees cooking prasadam

Within a few minutes we were at the beach. As we got out of the car I felt as if my eyes were tricking me. Everything was devastated as far as one could see. It seemed even more extensive than the southern part of the country. The tsunami had flattened practically every house. Cars, bicycles, chairs, sofas, toys, and clothes--a seemingly unlimited assortment of paraphernalia--were strewn everywhere. And there was the awful stench of death. I covered my mouth with a cloth.

"Mostly dead animals," the priest said, "but we are still finding human bodies. They're under the rubble of the houses and also wash up periodically on the shore."

On my drive along the southern coast I had seen the destruction only from a distance. Now I was walking through it. We had to step carefully through the decimated area, over shards of broken glass, chunks of concrete, and jagged pieces of wood and wire--and bones, already bleached white by the tropical sun. Nearby I saw volunteers from a humanitarian organization spraying everything in sight with disinfectant.

“By God’s grace there has been no epidemic yet,” said the priest.

Walking through one neighborhood completely destroyed by the tsunami, we came across two distraught men sitting in the rubble of what used to be a house.

As we approached, one of them looked up and sobbing uncontrollably, said, “I was on top of the house, and I saw my mother swept away before my eyes.”

“I lost both my children,” said the other man, standing. “They were torn from my arms as I sat right here.”

Grabbing my kurta, he screamed, “Why has God allowed this? I am not a bad man!”

For the moment there was nothing to say; no words could offer reason to one in such distress. I simply put my arm around him. After two minutes, as our group turned to go, I said to him softly, “Hare Krsna.” Nodding his head, he looked to the sky, silently accepting his destiny and the will of providence.

A few minutes later we approached a severely damaged temple that was completely deserted. “Where is the priest?” I inquired.

“He died in the tsunami,” said our priest. “Hardly anyone survived in this area. We burned his body and spread the ashes over there near the sea.”

Just then I saw a young man wandering aimlessly through the rubble nearby. I asked the priest to call him over.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him. “School started a few days ago.”

“I’m looking for the bodies of my mother, father, three brothers, and four sisters,” he said with a dazed expression. “The terrible ocean took them away.”

I sat him down and put my hand on his shoulder.

“The body is temporary,” I said, “but the soul is eternal and never dies.”

Those few words calmed him, so I continued. “Your mother, father, brothers, and sisters are elsewhere now. You won’t see them again in this life.”

I asked where he was living.

“With my auntie,” he replied.

“Don’t come back here,” I said. “Your mother would have wanted you in school now. Am I right?”

“Yes,” he agreed, and as he turned to go he said, “Thank you.”

Just as he left, a distressed woman came running up to me and grabbed my arm. She was speaking in Tamil, so I couldn’t understand her.

“She said she lost her husband and eight-year-old daughter in the tsunami,” the priest said. “And her three-year-old boy is in the hospital. She has no money to feed him. She’s asking if you can give her some.”

I reached into my pocket, and taking out two thousand rupees put it in her hand. Still crying, she went to sit in the ruins of her home.

We spent several hours among the devastation near the beach, talking to people and trying to comfort them as much as we could. Sometimes I would offer transcendental knowledge, but more often it was a simple embrace that gave a person the solace they needed.

On the way back to our van we stopped at the local school, which was not much more than a steel frame left standing after the tsunami. Going inside, I watched as the teachers gave thirty or forty kids a lesson in mathematics.

When the children noticed me they all ran up close, staring. I spent several minutes shaking their hands, asking them their names and pulling on the girls’ pigtails. One boy was wearing a hat, and I took it off and put it on my own head, making all the kids laugh. Suddenly I saw the reason he was wearing the hat: he had a horrible skin infection on his head. As I took the hat off I thought, “I’ll probably pay a high price for that trick.”

I taught the children to chant Hare Krsna and after a short kirtan we departed.

As we left, the teacher said, “Thank you. They’ll never forget your visit.”

Walking back to our van, I said to the priest, “There’s years of work to be done, just in this one village.”

"Can you stay a little longer?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I have to move on," I replied, "but I'll be sending a group of devotees here in a few days to distribute prasadam and chant with the people. And I'll spread the word. Perhaps there are devotees overseas who can spare a little time and come here as well."

Stopping, the priest took both my hands and said, "Tell them we would be most appreciative. Even if they came for just a few days."

We visited several more camps and the next day started the long drive back to Colombo.

As we neared our base in Colombo late that afternoon, our driver reminded me of a promise I had made to visit an orphanage just outside the city, run by the local ISKCON temple. Seeing that I was tired and so a little hesitant, he said, "They're wonderful little devotees."

"Devotees?" I asked.

"Yes. It's more than just an orphanage. Shall we go?"

"All right," I agreed.

When we arrived at the orphanage, I met Nandarani dasi, Mahakarta's wife, who started the project seven years ago.

"We have seventy-nine children at the moment," she said, "most of them orphans from the war. But recently the government has asked us to take seventy-five more children orphaned by the tsunami. We've just begun construction on a new dormitory for that purpose."

As she took me on a tour of the property, I was amazed at the clean and well-organized facility.

"We also run a school for the children," she said with a smile.

"It must be difficult raising orphans who've experienced the horrors of war," I suggested.

"Many saw their parents killed," she said soberly. "It was a technique used by soldiers on both sides. But through the years, these children have come to terms with all they saw in the war."

"How is that?"

“Through Krsna consciousness,” she replied. “Come, I’ll show you.”

She took me to the temple room, where all the children were anxiously waiting to meet me. When I walked in, they all paid obeisances and then eagerly gathered around me.

“They want to hear stories about Krsna,” she said, “and then have kirtan. It’s their life and soul.”

I immediately began telling them Krsna conscious stories, and after an hour I picked up a drum and started kirtan. Once again, I witnessed the all-merciful nature of the holy names as the children danced wildly with abandon, their big smiles radiating with youthful enthusiasm. I took the kirtan outside, and we chanted and danced all over the property. They were beside themselves with happiness. After an hour and a half I was exhausted and brought the kirtan party back into the temple room. But they wanted more, so I kept going, praying for the strength to fulfill their taste for the holy names. When we finally finished, I sat on the floor with all the children around me, blissful smiles still decorating their innocent faces.

“Am I in a war-torn country, recently ravaged by a tsunami--or am I in Vaikuntha, the spiritual world?” I wondered to myself in amazement. Looking again at the blissful children, I knew: “For the moment, I’m in Vaikuntha.”

As our group continued back to Colombo, I said to the devotees in the van, “This is something new in our movement: a Krsna conscious orphanage!”

That night I began making the final touches on the infrastructure I had set up for our relief work on the island. I would be leaving in a few days, but devotees who had come with me from overseas would continue the work for at least another two months.

Before taking rest, I remembered my promise to the priest on the east coast. I wrote emails to several godbrothers, asking if they could spare some time to come and help the villagers deal with the tragedy of the tsunami.

I got an instant reply.

“I don’t know how much help I could be,” one godbrother wrote. “I don’t have money, I’m not a doctor, and I don’t have experience in counseling.”

I wrote back, “Just come with the holy names. They’re what’s needed most here now.”

May Kṛṣṇa’s holy name, which is a reservoir of all transcendental happiness, the destruction of Kali-yuga’s sins, the most purifying of all purifying things, the saintly person’s food as he traverses the path to the spiritual world, the pleasure-garden where the voices of the greatest saints, philosophers, and poets play, the life of the righteous, and the seed of the tree of religion, bring transcendental auspiciousness to you all.”

[Srila Rupa Goswami, *Padayavali*—Text 19]

CHAPTER FIVE



Lessons on the Road

| FEBRUARY 1–APRIL 13, 2005 |

Since leaving Sri Lanka in late February I have had several dreams of the devastation caused by the tsunami and of the victims that I attended to. That real-life drama left an indelible impression on my mind. Even the most beautiful scenes of nature now appear tainted, for I realize more than ever before that everything in this world is temporary and subject to destruction.

In late March, I took a flight from London to Los Angeles for my annual two-month preaching tour through the United States. But I could not forget the tsunami, so unlike some of the other passengers, I was unimpressed by the glory and glitter of America upon our arrival. Many were awestruck at the well-organized and efficient procedures for customs and immigration in the huge arrival halls, amidst the latest technology and sophisticated security. And when we stepped outside the terminal, I recognized two passengers who stood motionless-mesmerized by the bigness of the American scene before them.

Only one thought came to my mind, however. It was a single line from a recording my spiritual master had made almost four decades ago. I'd heard it a thousand times, but it had more relevance now: "The whole show is only temporary."

Fortunately, Srila Prabhupada had also introduced me to the positive alternative: spiritual life, Kṛṣṇa consciousness, which since my experience in Sri Lanka, had taken on much more significance. Now I counted my blessings each day and found myself relishing and seeking more shelter in the daily spiritual activities that I had come to take for granted after many years. In that sense, the tragedy of the tsunami had started a renaissance in my spiritual life.

As I signaled to the vehicle that had come to pick me up, I was praying to the Lord not to let me forget recent lessons learned on the road back home.

When a relative dies one certainly becomes very much interested in philosophy, but when the funeral ceremony is over one again becomes attentive to materialism. The technical term for this attitude of the materialistic person is *smasana-vairagya*, or detachment in a cemetery or place of cremation.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 7.2.61 purport]

To ensure that my lessons were not only learned but also realized, the Lord kindly made arrangements to refresh my memory throughout my visit. The first lesson was on the positive side.

I was traveling in upstate New York with Sri Prahlad and his wife, Rukmini Priya. We were just one week into our travels, and we had been invited for an evening of kirtan at the famous Kripalu Yoga Institute. The immense 300-room complex was once a Jesuit monastery and now serves as a yoga retreat for people on the East Coast of the United States.

I already knew about America's ongoing fascination with yoga; otherwise, I would not have understood how such a large complex could be filled up most of the year. An estimated 16 million Americans practice one form of yoga or another, double the number of five years ago.

Recent articles in mainstream magazines like *Time* and *National Geographic* have extolled the glories of meditation, and America's fascination with yoga could be seen everywhere. The popular Kimp-ton Hotel chain supplies guests with a free yoga mat and block and provides a 24-hour yoga channel, and in-flight magazines often include simple five-minute yoga exercises to ease the stress of air travel, but most convincing of all was the many yoga studios in every town we visited.

Most of the yoga practices in America differ vastly from the bhakti yoga that we devotees practice. Yoga in America is based on physical well-being, and if there's any philosophy at all, it's of a non-devotional, impersonal nature. Therefore it has not been easy for devotees to introduce Krsna consciousness into the developing yoga scene.

Recently, however, the melodious chanting of mantras in kirtan has become popular with several non-devotee groups playing to large crowds across the country. When the managers of Kripalu Institute received a CD of Sri Prahlad from a local devotee, they invited Sri Prahlad for an evening of bhajan. We eagerly looked forward to the program.



As we entered the Kripalu Institute, classes had just finished. People were walking through the halls or sitting in little groups chatting.

All eyes turned to us as we entered, dressed in robes and carrying musical instruments and trays of prasadam. As we walked to the main hall, I no-

*Indradyumna Swami, Sri Prahlada das,
and Rukmini Priya dasi*

ticed many people following us. When we entered the hall, the woman helping us politely closed the door so we could set up. "The whole complex is buzzing about the program," she said.

Sure enough, when she opened the door 20 minutes later, a large crowd of over 150 people quickly entered and sat on the floor, most in meditative yogic asanas.

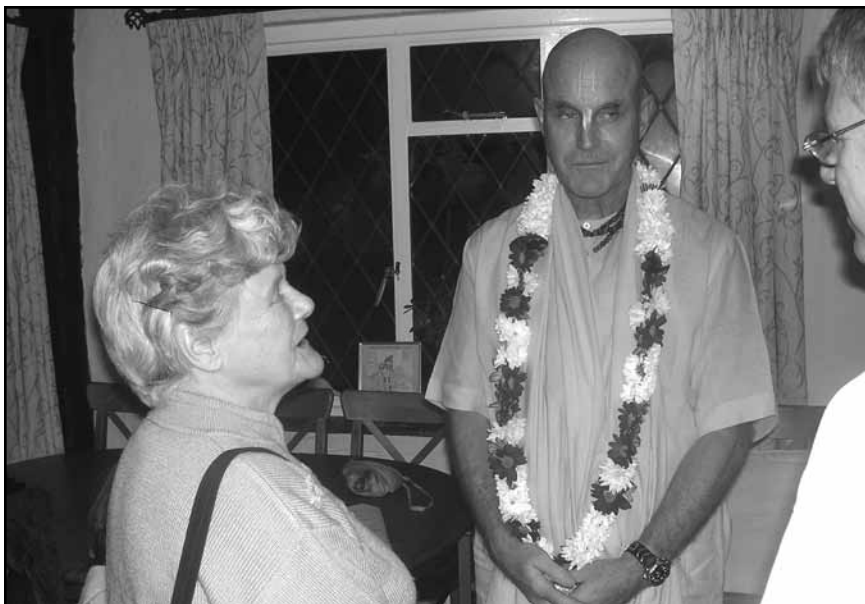
Up to that moment I had been wondering how to conduct the program. Normally I would speak at length about Kṛṣṇa consciousness: its history, culture, and philosophy. But although the people here were obviously spiritual seekers, past experience had shown that such people are often the most difficult to convince because of their preconceived ideas of yoga and mysticism, so I took a different approach and simply depended on Kṛṣṇa, that is to say, on His holy names. After a five-minute introduction I turned to Sri Prahlād. "Chant for at least an hour," I said.

It was the shortest public lecture I had ever given, but I sat back confident. I knew Sri Prahlād's chanting of the holy names would melt their hearts. And it did.

As Sri Prahlād began to play the harmonium and chant, I saw many of the yogis break their meditation and open their eyes in astonishment. Others closed their eyes and began swaying to the beautiful melodious kīrtan. Within 30 minutes practically everyone was dancing in transcendental ecstasy.

I noticed people there from all walks of life. Such a program was an easy way to contact people we might not ordinarily reach. I suddenly realized that kīrtan programs might be the right way to enter into the spiraling interest in yoga in America. I exchanged glances with Sri Prahlād, and I could tell he had had the same realization.

The most convincing sign came after the two-hour kīrtan finished. People stood stunned, relishing the deep spiritual experience they'd just had. Finally a woman walked up to me. "That's yoga," she said. "I feel so happy!" As I picked up the drum to leave, I turned to her and smiled. "Yes, Ma'am," I said. "Chanting that mantra is the topmost yoga system."



"That's yoga," she said. "I feel so happy!"

A verse from scripture came to my mind: The Hare Krsna mantra is the only mantra for destroying one's enemies—lust, greed etc.—and it is worshiped by all the words of the Upanishads. That mantra causes the darkness of ignorance to vanish and puts an end to material existence. That mantra is the only cause of the attainment of spiritual opulence, and chanting it protects one from the bite of the poisonous snake of sinful reactions. O tongue! Please constantly chant this mantra and make my life successful.

[Mukunda-mala stotram, Verse 31]

Another stop on our trip was Washington D.C., where the Lord again blessed me so I would not forget the realities of life. The blessing came in the form of Bhakti Tirtha Maharaja. For months Maharaja had been fighting cancer and had only recently conceded defeat, as tumors began appearing throughout his body despite the various treatments. His disciples updated me on his condition, and

I expected to find him in bed, succumbing slowly to death in a meditative mood.

But when I entered his room, I was surprised to find him sitting up in a chair, looking cheerful and alert. He was thinner than I had last seen him, but smiling broadly and radiating a bright effulgence.

As we began talking, it was obvious that he didn't have long to live. His cancer had infiltrated his bones, and he showed me a large tumor near his neck.

He wasn't the first devotee on the verge of death that I had visited, but his presence had an especially deep affect on me. In him, I saw myself, in the sense that his career in Kṛṣṇa consciousness has been very similar to mine. A sannyasi and a traveling preacher, he has lived an active life, visiting many countries of the world. We have even preached in the same countries and often crossed paths at big festivals.

Only last year we spoke together on a famous Croatian morning-television talk show. Like me he is a writer and thus known to the general mass of devotees. Now his career had suddenly been cut short, and he had only days or weeks to live. It was an eye-opener and made the reality of death even more real.

"Only time separates me from a similar fate," I thought. I suddenly felt an urgent need to become Kṛṣṇa conscious.

Today or tomorrow this worthless material body will leave me and all the material happiness connected with it will also leave. Because material happiness is temporary, it should be understood to be only a mirage of the real happiness. O my mind, please abandon this false happiness and enjoy the real, eternal happiness of devotional service within the land of Vṛndavana.

[*Vṛndavan-mahimamṛta* Chapter 1, text 24]

Maharaja sensed my mood. "More difficult than the pain and inconvenience," he said, "is that my days of traveling and preaching are over. After being active for so many years, I suddenly find myself confined to this room. No picking up and moving to the next town, the next program. It's hard." His face took on a sober look.

"I can understand that," I said.

"No you can't," he said with a faint smile. "Can you share with me the thoughts and realizations of other devotees you've known on the verge of death?"

I thought carefully for a moment and then mentioned how our Godbrother Sridhar Swami was fearless in the face of death. I attributed it to his having realized the continuity of devotional service to the Lord: As we are serving guru and Krsna in this life, we shall be doing the same in the next life.

Maharaja thought for a moment and then nodded his head. Such topics carry more weight for one on the verge of death.

Then Maharaja switched the subject to something more important to him. "I'm concerned that the general mass of devotees won't have the same facilities given to me near death," he said. "Because I am a leader, devotees have given money and facilities to cure me. I've been to a number of clinics and have seen many doctors. It's been costly. The normal devotee wouldn't have such opportunities."

I was amazed. "Here's a real Vaisnava," I thought. "He's on the verge of death but concerned about the welfare of others."

"So I'm going to start a trust," he continued, "with any money left over from donations to me, to insure that others can have access to the same treatment I've had."

His mind was working quickly. "I am conscious that there are still many anarthas in my heart," he said, "and I'm anxious that there may not be time to purge them."

He hadn't stated it as a question, but it was obvious that he was looking for advice.

"Maharaja," I said, "your service record throughout the years is outstanding. I have no doubt that is what Krsna will consider at the moment of your death."

*vayur anilam amrtam
athedam bhasmantam sariram
om krato smara krtam smara
krato smara krtam smara*

Let this temporary body be burnt to ashes, and let the air of life be merged with the totality of air. Now, O my Lord, please remember all my sacrifices, and because You are the ultimate beneficiary, please remember all that I have done for You.

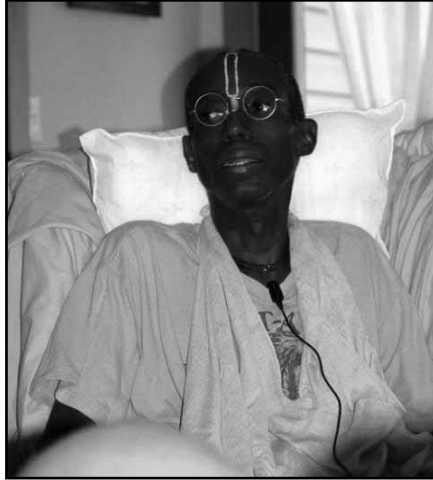
[*Sri Isopanishad*, Mantra 17]

To give Maharaja even more confidence I related the story of Ramanujacarya, who asked a similar question to the Deity of Ranganatha. “My Lord,” he said, “what is the fate of the devotee who cannot remember you at the moment of death?”

The Deity was silent for a few moments. “If my devotee cannot remember me at the moment of death,” said the Deity, “then I will remember my devotee.”

Maharaja smiled.

Then he began glorifying some of my preaching activities, and I decided it was time to go. As I left, I invited Maharaja to the Gaura Purnima celebrations the next day at the Potomac temple.



Maharaja spoke wonderfully for half an hour

The next day, just before sundara arotik, I was pleasantly surprised when he showed up in his wheelchair in spite of his fragile condition. The temple room was packed, and when the devotees saw Maharaja they cheered. Although I was meant to be the keynote speaker, I asked Maharaja to give the lecture after arotik. He spoke wonderfully for half an hour and then gave the microphone to me.

"I won't speak more than a few words tonight," I began. "I would like this occasion to be remembered for the enlightening words of His Holiness Bhakti Tirtha Maharaja."

Some devotees began to cry. I glorified Maharaja's service over the years and finally said that I had no doubt he was going back to Godhead. "Our only qualification for achieving such an exalted state," I added, "is the causeless mercy of the spiritual master, and the proof that Maharaja has achieved this grace is that after he returned from preaching behind the Iron Curtain, Srila Prabhupada warmly embraced him."

The next morning, I declined to give class because I was too tired and needed to prepare my things before leaving. Later that day I was humbled when I heard that Bhakti Tirtha Maharaja, though exhausted from his illness and preparing to leave this very world, gave a class in his room. It was evident that although he had been inquiring from me, I had much more to learn from him.

Just before we left the city, the Lord again showed us the contrast between the sober and the sublime when Sri Prahlad, Rukminipriya, and I visited the home of Dr. Kaya Ploss, an affluent and distinguished woman in American politics. At 74, Dr. Ploss is in charge of the Center for Polish and American Cultural Affairs, and the visit had been arranged by a devotee who lived next door to her.

I didn't know how important she was until we were sitting in her living room. I saw photos of her with various world leaders including Pope John Paul II, former United States presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton, a former Polish president, and the present one, Aleksander Kwasniewski, just to name a few.

At first she seemed a little uncomfortable about having us in her home, but after a while she relaxed. When she saw me staring at

the photos, she began telling us the story of her life, most of which centered on American politics. Her second husband had served as an advisor to the secretary of state, so we heard many stories of government intrigue and diplomacy. Every once in a while she would stop and ask us a question about Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

After an hour, the phone rang and she got up to answer it. "Excuse me," she said. "I'm expecting a call from my son. He is the Polish ambassador to the United Nations."

She took the call in another room, but Rukmini Priya, a native of Poland, was sitting within hearing distance and later told us what she had heard. "My dear son," Dr. Ploss had said, "something wonderful is happening. I have the Hare Krishnas in my home."

We spent over an hour with her, and she invited us back next year. "Many guests visit me here," she said, "and I visit them too. Next week I will be visiting the newly elected president of Ukraine, in Kiev. You are always welcome." She put her hand on my shoulder.

"Thank you," I said and gave her a copy of my newest book, *Diary of a Traveling Preacher*, Volume 5.

"I will definitely read it" she said.

A few days later, almost predictably, came the next lesson, yet another reminder that "the whole show is only temporary."

In Laguna Beach, California, I was invited to the home of Gaura Priya dasi, a 73-year-old disciple of Virabahu prabhu. She was dying of cancer.

As I walked in her room, I could see she was only hours away from leaving her body. She lay unconscious in her bed, thin and pale, her chanting beads draped over her arm. Her family members asked me to put a Tulasi leaf and some Ganges water in her mouth. I was grateful for the service to a Vaisnavi, though the circumstances were difficult.

"I guess I'm still not convinced," I thought, "so the Lord keeps hammering home the same point: Life is temporary, don't get distracted, keep your mind on the goal."

We had kirtan for some time, but after a while my mind began to wander, and I left to get some fresh air. I felt a little uncomfortable

about leaving, but I as I had never known Gaura Priya, it was difficult to be in the same mood as those who had served with her.

Her daughter, who was not a devotee, came outside. “I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for my mother,” she said.

“But I’ve only been here a few minutes,” I started to say. “I—“

“I mean your diary,” she said. “My mother loved to read it and waited anxiously for each chapter to come out. The whole last month she has been glorifying you. She was particularly inspired by the story of your brother and how he became a devotee. She saw it as a small miracle, and it gave her so much faith and spiritual strength in these last days of her life.”

Again I was both embarrassed and humbled.

“She so much wanted to meet you,” The daughter said.

“Thank you,” I said. “Now I can go and chant with feeling like the others.”

I returned to the room and started leading kirtan. This time I chanted from the heart, hoping that she would somehow hear by means of the transcendental medium. After some time, I concluded the kirtan, and before going whispered some words of encouragement into her ear.

My lessons seemed to be following a pattern of positive then negative, so I expected a positive one next, but I soon found myself face to face with death again. It seems to be one lesson we need be reminded of again and again.

*ahany ahani bhutani
gacchantiha yamalayam
sesah sthavaram icchanti
kim ascaryam atah param*

Day after day countless living entities in this world go to the kingdom of death. Still, those who remain aspire for a permanent situation here. What could be more amazing than this?

[*Mahabharata Vana-parva* 313.116]

But this time it was not a devotee in the Hare Krsna movement. It was Pope John Paul II. Like others, I was saddened to hear of his illness and death. Tears came to my eyes when I received the news of his dignified departure, surrounded by his associates in deep prayer.

A devotee looked at my face. "But Maharaja," he said, "many of the problems you face in Poland come from the Church."

"True," I said, "but I don't think they come from the Pope himself. He always showed a willingness for interfaith dialogue."

"Besides," I added, "although our spiritual traditions differ in some ways, I always appreciated his conservative stance on religious issues and his courage in spreading his faith. The world is a better place for his missionary work."

"Well," said the devotee, "I wonder if Srila Prabhupada would have seen it that way."

"He certainly did when he was with us," I said, "as evidenced by his letter to Pope Paul VI. The lives and deaths of holy persons contain valuable lessons for those of us treading the straight and narrow path back to the spiritual world."

Some passages from the letter follow:

Montreal, August 3, 1968

His Holiness The Pope Paul VI Vicar of Jesus Christ
State of Vatican City, Rome, Italy

Your Holiness:

Please accept my respectful humble obeisances at Your lotus feet. I beg to introduce myself as an Indian monk, following the Vedic principles of religious life. At the present I am in the renounced order of Sannyasa (aged 72 years) and preaching God consciousness all over the world

My mission is in the line of Lord Caitanya, Who is Personified Love of Godhead and Who advented Himself 482 years ago in India ... His mission is to revive God conscious-

ness all over the world on the basis of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, the science of God

The principle of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is that any religious faith which helps a man to develop Love of God, without any motive, and without being hampered by any material condition, is transcendental religion ... The special significance of human life is to achieve Love of God as the prime perfection of life ...

This tendency is very much deteriorating, and because Your Holiness is the Head of a great religious sect, I think we should meet together and chalk out a program for cooperation

The human society cannot anymore be allowed to continue a Godless civilization at the risk of decreasing truthfulness, hygienic principles, forgiveness, and mercifulness ...

The Krishna Consciousness movement is meant for overhauling the whole situation. We are creating men of character, and we are training our disciples to become Lovers of God, or Krishna

I do not wish to prolong the body of this letter further, but if you think that a meeting with you will be beneficial for the human society at large, I shall be very much pleased if Your Holiness will grant me an interview. Thanking you in anticipation for an early reply.

Yours in the service of the Lord,

AC Bhaktivedanta Swami

CHAPTER SIX



Tales of Wonder

| APRIL 14-28, 2005 |

As our two-month tour of the American temples was coming to a close, I found myself drawing on my body's reserve energies. Our schedule of two or three programs a day meant I rarely went to bed before midnight. Constantly on the move, traveling back and forth through different time zones, eating irregularly, and sleeping in a different home every other day had become a taxing routine and had taken its toll on me.

In Alachua, Florida, I fainted one morning as I left the temple. A devotee helped me outside and sat me on the lawn. "Maharaja," he said, "you'd better slow down. Take it easy."

"Actually I'm in good shape," I replied. "I had a full medical checkup in Mumbai two months ago, and the doctors said I was fine."

"Then why did you faint?" he asked.

I did my best to smile. "It's the last leg of the trip," I said. "I'll be okay. Don't worry."



“If I had to do it over again, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

As I sat on the lawn recuperating, I thought back on the past two months. “If I had to do it over again,” I said to myself, “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

I love my life as a traveling preacher. I relish preaching in any given place and then picking up and moving on. Even before I was a devotee I had traveled the length and breadth of America by the time I was 14 years old. When I accepted sannyasa at 29 and started traveling extensively, it was the perfection of that desire. It was no longer the wanderlust of a restless teenager, but the solemn duty of spreading the mission of the Lord. Remaining fixed in that service has required keeping focused on the goal—and never looking back.

I often remember Srila Prabhupada’s words as he handed the danda to a new sannyasi in Mayapura: “Don’t look back and think you have left anything behind, and never envy the position of the materialistic householders.”

Forget the past that sleeps and ne’er The future dream at all
But act in times that are with thee And progress thee shall
call.

[Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur, *Saragrahi Vaisnava*, 16th stanza]

But the past eight weeks had been pure preaching, and there was no harm in reflecting on the many highlights that came to mind: big temple kirtans at morning programs, selected verses from Srimad Bhagavatam that I had enjoyed speaking on, numerous sweet bhajans by Sri Prahlad, and the special feasts.

But the most precious memories of all were of the many devotees I'd met. The nectar of their association far outweighed any austerities I'd encountered. And I'd had plenty of association.

I suddenly realized that I was alone for the first time in months, sitting there on the lawn. I laughed out loud.

Many devotees came to mind, big and small. I remembered a middle-aged woman on Harinam in New Orleans who caught my attention because she seemed to be the happiest of all the devotees there. After the Harinam, as we all walked back to the van, she approached me.

"Maharaja," she said, "my name is Sarva Laskmi dasi, and I'm the happiest woman on earth."

"I won't contest that," I said smiling.

"I'll tell you why," she said. "In the 1960s I committed a horrible crime and was sentenced to 90 years in jail."

My eyebrows went up.

"But several years ago," she continued, "some devotees started a bhakti yoga program in the federal penitentiary where I was incarcerated. I began attending the programs and soon took up Krsna consciousness in earnest.

"I was trying hard to become a good devotee, so I also became a model prisoner. Two years later, after my spiritual master, Bir Krsna Maharaja, initiated me inside the prison, I was suddenly granted a full pardon and released.

"No official explanation was ever given why they let me go, but I knew it was simply Krsna's mercy. Now I try to share my good fortune with those who are prisoners in the jailhouse of material existence by preaching Krsna consciousness."

As the woman left, I could only marvel at the clemency of the prison officials, and even more at the mercy of the Lord. And more surprises came at the Sunday feast the next day.

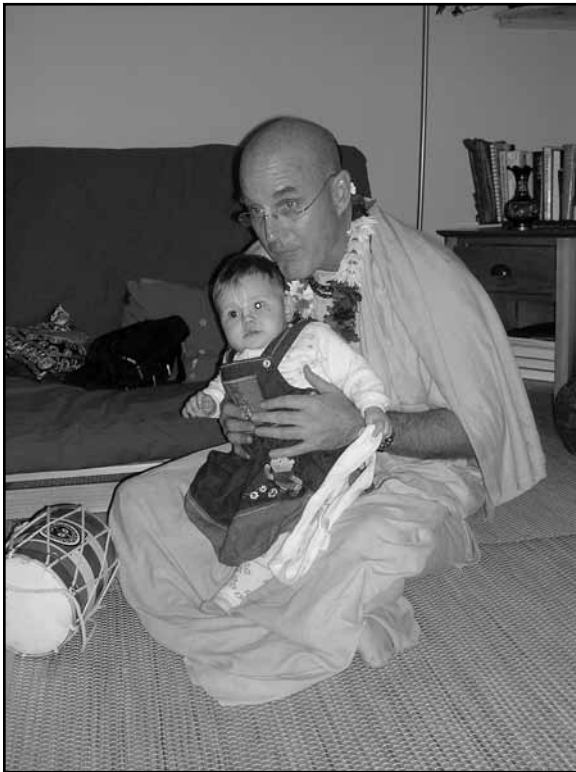
During the program, a woman devotee asked me to bless her baby. She held the child up and said, “He’s special.”

“Of course,” I replied, thinking that all mothers think their babies are special.

She smiled. “No,” she said, “he really is special. He hardly moved in my womb. In fact, I didn’t know I was pregnant until the eighth month.”

My eyebrows went up again.

“I had been experiencing a number of medical problems,” she continued, “but one particularly bad day I visited my doctor. Suddenly he got a surprised look on his face. “Young lady,” he said, “you’re pregnant!”



Of course he's special!

Her husband smiled and nodded his head. “I wish the child well,” I said. “I pray this may be his last birth in the material world.”

Then another woman approached me. “I couldn’t help overhearing,” she said. “You know, ‘I’ve recently been born as well.’”

After all I’d heard in the last two days, I was ready for anything. “How’s that?” I asked.

“I lived in this temple 30 years ago and saw Srila Prabhupada several times,” she said. “But foolishly I left early in my devotional life. Recently I’ve come back. I feel hope again. In effect, I’ve been reborn.”

“Will you stay with us now?” I asked.

“Definitely,” she replied. “I’ll never leave again.”

The trip through the United States was filled with nectar—the kirtans, the stories of how devotees came to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, the preaching, but the Lord was saving the best for last.

Our last stop was the Miami temple in Coconut Grove, a beautiful property in a well-known and well-to-do area. Trivikrama Maharaja had come from Orlando for our visit, and when Sri Prahlad, Rukmini Priya, and I arrived, he greeted us with a small group of devotees having kirtan.

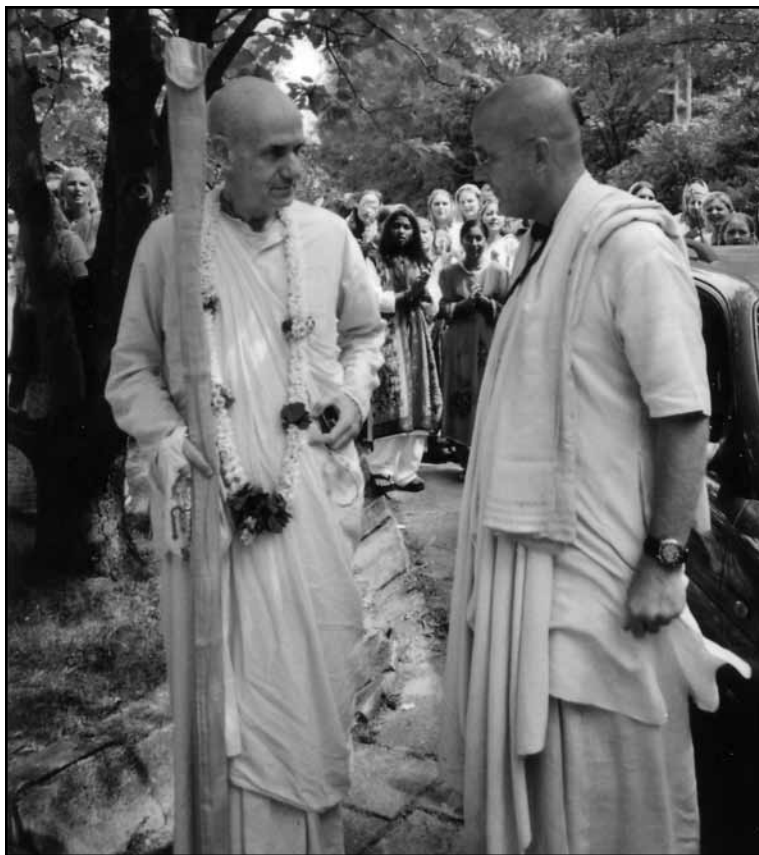
I noted one devotee in particular, who seemed to be especially absorbed in the chanting. His eyes were closed as he concentrated on the holy names, and a blissful smile adorned his face. As the kirtan party took us into the temple, I noticed that his fixation with chanting didn’t diminish.

“He obviously has a strong attraction for Kṛṣṇa’s holy names,” I thought. “I hope I can get his association.”

I turned to Trivikrama Maharaja. “Who is that devotee who’s relishing the kirtan so much?” I asked.

Maharaja smiled. “His name is Siddha-vidya dasa,” he said. “He’s our Godbrother, and he’s been part of the Miami temple practically from the beginning.”

I couldn’t wait to meet him, but during my short arrival talk, I noticed him get up and go out of the temple. I became anxious that I might not get his association that day.



Trivikrama Swami and Indradyumna Swami

As soon as I finished my talk, I turned to another devotee. “Where did Siddha-vidya go?” I asked.

“He’s getting ready for Harinam,” the devotee said.

I was surprised because a big program was scheduled in the temple that evening.

“But the program’s in just a few hours,” I said.

The devotee laughed. “You don’t know Siddha-vidya. He’s been going on Harinam sankirtan in Miami practically every single day since he joined in 1971.”

I made a quick calculation in my mind. “Every day for 33 years?” I asked.

“For the most part, yes,” he replied, “except when he’s sick or in India or there’s a special event happening.”

“He appears to be a humble Vaisnava,” I thought, “one of those silent soldiers in ISKCON who carries on year after year, not wanting any recognition.”

“Sometimes he’s out there all by himself,” the devotee continued. “In Miami everyone knows him.

“Year’s ago he was chanting outside the Super Bowl football game, and a television crew approached him. ‘Whose going to win the game?’ they asked.

“‘Krishna,’ he said with a big smile. They put that on the evening news, and he became famous.”

I became even more anxious to get his association.

“He rarely misses a morning program as well,” the devotee continued proudly.

“Makes sense,” I thought. “That’s where he gets his taste for the holy name.”

“Some years ago there was a serious misunderstanding between him and the local management,” the devotee continued. “The management went so far as to ban him from coming into the temple room. So you know what he did?”

“No, what?” I asked.

“Every single morning for two and a half years he came and watched the mangala arati from the window. He was even there during a hurricane.”

“When can I meet him?” I asked.

“On the Harinam this afternoon,” the devotee said. “We’re all going down to chant at South Beach.”

I was the first in the van.

South Beach is a hip area of restaurants and cafés stretching half a mile along the seaside. It is frequented by locals and tourists alike. Though it was a weekday when our group of 15 devotees arrived, there were plenty of people walking on the streets and sitting in the sidewalk cafés.

I was hoping that Siddha-vidya would lead the kirtan, but in

humility he deferred to Sri Prahlad. Sri Prahlad began to sing and play his accordion, and our kirtan party was an immediate hit. The area was full of Cubans and other Latinos, and they couldn't resist dancing to the beat. People soon began spilling out of the restaurants and dancing with us on the sidewalks. I wasn't used to such a reaction to Harinam. In Poland people smile and wave, but here people jumped right into the kirtan party.

I was absorbed in the kirtan when I noticed how Siddha-vidya was interacting with the crowd. He showed no inhibition in welcoming people to join from the sidelines. Many could not resist his invitation. As we moved along the sidewalk, he waved at the groups that had gathered to watch us, and many people waved back.

"Hare Krsna, Sid!" a man yelled out.

"Hari Bol, fellas!" said another.

I watched as Siddha-vidya shook hands with several passersby who obviously knew him. When he raised his hand and slapped a high-five with a black man, the man smiled warmly, as if an old friend.

Siddha-vidya moved easily through the streets. He was in his element—giving Krsna consciousness to the people. He was a sankirtan devotee to the core. He loved the people, and they loved him too. When we came close to some rough-looking men sitting at a table with their girlfriends, I avoided getting close. But Siddha Vidya approached them with a smile and gave one of the women a maha garland from the temple Deities. The group roared with approval. I jockeyed myself to get closer to Sid. I wanted his mercy too.

At one point he suddenly turned left off the sidewalk and led us directly through the doors of a big restaurant. The restaurant had just opened, and the waiters were still busy setting things up, but as soon as they saw Siddha-vidya, they dropped everything and started singing, clapping, and dancing alongside us.

I stood back for a moment. "Who is he?" I thought. "Who is this devotee who inspires people to dance wildly to the sound of Krsna's holy names?"

Obviously it wasn't the first time he'd been in the restaurant, but he seemed to be taking special pleasure in the fact that he had a big group of devotees with him this time and that Sri Prahlada, who was in true form, was rocking the house with the sound of the holy names. Even the bartender raised his arms in ecstasy.

As we continued down the street more people whistled and hollered to get his attention. "This devotee has created a revolution of the holy names in this little corner of the world," I thought. "By diligently going out day after day, month after month, year after year, he has melted these people's hearts and started them on the path of devotion."

The Harinam ended after two hours, and people smiled and waved as we drove off. It was all due to the determined efforts of Siddha-vidya to spread the glories to the holy names.

*tebhyo namo stu bhava varidhi jirna panka
sammagna moksana vicaksana padukebhyah
krsneti varna yugala sravanena yesam
anandathur bhavati nartita roma vrndah*

I offer my respectful obeisances to the devotees of the Lord. When they simply hear the two syllables 'Krsna,' their bodily hairs stand up in ecstasy and they become moved to dance in ecstatic bliss. With their sandals they expertly extricate the fallen souls deeply sunk in the fetid mud of the ocean of repeated birth and death.

[Sri Rupa Goswami's *Padyavali*, Text 54 by Sri Autkala]

My good fortune didn't end with Harinam that day. Before my visit was over I heard another tale of wonder, attributed to the causeless mercy of the Lord.

I was in the temple restaurant just about to begin my meal when I looked up and saw a man in a suit and tie enter. In the casual atmosphere he looked almost out of place in such formal clothes. Assuming he was a guest, I was about to ask a local devotee to invite

him to sit with me, but when the gentleman saw me he immediately paid obeisances.

Trivikrama Maharaja spoke up. "That's Murari Gupta das," he said. "He's a doctor and recently initiated by Bhakti Marg Swami."

Murari Gupta came over. After exchanging pleasantries I asked how long he had been involved in Krsna consciousness. He told me that in 1973 he was 17 and attending his first semester at the University of Florida. While walking to class one afternoon, he saw Tamal Krsna Goswami preaching to some students on a lawn of the university.

"The Radha Damodar Traveling festival was visiting the campus for a few days," Murari Gupta said. "Maharaja had arrived early that day, before the other devotees."

"I was interested in the spiritual teachings of the East, and I had read a version of the Bhagavad Gita several times, so I was immediately attracted, seeing Maharaja standing there in saffron cloth. Although he was young at the time, he appeared elderly and wise.

"Over the next three days, Tamal Krsna Maharaja spoke with me on several occasions, encouraging me to join their traveling festival. I wasn't ready, however. Nevertheless, after they left I started visiting the local Gainesville temple. Six months later I finally gave up my studies and moved into the temple. For the next six months I distributed Srila Prabhupada's books.

"Then one day I left to join the Radha Damodar party. I traveled on one of the buses and continued my service of book distribution.

"During the next year I was recommended twice for initiation from Srila Prabhupada, but both times I refused. It wasn't that I didn't want to take initiation. Rather, I took it as a serious commitment. I came from a well-to-do family, where my father had instilled in me the importance of accepting responsibility seriously. I wanted to be 100 percent sure that if I took my vows, I would never fail my spiritual master.

"At the same time, my family was putting pressure on me to go back to school. My parents would visit me in different temples.

They were respectful to Kṛṣṇa consciousness but insistent that I finish my education. As a result, I was often in duality as to what I should do.

“In Atlanta, in 1974, during a visit by Srila Prabhupada to the temple, I was again recommended for initiation. But once again I hesitated. I had just read an article on the importance of initiation written by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, and he was firm about the loyalty of a disciple. I wasn’t sure I met the criteria for being such a surrendered soul.

“On the morning of the initiation I was sitting outside the temple, confused. Suddenly I saw Srila Prabhupada coming my way, returning from his morning walk, surrounded by many disciples. Srila Prabhupada seemed to sense my dilemma and spoke a few words of reassurance to me as he passed.

“But just before the ceremony began, I left the temple and quickly made my way back home to Chicago. To make a long story short, I went back to school and eventually graduated with a medical degree. I was soon a practicing doctor. Later I married and had three children.

“My work often took me overseas where I would visit temples incognito. Wherever I went I carried a picture of Srila Prabhupada and chanted rounds on my beads each day. But I never revealed to the devotees I met that I was a covered bhakta. I was always a guest. I considered myself a thief in the night. I would come to a temple, see the Deities, take prasadam, and get some association. But I never offered any service in return.

“That all changed, however, after the terrorist attack in New York on September 11, 2001. At the time I was working in a hospital in Miami, and in the interest of national security the Florida Department of Health requested a security check on all doctors and nurses in the state. All our records and data were scrutinized, and one day I was called into the head office of the hospital. They had discovered that I had been arrested 17 times in my youth. I winced as I remembered that all those arrests were in connection with distributing books during the Radha Damodar traveling party days.

“There were no convictions because the police always let us go after a verbal thrashing, but the head of the hospital did note with concern the most serious arrest: several other brahmacaris and I had dressed as soldiers to facilitate our book distribution. We had done it only once but were caught. The military became involved, but eventually dropped charges.

“You can imagine how frustrated I was. I had to do a lot of explaining to the head of the hospital. But I did not want to ever be questioned again, so I called my lawyer and asked how to clear the record for good. He checked with the government and they said they would expunge all information from my records if I paid a fine of \$5,000 and did 100 hours of community service.

“As a doctor, it wasn’t a big obstacle to pay the fine, but I couldn’t imagine how I would do 100 hours of community service. Suddenly I got the idea that I could do service at the local Hare Krsna Temple. They were one of the organizations listed under authorized places for this kind of service.

“I had been visiting the temple incognito, and so no one knew me when I approached the temple authorities for service. They were happy to let me serve my 100 hours in temple duties, and so several times a week I would go to the temple and wash pots.

Boy, were the devotees surprised when they finally learned I was a doctor! They were even more amazed when they found out I was actually a devotee who had served on the Radha Damodhar party for a couple of years. They were kind to me, and gradually I became fully reinstated in Krsna consciousness. Eventually I became the temple treasurer. And now, of course, I’m the temple doctor.

“On December 18, 2004, 32 years after meeting the devotees, I finally took initiation from His Holiness Bhakti Marg Maharaja.”

“I’m glad you finally made it,” I said. “I wish you all success.”

Soon after my visit to Miami I left America for Europe. As I boarded the flight to London, I reminisced once again on the nectar of associating with devotees like Siddha-vidya and Murari Gupta. I would miss them. The only consolation was that on the other side

of the ocean, I would meet more devotees, and more again wherever my travels took me. Such is the great mercy of the Lord.”

*hari smrty ahlada stimita manaso yasya krtinah
sa romancah kayah nayanam api sananda salilam*

tam evacandrakam vaha purusa dhaureyam avane

kim anyais tair bharair yama sadana gaty agati paraih

When the devotees remember Lord Hari, their hearts become overwhelmed with bliss, their bodily hairs stand erect, and their eyes become filled with tears of joy. O Earth, these devotees are the best of men. Please carefully maintain them for long as the sun and the moon shine in the sky. What is the use of your carefully maintaining those other burdensome persons who are simply intent on coming and going to and from the house of Yamaraja?

[*Padyavali*, Srila Rupa Goswami, Text 55 by Sri Sarvananda]

CHAPTER SEVEN



Same Mission, Same Mercy

| APRIL 29–MAY 15, 2005 |

I arrived back in Warsaw on May 8, after an absence of nearly six months. My travels had taken me to the far corners of the earth, to such places as Australia, Russia, the United States, and South Africa. People in those prominent countries often consider Poland, tucked away in Eastern Europe and off the beaten track, as a place of less importance.

In fact, as I was leaving the United States, one of my Godbrothers hinted as much. “Maharaja,” he said, “maybe it’s time to move on from Poland. What major effect have your festivals really had there?”

His remark was partly in jest, so I didn’t bother answering, but his question crossed my mind several times during the flight across the Atlantic to London. The Lord, however, quickly sent an answer.

I was in London’s Heathrow Airport, accompanied by several disciples who had come to see me. As I was walking to my connecting flight to Warsaw, I suddenly noticed two cleaning men wheeling portable garbage bins, brooms in hand. They were walking quickly toward me, almost running, with big smiles on their faces.

One of them started speaking excitedly in Polish. “Bylismy na Waszym Festiwalu,” he said.

Gaurangi dasi, a woman disciple from Poland, translated for me: “He says they’ve been to your festivals in Poland.”

“Czy mozesz zaspiewac nam Hare Krszna tu na lotnisku,” the man continued. “To nasza ukochana piosenka.”

Gaurangi laughed. “He wants us to sing Hare Krsna right now, here in the airport,” she said. “He says they love our song.”

That surprise encounter was enough reason for me to continue the festivals in Poland, now and forever. Srila Prabhupada once said that by testing a single grain of rice, one can tell whether the whole pot is cooked. That these two men showed such appreciation for the holy names of Krsna surely meant that there were others in Poland as well.

And in case I had any more doubts, the Lord gave me another signal at the airport in Warsaw, when I handed my passport to the immigration officer, a woman. She took it and smiled a big smile. Then she spoke to me in English. “Hare Krsna,” she said. “Welcome to Poland.”

But unfortunately, successful preaching often brings the wrath of the envious.

*arjuna uvaca
sthane hrsikesa tava prakirtya
jagat prahrasyaty anurajyate ca
raksami bhutani diso dravanti
sarve namasyanti ca siddha sanghat*

Arjuna said: O master of the senses, the world becomes joyful upon hearing Your name, and thus everyone becomes attached to You. Although the perfected beings offer You their respectful homage, the demons are afraid, and they flee here and there. All this is rightly done.”

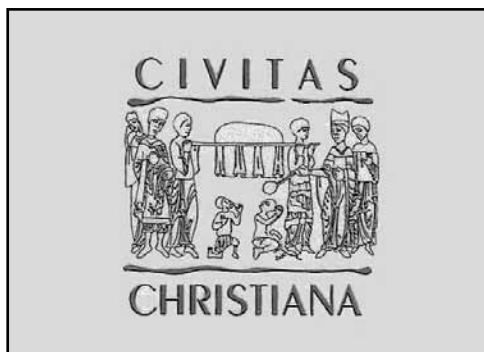
[*Bhagavad Gita* 11.36]

That evening, we held our first Tour Council meeting, and I told the story of my encounter with the Polish men in Heathrow airport.

Nandini dasi spoke. "Srila Gurudeva," she said, "while you were away, we made all the arrangements for our spring festival tour in the northeast of Poland in June. Four towns are eagerly looking forward to our coming. The region is very beautiful, with many forests, rivers, and lakes."

Radha Sakhi Vrinda dasi knew that Nandini was priming me for something else. "You'd better get to the point, Nandini," she said. "Gurudeva doesn't have much time."

Nandini paused for a moment and then looked up at me with a serious expression. "But," she said, "one of the towns is the headquarters for Civitas Christiana, the biggest anti-cult group in the country."



Civitas Christiana, the biggest anti-cult group in Poland.

I pretended not to be concerned. "But the anti-cult issue has died down over the last few years," I said.

"Died down, yes," Radha Sakhi Vrinda said, "but not dead. Civitas Christiana are still seething that we won a major court case against them several years ago."

Nandini continued. "I'm more concerned that the political situation in Poland is changing rapidly," she said, "and may soon

be unfavorable for us. It's almost certain that one of two right-wing parties will win the next election, in early autumn. You remember the problems we had last time a conservative party was in power."

"One especially fanatic party has been sending hate mail to Nandini," Radha Sakhi Vrinda said.

Nandini looked at Radha Sakhi Vrinda with a frown. "Don't worry, Gurudeva," she said.

"He should know how serious the situation is," Radha Sakhi Vrinda said.

Nandini gave in. "Srila Gurudeva," she said, "I've been receiving terrible e-mail messages from the group we believe were behind the violent attack on our festival in Tomaszow four years ago, and even worse e-mails from individuals of other right-wing political parties. The threats they make against our festivals are so horrible I won't repeat them."

"That's right," said Radha Sakhi Vrinda. "You remember the right-wing political party that forcefully stopped our Harinam in



Radha Sakhi Vrinda dasi

Kielce last spring and then tried to cancel our festival there. Well they haven't forgotten us either. They're still trying to stir up trouble on their website by saying we attacked them."

"Srila Gurudeva," said Jayatama, "some devotees think we should wait till next year to hold the festivals. The political situation will be clearer then."

"That, we won't do!" I said in a strong voice.

Everyone was silent. I thought for a moment. "We should take the threats seriously," I said, "but we won't be intimidated. We won't back down. We have to expect opposition. Srila Prabhupada once said, 'If there's no opposition, it means there's no preaching.' Mahaprabhu Himself had to deal with fierce opposition as well, and so did Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati and our own spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, in more recent history."

"We'll have to double or even triple our security personnel," I continued. "We can contact the same company we used last year. We should have security on Harinam as well."

As I spoke I tried to remember if I'd ever seen a Harinam party anywhere else in the world accompanied by armed guards.

"Will that be enough?" Radha Sakhi Vrinda said. "These groups are well organized and determined, as we've already experienced."

"It will be enough if we have the Lord's protection," I said, "and we will have it."

I paused for emphasis. "He's given His word," I said, and I quoted *Caitanya Bhagavat*:

*ksaneke uthila prabhu kartya hunkara
sabare balena "kene bhaya kara kara"*

The Lord stood up and roared loudly. He said to everyone, "Why are you so afraid?"

*ei na sammukhe sudarsana cakre phire
vaisnavera janera niravadhi vighna hare*

Can't you see the Sudarsan cakra escorting us? It always removes the obstacles faced by Vaisnavas.

*kichu cinta nahi krsna sankirtana tora
ki na dekha hera phire sudarsana*

Do not worry. Chant the glories of Krsna! Don't you see Sudarsana guarding us?

[*Caitanya Bhagavat*, Antya-khanda 2.139-141]

As we gathered our things to leave, Nandini came up to me. "Srla Gurudeva," she said, "can I speak with you?"

"Yes, of course" I replied.

"I hate to say it, especially because I know you're so tired after your travels, but if we're to double or triple our security this year, we'll need a lot more funds."

"I know," I said. "I thought I'd take a break for a couple of days and then start thinking about it."

"But we have to start making plans now," Nandini said. "You remember we had a situation like this last year, and it was hard for me to get an airline reservation for you to fly to another country at the last minute."

"There are not many places I can go," I said. "I've been pretty much everywhere."

Nandini was silent for a moment. "Except Russia," she said.

I gasped. "Russia?" I said.

"Russia," she said. "I know that the people there are poorer than in Poland, but"

"Not Russia," I said. "I don't want to visit Russia just to raise funds. I go there so rarely. It wouldn't be fair to my disciples."

"Gurudeva," said Nandini, "you know how much your Russian disciples love you. They'll be happy to see you for whatever reason. And you'd be preaching day and night, as always. Half the tour devotees on our festival program are Russian anyway. The Russian yatra is already doing so much to help us."



“...you know how much your Russian disciples love you”

“That’s true,” I said.

I thought for a moment. “Yes,” I said, “but do you think I’ll survive a grueling three-week tour across the length and breadth of Russia?”

Nandini didn’t answer, but we both knew she was right. We had no choice. The show had to go on. The festival program is Lord Caitanya’s mercy on the people of Poland, and the Lord would give us the strength, the endurance, and the ability to be victorious.

A few days later I prepared myself for my trip to Russia. But first I would go to Ukraine, to the city of Dnepropetrovsk to participate in Lord Nrsimhadeva’s Appearance Day festival. I planned to beg for His mercy, that we might be successful in raising the funds required for our 16th festival year, and for the protection that we would surely need.

As I was leaving for the airport, Radha Sakhi Vrinda came up to my car. “Sрила Gurudeva,” she said, “I’m still in anxiety about the

hate mail Nandini's getting and the future politics in our country. I fear for our safety on the spring festivals."

"Don't worry," I said as my driver started to pull away. "The Lord will watch over us as He did for His devotees in the past. It's the same mission and will get the same mercy."

*dattva cakram ca raksartham
na niscinto janardana
svayam tan nikatam yati
tam drastum raksanaya*

Lord Janardana is not content even after engaging Sudarsana to protect His devotees, so He personally goes to see and protect them.

[*Narada Pancaratra* 1.2.34]



*Sri Sri Gandharvika-Giridhari, the presiding Deities
of the festival program in Poland*

CHAPTER EIGHT



A New Beginning

| MAY 16-23, 2005 |

I took a flight from Warsaw to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, with Sri Prahlad das and Rukmini Priya dasi. We landed in the early afternoon on a warm spring day. As we walked outside from the international terminal to the domestic for our connecting flight, we saw many people lounging about casually on benches or sitting at small sidewalk cafes.

A number of elderly women in headscarves, typical of the older generation, were selling their wares of honey, fruit, vodka, and candy from small tables. Taxi drivers approached the crowd of passengers leaving the terminal, and big, burly men stood about in small groups, talking and smoking.

Although I visit Ukraine every year, the arrival is always somewhat of a culture shock, and it takes me a few hours to adjust. The scene was much the same as when I first visited here 15 years ago: old, poorly maintained gray buildings, rusted iron lampposts, potholes in the roads - all from another era.

To be sure, there were superficial changes: fancy shops, nice

cars, people wearing the latest Western fashions with cell phones in hand. And Ukraine had recently undergone a major change with its Orange Revolution, when the people elected a liberal, democratic president who proposed joining the European Union. But it would take centuries to change the external look of the country, the result of 50 years under the old government.

As we boarded our flight to Dniepropetrovsk, I was again reminded of the old status quo. The plane was typical of those I'd been flying on for years in Ukraine: foul-smelling and messy, with a grimy carpet. There was little leg room, and the food table on the back of the seat in front of me had a broken hinge and rested permanently folded out in front me.

Worse yet, I had a seat in the middle of a row, with a heavy-set woman on one side and what appeared to be a foreign businessman with suit, tie, and briefcase on the other. I settled in and prepared myself for one hour of pure austerity.

But as is often the case, the Lord took advantage of the situation to deepen my appreciation of His glories and to let me share them with others.

A half an hour into the flight, the gentleman on my side turned to me and began speaking with a British accent. "Are you part of a spiritual organization?" he asked.

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

"I see," he said. "I'm also on a spiritual search."

I thought his comment a little odd, considering his clothes and briefcase.

My surprise must have shown in my face. "Don't be fooled by my appearance," he said. "I am retired and divorced, and I'm traveling looking for the deeper meaning of life."

"In Ukraine?" I said. "It's an unusual destination for a spiritual seeker."

"I've traveled to over a hundred counties in the last thirty-five years," he said. "Mostly for business, mind you, but always searching for what was missing in my life."

I studied him closely. "What could be missing?" I said, trying to

get the right question out of him. "Judging from your appearance, you look quite successful."

"I'm a millionaire many times over," he said without emotion, "but I'm not happy. Wealth came to me without much effort, but it's never been my goal. Ever since I was young, I've been searching for something more meaningful. It began when I was 17. I was a fan of the Beatles. In 1967, when I heard they had gone to India on a spiritual quest, I also felt a strong desire to go there."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"I'm 56," he replied.

"So am I," I said. "It seems that there are similarities in our lives. I was born in America, and like much of the youth in the 1960s, I rejected the status quo of the times, looking for a spiritual alternative."

"Is that so?" he said. "My parents made sure I finished my education and then set me up in business. It was only then that I could fulfill my ambition to start traveling. I went to India and visited many holy places, but even there I couldn't find exactly what I was looking for."

I decided it was time to offer some spiritual advice.

"You know," I said, "the ancient scriptures of India say the most important thing about a holy place is the holy men who live there. By hearing from such enlightened souls, we can appreciate the true sanctity of the place. Because we are conditioned souls, our senses are covered by illusion. "

He thought for a moment. "That makes sense," he said.

He then continued with his story. "Though I am busy with family affairs and work, my main objective in life has always been the spiritual. I made it a point to inquire about the spiritual tradition of any country my business took me to. I've been to more churches, temples, and mosques in my life than you can count." He shook his head.

"What have you learned from all those visits?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "Not a lot, really," he said.

A verse came to my mind from *Prema Bhakti Candrika*, by Srila Narottam das Thakur. I always travel with a copy, and I quickly pulled the book out of my shoulder bag and showed the man the verse:

*tirtha jatra parisrama kevala manera bhrama
sarba siddhi govinda carana
drdha visvasa hrde dhari mada matsariya parihari
sada kara ananya bhajana*

Traveling to the holy places is a waste of energy and born from illusion, for the lotus feet of Sri Govinda are the perfection of one's life. Therefore, one should give up pride and envy and with firm determination in the heart, always worship the Lord without deviation.

I added some explanation. "It doesn't means we shouldn't visit holy places," I said, "but the objective is to find God there. Churches, temples, and mosques are houses of God."

"Houses of God?" he said. "Do you actually believe God is a person?"

I smiled. "There's not much time to debate," I said, "but if God is not a person, where has your own personality come from?"

"What do you mean?" he said.

"God means the Absolute Truth, that from which everything is coming," I said.

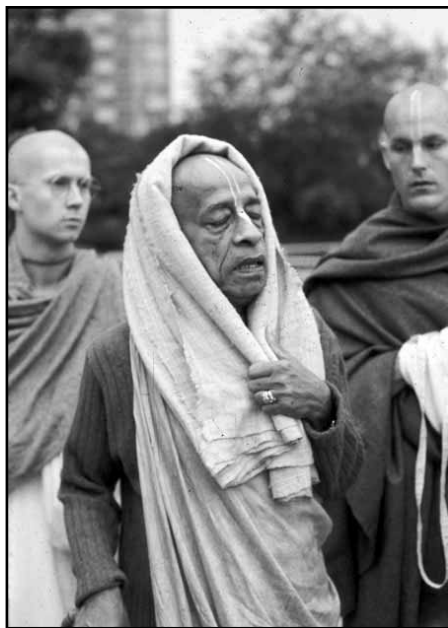
"That sounds logical," he said,

"Something cannot come from nothing," I said. "Because you have personality, God must also be a person."

I see what you're getting at," he said. "It makes sense ... again."

He paused for a moment, then continued. "Where have you gotten all this knowledge?" he said. "Have you traveled a lot also?"

"Yes, I have," I said. "Perhaps not to a hundred countries like you; still, I've traveled far and wide, but my source of knowledge comes not as much from my travels as from what I've heard from my spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada."



*“...my source of knowledge comes from what I’ve heard
from my spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada.”*

I started to take down notes of the conversation.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m writing down our conversation,” I replied. “If I don’t, I’ll quickly forget it. I keep a diary.”

He looked a little puzzled. “Why is our conversation so important to you?” he asked.

“I’ll be sharing it with others,” I said with a smile. “I send my diary out regularly to receivers on the internet.”

“You must be well known then,” he said.

“I suppose so,” I said.

“I’d like to be famous,” he said. “It’s the one thing I have never achieved in life.”

“No you wouldn’t,” I said.

He looked surprised. “I wouldn’t?” he said.

“Material opulence hasn’t brought you any lasting satisfaction,” I said, “and neither would fame. It’s a subtle material pleasure, but material all the same.”

“That’s true,” he said nodding his head. “Everything you say is true.”

“It’s because I have a spiritual teacher,” I said.

He started speaking excitedly. “After Ukraine, I’m going to Moldova,” he said, “then Romania, and then Bulgaria. This summer I plan to go to Africa, to the Congo. And then I hope to return to India in the autumn. I’ve heard India is very beautiful in that season.”

“Time is running out,” I said. “You’ve only got another fifteen or twenty years left, at best.”

“What are you getting at?” he said.

“Both you and I have been traveling for thirty-five years,” I said, “but soon we’re going to die. Are you ready for death? In all your travels, have you learned what happens after death?”

“No I haven’t,” he answered, looking a little embarrassed.

“That subject is just the beginning of spiritual knowledge,” I said. “Maybe you should change your approach to learning about spiritual life.”

Just then the stewardess announced over the sound system that the plane was about to land. The conversation was about to end.

“Where will I go after I die?” he said. His voice had an edge of desperation.

“That depends on your consciousness at the moment of death,” I said. “You could descend into the animal species, be reborn in the human form of life, or go back to the spiritual world.”

“You also learned that from your spiritual teacher?” he asked.

“I didn’t learn it in a taxi,” I said. I couldn’t help smiling.

Our plane landed and started towards the airport terminal. He was quiet. After a few minutes he turned to me. “It’s a fact that our lives have been similar,” he said. “We were born in the same year, grew up in the same generation, listened to the same music, and traveled to many of the same places.”

He turned to look out the window, and I scribbled his words down on my notepad. "But what we have most in common," he said, continuing to look outside, "is that we're spiritual seekers."

He turned to me. "But the difference," he said slowly, "is that you found what I was looking for."

"The difference, my friend," I said, "is that I found a spiritual teacher."

His eyes opened wide as he suddenly realized what I had been stressing the whole time. "Yes, it's clear now," he said softly. "That's what I've been missing: a spiritual teacher."

The plane had come to a full stop, and the passengers were busy gathering their belongings and starting to move out.

"But it's not too late," I said.

I quickly wrote down my e-mail address and handed it to him. "Here's my e-mail address," I said. "Write to me."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "I promise you," I said, "I'll share with you everything I have ever learned from him."

He closed his eyes for a moment and nodded his head. "Thank you," he said. "I think my search has finally ended."

I smiled. "It's more like a new beginning," I said. "Only now, you'll have Srila Prabhupada to show you the way."

I thought of Srila Prabhupada's introduction to *Sri Isopanisad*:

If you want to attain knowledge by any personal endeavor, by exercising your imperfect senses, you will never come to the right conclusion. That is not possible. There is a statement in Brahma-samhita: Just ride on the airplane which runs at the speed of mind. Our material airplanes can run two thousand miles per hour, but what is the speed of mind? You are sitting at home, you immediately think of India, say ten thousand miles away, and at once it is in your home. Your mind has gone there. The mind-speed is so swift. Therefore it is stated, 'If you travel at this speed for millions of years, you'll find that the spiritual sky is unlimited.' It is not possible even to approach it. Therefore, the Vedic injunction is that one must approach—the word 'compulsory' is used—a bona fide spiritual master, a guru.

CHAPTER NINE



In Service To Him

| MAY 24-25, 2005 |

Just over a thousand devotees came to the festival in Dniepro-
petrovsk, a large city in Ukraine. It was a three-day event: a
day in glorification of Srila Prabhupada, the appearance day
of Lord Nrsimhadeva, and my birthday.

It also marked the 18th year of my service as a spiritual master.

On the morning of my Vyasa-puja celebration, I checked
through the list of my disciples. There were over 2,000. Although all
of them certainly knew me, I could not possibly remember each and
every one. I took a deep breath.

“It’s a heavy service, isn’t it?” I thought. “But it’s the order of my
own Guru Maharaja.”

I will be the first to admit I am not qualified, but then again,
I have faith in Srila Prabhupada’s words: “Along with the instruc-
tion of the spiritual master comes the ability to execute it.” Visnu-
jana Maharaja shared these words with me shortly after I joined the
movement. They come from a letter by Srila Prabhupada, and they
have been a guiding light for me ever since.

I have experienced the truth of these words many times, from my first responsibility as a sankirtan leader to becoming an initiated brahmana, a temple president, a regional secretary, and eventually a sannyasi. I know I am unqualified, but the power of devotional service and the mercy of my spiritual master have somehow enabled me to perform these duties. And my ability to somehow or other take on the role of a guru is only further proof of my spiritual master's causeless mercy.

As I was leaving my room to go to the celebration, I asked to be alone for a moment. I prostrated myself in front of my altar and prayed to Srila Prabhupada that I may never, even for a moment, forget that his mercy is all I am made of. I prayed for the purity, strength, and wisdom to continue guiding my disciples safely to his lotus feet.

The next day I flew to Moscow with my disciple Uttama-sloka das, who would translate for me during my three-week visit to Rus-



Indradyumna Swami's personal altar

sia. When we arrived, I was surprised to find only four devotees waiting to greet us, three of them in non-devotional dress.

In previous years there would always be large groups of disciples, often hundreds, waiting to greet me in Moscow. Colorfully dressed in dhotis and saris, singing melodious kirtans, they would surge forward with garlands and bouquets of flowers, each one trying to be the first to greet me. It was never that I personally needed such a reception, but I enjoyed seeing their enthusiasm in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, proof that they were advancing in devotional service. And I enjoyed reciprocating with their loving sentiments.

I turned to Uttama-sloka. "What happened?" I said. "Where is everyone?"

"It's a sign of the times Śrīla Gurudeva," he said. "Russia—and Moscow in particular—are not the same places they were when you first started coming here. Moscow is a wealthy city now, even by Western standards. There are forty-eight billionaires living in Moscow, compared to forty-three in New York."

"What are you getting at?" I said as we walked towards the baggage claim, the four disciples trailing nervously behind.

"Well," he said, "it seems that the opulence of present-day Moscow has bewildered some devotees, and they have compromised or even given up their Kṛṣṇa consciousness."

"It's true," I thought. "It's happened elsewhere as well."

But I also felt responsible for their loss of faith and enthusiasm. "I've neglected them," I thought, "spending so much time away from Russia. My focus on the festival tour in Poland has meant fewer visits to Russia."

I looked back at the four devotees. "Irony, isn't it?" I thought. "Just yesterday people were glorifying me for my service as guru, and today I'm scolding myself for neglecting my disciples."

Adding to my anxiety was the fact that my main reason for this trip was to raise funds.

As we left the airport terminal, I turned to Uttama-sloka. "Perhaps it's time I stop initiating," I said. "I should focus on the disciples I already have."

The next day was a free day with no engagements. I worked on answering the 1,074 emails in my in-basket. I began at 7 a.m. and finished at 10 p.m., managing to answer 350 letters. I could have done more, but I wanted to improve on my service as a spiritual master, so I spent more time answering each question in the letters.

The next day I woke up early and began packing for my next flight. As I stood there in the early-morning darkness I suddenly realized I had no idea where I was going. I had left the travel arrangements to my Moscow secretary, Jananivasa das, but because of our busy schedules, we had not had a chance to meet or even talk on the phone.

Jananivasa arrived at 6 a.m. and handed me an envelope. "Here are the tickets for you and Uttama-sloka," he said.

I started to laugh. "Thank you," I said, "but where are we going?"

"First you're going to Kazan," he said, "the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan. It's a predominantly Muslim region."

"Huh?" I said. I stopped laughing and looked up at Jananivasa, but I couldn't say what was on my mind: How much money would I raise in a Muslim area?

But Jananivasa read my thoughts. "Don't worry," he said. "The devotees there are eager have you. They've promised to contribute to your Polish Tour."

"That is really kind of them," I said. "Lets move then. It's getting late."

Traffic was light and we reached Domodedovo airport early. As we sat waiting for the check-in counter to open, I marveled at the opulence of the airport.

It was a marked contrast to the old days, when everyone and everything was poor, gray, and lifeless. It was true what Uttama-sloka had said: Moscow had become an opulent city. The newly renovated Domodedovo airport, though smaller than London's Heathrow airport, was more attractive and had better facilities.

It was bright and shiny, with boutiques offering designer clothes and perfumes. There were facilities for disabled people, modern toilets, and—in stark contrast to the atheistic old days—prayer rooms. People from all parts of Russia were browsing through the shops, or eating and drinking in the cafes.

But no one was smiling. In Russia, I have noticed that people often look stern. I turned to Uttama-sloka. “Are they trying to look tough?” I said.

He looked at me soberly. “No,” he said, “they have tough lives. There’s not much glitter in their lives outside of this airport.”

After checking in we went to security control. We put our bags on the x-ray machine, and a security officer called us to the side. He took us a few meters away to a large machine, at least seven feet tall, and asked me to go inside. I recoiled and stepped back.

“What is it?” I asked Uttama-sloka.

He asked the security officer.

“It’s an x-ray machine that scans the entire body,” Uttama-sloka said. “They want to see whether we are carrying any bombs.”

“Bombs?” I asked. “Inside of me?”

“During the last year,” he said, “several planes have been blown up by suicide bombers. They had plastic explosives tied to their bodies, some say surgically implanted under the skin. So the Russian authorities produced this x-ray machine to scan suspicious passengers. The officer wants you to step inside now.”

As I stepped into the machine it started humming, and after 45 seconds the officer asked me to come out. I immediately went over to the computer to see my image. I asked the woman sitting in front of the screen if she had ever discovered a bomb inside someone’s body.

Her face took on a serious look. “Yes, sir,” she said, “more than once.”

As we walked to our gate, I spoke to Uttama-sloka. “I only read of one plane being blown up by terrorists in Russia during the year,” I said.

"There were several," he said, "but the government didn't publicize it. They wanted to protect the aviation industry from losses. After all, what would happen if people were afraid to fly?"

A few hours later, we landed in Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan. There was a large group of devotees greeting us at the airport with a big kirtan. The arrival hall was resounding with the holy names, and devotees rushed forward with garlands and flowers. It reminded me of the old days in Moscow.

Uttama-sloka winked at me. "Kazan's not as opulent as Moscow," he said.

We walked outside. As I stood by the car, waiting for Uttama-sloka and our baggage, I was surrounded by devotees and onlookers alike. There were policemen, businessmen, airport workers, cleaning women, shop owners, passersby, and even a few dogs, all staring at me. I felt self-conscious, so I looked at the sky. "Thank you, Lord," I said softly. "Once again it's a big reception, but enough's enough."

In the car, I asked the temple president about Tatarstan.

"It's a long history," he said. "The culture took shape during the Mongol invasions in the 11th century. Later the country converted to Islam and stayed that way until it came under the control of Russia in the eighteen hundreds. Now it is half Muslim and half Russian Orthodox. It produces most of the oil and natural gas used in Russia."

"Kazan is the ancient capital of the Tatars," he continued. "This year the city is celebrating its founding a thousand years ago. As part of the celebration, the city administration has produced a film about the history of Kazan, and there is a scene of a Harinam procession going down the main street."

"Amazing!" I said.

"Kazan has a million people," he continued. "There is an ongoing competition as to who can build the most places of worship. You'll see more mosques and churches in this region than anywhere else in Russia."

I sat up and looked out at the city. I couldn't resist a little joke.

“And what percentage of the people are Hare Krsna devotees?” I asked.

“We have three hundred and fifty devotees here,” he said.

I sat back in my seat. “I’ll enjoy the preaching here,” I thought. “It will be a little break. No one knows me. I’ll just play the part of a visiting sannyasi. It will be simple, like the old days.”

But the temple president had other plans. “Maharaja,” he said, “there’s one thing I’d like to ask you. You have a number of aspiring disciples here whom I would like to recommend for initiation. Can you hold a fire sacrifice and initiate them tomorrow?”

I sat up straight. “Disciples?” I said. “But I’m thinking of not...”

I stopped speaking and sat back. “Hey,” I thought, “remember your prayers to Srila Prabhupada in front of your altar in Ukraine? Was it just a lot of big talk? Have you forgotten that taking disciples is a service to your spiritual master? Are you going to refuse his order now? ‘Along with his instructions comes the ability to execute them.’ Remember?”

I looked out the window. “Okay,” I thought. “I’ll just have to work harder.

I’ll have to adjust things so I can travel more and give disciples the attention they need. Most important, I’ll have to become more qualified. For that I can only beg for Srila Prabhupada’s mercy.”

“Maharaja?” the temple president said, waking me out of my meditation.

“Yes,” I said, “I’ll initiate those devotees tomorrow afternoon.”

“They’ll be so happy,” he said. “They’ve been waiting for years.”

The car turned into the parking lot of an apartment building. There was another big group of devotees having kirtan, and many of the neighbors had gathered to see what was happening.

I got out of the car, and the kirtan leader started chanting, “Jaya Gurudeva! Jaya Gurudeva! Jaya Gurudeva!”

Closing my eyes I prayed for the mercy of my own Gurudeva.



"They've been waiting for years."

[One] should try to cooperate with the Lord in His outward activities for correcting the fallen souls. By His order only, one should become a spiritual master and cooperate with the Lord. One should not become a spiritual master for one's personal benefit, for some material gain or as an avenue of business or occupation for earning livelihood. Bona fide spiritual masters who look unto the Supreme Lord to cooperate with Him are actually qualitatively one with the Lord.

[Srimad Bhagavatam 1.13.48]

CHAPTER TEN



Sharing Good Fortune With Others

| MAY 26–JUNE 1, 2005 |

My three-day visit to Tatarstan went by fast. It is said that if you enjoy what you are doing time passes quickly but if you are bored or annoyed time drags on. And I was doing what I enjoy most: sharing my good fortune with others.

Several months earlier, I had been talking with my son, Gaura Sakti dasa, about how the devotees of my generation are starting to pass away. “You’ve lived such a full life,” he said, “even if you were to die today, you would have nothing to lament.”

It is true. Since coming to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I have never had to struggle for the necessities of life. In fact, the Lord has been more than generous in providing whatever facilities I needed for myself and for spreading His movement.

And spiritually, I cannot begin to fathom the mercy the Lord has bestowed upon me—my own spiritual master, the holy names, the association of Vaisnavas, and my beloved Deities, who are my constant companions. But a devotee should never think such gifts are meant for him alone. They are meant to be shared with others.

A devotee, after his initiation by the Lord or His bona fide representative, takes very seriously chanting of the glories of the Lord and traveling all over the world so that others may also hear the glories of the Lord ... (His) only business is to chant and remember the holy name, fame and pastimes of the Lord and, according to personal capacity, to distribute the message for others' welfare without motive of material gain.

[*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.6.26 purport]

Ever grateful, I have tried my best to fulfil that order of Srila Prabhupada by taking his mercy worldwide.

While I was checking through airport security for my next flight, an immigration officer looked at my passport. It had 314 entry and departure stamps plus visas for 18 countries. He laughed. "Is this a travel Bible?" he asked.

No one would deny that traveling all over the world is exciting, but the thrill of adventure is sometimes offset by the austerities involved. My onward journey was testament to that.

The Kazan airport has a unique system: passengers must pass first through a full security control before checking their bags. When Uttama-sloka dasa and I arrived at the check-in counter, an agent took our tickets and quickly handed us our boarding passes. She then indicated to the other passengers to step forward.

As the passengers surged towards the front, I turned to Uttamasloka. "Hey!" I said, "Tell her she didn't check our baggage."

Uttama-sloka pushed his way to the desk again, asked the question, and was quickly squeezed back out.

"She said to carry our bags onto the plane," he said.

"What?" I said. "Carry all our luggage onto the plane? How is that possible?"

The problem was that I had a lot of luggage. When I travel through Russia, I always bring some essentials that I may not ordinarily take elsewhere: a good sleeping bag, a foam mat to sleep on, a

pillow, my own eating utensils, medicine, and clothes for both warm and cold weather. It's a big country spanning many time zones.

Uttama-sloka and I must have been quite a sight as we dragged our luggage to the boarding gate. We arrived just before the boarding call was made. As there was no seat assignment, all the passengers were grouped in front of the door, anxiously hoping to be the first to board the bus taking them to the plane. Piles of luggage were everywhere.

"What next?" I thought. "How in the world will all of us—and this luggage—fit on the plane?"

One minute later the door opened, without an announcement, and there was a mad rush to the bus. Uttama-sloka and I were the last ones. When the bus arrived at the plane, there was another chaotic dash. We were the last ones out.

As we walked toward the plane, I was shocked to see its condition. It was an old propeller plane, like something one might see at an aviation museum. A woman was standing on an old wooden ladder, propped up against the front of the plane, washing the windows with a bucket of soapy water and a rag.

We entered the plane, and a flight attendant greeted us. "Where are you flying to?" she asked.

"Huh?" said Uttama-sloka. "Uh...Ekathrinburg." He looked at me with a surprised expression.

"What kind of question is that?" I said. "Does she need to ask where are we're flying to?"

"I sense things are a little unorganized here," he said, "and perhaps passengers sometimes board the wrong flights."

We were lucky, as we found two seats together, near the middle of the plane. But there was no place for our luggage. The baggage compartments were already full, so we put some of our luggage on the floor next to us and kept the greater part on our laps.

The hostesses didn't check whether the passengers were wearing seat belts, and no safety announcements were made. Quite the contrary: Fifteen minutes into the flight, a hostess appeared in the

aisle and screamed out an announcement: "This flight will be very shaky!" She didn't say anything else or give any pertinent instructions.

I turned to Uttama-sloka. "In America they wouldn't let this plane off the ground," I said.

Then the co-pilot, a man appearing to be in his forties, came down the aisle on his way to the restroom. I told Uttama-sloka to ask him how old the plane was.

I saw the man laugh at the question.

"He told me the plane was made before he was born," Uttama-sloka said.

The three-hour flight was indeed shaky, as the hostess had predicted. Considering that, and how old the plane was, I was a little nervous. And thirsty too, probably from the effort of dragging our bags around, but no water or juice was served. My tolerance was tested even more by the bags surrounding me and on my lap, which didn't allow me to move for the entire flight. I knew we had landed when the wheels of the plane touched ground with a screeching noise and the plane skidded to a halt.

"That's one flight I'll never take again," I said to Uttama-sloka.

But thinking back, I would have gladly taken the same plane to our next destination, had I known about the train we were to take two days later after a brief visit with the devotees in Ekaterinburg.

It was a cold, drizzly morning as we boarded the train to Ufa. "How long is the ride?" I asked Uttama-sloka, as we carried our luggage to our compartment.

"Twenty-three hours," he said.

"Twenty-three hours!" I exclaimed.

I had assumed it would be at most a three-hour journey. Being so engaged in preaching, I hadn't asked Uttama-sloka about the details of the journey.

"Yes," he said, "it's long, but not by Russian standards. A number of your disciples took two-, three-, or even four-day train rides to come to your Vyasa Puja celebration in Ukraine last month."

We entered our compartment, and he flicked on the light switch. "But I'm not sure they rode on trains like this one," he said, his eyes wide open.

I looked around at what would be my home for the next day and night. "Looks like this train outdates the old plane we took the other day," I said.

The rug was filthy. The window was so dirty you could barely see outside. The vinyl seats were torn and the small folding table coming out from the wall probably hadn't been cleaned in the last fifty years. There were small pieces of old, dried-up sausage sticking out of the cracks in it.

I pulled out the mattress under my seat, to make room for my luggage, and it was covered with rat droppings. I recoiled. I sat down on my seat, not wanting to move left or right.

"My, my," I thought, "What don't I go through for the people of Russia!" But I quickly realized my foolishness and calmed down.

"And my spiritual master?" I thought, "How much more didn't he go through to deliver me and the people of the Western world!"

I remembered when a disciple asked Srila Prabhupada about his first year preaching alone in New York. "You couldn't imagine what I went through," Srila Prabhupada replied.

"For my spiritual master," I whispered to myself, "for my spiritual master, I should at least tolerate a day and night on this awful train."

Krishna soon tested the sincerity of my words. Although it was spring and the weather was quickly warming up, all the windows in the train were bolted shut, a measure taken in winter. It soon became unbearably stuffy.

"Please open the window," I said to Uttama-sloka.

He fidgeted with the window for a while, finally using great force to open it. But the cool air of the evening soon turned to icy cold as we passed through a mountainous region.

"Close the window," I said hours later, in the dead of night, still sitting motionless in the same spot.

Uttama-sloka struggled with the window for half an hour and finally gave up. “It’s not possible, Srila Gurudeva,” he said. “It’s stuck.”

A few hours later, as we slowly passed through marshland, mosquitoes took advantage of the open window to visit us inside. With no mosquito repellent, we were at their mercy, of which they showed none. Well, such is the life a traveling preacher.

But all my austerities were soon to be rewarded.

The long train ride finally came to an end. As we pulled into Ufa, I saw a large group of smiling devotees on the platform, waiting to greet us. When they saw us through the window, ten of them ran onto our coach and crowded outside our compartment in the hallway. We handed them our luggage and within moments were off the train.



Indradyumna Swami and the devotees in Ufa

We arrived at the apartment where we'd be staying. Not having slept much the previous night and still disoriented from the shaky flight two days earlier, I immediately took out my sleeping mat.

But just as I lay down, Uttama-sloka came into the room. "Srila Gurudeva," he said, "there's a difference in time here, and we're late for your evening lecture."

I forced open my heavy eyelids. "Can I shower first?" was all I could say.

Twenty minutes later we were off to the hall.

"How many devotees do you have in the yatra here?" I asked my devotee driver.

"About three hundred," he replied.

"That's nice," I said.

"We could make more," he said, "but this is a Muslim area and we're not allowed to preach openly. We can't have Harinam or public programs."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"And we don't get many visits from senior devotees," he said looking over at me. "The last sannyasi to visit here came over a year ago. The devotees are so grateful that you've come."

He paused. "I hope it wasn't too much trouble for you to come," he said.

"Trouble?" I said. "Uh... no trouble... no trouble at all."

I paused. "Well," I said, "actually there was some trouble. You see, there was this shaky plane and then this awful train. Our compartment was full of rat stool and ..."

The car turned a corner and a large group of devotees on the sidewalk exploded into a kirtan, chanting and dancing wildly. As we got closer, I could see several devotees crying. My driver raised his voice to speak over the sound of the kirtan. "I told you," he shouted. "Preachers rarely come. Ufa's the end of the world."

We stopped, and as I got out of the car I was met by a torrent of flowers, bouquets, money, fruit, and other gifts. The kirtan party escorted me into the building, up some stairs, to the entrance of a



“I felt a surge of inspiration to reciprocate with their warm reception and loving sentiments.”

large hall. The kirtan stopped for a moment as devotees took off their shoes.

When I entered the hall, I was surprised to see hundreds more devotees. They all fell silent when they saw me. For a moment no one moved. Then the kirtan started again, as suddenly as it had stopped, and I was escorted to a Vyasasana at the front of the hall.

As the kirtan picked up speed, the devotees became more and more blissful. Sitting on the vyasasana I looked over the audience. There seemed to be people from all walks of life, and I even noticed a few men wearing the small round caps of the Muslims.

When the kirtan ended I folded my hands and said the Premadvani prayers over the public address system, glorifying our guru parampara and Kṛṣṇa. As the audience rose from bowing on the ground and took their seats, I felt a surge of inspiration to reciprocate with their warm reception and loving sentiments.

The fatigue of my travels suddenly vanished, and the impressions of my recent austerities faded into oblivion. I felt invigorated and enlivened in the association of so many wonderful devotees serving Lord Caitanya in that far-distant place. As I prepared to make my opening statement, I closed my eyes for a moment and thought about my favorite of all the letters of Srila Prabhupada. It was written to a close friend of mine and often serves as a reminder of the joy a devotee feels, despite any inconvenience, in sharing his good fortune with others.

My dear Prabhavisnu,

Please accept my blessings. I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter dated January 1, 1973, and I am very glad to hear from you the wonderful news of travelling party in England ... I can understand that it is not an easy matter to travel extensively over long periods of time without proper food, rest, and sometimes it must be very cold there also. [But] still, because you are getting so much enjoyment, spiritual enjoyment, from it, it seems like play to you. That is advanced stage of spiritual life, never attained by even the greatest yogis and so-called jñanis. But let any man see our devotees working so hard for Krishna, then let anyone say that they are not better than any millions of so-called yogis and transcendentalists. That is my challenge! Because you are rightly understanding through your personal realization this philosophy of Krishna Consciousness, therefore in such a short time you have surpassed all the stages of yoga processes to come to the highest point of surrendering to Krishna. That I can very much appreciate, thank you very much for helping me in this way.

Hoping this meets you and the other men of your party in the best of health and spirits.

Your ever well-wisher,
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The Debate

| JUNE 2-4, 2005 |

Throughout my Russian preaching tour, I had been corresponding by email with Sri Prahlada das about managing my time better. My schedule has been so intense the last six months that I have found little time to study, an essential practice for one who lectures two or three times a day. As I grow older, I also find myself hankering to spend more time chanting japa as well as worshipping my beloved Deities each morning.

I was falling behind in my email correspondence as well. There are often hundreds of emails waiting to be answered. Many of them are letters from disciples who need urgent attention.

One of my last destinations on the tour was Rostov, in southwestern Russia, and soon after arriving there, I went online and discussed the issue again with Sri Prahlada. We came to the conclusion that I would have to sacrifice something in my busy schedule. Because a devotee's spiritual practices are his first priority, he may need to realign that commitment from time to time, as he accepts other

responsibilities. In order to perform my diverse duties I would have to be fixed in the most essential one, my sadhana.

When a person is steady in the duties for which he is qualified, he easily becomes qualified for the next level of duties.

[Sri Bhaktivinode Thakur, *Jaiva Dharma*]

I wrote to Sri Prahlad that I certainly couldn't compromise on my preaching, which was my first and foremost duty to my spiritual master. Neither could I further reduce basic activities like sleeping, which I had long ago minimized because of the very nature of my preaching, namely late programs and festivals.

I suggested to Sri Prahlada that I cut back on my writing, beginning with my diary. Each chapter takes an average of 8 to 10 hours to write, over several days, and often, the only time I have for writing is after midnight. In place of the diary I proposed writing a summary of my activities to my disciples twice a year.



Sri Prahlada das

Sri Prahlada's reply came immediately. "Srila Gurudeva," he wrote, "you can't do that. Many people, both devotees and non-devotees, read your diary."

"Something has to go," I replied.

Sri Prahlada's last message of the day came. "Think it over a hundred times before you decide to stop," he wrote.

As I drifted off to sleep that night the question ran through my mind again and again. "I won't think about it anymore tonight," I said to myself. "I'll think about it tomorrow, but it seems the only answer."

The next day, after the morning program, Uttama-sloka das came to my room.

"A local TV station has just called the temple," he said. "They want to know if you would like to be a special guest on a talk show tonight. The host is a famous TV personality."

"Is it an important show?" I asked.

Uttama-sloka smiled. "It's very popular," he said. "Four million people watch it twice a week."

"Okay," I said. "We can go."

That afternoon, as I was getting ready to go to the program, a woman devotee came up to me. "Maharaja," she said, "did they tell you that the host of that talk show often challenges his guests, making them feel awkward with difficult questions?"

"Really?" I said. "No one mentioned it to me. I'm sure if Uttama-sloka had known, he would have said something."

"That's one reason the show is so popular," she said. "He's very good at it."

He's quick and sharp. Famous people often turn down his invitations to the show."

I started feeling a little nervous. "Uh...Is that so?" I said.

I thought for a moment. "I'm not an expert debater like Jayadvaita Maharaja or Umapati Swami," I said, trying to smile. "But I can hold my own."

"Be careful, Maharaja," she said. "He's made fun of a lot of guests."

On the way to the television studio I quietly chanted japa and thought of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes in order to make my mind peaceful. Go-

ing into a confrontation in a relaxed mode is a technique I learned from my mother when I was young. I was athletic, and before swimming meets, when most of my teammates were busy with last-minute warm-up exercises, I was off to the side, relaxing and reading a book to take my mind off the competition.

At the last moment I'd step up to the starting block and fix my mind on the contest. If I worried too much about whether I'd win or lose, I'd expend too much energy. It may have been an unconventional approach, but it worked and I won most of my swimming races in high school. As a result, I was captain of the swim team for four years in a row.

As we drove into the parking lot of the television station, I put my japa beads aside and pulled out my copy of *Prema Bhakti Candrika*, by Srila Narottam das Thakur. I turned to the following verse:

By the indication of the sakhis, I will offer camara and betelnuts in the lotus mouths of Radha and Krishna. The sakhis, with Radha and Krishna in their midst, are totally aware of the different services to be rendered at appropriate times.”

[*Prema Bhakti Candrika*, Text 54]

“That’s a beautiful prayer,” I thought, looking out the window. “That is Narottam das Thakur’s eternal seva in the spiritual world. As Manjulali Manjari he prepares betelnuts to offer to Radha and Krsna, and sometimes he fans Them too.”

“Srila Gurudeva! Srila Gurudeva!” said Uttama-sloka. “What are you doing? We have to go now! We’re late!”

I awoke from my daydream and jumped out of the car. We walked quickly to the building and up four flights of stairs. When we entered the studio, the television crew quickly whisked me to the set and turned on bright lights.

Uttama-sloka sat near me as my translator. I hardly had time to study the scene around me. I did notice with curiosity, however, that several meters away from me were some musical instruments

including a guitar, a set of drums, and a harmonium. I was going to ask if the harmonium was ours, when the program's host suddenly walked onto the set.

Either he was too busy or he was ignoring me, but he didn't acknowledge my presence until several minutes later, when his secretary came forward to introduce us. As I stood there, I had a strange feeling that we were like two boxers coming out from our corners of the ring to shake hands before a fight. Our brief exchange was cut short by a technician calling for a sound check, and I had no time to study my host.

I sat down again. My heart started pounding in anticipation, so I pulled out my book and started to read:

I will constantly desire to serve the lotus feet of Radha and Krishna with loving attachment. Whatever I contemplate during the practice of devotional service, will certainly be achieved upon perfection in a spiritual body.

This is the method on the path of attachment.

[*Prema Bhakti Candrika*, Text 55]

"Gurudeva!" Uttamasloka called out. "The show starts in 30 seconds!"

I put my book away and focused my attention on the host.

"Look 'em in the eye," my father used to say, "and most of those schoolyard bullies will back down."

I looked my host in the eye, but he stared right back. I couldn't remember what my father had said to do next, so I just smiled.

The television crew manager said something in Russian. I thought it must have been, "Lights! Camera! Action!"

I took a deep breath and prayed to Srila Narottam das Thakur: "You were a rasika bhakta but a fearless preacher as well. I'm too young a devotee to understand the deeper mellows of bhakti, but I want to be fearless like you.

Please bless me."

"Good evening," our host said confidently as he looked straight

into the camera and his unseen audience of millions. "Tonight we have with us a leader in the Hare Krsna Movement: Indradyumna Swami, from America."

I had forgotten my hearing aids, and I struggled to hear Uttamasloka's translation of the host's words into English.

The host turned to me and smiled. "Welcome Swami," he said.

Generally I can understand people by their facial expressions and body language. It's a sense one develops after years of preaching, but with the bright lights, I could barely make out the host's smile.

"Was it a warm smile?" I thought. "Truly welcoming me to the show? Or was it a sly smile, like the one a hunter makes just before he kills his prey?" I strained to see him clearly, but the lights were too bright.

"Thank you so much," I said. "I'm honored to be on your show."

As Uttama-sloka translated my words, I suddenly realized that I had a slight edge over my host because of the translation. Each question or challenge and each reply would have to be translated, so I would have a moment to reflect on each exchange.

"I'll use that to my advantage," I thought, and I started to develop a battle plan.

"I won't acknowledge the word 'sect' if he uses it to defame me or Krsna consciousness," I thought. "I'll always reply, 'This religion is this or that.'"

It was only a 20-minute show, so I braced myself for an early attack.

The host turned to me. "Swami," he said, "can you tell us why you joined a spiritual movement from the East?"

"And here we go," I thought. "He's setting me up. He's getting ready to denounce Krsna consciousness because it's not Christian."

"Religion is neither Eastern nor Western," I replied. "It's transcendental."

It comes from God, from the spiritual world. At different periods in the history of man, God has sent His representatives to teach human society as much spiritual knowledge as the people of the time could understand.

Therefore, although there may be some superficial differences, the essence of all religions is the same: to love God.”

“A very articulate answer, Swami,” the host said.

“He’s not fooling me,” I thought. “He’s flattering me to get my guard down, but it won’t work.”

I breathed slowly, focusing my mind ever more carefully for the battle ahead.

“I see from your resume that you were you were a teenager in the 1960s in America. Were you ever a hippie?”

“So that’s it,” I thought. “He’ll try to link Krsna consciousness with the hippie movement. Well go right ahead, buddy. I’ve heard it all before.”

I decided to deflect the challenge with a smile. “I was what you might call a weekend hippie,” I said. “I engaged in some vices, but I came from a good family and I respected my parents. With their encouragement, I was serious about school.”

He paused for a moment.

“Yeah,” I thought, “I got him on that one. Come on, smart guy. Let’s see your stuff. I’m not scared.”

I looked at the clock on the wall. “There’s still 14 minutes left,” I thought. “He’s gonna go for the jugular vein, and pretty quick too.”

He laughed. “Okay,” he said, “a weekend hippie. But why do you think so many hippies joined the Hare Krishna movement?”

“Because they were frustrated with material life,” I said keeping my cool.

“For all their decadence, my spiritual master said the hippies had one good

quality: they had a spirit of renunciation. Some of them eventually saw the futility of material life and realized that Krsna consciousness was a positive alternative.”

“Can you explain to us exactly what you mean by positive alternative?” he said.

“What kind of question is that?” I thought. “It’s not a trick question, and neither is it a challenge. So what’s he up to?”

I momentarily lamented that I hadn't had the time to watch any of the host's previous shows to see how and when he attacked his guests.

"He's trying to soften me up by more flattery," I thought. "Anyway, for now, let me take advantage of this and preach to the four million people watching the show."

"There is no such thing as perfect happiness in this world," I said, "neither for the hippie nor for the gentleman. Everyone is subjected to the four miseries of material existence: birth, disease, old age, and death."

I looked straight into the camera and paused for a moment. "Just preach," I thought. "Certainly there must be sincere souls out there hankering for this knowledge."

"Maybe one cannot find water in the desert," I said, "But that doesn't mean there are not oceans of water somewhere else. Similarly, the fact that we can't find happiness in this world doesn't mean there is not a world where unlimited happiness really exists. This Hare Krsna movement teaches us the process of returning to that spiritual world. Therefore, it is the positive alternative."

I began speaking more forcefully. "It's the only alternative," I said.

"Science and technology can make life a little more comfortable, but they can't stop birth, disease, old age, and death. That only happens when we return to the spiritual world."

"Okay," I thought, "you got away with saying a lot that time. But don't push your luck. Let's wait for his next question...or first challenge."

"Well said, Swami," he said.

"Thank you" I said. I wondered whether my voice did not have a tinge of suspicion in it.

"And just exactly what is the process for returning to the spiritual world?"

he said.

"What's going on here?" I thought. "How long is he going to play cat and mouse with me?"

"Chanting the names of God," I replied. "In India people call God Krsna."

I looked at the clock on the wall. Three minutes left.

"Is he going to throw the bomb at the end?" I thought. "Is that his technique? Why didn't the devotees prime me?"

"Well then," he said, "can you sing Hare Krsna for us?"

I'm sure the audience must have seen my surprised look.

"If you were a weekend hippie," he said, "you must have learned to play the guitar, right?"

"It won't work, Mister," I thought. "If this is how you think you're going to embarrass me, you've got another think coming."

I reached over and picked up the 12-string acoustic guitar. I quickly tuned it and started strumming chords and singing along. The guitar had a beautiful sound, like the one I had owned as boy. I closed my eyes and chanted Hare Krsna, every once in a while doing a little riff of notes on the strings.

"Excellent Swami," came the voice of my host behind the bright lights. "Now could you sing on the little Indian organ, just over there?"

"Am I dreaming or what?" I thought, trying not to show my confusion on camera. "What's gotten into him?"

I picked up the harmonium, placed in on the small table in front of me, and began singing Hare Krsna again. I'm not sure how long I went on, but when I finally opened my eyes and looked at the clock, I saw the show had gone overtime.

"One more quick question, before we finish" said my invisible host.

"Something I've always wondered about. Why do bad things happen to good people?"

"Just stay cool," I thought. "Don't try to figure out what's happening. Just speak. Remember, four million people are listening."

I sat up a little straighter and leaned towards the camera for emphasis. "To understand the answer to that question," I said, "you have to learn about karma and reincarnation. Karma is a subtle law



"I picked up the harmonium and began singing Hare Kṛṣṇa again."

of nature that dictates that we are responsible for our actions. Put simply, if you do good, then good will come back to you. If you do bad, then bad will come back to you."

"Just like a boomerang," I continued. "The aborigine throws it with great force, and it comes back to him. Similarly, if one performs impious or sinful deeds in this life, then he will be obliged to suffer the reaction later, possibly in his next life."

I looked at the clock. Thirty-five minutes had passed. I wasn't going to ask what was happening. I had to bring my explanation to a conclusion.

"Death means the demise of the body," I continued.

Now Uttama-sloka's translation seemed to be working against me. The whole process was taking so long.

"We are not the bodies," I said. "We are the soul within the body. Until the soul becomes self-realized, a lover of God, he has to continue taking birth in this material world. And because our past lives are generally a mixture of good and bad deeds, we sometimes see a good person receiving the results of his bad deeds, from a former life."

The host turned toward me. "Swami," he said, "we have to thank you for taking your valuable time to be with us this evening, as well as for your enlightening words and your beautiful singing as well."

He turned towards the camera. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "from me to you, that's all for tonight. Thank you."

I just sat there dumbfounded.

As the lights dimmed and the host sat for a few moments talking with the television crew, I saw him clearly for the first time. He was handsome and well dressed, and he had an air of confidence. When the crew left, he stood up and walked toward me with a smile on his face.

Several devotees, who had accompanied me, ran up just as he reached me, and a woman devotee began speaking to him. "Thank you very much for being so respectful to my spiritual master," she said. "I've seen what happens on most of your shows."

The host turned towards me and extended his hand. "I have to be respectful,"

he said. "You see, I read his diary on the Internet."

I was speechless. I just stood shaking his hand firmly, acknowledging his graciousness. After a few moments, the television crew called him over. He bowed his head respectfully to me, then turned and left.

With that we departed. The whole way back to the apartment I didn't say a word. I was spellbound from the whole experience.

That night I tried to write to Sri Prahlada on email and explain what had happened. After several tries, I gave up. I was too tired. I simply sent the following message:

“I’ve decided to continue writing my diary on a regular basis. I’ll tell you more when we meet again. For now I can only say the Lord works in mysterious ways.”

Then I went to bed.

Realization means you should write, every one of you, what is your realization. What for this Back to Godhead is? You write your realization, what you have realized about Kṛṣṇa. That is required. It is not passive.

Always you should be active. Whenever you find time, you write. Never mind, two lines, four lines, but you write your realization. Sravanam, Kirtanam, writing or offering prayers, glories. This is one of the functions of the Vaisnava. You are hearing, but you have to write also.

[Srila Prabhupada, *Brahma Samhita* lecture,
Los Angeles, August 14, 1972]

CHAPTER TWLEVE



Without Discrimination

| JUNE 8, 2005 |

Every morning while I was visiting Rostov, Russia we would drive from the apartment where I was staying to the temple, an old house in a poor neighborhood of dirt streets outside the city. The temple didn't have facilities for more than a handful of devotees, what to speak of guests.

Over 100 devotees would line the road to greet us with kirtan, but one morning I noticed three or four dark-skinned people in ordinary clothes among them.

That morning, when I sat down to give class, I looked for the dark-skinned people, but I did not see them. I asked the devotees where they were.

"They're Gypsies," a devotee said. "We don't let them into the temple."

I thought of my Gypsy friends in Siberia. "Oh, I love Gypsies!" I blurted out.

The devotees were stunned.

“What I mean to say,” I said, “is that I have a number of friends who are Gypsies and are practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness.”

Another devotee spoke up. “Here they just steal when they come to the temple,” he said.

The other devotees nodded their heads in agreement.

“I’m aware of their bad habits,” I said, “but I’ve seen how chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa purifies them, just as it did for us.”

“These Gypsies are really rough people,” another devotee said. “We know. They live close by.”

“Even the police won’t enter their village,” said another.

“Is that so?” I said.

I wanted to say more about how my Gypsy friends in Siberia had changed, but time was short and I was expected to give class.

I asked for a copy of *Srimad Bhagavatam*, and a devotee handed me the Seventh Canto. When I looked at the verse for the day, I could not help smiling.

*tasmat sarvesu bhutesu
dayam kuruta sauhṛdam
bhavam asuram unmucya
yaya tusyaty adhoksajau*

Therefore, my dear young friends born of demons, please act in such a way that the Supreme Lord, who is beyond the conception of material knowledge, will be satisfied. Give up your demoniac nature and act without enmity or duality. Show mercy to all living entities by enlightening them in devotional service, thus becoming their well-wishers.”

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 7.6.24]

The verse seemed to fit what I wanted to say to the devotees, and even more so when I read the purport to them:

Preaching is the best service to the Lord. The Lord will immediately be extremely satisfied with one who engages in this ser-

vice of preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness ... As one performs this service for humanity, without discrimination between friends and enemies, the Lord becomes satisfied, and the mission of one's life is fulfilled.

I didn't wait a second to begin my lecture. I spoke from the text, the purport, and my heart. In particular, I stressed Srila Prabhupada's point that a devotee preaches without discrimination. "A devotee sees everyone as a candidate for devotional service to the Lord," I said, "even Gypsies."

I noticed a few devotees squirming as they heard this.

It was time to end the class. "Following Prahlada Maharaja and Srila Prabhupada's instructions," I said, "I suggest we take a Hari-nam party through the Gypsy village this afternoon."

The devotees reacted in various ways. Most smiled broadly, some stared in mild shock, while others looked serious, contemplating the possible consequences of my suggestion.

After a few moments of silence, one devotee raised his hand. "Maharaja," he said, "a small group of devotees were doing Harinam in the area and actually went a few yards into the Gypsy neighborhood a few days ago, but one man told them they'd better get out. So they left."

"Here's what I think," I said. "I propose all one hundred of us go there dressed in colorful dhotis and saris, chanting and dancing, with beautiful flags and banners... and prasadam. We can take hundreds of sweet balls."

As I continued describing the Harinam, I could see their faith increasing, and when I finished, they roared with approval. We set the time for 6 PM, as it was spring, and it stayed light outside until late in the evening.

After the lecture, one of the older devotees came up to me. "I don't know what your Siberian Gypsy friends are like," he said, "but here they're not poor. They own opulent homes that stand out in contrast to the simple Russian dwellings in this area."

"How is that?" I asked.

“They deal heavily in drugs,” he said, “and they rarely get caught. They pay big bribes to government officials. You’ll see only cars like BMW and Mercedes in their neighborhood. The local people are afraid of them and leave them alone. If a Gypsy is hurt by a local, a whole group of Gypsies will come and take revenge. Even their children and old men carry knives.”

“But we’ve never had any problems with them,” he continued, “aside from their stealing our shoes. They actually have a book—I’ve seen it—called *A Guide for Thieves*. It explains what is available to steal in different parts of the city. The book mentions that the Hare Krsna temple is a great place for stealing shoes. But I don’t think it’s too great a risk to go chanting in their village.”

He started to smile. “You may not remember,” he continued, “but you took devotees on Harinam there 10 years ago.”

“I did?” I said.

Yes,” he replied, “but then it was just a few families. Now it’s more like a village, so we should be careful.”

That afternoon I gave another class at the temple. While I spoke, the devotee women were busy making final preparations for the Harinam. They were rolling sweet balls, sewing flags and banners, and decorating their faces with gopi dots.

After class we assembled outside, and I gave the devotees a pep talk.

“If we see it’s dangerous,” I said, “we’ll come back immediately, but I’m confident we have something that will win their hearts over: our singing and dancing. Singing and dancing are an integral part of Gypsy culture, and my experience is that whenever we take the kirtan to them, they can’t resist.”

With that we started off down the dirt street leading to the Gypsy village, about 250 yards away. We first passed the homes of our Russian neighbors, and many of them came out to see what the loud chanting was all about.

I watched people’s reactions. They looked uninterested, and many would not accept prasadam. At one point I saw a lady speaking strongly to a devotee who was trying to sell her a book. I thought



With that we started off down the dirt street leading to the Gypsy village...

maybe the devotee was not being tactful, so I called him over. "Is there a problem?" I said between mantras.

"No!" he yelled over the kirtan, "No problem, Maharaja. I told her we're going to the Gypsy village, and she said we were crazy."

I livened up the beat of the kirtan and changed the melody. The devotees chanted louder and more enthusiastically, and soon all of them were dancing. As we came closer to the Gypsy village, the Russian houses thinned out, until there was an empty field about 50 yards long. At the end of the field was a row of trees, separating the Gypsy village from the rest of the area.

We came to a passage through the trees that led into the village. I broke into an even faster kirtan, and with all the devotees chanting and dancing, we burst through the trees into the Gypsy village.

I don't know who was more surprised, the Gypsies or the devotees. The Gypsies were standing around in small groups, sitting on their porches, or working in their gardens. They all froze, with as-

tonished looks on their faces. For a split second I thought I'd made a mistake in coming, but then suddenly Gypsy children from all directions started running toward the kirtan party.

The devotees had formed a circle and were chanting facing each other, but within moments about 30 children broke through the circle and started dancing in the middle. The devotees stepped back to give them more room, only to have more Gypsy children come in and fill the space.

Gathering more and more children, we continued through the village, raising a little cloud of dust. Doors and windows would fly open, and Gypsy women would look out and wave excitedly. Then they'd disappear and come running out the front door, children in tow, to see the fun.

Teenagers came and started dancing as well, but the boys and girls didn't mix. They danced in different parts of the kirtan party. I noticed they didn't even look at each other, so strict are the Gypsy customs.

At one point, one of the brahmacaris tried to get my attention. He was pointing towards some Gypsy boys dancing on the side. I couldn't understand what he was saying so I waved him over. "What is it?" I shouted over the roar of the kirtan.

"That Gypsy boy is wearing my shoes!" he replied.

I tried hard not to laugh.

But no adults joined the kirtan. I became a little nervous when I saw some of the men looking at us suspiciously. Further down the road I noticed what looked like some village elders talking together in front of a big house. "This must be the home of the village leader," I thought, so I moved the kirtan party down the road and stopped in front of the house.

Within a minute a large man came out on the porch and stood watching us without showing any emotion. Once again I changed the melody of the kirtan and played the drum even faster, until my arms started aching. The effect was wonderful, as the Gypsies and devotees went wild, dancing all over the street. Many of the Gypsies were chanting Hare Krsna along with us.



Dancing with the gypsy children

As the kirtan continued, I made eye contact with the Gypsy leader several times. As he continued watching us, I brought the kirtan to a peak, causing even some of the men to dance on the side. By that time I was completely exhausted, but I kept going. I wanted to show the Gypsy leader the glories of the holy name and how we truly made no discrimination between them and us.

It worked. A minute later, as I glanced towards him, he winked. When I smiled in return, he grinned—a sign of approval that suddenly had all the Gypsies in the neighborhood, including the adults, dancing with us.

It was no time to stop, and by the mercy of the Lord I got a second wind. I turned around on the street and started the kirtan party back towards the temple, stopping several times as more Gypsies joined. At one point I was surrounded by them, and because of the dust, I couldn't see the devotees.

As we got closer to the exit back to the main road, some of the Gypsy teenagers were standing along the side, slapping raised hands

with the devotees palm to palm in the popular high-five gesture. A number reached out to me, and I slapped my hand with theirs.

Just as we were about to exit the village, a hand appeared and I raised mine to slap back, but a devotee grabbed my arm and quickly pulled it down. His blunt action hurt my arm, and I gave him an angry look.

"I'm sorry, Maharaja," he said, "but that was a girl. If the Gypsy men saw you slap her hand, we'd all be in big trouble."

"Thank you!" I yelled as we broke through the trees back onto the main road.

Without decreasing the momentum, I continued the kirtan down the road towards the temple. I looked back and saw all the Gypsy children and young adults chanting and dancing alongside of us. The kirtan party was now double what it was when we'd left the temple.

We'd been chanting over an hour and a half. Most of the Gypsies had learned the mantra and were chanting with even more enthusiasm than the devotees, who seemed to be fading.

The neighborhood Russians were watching us, some smiling, some scratching their heads, some laughing.

I stopped the kirtan in the middle of the road and spoke to the crowd, while Uttama-sloka dasa translated. As they were mostly children, I tried to keep it simple. "Life is temporary and full of misery," I said, "but whenever you sing this song, you'll never be sad, you'll always be happy."

"Sing more song!" one of the children yelled. "Sing more song! No stop! No stop!"

So I started the kirtan again.

By the time we came to the temple, the kirtan had been going for over two hours. I could not go on any longer and brought it a close with a big "Hari bol!" But the Gypsies continued singing the Mahamantra, over and over. I stood waiting for them to finish, but after a few minutes I could see they had no intention of stopping.

I had no choice but to pick up the drum and start chanting again.



I looked back and saw all the Gypsy children and young adults chanting and dancing alongside of us

Looking back, what took place that day was one of the best kirtans I have ever had in my life. I don't know how long we all chanted together—we and our Gypsy friends on that dusty road that night—but all of us, without discrimination, tasted the nectar of the holy names.

At one point I was down on my knees with the Gypsy children all around me. I picked up a little girl, put her on my drum, stood up, and started dancing, and I won their hearts. They surged forward. “We love you!” they shouted. “We love you! We love you!”

So many of them were hugging me and the devotees, that I couldn't play the drum. Together in unison, as one voice, without any instruments, we kept chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa for another 20 minutes, and then finally, as darkness descended I stopped.

As our voices trailed off and silence prevailed, everyone, young and old, tried to fathom what had taken place. Even the Russian neighbors stood there amazed.

Then a Gypsy boy stepped forward. "We love you," he said, "but they won't let us in the temple."

It was a tense moment.

"Therefore we brought the temple to you!" I said loudly, smiling.

They all cheered.

"But now it's late," I said, "and we all have to sleep. Please go home now. Some day we'll sing together again."

"Do you promise?" a little girl said.

"I promise," I replied.

The Gypsies began waving goodbye and shaking the devotees' hands, and the devotees got into their cars and started home.

The next morning I slept a little later than usual, exhausted from the kirtan, and it was almost 8 AM when we started for the temple. As our car turned onto the dirt road, I was surprised to see Gypsies there. Only this time it was a large group, smiling and waving as I drove by.

At the temple, I was again escorted inside and straight onto the Vyasaana. As soon as the devotees were seated, I spoke up. "Please invite my friends inside," I said.

"You mean the Gypsies?" a boy said.

"I mean my friends," I replied.

A couple of men looked at each other and one got up and went outside.

I had just started the class when he returned with a group of Gypsy women and children. I stopped the class, welcomed them, and asked the devotees to make room for them to sit down. The Gypsies themselves made space for what must have been a senior Gypsy woman, and with that I picked up the *Bhagavatam* to begin speaking again.

Then I got an inspiration. I put the book back down and took off the large, fragrant garland that the devotees had put around my neck. I called Uttama-sloka over. "Here," I said. "Please give this garland to that lady."

Uttama-sloka made his way through the crowded temple room and carefully placed the garland around the neck of the senior Gypsy woman. She looked up and burst into tears.

Holding back my own emotions, I picked up the *Bhagavatam* and began to lecture, keeping to the basics so our new guests might understand. Towards the end, they all stood up, smiled at me, and left.

Ten minutes later, I ended the class and gathered my belongings for my departure to the airport and my flight to Moscow. As I walked out of the temple, I turned to a devotee. "I'm only sorry that I didn't get to say goodbye to my friends," I said.

"No need to feel sorry," he said. "They're all waiting for you on the road."

As we drove out onto the dirt road, sure enough, there was a large group of Gypsies, flowers in hand, waiting to say goodbye.

I asked the driver to slow down. As we passed them they smiled, waved, threw flowers ... and sang Hare Kṛṣṇa.

Only this time, I was the one who cried.

*sarvavatara bhajatam jananam
tratum samarthah kila sadhu varta
bhaktan abhaktan api gaura candras
tatara kṛṣṇamṛta nama danaih*

The news broadcast by the saints is that avatars of the Lord are indeed capable of delivering Their devoted followers who worship Them. However, Sri Gauracandra delivered both devotees and non-devotees alike with His gifts of Sri Kṛṣṇa's ambrosial names.

[Srila Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Susloka-Satakam*,
verse 44]

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Back On The Front Lines

| JUNE 9-20, 2005 |

On the flight from Moscow to Warsaw, I counted the money I had collected for the festival program in Poland. I had gone to Russia to raise funds for increasing the security of the program, but my collection didn't come to much. In fact it barely covered the costs of my travels through Russia.

But I didn't lament. The wonderful experiences I'd had preaching in Russia were priceless. As Srila Prabhupada once wrote to a disciple, "Preaching in the snows of Moscow is sweeter than the sweetest mango."

And by Kṛṣṇa's grace several donors had come forward with help from overseas, so we were guaranteed the protection we needed.

I arrived back to a Poland that was different from that of the previous year. The Poles were still lamenting the loss of "their" pope, John Paul II, who had passed away some months earlier. As we were driving through Warsaw on the way to the temple, I saw his picture everywhere—on billboards, in shops, and in the windows of homes.



*Preaching in the snows of Moscow is
sweeter than the sweetest mango.*

“The Poles are proud of John Paul II,” said my driver, Jayatam dasa. “He visited Poland three times during his papacy, and the people here are planning to build a big church at each and every place where he said Mass during those visits.”

I admired their continuing affection for their spiritual leader, but on the other hand, I sensed that his departure had increased national pride. “Poland for Poles” was written as graffiti on walls around Warsaw.

“The elections are coming up in the next few months,” said Jayatam, “and one of the right-wing parties is sure to win.”

“Are they giving us trouble?” I said. “Is Nandini dasi still receiving email threats to our festival program?”

“No,” he replied. “They suddenly stopped a few weeks ago. I am quite relieved.”

“I’m not so sure we should relax,” I said. “It could be more like the calm before the storm.”

"That may be true," Jayatam said. "For sure we'll have to be careful during our spring tour. You know Lech Walesa. He is the former leader of Solidarity and the previous prime minister. Well not so long ago, he gave a speech in Mragowo, and members of a right-wing party came and pelted him with eggs. 'What kind of culture are you advocating by such activity?' he said, and they responded by throwing more eggs. And this is the town where we will be holding our first festival."

"Oh great!" I said. "Whose idea was it to have our first festival there?"

"Nandini's and mine," Jayatam replied. "We weren't aware of the politics there."

When we reached the apartment, I immediately called Sri Prahlada. He and all the tour devotees had been at our spring base near Mragowo for three weeks already, getting everything ready for the tour.

"How are the preparations going?" I asked him.

"Devotees have been working hard," he said, "cleaning all the paraphernalia for the tour. It's not an easy job. We have tons of equipment."

He laughed. "A crew of 10 men have been working three days just scrubbing clean our big tents," he continued. "Harinam has been going out daily, distributing invitations. Tomorrow is the first festival."

"How is the people's reaction to Harinam?" I asked.

"Generally very good," He replied. "But "

"But what?" I asked.

"There are some young men who defiantly raise their arms in a Nazi salute whenever we pass by," he said. "Sometimes it's a little scary."

"Neo-Nazi skinheads," I said softly, "our arch-enemies."

It wasn't something we wanted, or even needed, to discuss. We'd have our security at the festivals. So I ended the conversation, but as I put the phone down, I sighed deeply. "Back on the front lines," I said to myself.

The next day Jayatam and I started driving northeast, towards Mragowo. As I looked to the sky, I saw another cause for concern: dark clouds.

"Sorry to tell you this," said Jayatam, "but the weatherman is predicting rain throughout the northeast today and tomorrow."

"Same obstacles we've been dealing with for years," I said. "Extremists, hooligans, and bad weather. But by Krsna's grace we always pull through. Right?"

Suddenly the rain came pouring down with a loud crash of thunder. "I guess we do," said Jayatam softly.

After several hours, we came to Mragowo and started driving into the town.

"Where's the festival located?" I asked.

Jayatam smiled broadly. "On the main square," he said.

"Oh, that's prestigious," I replied.

"Yes," he said, "and they've given us a longer permit than they have ever given anyone else. Usually the maximum is two days, but they have given us three."

"Why the special treatment?" I asked.

"After so many years," he said, "our festival has developed a good reputation. You see our poster over there, on that wall, advertising the event?"

I looked and saw a beautiful poster with the face of an Indian girl.

"Look toward the bottom," he said. You'll see the logos of our media patrons."

"Patrons?" I said.

Jayatam laughed. "Not financial sponsors," he said. "Don't get your hopes up just yet. But they all agreed to let us use their logos, as they support the idea of such a big cultural event. And of course, they also get publicity for themselves. They know how many thousands of people come to our festivals."

"Stop the car," I said. "I want to see the poster close up."

We stopped and walked over to one of the posters. I saw the logos of several Polish newspapers, radio stations, and two regional television stations.

“What do you think?” Jayatam said, a big grin on his face.

“This is what I’ve always wanted,” I replied, “that mainstream society would acknowledge our festival program. It took 16 years to come, but it was worth the blood, sweat, and tears.”

He smiled and took out an invitation from his bag. “I was saving this for last,” he said, and handed it to me. “It’s the new invitation to the festival for this year.”

I looked at the invitation. It had the same picture as the poster. “Turn it over,” he said.

I was surprised to see pictures of the Indian Ambassador to Poland, our famous friend Jurek Owsiak, and one of Poland’s most famous entertainers, the singer Urszula.

“You’ll see they’ve all given quotes about how nice the festival is,” Jayatam said, pointing to the text beside each of the pictures.

“Really?” I said. “The Indian Ambassador gave a quote promoting our festival?”

“Yes,” said Jayatam, “and he did it with pleasure. We’ve printed 300,000 for the spring and summer season.”

“All right then,” I said, “let’s get to the festival. It’s about to begin.”

I felt a little awkward arriving the very hour of the day of the first festival. In principle I should have been with the 150 devotees of the tour during the three weeks of preparation. But circumstances were such that I had to make sure the event was secure.

As we drove up, I was overjoyed to see our big stage and colorful tents filling up the main square. I was also happy to see 10 security men in uniform, standing at strategic points around the festival. Unfortunately, dark clouds prevailed overhead and a light drizzle was falling. As we pulled up to the festival, I was disappointed to see only a few guests walking around.

“Doesn’t look good,” I said to Jayatam.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “There is still 15 minutes to show time.”

As I got out the car, I saw devotees busying themselves with last-minute preparations. Because the festival was to begin in a few



Tour devotees busying themselves with last-minute preparations

minutes, all they could do was wave with big smiles. I scanned the scene, taking in the magnitude of our presence in the center of town. After a few minutes, people started arriving.

Suddenly a man appeared at the main gate and started handing out leaflets to people as they came in. Instinct told me it was a member of an anti-cult group. I told Jayatam to go over and get a leaflet. By the look on his face as he returned, it was obvious I was right. And the fact that some people who were reading it looked puzzled was further proof.

“Call security and get them to remove that man,” I said to Jayatam, as the drizzle from the sky turned to rain.

As the first performance began on the stage, I noticed two of our security men arguing with several young men drinking beer in the front row benches. The security men wanted them to leave, but the boys, already drunk, didn’t want to go, and the argument was

heating up. Most of crowd was standing back, away from the benches, afraid to get close to the scene.

"A great start for the festival season," I said to myself.

Just then the head of our security came up to me.

"This is one of the most difficult places we've ever had to secure," he said. "The park just across the street is frequented by drunks and vagabonds. And we've noticed many suspicious young people hanging around. It's a potentially dangerous situation."

Suddenly a devotee ran up. "Maharaja!" he shouted. "Some skinheads just beat up Bhakta Dominique behind the book tent!"

I turned to run there, but the security man stopped me. "We'll take care of it," he said.

Squinting, I could see Dominique sitting on the ground, blood pouring down his face onto his shirt. Fearing more violence, I quickly ran over to the nearest tents to see whether any suspicious activity was going on. After a few minutes, the security chief returned.

"They broke Dominique's nose with one punch," he said. "We caught one of the boys."

"It might be wise to station a few of your men just outside the festival," I said. "And what about that man distributing those tracts?"

"We asked him to leave," said the security chief.

I returned to my van to watch the festival scene from a different vantage point. Looking out across the grounds, I suddenly noticed the same man passing out tracts again, this time at another entrance. I saw a number of people standing around the festival reading them.

I called Jayatam. "The anti-cult man is back," I said. "He's distributing his leaflets on the other side of the festival. Security has to do something about him, or he'll ruin the whole atmosphere."

"I'll get right onto it," Jayatam said. "Right now the security men are getting rid of the drunks in front of the stage and looking for the rest of the skinheads. They are also dealing with a man who was shouting at the devotees in one of the shops."

"If this is any indication of what's ahead," I thought, "we may have to shift to another area."

I felt disappointed, and I sat watching the festival site for over an hour, hoping Krsna would send a sign that our efforts would not be spoiled. Gradually the rain let up, and people started filling up the festival grounds. I decided to walk around and get the feel of how the festival was going.

I visited the book tent. It was there that Krsna sent the first ray of hope. Radha Caran dasa, approached me. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "An amazing thing happened a few minutes ago. A woman came in with an invitation to a festival we did in this town in 1991."

"1991?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "It must have been one of our first festivals and much, much smaller, but it had such an effect on her life that she has held on to that invitation as a memento for all these years. At that festival she bought a copy of Bhagavad Gita and was reading it regularly. One day she lent it to a friend who liked it so much she wouldn't give it back. She tolerated this, not wanting to disturb their friendship, and came today to buy another copy. She told me, 'I'll never lend this book to anyone.'"

"Earlier another woman came by," he continued. "She was obviously poor. She said she lived alone and had no family or work. She collects discarded beer cans and returns them to stores for a small amount of money. That's what she lives on. She came in here with her week's collection in hand, a few small bills. She was very interested in Krsna consciousness. She asked amazing questions. Her sincerity was obviously due to her realization about the suffering of material life.

"I was about to give her a book for free, when I turned to answer a question from another guest. While I was talking to that person, she decided to buy a book from another devotee. She said to him, 'This book is more important to me than the three days of food this money will buy.' Before the devotee realized what her situation was, she left."

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” I said. “It makes it all worthwhile.”

“Makes what worthwhile?” he said. “What do you mean?”

I smiled. “I’ll tell you later,” I said.

When I left the book tent, I saw that the sun had broken through the clouds and people had started pouring onto the festival grounds. “I guess it’s looking better,” I said to myself.

From a distance, the head of security, gave a thumbs-up, indicating things were under control.

“... and better and better,” I continued in the same breath.

I looked over the entire festival site and saw that all the benches in front of the stage were full, the stage program was in full swing, and many people were in the restaurant, the shops, the exhibitions, and the yoga tent.



Prasadam in the festival restaurant

"Somehow we always pull through," I said to myself, remembering my conversation with Jayatam in the car. I also remembered his cautious confirmation and prayed that the auspicious signs would continue.

I didn't have to wait long. Nandini dasi walked up with a well-dressed gentleman. "I'd like to introduce you to the man in charge of cultural affairs in this town," she said. We shook hands.

"He said this is the biggest crowd that has ever attended an event in this town," Nandini continued. "Last month, one of the most famous bands in the country played in the square, but only a handful of people came. He wants to congratulate you."

We shook hands again, and off they went to see another part of the festival.

Before I could move two steps forward, Jayatam came running up. "Srla Gurudeva," he said excitedly, "Television Polska just called. It's the second biggest channel in the country. They want to come and film the festival tomorrow. One of their reporters is here right now, and he sent a very favorable report to Warsaw. They want to do a special show at the end of the national news broadcast on Friday evening and Saturday morning."

"Now that has to be a sign from heaven itself," I said under my breath.

"How many people will watch the broadcast?" I asked.

"About 20 million," he said with a smile.

"It's not how you start," I said softly, "it's how you finish."

"Excuse me?" Jayatam said, a puzzled look on his face.

"Uh... An English expression," I replied.

Looking around the festival site, I saw thousands of people enjoying themselves. And the man with the leaflets was gone, the drunks were gone, and the skinheads hadn't returned.

"Tell Television Polska, they can come any time," I said. "The coast is clear."

"The coast is clear?" Jayatam said. "What does that mean?"

"It means, well ... like, you know, like the coast?" I said. "The coast is the ocean bordering a country, and umm ... "

I paused for a moment and then smiled. “It means we’re out of danger,” I said. “The Lord is watching over us.”

Jayatam nodded his head and smiled.

In all kinds of danger, the members of the Krsna consciousness society should be confident of their protection by the Visnudas or the Supreme Personality of Godhead, as confirmed in *Bhagavad-gita* (kaunteya pratijanihi na me bhaktah pranasyati [Bg. 9.31]). Material danger is not meant for devotees. This is also confirmed in *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. Padam padam yad vipadam na tesam: [SB 10.14.58] in this material world there are dangers at every step, but they are not meant for devotees who have fully surrendered unto the lotus feet of the Lord. The pure devotees of Lord Visnu may rest assured of the Lord’s protection, and as long as they are in this material world they should fully engage in devotional service by preaching the cult of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu and Lord Krsna, namely the Hare Krsna movement.

[*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 6.3.18 purport]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The Frowning Girl

| JUNE 21–JULY 4, 2005 |

One day, when Monika was seven years old, she surprised her mother. “Mommy,” she said, “I believe in reincarnation.”

“Really?” said her mother, a devout Catholic. “Where did you ever get such an idea? Certainly you haven’t learned this in church.”

“I don’t know, Mommy,” Monika said. “But I know it’s true. After we die, we are born again.”

“Well keep it to yourself,” her mother said. “Out here in the countryside, people just won’t understand.”

“I want to learn more about it,” Monika said. “Can I read books about other religions? I have so many questions.”

“Well... all right,” said her mother. “Go ahead. But don’t give up your Bible studies. There’s a lot to learn there as well.”

“Of course, I won’t, Mommy,” said Monika. She hugged her mother. “Can we get some books today?”

For the next few years, Monika read the many books her mother took out from the library or bought at local stores, and she gradu-

ally became familiar with the different religions of the world. Her friends sometimes thought it odd that she preferred to stay home and read rather than play outside in the beautiful forests that surrounded Ketrzyn, the town where she lived.

One day, just after Monika turned 11, her mother asked about her spiritual search. "Monika," she said, "after all your reading, are you finding the answers you were looking for?"

Monika looked up from the book she was reading. "Not all of them, Mom," she said, "but I find something valuable in most of the books you get me."

"And the Bible?" her mother said.

"Yes, Mom. I love the story about how Jesus cured the leper. But you know, there's one religion I have a doubt about."

Her mother smiled. "Which one is that?" she asked.

Monika frowned. "The Hare Krsna religion," she said.

"Where did you ever hear about them?" her mother asked.

"Some of the kids at school were talking about them," Monika said. "They say they're a cult and they're really weird and scary."

"Well, don't worry," her mother said. "You'll probably never meet them. Not in this country town anyway. I heard they live in America."

Two days later Monika was sitting on the porch of her house, just off the main street of the town. It was a quiet, warm spring afternoon, and people were walking by, busy with their shopping. She picked up a book her mother had just given her about the religious rites of the ancient Incas of Peru.

She was about to open it when she heard the sound of drums and cymbals. She looked up and saw a large group of men, women, and children dressed in exotic, colorful clothes, singing and dancing down the street, 100 yards away.

"Oh my!" she said. "What in the world is this?"

She saw other children of the neighborhood running down the street to have a look, and she got up from her chair to join them. Then she heard the group singing, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare..."

She stopped. "Oh my God!" she gasped. "It's that cult!"

She stared in shock as the singing party approached.

"There are so many of them!" she thought as she watched the chanting party coming closer. The drums pounded, the cymbals rang, and the voices drowned out the sound of the passing cars. "Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare ..."

Monika closed her eyes and covered her ears as the kirtan party passed her house.

Two weeks earlier I had held a meeting with our festival committee. Our first festival of the year, in Mragowo, had ended a few days earlier, and the committee members were buzzing with excitement.

"The first festival started off rough," said Jayatam dasa, "especially for Bhakta Dominique. The skinheads broke his nose. But everything finished so wonderfully. You know the woman who came the next day with the crew from national television. Well she said she's been covering big events for nine years but she had never seen a festival where everyone was so happy. Then she laughed and said she'd never seen an event where the organizers themselves were so happy."

Jayatam smiled. "The station liked her coverage so much they aired it three times on Panorama," he said. "It's one of the most popular shows in Poland."

Twenty million people watch it every night."

Nandini dasi spoke up. "I'm getting calls from town councils all over the region," she said. "They want to know whether we'll do the festival in their towns."

"We still had one date open," Nandini continued. "I didn't know which town to choose. Then the mayor of Ketrzyn called me. He said he'd give us a letter of appreciation for the festival even before the festival took place."

So we've decided to have our last spring festival in Ketrzyn. It's deep inside the countryside. The people there are simple but pious."

I went over to the table and looked at a map. “I can’t even find it,” I said.

“There it is,” said Jayatam, “that little point there.”

The day before we arrived in Ketrzyn, I had a short meeting with all the devotees. “It’s not a big town,” I said, “so I think one or two Harinams will be enough.”

The next day we arrived in Ketrzyn and parked our buses near the center of town. Then 70 of us began a colorful procession down the street. The festivals in the three previous towns had been big successes, and the devotees’ spirits were high.

The brass kartalas, the mirrored mrdanga covers, and the women’s jewelry all glittered in the sun. A gentle breeze brought relief from the summer heat and gave the devotees energy as they danced with abandon through the town.

The women in their colorful saris danced in rhythmic synchronized steps, attracting the attention of everyone. The men didn’t



Devotees arrive in Ketrzyn ready for harinama

dance as artistically, but their enthusiastic chanting of the holy names brought smiles to the faces of the townspeople.

And there were more smiles as people accepted invitations to the festival.

Storeowners came out on the sidewalk to watch as we passed by, and people waved from windows.

I tried to speak to Sri Prahlada dasa over the roar of kirtan. "This reminds me a lot of the old days on the tour," I said, "when we'd visit a town for the first time."

We came to a row of old houses nestled in between the shops, and I noticed a girl, about eleven, sitting motionless in a chair on the porch, glaring at us with a frown, in marked contrast to the mood of the other people. As we came closer she closed her eyes and covered her ears with her hands.

I motioned to Sri Prahlad. "Look at her," I said. "Not everyone's happy we're here."

One of the men in the group offered Monika an invitation, but she refused it, so he left it on the porch railing, just in front of her. As the kirtan went on its way, Monika opened her eyes and uncovered her ears. She stood up and watched as the chanting party disappeared down the street.

Monika gingerly picked up the colorful invitation. She looked around to see if anyone was watching. Then she looked over the invitation and started to read aloud: "Invitation to the Festival of India."

She turned the invitation over and read a statement from Anil Wadhwa, the Indian Ambassador to Poland:

"This wonderful festival is just like a trip to India, but it's easier, because the festival comes straight to you. You don't need a visa, and the festival is free. Go and see the artistic singing, dancing, and theatrical performances. Taste delicious vegetarian food and smell aromatic incense.

While I was at the festival I felt right at home. Don't miss it!"



"This wonderful festival is just like a trip to India"

She read the rest of the invitation, about the activities of the festival, and then put it down.

"It doesn't sound so scary," she muttered to herself. She looked up as the chanting party turned down a side street. A man carrying a bunch of balloons was the last to disappear around the corner.

"And they sure don't look weird either," she thought.

She sat down on her chair. "I wonder..." she thought. "Maybe the kids at school don't really know what Hare Krishna is."

She reached for her new book, but the invitation on the table caught her eye again. She picked it up and read it and re-read it many times. Then she just sat looking ahead, thinking.

Thirty minutes later she heard the sound of the drums, the cymbals, and the loud chorus of the people again, coming back up the street.

"They're coming this way again," she thought. "I'll watch them more closely this time."

When our kirtan party reached the end of the shopping street we turned into another small street and then came back around up the main street in the direction we had come from. People continued to smile and wave, and the invitations were flying out of the distributors' hands.

As we neared the small house where the girl with the frown had been sitting, I strained my eyes to see if she was still there. I felt sorry that she hadn't appreciated the devotees and the sweet sound of the holy names.

Then I saw her again. She was sitting in the same place, but this time her eyes were open and she was looking at us intently. Within moments, her intense look relaxed into curiosity, and as we passed, it melted into a charming smile. The transformation was so quick that it caught me by surprise.

"Now that's unusual," I thought. "From a glaring frown to a sweet smile in minutes."

Monika stood up. "But how..." she thought, "how could this be a cult if the Ambassador of India endorses their festival? It must be the real thing. And just see how happy they are! I want to know more."

She started running after the chanting party and caught up with it just as it entered the main square.

"Oh look!" she thought. "Mr. Tomczak took one of their invitations, and Mrs. Jankowski is buying a book from one of their people."

She came closer and peeked from behind Mrs. Jankowski, who was holding the book in her hand.

"*The Science of Self Realization*," she said softly.

"I'd like to have that book," she said out loud.

Mrs. Jankowski whirled around. "Is that so?" she said with a smile. "Well then, when I'm finished with it, I'll send it over to your mother. How's that?"

"That would be wonderful, Mrs. Jankowski," said Monika. "Thank you very much."

Monika turned around and ran up to get a closer look at the singing party.

"I just love the way the girls are dressed," she thought. "Yes, yes, that's it! If I dress myself like them, I can join the singing party. All right!

That's what I'll do."

She twirled around and sped off in the direction of her house.

As the kirtan party reached the town square and stood in one place, the book distributors began approaching people who stopped to see the exotic demonstration. I smiled as I saw a woman eagerly accept a book from a devotee and ask the price. Suddenly the woman turned around, and I saw the girl from the porch standing right behind her. This time she had a big smile on her face.

I turned to Sri Prahlada. "Look!" I said. "Remember that girl with the frown? She's over there smiling."

Sri Prahlada was in the middle of singing the Hare Krishna mantra, so he just replied to me with a wink.

I turned my head to look at the girl again, and I saw her standing in front of the women in the kirtan, a wistful look on her face. Suddenly she whirled around and ran back down the street.

"Oh well," I thought. "Looks like her attraction didn't last long."

After 30 minutes I called out to the devotees, "All right" I shouted. "Let's head in that direction." I pointed to a part of town we hadn't touched yet.

The massive party of devotees turned and like a large colorful snake, wound its way through the old cobblestone streets.

"Mom! Mom!" Monika yelled as she burst into the house. "You know those scary people we talked about? And what the kids said? And you said they wouldn't come?"

"Calm down, darling," her mother said. "You're speaking so fast, I can't understand anything. What in the world are you talking about?"

Monika caught her breath and tried again. “Mom,” she said, “it’s not true what the kids said. They’re not a cult. The Indian Ambassador likes them.

Mr. Tomczak took their invitation. And Mrs. Jankowski bought one of their books.

“Who are you talking about, darling?”

“The Hare Krishnas!” Monika said, almost shouting. “And they’re so happy!”

“I know,” her mother said. “I saw them singing in town. But you should be a little careful...”

“They’re all right, Mom. I can see it.”

“And so?” her mother replied.

“So where’s that big scarf Dad gave you on your birthday? And where are the beads you bought at Easter and the sandals I didn’t like? Quick, Mom!”

As our kirtan party left the main square, I moved to the front in order to direct the chanting party through the streets. We continued for another half hour. Then suddenly I saw the girl running down the street in front of us.

As she came closer I gasped in surprise. She had changed her clothes and was wearing something resembling a sari.

“It’s a pretty small sari,” I thought, closing my eyes after noticing how it barely covered her and was pinned closed.

Within a moment she was dancing in the kirtan party, big blue wooden beads around her neck, looking something like the neck beads on the devotees. I noticed she had painted a dot on her forehead like an Indian bindi, probably with lipstick, and that she had changed her shoes for sandals. It didn’t take her long to learn the Hare Krishna mantra and soon she was wearing the same beautiful smile as the devotees.

After 45 minutes she grabbed some invitations from one of the distributors and started running here and there, distributing them to the townspeople.

At one point what must have been some of her friends walked by and stopped.

They stared and raised their eyebrows to see her dressed as she was, distributing invitations, but she just smiled at them and continued on with her newfound enthusiasm.

An hour later we returned to the bus, Monika distributing invitations all the way. As we boarded the bus to leave, I saw yet another expression on her constantly changing face: sadness.

"Tell her we'll be back tomorrow at 1:00 pm for more singing and dancing," I said to Mathuranath dasa. "And the festival is tomorrow, as well."

"Oh Mom, it was so much fun," Monika said when she went home. "You want to hear the song they sing? Once you start, you can't stop singing it."

"No, that's okay," her mother replied. "I heard plenty of it. The whole town did."

Monika could hardly contain herself. "The festival is tomorrow, Mom," she said. "Will you come?"

"I'm not sure," her mother replied. "It might not look so good. I mean, what if the priest saw me?"

"Oh come on, Mom!" Monika replied.

The next day we arrived in Ketrzyn at exactly 1:00 pm. We only had a few hours to finish advertising the festival, so we quickly chanted into town. I marveled at the beauty of the old buildings, many of which were built when the area was part of Germany 100 years ago. But what I was really looking forward to was seeing Monika again. I didn't have to wait long. As soon as we entered the main street I could see her off in the distance, sitting on her porch waiting for us to pass by. As soon as we did, she ran and leaped into the kirtan party, in full devotional attire (as she imagined it) and spent the next few hours chanting with us.

The festival site was not far from the center of town, just beside a lake.

I'll never forget the look on her face when we finished the chanting, rounded a corner, and came upon the beautiful site, with its large stage and multi-colored tents. I imagined that her expression was something like what mine will be when I finally come face to face with the spiritual world.

After I briefly inspected the site, I turned to one of the woman devotees.

"Please find that girl who was distributing invitations," I said. "I'd like to speak with her."

In a few minutes she came back with Monika. I asked Monika to sit down on one of the benches with a translator and me.

"I remember the frown on your face when you first saw us," I said with a little laugh.

"Oh, please don't mind that," she said. "That was before I knew you."

"Let me tell you how it all happened," she continued. "You see, when I was seven years old, I told my mother I believed in reincarnation ..."

I sat and listened to her story with fascination. She spoke quickly, and as she talked, her eyes darted around the festival site and the treasures it held for a girl who had only read about the wonders of India.

Suddenly she jumped up and began running toward the tents. I sat there spellbound, watching her as she walked past the gift shop, the restaurant, and the displays on vegetarianism and yoga. Finally she came upon a tent with a display on reincarnation. She paused for a moment and then went in. I don't know exactly how long she stayed inside, but it must have been well over half an hour.

My translator and I sat watching.

"What's up?" said a devotee passing by.

"Inside that tent is a young lady who's reached a crossroads in her life," I said. "It's a very special moment."

By the time the festival started she had made her way around the entire site. I smiled when I saw her just before the stage show began, sitting in a front row seat in a real sari the devotee women



Festival gift shop

had dressed her in, Vaisnava tilaka and gopi dots adorning her face and tulasi beads around her neck.

I continued on my way around the grounds, checking the stalls and tents to make sure everything was all right. Here and there I'd pick up a piece of paper or an aluminum can, wanting to protect our image and give the best possible reputation to our festival.

Suddenly, as I came near the book tent, I heard a loud cry: "Mom!"

I turned just in time to see Monika jump into her mother's arms. Within moments they were in the book tent. And why not? That was their pastime. But now they had their choice of the cream of the crop.

Later in the evening, another devotee and I met Monika walking blissfully around the festival, a bead bag around her neck.

"My mother just left," said Monika. "She had her reasons why she had to leave, but she said I could stay."

“Oh really?” said the devotee accompanying me. “How is that?”

Monika smiled. “I told her that here I found the answers to all the questions I ever had,” she said. “And most important I most important of all I found God.”

She said it with such conviction that her words seemed to dwarf my own realizations about the Lord.

I thought about the frowning girl on the porch, and I marveled at the transformation that had taken place in her life in just two days.

As she walked away, another devotee approached me. “Maharaja,” he said, “isn’t that the girl who followed us on Harinam? She’s so different now.”

I couldn’t help smiling. “She certainly is,” I said. “If only I could be so fortunate.”

*nrtyan vayu-vighurnitaih sva-vitapair gayann alinam rutair
muncann asru maranda-bindubhir alam romanca-vanankuraih
makando 'pi mukunda murcchati tava smrtya nu vrndavane
bruhi prana-samana cetasi katham namapi nayati te*

This mango tree in Vrindavana is now overwhelmed by remembering You. It dances, moving its branches in the breeze. It sings in the form of these humming bees. It sheds tears in the form of these many drops of honey. Its hairs stand erect in ecstasy in the form of these new sprouts. O Mukunda, as dear to me as my own life, why is this tree so filled with love for You? Who am I, so hard-hearted that even Your name will not enter my heart?

[Sri Isvara Puri, quoted by Srila Rupa Goswami,
Padyavali, Text 62]

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Difficult Lessons

| JULY 5-28, 2005 |

Our spring tour had been a success. We had put on 12 big festivals with a total attendance of over 60,000, so our spirits were high as we began the summer tour in early July along the Baltic Coast. Our ranks had swelled to over 220 devotees, filling to capacity the school we had rented in Siemys'l, a village of 300 people.

The school would be our base for the summer, and the villagers welcomed us with waves and warm smiles, in sharp contrast to their mood last summer. I asked Nandini dasi, about the change.

"Last year," she said, "just before we came, a member of the town council verbally attacked the headmaster of the school at a meeting. He accused the headmaster of renting the school to a dangerous sect. He convinced the whole council that we should be thrown out of town, but we had a signed contract with the school, and the headmaster liked us, so we were able to stay.

"Throughout the summer the townspeople came to know and appreciate us. As a result, I got a number of letters from the

headmaster during the winter saying that the whole town would welcome us back this summer. When Jayatam das and I visited the town officials in the winter, we spent four hours in the police station because the officers had many questions about spiritual life and couldn't stop eating the samosas we had brought.

"The police chief told us that at a recent town council meeting, the man who had blasphemed us the year before tried to do the same thing again, but all the other council members stood up and told him to sit down and shut up."

On the day of our arrival I held a meeting in the gymnasium with all the devotees.

"It's going to be a blissful summer," I began. "We have 40 festivals planned. That's six festivals a week. We'll take every Monday off to rest. On that day there won't be a morning program. You'll sleep in and come for prasadam later in the morning."

I could see some surprised looks among the newcomers. A boy raised his hand. "Maharaja," he said, "why won't we have a morning program on Mondays?"

"We'll have a full morning program six days a week," I said, "but the nature of this service is that you'll need extra rest one day a week. Every day most of us will be doing four or five hours of Harinam along the beach, advertising the program, while others will set up the festival. Then we'll all do the five-hour event and arrive back at the base after midnight. It's an intense schedule, something like drinking hot sugarcane juice. It's so hot it burns your lips but so sweet you can't stop."

I smiled at the boy. "You'll soon thank me for that day off," I said.

The first 10 festivals went well, with an average of 6,000 people at each one. People sat mesmerized watching the stage program, and they also enjoyed the many exhibits and stands depicting Vedic culture. We simply couldn't cook enough prasadam for the restaurant, and for the first time in years we enjoyed good weather. In fact, it became so hot that I started to worry about the devotees' working so

hard. After a few weeks I could see signs they were getting weary, so I cut out one festival and gave them an extra break.

But that extra rest still wasn't enough for many of the devotees during the events of July 7.

The sun rose early, at 5 AM, that day, and I was chanting my rounds in my room when suddenly a devotee came running in. "Rasamayi is on fire!" he screamed.

I bolted out of the room and down a corridor, where I was met by another devotee.

"It's okay," she said. "Her sari caught fire while she was doing puja. After offering the ghee lamp to the Lord, she absent-mindedly put it down too close to herself. When she realized her sari was on fire, she immediately rolled on the ground, smothering the flames like you had taught us at a meeting last week."

"Tell the pujaris to be more careful," I said and returned to my chanting.

Her close call became the talk of the tour after the morning program.

Later in the afternoon, as I was preparing to go on Harinam, Gokularani dasi called me on my cell phone. "Srita Gurudeva," she said, "I have bad news for you. I'm on my way to the hospital. Another woman's sari caught on fire in the kitchen and she was burned."

I was already upset about the accident earlier in the morning, and I became angry. "I told the women, no saris in the kitchen!" I said loudly. "It's too dangerous!"

I started to calm down. "How bad is it?" I said.

"It's mainly her back," said Gokularani. "We've put special burn cream on it, and I'll send you a report from the emergency room at the hospital."

"This day is starting off badly," I said to myself.

The news of the burning quickly spread among the devotees. Many appeared visibly affected as they boarded the buses to go on Harinam or to set up the festival. I approached a group of devotees

as they came out of the school. "I'll keep you informed about how she's doing," I said, "but this is all the more reason we have to go out and preach. The material world is a dangerous place. People have to be reminded of this in order to become more serious about spiritual life."

The devotees nodded in agreement and silently moved on.

But another lesson was waiting for us just down the road. As my van and a busload of devotees passed through a town near our base, we got stuck in traffic. On the pavement, just to our right, an elderly man was walking by. Suddenly he twirled around and fell on the ground. As people rushed to help him, I saw his eyes staring wide open without blinking, a sure sign he had left his body.

I looked back toward the bus and saw the expressions on the devotees' faces. Once more the hard realities of life had hit, and they had become grave.

"Difficult lessons today," I thought. I remembered a verse from *Bhagavad Gita*:

*duhkhesv anudvigna manah
sukhesu vigata sprhah
vita raga bhaya krodhah
sthita dhira munir ucyate*

One who is not disturbed in mind even amidst the threefold miseries or elated when there is happiness, and who is free from attachment, fear and anger, is called a sage of steady mind.

[*Bhagavad-gita* 2.56]

I turned to a devotee sitting next to me in the van. "Seeing such things," I said, "a devotee loses faith in the false promise of material happiness and becomes more determined to go back home, back to Godhead."

"Yes, it's true," he said softly and closed his eyes in meditation.

"Sometimes you don't have to say much," I thought, "You just have to say the right thing."

mitam ca saram ca vaco hi vagmita iti

Essential truth spoken concisely is true eloquence.

[*Caitanya-caritamṛta*, Adi 1.107]

And there was more to come. In retrospect, it appears the Lord wanted to impress upon us even more deeply the lessons of the day.

As we continued driving, two kilometers down the road, I saw a small car stalled in the middle of the road, in the lane coming opposite to us. My first reaction was, “Why doesn’t the fool get out of the car and alert the oncoming traffic?”

Just that moment, a speeding car came from behind the vehicle. The driver of the car slammed on the brakes and came to a screeching halt within a meter behind the stalled car.

But the next car wasn’t so lucky. It plowed full force into the back of the second car. We could hear the sound of the crunching metal and breaking glass and worst of all, the screams of the passengers.

The devotees in my van covered their eyes.

“Slow down,” I said to my driver, as we passed the wreckage. I made a quick assessment of the damage. Although the two cars were badly smashed, all the passengers seemed all right. They were still in their seats, conscious, and there was no blood. I looked in our rear-view mirror and saw four cars stopping behind us and a number of men rushing to the scene of the accident, one already on his cell phone.

“Keep moving,” I said to the driver.

“Shouldn’t we stop and help?” a devotee said.

“There are many people to assist them,” I replied. “Best if we continue and go on sankirtan.”

An hour later we arrived in the town of our next festival. The crew was setting up the event in a beautiful park near the beach. I could see that the devotees on the buses were still affected by the day’s events, and I pressed them to go out on Harinam. I knew



Setting up the main stage

chanting Hare Krsna would give them immediate relief from all they'd seen and heard that day.

But even in the midst of our happy kirtan, some of us had to endure yet another lesson.

As we chanted along, I saw a girl about 10 years old playing in the sand 30 meters away. Suddenly she dropped to the ground and didn't move. Her parents rushed towards her and began giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but it didn't appear to be working. She looked lifeless.

Because I didn't want the devotees to see what was happening and because it would not have been appropriate to pass by, I immediately turned the Harinam party around and went back down from where we had come. But I could tell that some devotees had seen what had happened.

We stopped to chant before a large gathering of sunbathers. Many of them smiled at us and held up the invitations to the festi-

val that our distributors had given them. After a minute, a woman devotee approached me.

“Maharaja,” she said, “I saw that poor girl on the beach and the accident and the poor man on the sidewalk. And I heard about the girl who was burned.”

“I understand,” I said.

“I want to go home,” she said.

I paused for a moment. “Do you think it’s different anywhere else in this world?” I said. “The Bhagavatam says, *padam padam yad viptatam na tesam*: ‘There is danger at every step in this world.’ What you’re seeing today is the very real face of material existence. All too often we ignore these realities and think we can be happy here. Seeing these things should make you more mature in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

“Sankīrtan in the safest place in the material world, because one is often reminded of the miseries of material existence while simultaneously seeing the mercy of Lord Caitanya in delivering people. Wait until the festival this afternoon and you’ll see the bright side of life: Kṛṣṇa consciousness.”

“All right,” she said.

I started to follow the kīrtan party down the beach when suddenly I felt a terrible pain in my right foot. I lifted my foot and saw a big black wasp struggling in its death throes in the sand. I had stepped on it, and it had stung me.

“It’s probably the only wasp on the entire beach,” I thought, “and I had to step on it.”

I am allergic to bee stings, and I started to sweat. The pain was increasing and was soon shooting up the inner part of my leg.

“What a day!” I said out loud.

“It’s one thing to speak about the miseries of material life,” I thought, “but another to realize them.” Grimacing with pain, I started hobbling towards the Harinam party.

Within a few minutes my foot was starting to swell, so I stepped into the sea. The cold water eased the pain. Several devotees looked back and were surprised to see me standing in the water.

"This has got to be the last lesson of the day," I said, leaving the water to catch up with the chanting party.

It wasn't.

As soon as I reached the Harinam group, a devotee who had just come from the bus pulled me aside.

"There's been a terrorist attack in London," he said. "Three explosions took place in the Underground and one on a bus. Over 40 people are confirmed dead and 700 wounded.

I stood silently, oblivious to my own pain for the moment.

"There is talk in the Polish government of canceling all major events," he continued.

"I hope they don't do that," I said. "It would mean the end of our festivals this summer."

I looked around the beach. It seemed that word of the terrorist attack had already reached many people. I decided it wouldn't be appropriate to continue singing and dancing, so I turned the kirtan party towards an exit and chanted back to the festival.

By the time we arrived at the site, my own tolerance of material life was being tested. But I had to rally the devotees. We had a festival to put on.

I gathered some of the men. "We've seen a lot of material life today," I said. "It's a world of duality: heat and cold, black and white, happiness and distress. We're out here to help people see the reality of material existence and offer them the alternative of Krsna consciousness through these festivals. So let's get to work."

Some of the men turned and ran to their services.

Soon thousands of people began streaming into the festival. The benches in front of the main stage quickly filled to capacity as the sweet sound of Krsna's name began to flow from the bhajan.

Other guests wandered through the exhibits on vegetarianism, reincarnation, karma, and yoga. Some went straight to the restaurant, and the most serious ones sat in the questions-and-answers tent. I smiled as I saw a man leave the book tent with a large pile of our books in his hands.



Pancakes at the prasadam tent

Then I noticed a well-dressed man being escorted onto the stage by our master of ceremonies, Tribuvanesvara das.

Jayatam was standing near me. “Who’s that?” I asked him.

“He’s the mayor of the town,” he replied. “He’s going to officially open the festival. And you know what he told me?”

“No, what?” I replied.

“He said the entire beach is empty. It’s still hot and sunny—late afternoon—but the beach is empty. Everyone has come to our festival. He said he’s never seen the beach empty on a summer day any time in his whole life.”

I started to feel relief from the hard lessons of the day.

More good news came when I received a call from Gokularani. The girl who had been burned that morning was not in serious condition and would be released from the hospital the next day.

I felt relieved, and I went near the entrance of the festival site to watch people coming into our program. I sat there for a few minutes relishing their looks of amazement and their expressions of wonder as they came in.

Then a group of 10 tough-looking boys entered. They must have been locals, as they weren't dressed as tourists. For a moment I was taken aback by their rough nature. One of the boys stepped forward and in a show of bravado pointed to the devotees. "Who the hell are these people?" he said with a tone of disgust.

"They're Hare Krsna's, you idiot!" said one of the others. "You don't know the Hare Krsna's? They're nice people."

"Yeah!" said a chorus of four or five more boys. "They're nice people."

The first boy sheepishly mixed back into his crowd of friends, and they all went straight to the restaurant.

I wanted more inspiration, so I walked back to the book tent. I passed a lady with a big smile on her face, walking out with a Srimad Bhagavatam under her arm.

The devotee who sold it to her came up to me. "Many years ago she came to one of our festivals and bought the Bhagavad Gita," he said. "From her reading of the book she ascertained that there are two worlds: the material and the spiritual. Recent events in her life made her lose hope of ever being happy in this world, so she came here to find a book that describes the spiritual world in detail. She was so happy when I presented her with the Srimad Bhagavatam."

"I know how she's feeling about the material world," I said. "It's been a rough day."

And so it went through the five hours of the festival. At every step, at every turn, I found people appreciating the message we'd brought.

During the final hour, as our new rock band, 18 Days, was playing, a middle aged woman in the crowd turned to me.



At every step I found people appreciating the message we'd brought

"It's terrible what happened in London today, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied. "It certainly is."

"This music is much too loud for me," she said, "but it will attract the young people, and they will become interested in your way of life."

She paused for a moment. "And if they're fortunate, " she continued, "they'll buy one of your teacher's books and find an alternative to all these miseries of life."

She went back to watch the band.

"Amazing!" I thought. "How has a guest at our festival had such deep realization? Then I noticed she had a copy of Srila Prabhupada's, *Teachings of Queen Kunti* under her arm, a bookmark inserted halfway through it.

"Of course," I said softly, "that's the answer: the mercy of my

spiritual master, who is kindly delivering the message of Godhead, freeing us all from the ocean of birth and death.”

*sankirtanananda rasa svarupah
prema pradanaih khalu suddha cittah
sarve mahantah kila krsna tulyah
samsara lokan paritarayanti*

The Vaisnavas are internal forms of the blissful mellows of Sri Caitanya’s sankirtan movement. Because they distribute the gifts of love of God, their consciousness is always purified. They are great souls. Indeed, Lord Kṛṣṇa empowers them as equal with Himself and they rescue the people from the cycle of birth and death.

[Sṛila Sarva-bhauṃa Bhattacharya, *Susloka-Satakam*,
verse 39]

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Dreams Come True

| JULY 29–AUGUST 10, 2005 |

After the difficulties we went through on July 7, I started having nightmares every night. One evening, after a week, I talked about it with Sri Pahlada das. “It’s been a long time since I had a Krsna conscious dream,” I said. “Since the tour started in May, I’ve only been dreaming of war or being chased or having to hide. I know it’s the result of preaching in a society often opposed to what we do, but I wish there were some relief, at least in sleep.”

“I know how you feel,” said Sri Pahlada. “I’ve been having some bad dreams lately as well, but things will change when we go to the Woodstock festival in a couple of weeks.”

“That’s true,” I said. “There’s no opposition at Woodstock. Jurek Owsiak, is always keen to have us there.”

“Sure,” said Sri Pahlada. “Your mind will relax once we get there. It’ll make you feel good to be somewhere where the organizer is not only our friend but also gives us carte blanche to preach any way we want.”



The 100-meter-long tent for the main programs

That night I was still a bit apprehensive about going to bed. As I lay down I remembered Sri Prahlada's words: "Things will change when we go to Woodstock ..." I soon fell fast asleep.

In the middle of the night I awoke with a start. "Prahlada!" I called out. "Prahlada!"

Sri Prahlada, who was sleeping just a few meters away, woke up. "What is it Gurudeva? Did you have another nightmare?"

"No," I said, "I just had the most wonderful dream!"

"What was it?" Sri Prahlada said excitedly, rolling over in his sleeping bag to look at me.

"I dreamed we were in a tour committee meeting," I said, "when suddenly there was a knock on the door. I said, 'come in', and a celestial boy walked in. He had a soft glow about him. He knelt down in front of me without saying anything and handed me a large piece of rolled up paper. The paper was also glowing. I opened it, and it read, 'See you at Woodstock. Signed, Lord Nrsimhadeva.' Then I woke up."

"Wow!" said Sri Prahlada. "What a dream!"

"Yeah," I said. "Finally I dreamt something spiritual, but we can't take it too seriously. I remember reading where Srila Prabhupada said that dreams are generally nonsense, although when you dream of the spiritual master or Krsna, it's nice."

I lay back down and had the soundest sleep I'd had in months.

The next week and half of our summer tour went well. We sent a separate group of devotees to Kostrzyn, the site of the upcoming Woodstock festival, to begin setting up our village, Krsna's Village of Peace.

A tent company arrived in Kostrzyn around the same time to erect a 100-meter-long tent for our main programs. Our men would work 12 days to set up most of the 20 smaller tents that would display different aspects of Vedic culture including yoga, meditation, and reincarnation. There was lots of other work to be done as well: installing electrical poles and lines, digging ditches for water pipes, pouring gravel on the dirt roads to offset any mud in case of rain, putting up fencing around our three-hectare plot. Jurek expected close to 500,000 people, and we knew many of them would come through Krsna's Village of Peace to have a look.

A few days later Sri Prahlada asked me if I had had any more Krsna-conscious dreams. "No," I said, "and I don't expect to either. That last dream was one in a million. I'm still in anxiety."

"Now what?" Sri Prahlada asked.

"Krsna's Village of Peace is a huge responsibility," I said. "Tens of thousands of people will visit us. We have to make sure they all get the best possible impression of Krsna consciousness. That's my real dream: that our village will be a big success. Anything could go wrong—the weather, the transport of the 22 tons of food we'll be cooking, the health department's final permission to cook, the journey of the 500 extra devotees coming in from all over the world to assist us ..."

Sri Prahlada smiled. "Don't worry, Gurudeva," he said. "Lord Nrsimhadeva said He'll meet you at Woodstock."

We both laughed.

"It was just a funny dream," I said.

"But nice," Sri Prahlada said with a wink.

During the last festival on the Baltic Coast, I had just finished my lecture on stage and was walking to the book tent when my cell phone rang.

"Hello?" said the voice on the phone. "Guru Maharaja, can you hear me?"

The sound was distorted, but I could understand. "Yes," I said. "I can hear you. Can you hear me?"

"This is Narottam das Thakur das in Mumbai," came the reply. "I have some wonderful news for you. I just found an old Nrsimha Deity in an antique shop. I couldn't resist and bought Him for you."

"For me?" I said.

"Yes," he said, "to protect you and all the devotees on your festival program. I'll try and send Him to you somehow."

Then the line broke.

Suddenly I remembered my dream, and I began to laugh. "If He shows up for Woodstock," I thought, "that will be a dream come true."

Three days later, after a drive of several hours, Jayatam das and I were nearing the site of the Woodstock festival. "Hey," said Jayatam, "look how many kids are here already, and the festival is still two days away."

As we drove through a forested area, we passed four armored police vans, parked just off the road.

"What's going on?" I asked Jayatam.

"There will be heavy security at Woodstock this year," he said, "because of the bombings in London on July 7th."

Finally we came to the Woodstock field. "Look up in the sky," said Jayatam.

I looked out the window and saw a big balloon, stationary and motionless in the sky above.

"It has a very sophisticated camera that will scan the entire Woodstock field," Jayatam said. "That camera can read a newspaper in someone's hand. They plan to use it to watch for drug dealers ... and terrorists."

I laughed. “Looks like I’m not the only one in anxiety,” I said.

As we drove into the main entrance, I could only smile. The first thing we saw was our huge tent up on the hill, just off center on the festival grounds. A big sign was strung across it: “Kṛṣṇa Village of Peace.” It could be seen from most of the festival grounds.

“We couldn’t ask for a better location,” I said.

“The whole country will see us,” Jayatām said. “We’re directly across from the main stage, so all the television cameras will be panning our village.”

I smiled again. “How many people will see those news broadcasts?” I said. I already knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it again.

Jayatām laughed. “Millions and millions!” he said.

“Param vijayate Sri Kṛṣṇa sankīrtan!” I shouted. “All glories to the sankīrtan movement of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu!”

We drove up the hill, and within minutes we were at Kṛṣṇa’s Village of Peace. The devotee men were still busy with last-minute preparations. The village looked like the spiritual world—big, colorful, and magnificent.

As I walked into the big tent to see the new decorations on our main stage, I noticed a lone figure, sitting on a chair, right in the middle of the gigantic tent. It was an old man. I was curious, so I went up to him.

I smiled. “You’re early,” I said. “The festival doesn’t begin for two more days.”

He looked up with a sad, weathered face. “I’ve waited all year for you people to come back,” he said. “Not a single day passed that I didn’t think of your village. Last year I was here every day.”

He looked towards the devotees decorating the stage. “It’s the only light in my dark existence,” he said.

My smile faded. “I’m sorry to hear your life is so hard,” I said.

“Life is always hard,” he said, “but recently even more so. My poor wife of 40 years just went insane. I would have gone insane too, but I knew you people were coming back. I find so much shel-

ter here. It's the atmosphere you bring, the spiritual atmosphere. You don't mind if I sit here, do you?"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Not at all, Sir," I said. "Stay as long as you want."

Most of our VIP guests arrived that day from overseas. When I learned that Deena Bandhu prabhu, my Godbrother from Vrindavan had come, I went straight from the festival site to his room in the school where we were staying.

I entered the room and paid obeisances, and then we hugged. He's a veteran of our program at Woodstock, and I was delighted to have him back. We exchanged pleasantries, and just as I was about to leave he handed me a small box. "Oh Maharaja," he said, "one of your disciples sent this for you."

It was heavy, and there was some tissue hanging out the side, so I assumed it was some maha burfi sweets, and I started to put it into my pocket.

Deena Bandhu smiled. "I think you should look inside," he said.

I pulled the box back out of my pocket, slowly opened the lid, and pulled back the tissue. Suddenly I saw the most beautiful, intricately carved bronze Deity of Lord Nrimsha that I had ever seen. I stood there dumfounded, my mouth open.

"They say He's over 300 years old," said Deena Bandhu. "You weren't expecting Him?"

"Well," I said, "yes and no. I mean ... you see ..."

I didn't have the courage to tell him about the dream. I quickly excused myself and left the room.

I got back in my car and pulled out my cell phone. "Sri Prahlada!" I screamed. "The most amazing thing happened! One of my disciples in India sent me a beautiful, ancient Nrsimha Deity. He's small and very ferocious."

"So your dream has come true," Sri Prahlada said.

"Well ..." I said, "yes, I guess it did. But you know what Srila Prabhupada said about dreams."



Indradyumna Swami's 300 year old Nrsimhadeva Deity

I could almost see Sri Prahlada smile over the phone. “Yes,” he replied. “Srila Prabhupada said that dreams of the spiritual master or Krsna are nice.”

That afternoon Jurek Owsiak, the main organizer of the Woodstock festival, visited our village and addressed 400 devotees assembled at the back of our big tent.

“We’ve been cooperating together for eight years at the Woodstock festival,” he began, “and through those years I’ve come to appreciate you and your ideals more and more. Consider the whole festival grounds yours. Go everywhere and spread your message to the kids. Our work together has been recorded in heaven.”

We opened Krsna’s Village of Peace the next day, one day before the main event. As we removed the barriers at the road leading into

our village, thousands of kids streamed into our festival site. I knew some had come simply to be with us and wouldn't leave the village over the next few days except to sleep in their tents. It happens every year.

For those who couldn't make the climb up the hill to participate in our 16-hour stage show, prasadam distribution, and activities in our many tents, we took the festival to them. Each day we held Ratha Yatra, pulling our huge cart through the sea of tents and people below our hill. From every vantage point at the festival you could see the cart towering 10 meters high, with its huge red, blue, and yellow canopy blowing in the breeze. The kids were spellbound.

When Ratha Yatra wasn't going on, we took huge Harinam parties to every nook and cranny of the festival grounds. Often the kids would dance and chant Hare Krsna with us. I knew such opportunities don't come often in life, so I took full advantage of them.

Every day I made my rounds to all of our tents to make sure everything was going all right. One day, I arrived at the temple tent while Bhakti Charu Maharaja was leading a blissful kirtan. I had invited him as a special guest, and later that day I asked him how he liked the festival.

"It's wonderful," he said. "It can't be understood just from photos or videos. You have to see it in person."

I respect Maharaja as a dear servant of Srila Prabhupada, so I asked him another question. "Do you think Srila Prabhupada is pleased?" I said.



Bringing the festivals to the kids: Daily Ratha Yatra

He looked surprised. "Of course he is," he replied.

By the afternoon of the third and final day, we had distributed over 100,000 plates of prasadam. Long lines of kids continued queuing at the prasadam tent well into the night. It was so ecstatic that at one point I couldn't resist joining the team of 25 devotees distributing the prasadam.

As the wee hours of the morning came, we held our final kirtan on the stage in our big tent. There were a couple of thousand kids in the audience. These were the cream of the crop, the ones that had developed an attraction for Krsna consciousness. After the kirtan I gave a farewell talk, and when I finished I noticed many kids had tears in their eyes.

Suddenly the whole event was over, just as quickly as it had begun.

Later in the morning tens of thousands of kids were streaming out of the festival grounds. I saw a few carrying Srila Prabhupada's books. Others had plates of prasadam wrapped in plastic, saved for the journey home. As we drove by on our way to break down our festival site, some of the kids called out to us: "Hare Krsna! Hari Bol! Thank you!"

"It was the best Woodstock ever," said Sri Prahlada. "We were everywhere, on the hill and on the field. And everyone liked us. And you must be satisfied, Srila Gurudeva. All your dreams came true."

"Yes, indeed they did," I replied, with slight reservation.

"What is it?" said Sri Prahlada, who knows my mind better than anyone else.

"Well," I said, "what really matters is whether Srila Prabhupada is satisfied."

"He must be," said Sri Prahlada. "Just consider how many people heard the holy names and took prasadam."

"I understand that," I said. "But wouldn't it be nice if every so often there was a sign from him. Do you understand what I'm saying? Maybe I'm just being sentimental."

Sri Prahlada's face took on a serious look. "Why don't you pray for that?" he said.

“It was just a thought,” I said, “but maybe I’ll take your advice.”

The next day I flew to Ukraine to spend a few days with a small group of devotees doing a festival program in Cremia, on the Black Sea. They had invited me to come and give them some advice.

They put me up in a nice hotel next to the beach, and as I lay down to rest, my thoughts drifted back to Poland and the great yajna we had just performed. My mind was racing, remembering all the preaching we had done. Finally I dozed off and was blessed with the most wonderful dream of my life.

I dreamt I was walking through a garden, chanting japa. Suddenly I saw Srila Prabhupada sitting in a small clearing some distance away, speaking to a few senior disciples. When he saw me he got up and to my astonishment, began walking towards me.

I started to offer him my obeisances, falling to my knees, but before I could go any further he reached me and lovingly hugged me. Still on my knees, my head was pressed close to his chest. His saffron cloth blew lightly in the breeze around me. He hugged me for a long time. In retrospect, it didn’t seem like a dream. It was more like a real-life experience.

I looked up and saw him gazing at me, his eyes full of love. “Srila Prabhupada,” I said, “I’m just your servant. I’m prepared to do anything to please you.”

Then he smiled and hugged me even tighter.

I woke up and sat up in my bed. I was stunned.

I reached for my phone and called Sri Prahlada, but he didn’t answer. Suddenly I realized it was 11 PM. I stayed awake most of the night. The next morning I called him.

“Do you remember how you advised me to pray the other day?” I said. “Well I had this dream last night ...”

At the end Sri Prahlada laughed. “Put it in the diary,” he said.

“Put it in the diary?” I said. “What will the devotees think?”

“Probably they’ll think like Srila Prabhupada,” he replied, “that dreams of the spiritual master are very nice.”

Later that day, I found the quotation from Srila Prabhupada about dreams:

So far dreaming is concerned, we regard dreaming condition as another form of illusion or maya, only more subtle, that's all. But just like we may be serving Krsna in our waking state and thinking about Him then, so also it is possible to dream about Krsna and the spiritual master ... if we occasionally dream of Krsna, that is nice, that means you are making advancement in Krsna Consciousness.

[letter to Mahati dasi, 1977]

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The Last Festival

| AUGUST 11–25, 2005 |

By the time I returned to Poland after my short visit to Ukraine, the devotees had broken down Krsna's Village of Peace at Woodstock and returned to our summer base on the Baltic coast.

They greeted me with a small reception, and I spoke about our plans for the next two weeks. This would be the final leg of our festival tour. The devotees had been holding festivals almost every day since May, and they were tired, but when I mentioned that the season was drawing to a close, many of them had tears in their eyes.

For all of us here, the festivals are our life and soul. Though we had experienced many obstacles in the past months, endured many austerities, and bore witness to the sufferings of many people, the pleasure of giving Krsna consciousness to others far outweighed any inconvenience we had undergone.

As in every other year, hundreds of thousands of people had attended our festivals. I thought about the magnitude of what we had done, and I did not know how to repay the devotees. Then I remem-



Last harinama of the festival tour

bered the dream about Srila Prabhupada I had had in Ukraine, and I shared it with the devotees. They listened spellbound.

“What we accomplished this year was a team effort,” I said. “Therefore the embrace that Srila Prabhupada gave me in the dream is meant to be shared with all of you.”

Though rainstorms were predicted, the weather remained perfect throughout the next two weeks, so we lengthened the hours of Harinama, causing the attendance at the festivals to increase.

Each summer we hold our final event in the town of Pobierowo. As we were setting up the grounds there, the mayor came by on her bicycle and spoke with Jayatam dasa.

“When people heard that your last festival would be here,” she said, “many extended their vacation an extra three days. Our office has been flooded with inquiries about the program. You can expect a very big crowd.”

I heard about her prediction, and I decided to make it come true, so I took the Harinam party out to the beach early that day. Even in the morning it was so crowded that our group of 110 devotees had difficulty maneuvering through the people lying on the sand.



The Mayor of Pobierowo with her daughter

At one point I noticed a man following us, and after some time I went and spoke with him.

“Are you enjoying the chanting?” I asked him.

“Very much,” he said. “I’ve been hearing about your festival for years, but my wife and I could never get enough money together to come up to the coast to see it, but last week I convinced 18 of my neighbors to pool their resources with ours so we could all come.”

He motioned with his head toward some people sitting in the sand nearby. I looked over at them, and they smiled and waved.

“I was so excited I couldn’t wait for the festival this afternoon,” he continued, “so I decided to join you people singing here on the beach. Many of the townspeople say it’s as good as the festival itself.”

An hour later, I noticed another man following us. And I wasn’t the only one. A number of young people on the beach were

pointing at him excitedly. I took the liberty of approaching him, and he introduced himself.

"I'm the bass player in a famous rock band in Poland," he said. "When your group passed by on the beach, I was impressed with the man singing and playing the accordion. He's one of the best musicians I've ever heard. What's his name?"

"Sri Prahlada das," I replied.

I could not hold back a smile. "But he's not for hire," I added.

As we moved along, people kept stopping us, asking if they could take a photo with us. Posing for photos with people was a daily affair for us on the beaches, and as they snapped away, we smiled and waved, happy that our colorful procession would be remembered back home after vacation was over.

A little further down the beach I was startled by an unexpected sight. A seal, lying in the sand, jumped up and lumbered into the water. I had never seen a seal in the Baltic Sea before in all the years we had been doing Harinam there.

"The locals say he's been here all summer," said a devotee. "They think he must have wandered in from the North Sea."

I thought that was the end of it and continued the Harinam party, keeping close to the shore, but then I noticed the seal swimming alongside us. I thought he would pull away after a few moments, so I called out to the devotees, "Look at that!"

The devotees laughed and raised their eyebrows, and the seal kept swimming beside us in the water. Every once in a while he would let out a loud bark.

Soon the crowds noticed this and people started following us. As we kept chanting and dancing down the beach, the seal continued to swim along, perking its head up every few meters to look at us. The crowd following us became larger and larger.

When we reached the end of the beach we turned around to go back, and sure enough, the seal turned and followed us. Finally, a young woman entered the water and started swimming, and the seal turned and followed her, a few meters behind. That was the last we saw of him.

"It's like you mentioned the other day, Guru Maharaja," said a devotee. "The beach is no place for brahmacaris."

On the way back to the festival site a devotee stopped in a camera store to have her film developed.

A few minutes later she came running up to me. "Maharaja," she said, "the store owner was really happy to meet me. He even shook my hand. He said that practically every roll of film he's developed in the last few days has pictures of us with people standing next to our kirtan party on the beach."

I entered our festival grounds with mixed feelings. I had no doubt it would be a big festival, as the mayor had said, but it would be the last of the year. The hours were passing, and soon the tumultuous roar of the holy names would come to an end.

As I approached the stage, two young girls, about nine years old, came running up to me.

"Do you remember me?" said one, almost out of breath.

"Well, no," I said. "I can't say that do. I'm so sorry."

"I was at the festival last year," she said, "and the year before, and the year before that. I live in this town, and I wait all summer for the festival to come. This is my friend, Agnieska. It's her first time."

Agnieska smiled. "I was supposed to go to Italy today with my grandparents on vacation," she said, "but I told my Mom I'd rather stay back and come to the festival."

"Really?" I said. "You stayed back for the festival instead of going to Italy?"

"Yep," she replied, "and I'm really glad I did 'cause I heard there's going to be a wedding today."

"Yes," I said, "there will be a wedding."

"Can we be in the wedding?" the girls said in unison. "Please! Please!"

Their enthusiasm made me smile. "Sure," I said, "as a matter of fact, we were just looking for two little girls to escort the bride through the crowd onto the stage and to bring the rings out when

the couple exchange their vows. So you'll have to run over to the fashion booth and get dressed in saris real quick."

In half a moment they were there.

A short while later, people started pouring into the festival. Before we even started, the tents were filled with the curious, while the restaurant was filled with the hungry, and the seats in front of the stage with those eager for entertainment. It was just like all the other festivals of the summer ... except that it would be the last.

I tried to forget that the end of the season was near and kept walking toward the stage to tell the devotees to start the opening bhajan. The hundreds of seats in front of the stage were already full, and there was still 20 minutes to show time.

As I got closer, Nandini dasi came up to me.

"Srila Gurudeva," she said, "something wonderful just happened."

"What was that?" I said.

"As I was driving to the festival an hour ago," she said, "a desperate-looking young man ran up to the window of the car and begged me to stop. 'My girlfriend is about to commit suicide,' he said. 'Please take me to her.'"

"I asked him where she was, and he said, 'The train station.'"

"I said I would take him and we drove off. I was not in devotee dress because I had been doing legal work in some offices. As we drove along he told me how grateful he was.

"In order to take his mind off the stressful situation, I asked him what his interests in life were. 'The Festival of India,' he said. 'I visit their website regularly. What these people do is simply incredible. I came to meet them personally, but my girlfriend just had an argument with her mother and wants to do something really stupid.'"

"I tried to change the subject again, and I asked him if he was a student. 'Yes,' he said, 'I'm studying philosophy at the university in Krakow. But it's all very boring compared to the philosophy I read on the Festival of India website. The Hare Krishnas understand the bigger picture of life: karma, reincarnation, the material world, and the spiritual world. And they have a really pure lifestyle.'"

"I was amazed. Then he told me, 'Actually, I'd like to become a volunteer and help them spread their message.' He paused and studied me curiously for a moment. Then he turned his head to look in the back seat and saw the samosas I was bringing to the restaurant. He looked at me with his eyes opened wide. 'Are you a member of the festival group?' he said.

"I smiled and told him I was.

"Wow!" he said. "This is incredible! I got to meet one of you personally. Now I can see that you really do care for people. After I deal with my girlfriend, I'll come straight back to the festival. Can you help me become a volunteer?"

"I told him I could, and with that he jumped out of the car, just as we came up to the train station. I'm waiting for him to come back to show him how he can become a volunteer."

After speaking with Nandini, I continued towards the stage. As I walked along, I noticed we had the biggest crowd of the summer. But rather than make me happy, it only gave me more pain as I thought about the end of the season.

Soon the stage program started. An hour later when Tribuvaneshvara dasa, our master of ceremonies, announced the wedding, the shops and restaurant quickly emptied and people hurried forward to watch.

I started toward the stage. "They won't understand if I look sad," I thought, so I forced myself to smile. Then I walked onto the stage with my translator and welcomed the huge crowd.

"We're honored that so many of you have come to participate in this traditional Indian wedding," I said, my voice bellowing out over the sound system. "We're pleased to share this very colorful and joyful occasion with all of you.

"Our bride and groom, Kunja-kishori dasi and Dayal Nitai dasa, are from St. Petersburg, Russia. They're part of our international group of devotees who have been putting on this festival for 16 years on the Baltic coast."

I suddenly felt overcome with emotion and had to stop. I took a few deep breaths and continued.

"It has been Kunja-kishori's and Dayal Nitai's dream for several years to be married at our festival. I'm sure they will appreciate that so many of you have come to encourage them."

I paused for a moment. "But I must mention one thing," I said. The crowd became silent as the tone of my voice changed.

"The bride is blind," I said slowly. "She won't be able to see anything that takes place on the stage today."

Many people looked startled.

"But she told me that she's never felt her blindness a handicap," I said. "She perceives the world fully through hearing. If anything, she told me, her blindness is a mixed blessing, as it has brought her closer to God."

"I told her how many of you have come to her wedding today, and she is thrilled. My request is that you help her enjoy this auspicious occasion in a way she can understand: by loudly applauding the special moments of her wedding."

Many people nodded their heads.

Then we began. First Dayal Nitai walked to the stage from the back of the festival through the crowd, accompanied by his friends, all chanting Hare Krishna and playing musical instruments. The crowd looked pleased as he walked up onto the stage.

But they were really waiting for Kunja-kishori. Soon she appeared, walking slowly on the same path with her girlfriends and the two little girls in their new saris. The entire audience stood up and gave her a round of thunderous applause.

She came onto the stage and circumambulated her husband seven times with the help of a friend. Then she stood before the crowd to another round of loud applause. "Bravo! Bravo!" yelled a man.

When Dayal Nitai lifted Kunja-kishori's veil, revealing her lovely face, the crowd burst into applause again and continued for a long time. When the couple exchanged garlands, the crowd applauded even louder.

When, on behalf of her father, I gave her away to the groom, the crowd applauded yet again and roared with approval.

And so it went at every stage of the wedding. I couldn't remember ever having participated in a public presentation of Krsna consciousness where the crowd participated so eagerly. At the end of the wedding, Dayal Nitai helped Kunja-kishori down the stairs and off the stage, where they were met by hundreds of people, all applauding.

As I stood on the stage watching it all happen, I remembered Srila Prabhupada's words:

"India will conquer the world by this Krsna culture. Rest assured." [Pandal lecture, Mumbai March 31, 1971]

Then once again I remembered that the festival season was coming to a close, and my joy at seeing so many people appreciating Krsna consciousness faded into sadness. I went behind the stage curtain and sat alone for a few minutes, trying to regain my composure.

After I came down from the stage, I met Nandini and Jayatam. I could see by the looks on their faces that they were feeling the same emotions as I. Just at that moment, a well-dressed older couple approached us.

"That was a beautiful wedding," the man said, "as is everything else you are presenting here."

"Thank you," I said.

"One of your members told me you've been doing this festival for 16 years," he continued. "Is that true?"

"Well we started simply," I said, "but yes, this is the 16th year."

He looked at me for a moment and then put his hand out. As I shook it he said, "May your festivals go on until the end of time and one day more!"

I was so touched I couldn't reply.

As he and his wife left I turned to Jayatam and Nandini. "That's the only reward we want for our service," I said. "Whatever difficulties we've undergone this summer, that one handshake makes it all worthwhile."

The next couple of hours went quickly. Before I began the final kirtan on stage I opened my heart to the thousand people standing in front of me.



"This next performance, the singing of Hare Krishna, will be the last of the season."

"Ladies and gentleman" I began, "this is a very emotional moment for all of us here at the Festival of India. This next performance, the singing of Hare Krishna, will be the last of the season.

"We have enjoyed sharing with you and others, this wonderful spiritual culture of India. It has much to offer the world. We live in troubled times, but this Krsna consciousness movement is teaching the best way to live in this world, while preparing us to return home, to the spiritual kingdom."

The crowd was listening to every word. I didn't have to convince them of much. The festival itself had already done that.

"We look forward to seeing you again at another one of our festivals," I continued. "God willing, we'll be back again next year. The following kirtan is dedicated to all of you. Without your enthusiastic participation this festival wouldn't be the great event that it is."

When I stopped they applauded, just as they had so done many times throughout the program.

“They’re appreciating Kṛṣṇa consciousness,” I thought, “by the mercy of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu.”

I paused for a few seconds before beginning the last kīrtan. As I looked out at the sea of people, I prayed to the Lord that I might envision that moment when I leave my body. It was everything I had worked for in life.

Then fighting back tears, I began the final kīrtan. I took shelter of the holy names knowing that deep feelings of separation would soon overcome the other devotees and me when the program finished. What would life be without the festivals, which bring joy to the lives of hundreds of thousands of people?

*saiveyam bhūvi dhanya gauda nagari velapi saivam
so’yam sri purusottamo madhupates tany eva namani tu
no kutrapi niriksyate hari premotsavas tadrso
ha caitanya kṛpā nidhana tava kim viksyē punar vaibhavan*

The fortunate town of Navadvīpa remains. The seashore remains. The city of Jagannātha Puri remains. The holy names of Lord Kṛṣṇa remain. But alas, alas! Nowhere do I see the same kind of festival of pure love for Lord Hari that I saw before. O Lord Caitanya, O ocean of mercy, will I ever see Your transcendental glory again?

[Śrīla Prabodhananda Sarasvatī, *Śrī Caitanya Candramṛta*, text 140]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Taking Care

| AUGUST 26–SEPTEMBER 26, 2005 |

Soon after our summer festival season, Nandini dasi and Jayatam dasa offered to organize a retreat for me so I could recover from the strain of 61 festivals in three months.

No doubt I needed rest, but I turned the offer down. “I need to keep active,” I thought, “otherwise the pain of separation from the festivals will be too great.”

Jayatam was not happy. “Srila Gurudeva,” he said, “you’re almost 57. You should start taking better care of yourself. It took you a long time to get over that flu recently.”

Then an invitation came to a festival in the city of Odessa, on the Black Sea in Ukraine. I jumped at the chance.

“At least take time to go swimming,” said Jayatam. “It will do you wonders.”

“Good idea,” I said and threw a pair of swimming trunks in my suitcase.

The three-day event turned out to be one lecture and kirtan after another, and I only saw the sea from a distance. But on the evening



"...I felt a sharp pain shoot through my right side."

of the second day, my body gave me a warning.

I stepped forward to lead arotika in the main tent. A thousand devotees had crammed in, eager for kirtan. As I reached down to pick up a mrdanga, I felt a sharp pain shoot through my right side. I stood up straight, and the pain slowly subsided.

"Too much lunch," I thought, and I started to sing.

As the kirtan built up, I passed the microphone to someone else and began dancing with the devotees. After an hour we were all leaping high. Suddenly I felt the same sharp pain in my abdomen. I continued dancing, trying to ignore it, but it became too much.

I had to slow down. I took back the microphone and started singing again, but the pain kept getting worse. My voice trailed off, and I had to bring the kirtan to a close.

"More kirtan!" the devotees shouted. "More Kirtan!" I tried to smile as I turned around and walked to the nearest chair.

A brahmachari quickly walked over to me. "Is everything okay?" he said. "You look pale."

"I feel fine," I said. "No problem."

A few minutes later a senior devotee began lecturing on stage, and I retired to my room.

"I'll be okay tomorrow," I thought as I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning I was to give *Srimad Bhagavatam* class. As I sat playing the harmonium and singing before the lecture, I felt the pain in my abdomen again.

"What's happening?" I thought, and I quickly ended the bhajan.

That afternoon, before leaving for Poland, I initiated 10 disciples in my room. Sadhumati dasi, an 85-year-old disciple came in to receive gayatri mantra.

She had tears in her eyes. "I've waited years for this moment," she said. "Guru Maharaja, I've had a hard life, but the Lord has always watched over and protected me."

As I was chanting the gayatri mantra in her right ear, the pain in my side appeared again. I winced, and I struggled to keep my concentration.

I was curious how Sadhumati had kept her strong faith in the Lord throughout her life, so I asked her to tell me about herself.

"I was born near Nikolayev, Ukraine," she began, "the youngest of six children. My family was very poor, and life was austere. Even as children, we worked so hard that we rarely had time to attend church.

"I was in my early twenties when World War II started. I was sent to Saratov to sew clothes for the soldiers. Those were difficult times. We got only 500 grams of bread a day. Sometimes I cried because I was so hungry. I remember praying to God that I wouldn't starve.

"I thought that anything would be better than the terrible conditions we lived in, so I volunteered to fight on the front lines. Because I was a woman, the local military commander refused, but I insisted, and he finally agreed. The Russian army had lost many men in the war. After three months of training, I was sent to help defend St. Petersburg from the Nazi invasion.

"Although I was a communist, I had deep faith in God. I saw many terrible things during the war. I often prayed, 'My Lord, if I'm killed today, please take me to You.'

"Once I had to climb a telephone pole to fix a wire. Just at that moment two fighter planes collided above and the falling debris knocked me down. I was severely injured, but I survived.

"After the war I married a soldier, and we had three children. When my eldest son grew up, he fell into bad association and started drinking and taking drugs. To maintain these vices, he began steal-

ing. Finally he left home. Suddenly life had no meaning for me at all, and I prayed desperately to the Lord to help me.

"Then one day my son came home to visit, and I saw many wonderful qualities in him. He'd given up his bad habits and was peaceful and serene. He said it was due to his faith in God. He told me he had joined a spiritual movement from India and asked me to visit his temple. When I did, I was impressed with the spiritual atmosphere.

"I visited the temple regularly. I was happy in God's house, cutting vegetables and cleaning floors.

"Several years later you came to visit us, and after your first morning class, I asked if I could become your disciple. Now I am getting my second initiation, and I feel completely safe in Krsna's hands."

I was amazed. "Such is the mercy of the Lord," I thought, "that an elderly woman from the Ukrainian countryside-a former soldier in the Red Army-has become a brahmani Vaisnavi."

I asked her one last question. "Despite your 85 years, you look quite healthy. What is your secret?"

She smiled. "I take care of myself," she said.

Her answer echoed the advice Jayatama and Nandini had given me a few days earlier: to take better care of my own health.

"In one week I'll be in Hungary," I thought, "and I'll see a doctor about the pain in my side."

After I arrived in Budapest, the devotees quickly arranged an appointment for me with a good doctor.

The doctor wanted me to first have a blood test and an ultrasound scan of my abdomen. During the scan a trainee-nurse gasped in shock. "O my God!" she blurted out. "Your liver is so swollen!" The older nurses admonished her with strong looks.

"So that's where the pain is coming from," I said.

Several hours later, the doctor was studying the scan. "How long have you had this condition?" he asked. He looked concerned.

"I've felt the pain for ten days now," I replied.

“Ten days?” he said. “And only now you’ve come in?”

I was silent.

“Have you ever had liver problems before?”

“I had hepatitis A in India 10 years ago,” I said.

A devotee who had come with me spoke up. “And he assisted a senior devotee in our movement, Sridhar Swami, in his final days. Sridhar Maharaja had hepatitis C. Indradyumna Swami ate something that Maharaja had eaten.”

The doctor looked worried.

“You can only get Hepatitis C from contaminated blood,” I said to the devotee.

“Or food contaminated from blood in the mouth of a patient with the virus,” the devotee replied. “Maharaja’s gums were bleeding toward the end.”

The possibility that I could be seriously ill suddenly hit me, and I began to sweat.

“Hepatitis C,” I thought. “Can kill.”

I felt weak.

“We need to see the results of the blood tests tomorrow,” the doctor said in a professional tone. “There’s no use discussing this any further until then.”

On the way back to the temple I was quiet. Back in my room, I sat on a bed. “Is this the beginning of a long drawn-out disease?” I thought.

I shook my head. “No, no,” I thought. “It’s much too early to start thinking like this. The doctor said we should wait for the results of the blood tests.”

But the persistent pain, the worried look on the doctor’s face, and the devotee’s words had all affected me.

“If it actually turns out that I have a serious disease,” I thought, “I’ll keep preaching as long as I can and try to deepen my own Krsna consciousness at the same time. And I’ll make a serious effort to renounce everything that’s not essential to awakening my love for Krsna.”

I looked around the room and managed a small laugh. “I doubt whether such nice facilities as these will have any relevance when death is just around the corner,” I thought.

I shook my head and began to talk softly to myself. “Shame on you,” I said. “You’re probably more aware of Hurricane Katrina and the war in Iraq than Krishna’s pastimes in Vrindavan.”

I caught my reflection in a nearby mirror. “And you’ve put on weight,” I said.

I reached for a pen and paper. “Eat frugally,” I wrote.

“And how have I been spending my spare time?” I thought.

“Socializing,” I said softly, answering my own question. “But better to use that time in study, chanting the holy names, and prayer.”

Someone knocked on the door, and I awoke from my self-analysis.

“Come in,” I said.

A devotee opened the door and peeked in.

“Maharaja,” he said, “what did the doctor say?”

“Not much,” I replied. “He’s waiting for the results of my blood tests, but it could be serious.”

“I really hope not, Maharaja,” he said and closed the door.

“Me too,” I said under my breath. “But what if it’s the beginning of the end?”

As I lay down that night, the pain came back, and I tossed and turned trying to find a comfortable position.

After some time I sat up straight. “Am I ready to die?” I said to myself. “I should be. A devotee’s whole life is preparation for that final moment.”

I remembered a Bengali Proverb:

bhajan kara sadhana kara-murte janle hoy

Whatever bhajan and sadhana one has performed throughout his life will be tested at the time of death.

[Srila Prabhupada lecture, Mumbai January 11, 1975]

I lay back down, and as I finally drifted off to sleep I made a promise to myself: “Whatever comes of this, I’m going to try and become a better devotee.”

Five hours later I awoke, thinking I’d had a nightmare about being sick. But the pain in my side came back, and I remembered the reality at hand.

The morning dragged on as I waited to go back to the clinic. Finally, 10 AM came, and when we entered the doctor’s office, I saw the results of my blood tests on his desk. He was on the phone, a serious look on his face. I became nervous. After what seemed like an eternity, he finished the call and picked up the results. He slowly turned around in his chair.

It was a tense moment.

He looked over the results. Then he smiled. “I see we’re not dealing with anything sinister,” he said. “There’s no virus, infection, or tumor.”

A wave of relief came over me.

“My opinion is that your liver was already weak from the hepatitis you had years ago, and combined with your present state of exhaustion, the long influenza you had, and perhaps the medication you were taking, it has become swollen.

“The swelling will gradually reduce over one month, but only if you take complete rest, eat properly, and do some moderate exercise.”

As we came out of the office the devotee with me heaved a sigh of relief.

“That was a close call, Maharaja,” he said.

“More like a wakeup call,” I said.

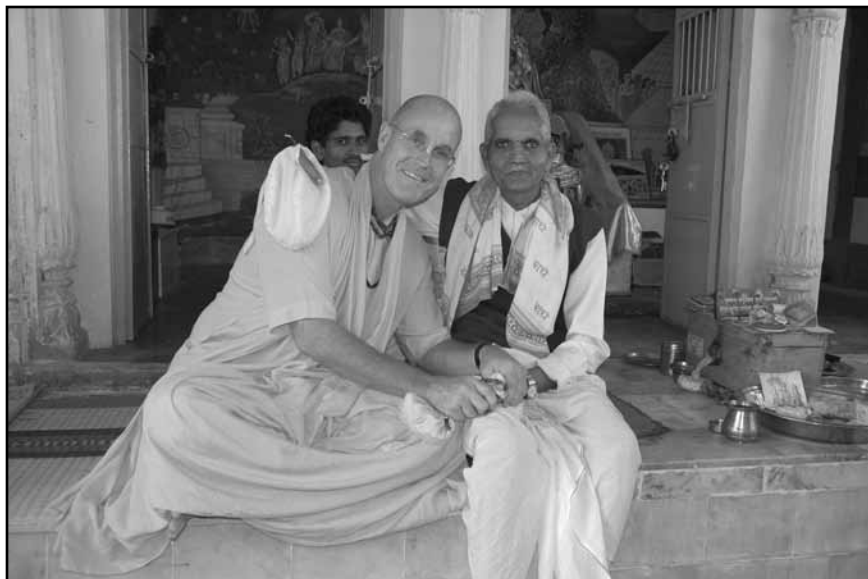
“To take care better care of yourself?” he said.

“Yes,” I said, “and to take Kṛṣṇa consciousness more seriously.”

His face brightened. “Soon you’ll be just like before,” he said.

I was going to agree, when I suddenly remembered my realizations the night before. “Actually,” I said, “I don’t think things will ever be the same again.”

His smile vanished. “What do you mean?” he said. “The doctor said you’ll be fine in one month.”



"I'll take shelter of the devotees in Vrindavan and try to remember the transcendental pastimes of the Lord."

"Last night I made some promises to myself," I said, "and I feel they are as valid now as they were when I thought I was facing a long illness."

The devotee raised his eyebrows.

"There will come a time when a medical exam won't be so favorable," I said. "And no doubt, one day I'll have to die. I need to make some adjustments in my spiritual life. A sannyasi is meant to be the emblem of renunciation.

"A fish can swim in water, but if he tries to swim in milk he'll drown. Similarly, one in the renounced order should live a simple life. If he accepts too much opulence he can fall down.

"While I recuperate, I'll use the time to increase my hearing and chanting about the Lord. It will help me and help my preaching. A sadhu shouldn't be like a cow—always giving nectarean milk but only eating grass."

"Where will you go to recuperate?" the devotee asked.

“For my body,” I said, “I’ll go immediately to Durban, South Africa, and rest for a month in our temple there. And for my soul, I’ll go to Vrindavan during Kartika. I’ll take shelter of the devotees there and try to remember the transcendental pastimes of the Lord.”

*svantar bhava virodhini vyavahrtih sarva sanais tyajyatam
svantas cintita tattvam eva satatam sarvatra sandhiyatam
tad bhaveksanatah sada sthira care nya drk tiro bhavayatam
vrindaranya vilasinor nisi dasyotsave sthiyatam*

One by one, give up all activities that are averse to your internal mood. Always meditate on the subject matter that is firmly fixed in your heart. Consider all the animate and inanimate living entities of Vrindavan to be absorbed in thoughts of Radha and Krsna. In this way always reside in Vrindavan in a festive mood in the service of the youthful divine couple.

[Srila Prabodhananda Saraswati, *Sri Vrindavan Mahimamrta*, Sataka 3, Text 1]

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Disappearance Day Offering to Srila Prabhupada

| SEPTEMBER 27–NOVEMBER 8, 2005 |



Dearest Srila Prabhupada,

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

My glorious master, on this auspicious anniversary of your departure from the world, I once again find myself in the holy land of Vrindavan. It was here that you retired from family life and in your old age began your mission of taking Lord Caitanya's message to the West.

I too have retired from family affairs, and now I am beginning to feel the effects of aging. Each year, following in your footsteps, I

come to take shelter of this holy dhama, and in time I return to my preaching in the West.

My youthful energy and bodily strength have long disappeared, and without your example I might think of relaxing now, but you showed that the latter part of life can be the best time for preaching.

As one grows older, the senses, weakened and humiliated in their attempt to enjoy this world, become submissive to the desires of the Lord. The mind, disciplined by decades of chanting the holy names, finds peace and joy in those sacred sounds. And above all, the satisfaction of years of devotional service at last overwhelm one's attraction to the beauty of this world, and one abandons all that is not essential to devotional service to the Lord.

Srila Prabhupada, a recent illness has forced me to rethink my priorities and has renewed my appreciation for the gifts you've given me: your merciful shelter, the Mahamantra, service to the Vaisnavas, and the privilege of being part of the sankirtan movement of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu.

During my recuperation, I remembered how you had once given me a piece of your own clothing. "A gift from a Vaisnava is a very special thing," you said. As love is reciprocal, I want to return your kindness and give you what I know pleases you the most: the spreading of Krsna consciousness throughout the world.

My illness was a mixed blessing. Although it forced me away from the field of preaching for over a month, it has made me see more clearly that life is full of suffering, not just my own but that of others as well.

Now is not the time to become inactive. On the contrary, my health has been rejuvenated, and I am duty bound to use whatever years remain for sharing my good fortune with others. Though my pace may slacken, please bless me that my words and realizations may deepen, enabling others to obtain your mercy as well.

On this auspicious day I pray for the determination to preach your sublime message until my final breath. In the end, if my heart is purified and you feel it appropriate, please let me assist you in your eternal service in the spiritual sky. By your grace alone is such mercy possible.

*vettha tvam saumya tat sarvam
tattvatas tad-anugrahat
bruyuh snigdhasya sisyasya
guravo guhyam apy uta*

And because you are submissive, your spiritual masters have endowed you with all the favors bestowed upon a gentle disciple. Therefore you can tell us all that you have scientifically learned from them.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 1.1.8]

In a few days, I will follow your example and leave Vrindavan. Though I come to this transcendental abode each year, I have yet to fathom its wonders. It is said that all the opulence of Vaikuntha cannot compare to even one particle of dust from this holy realm. I am certainly not qualified to stay here, but I know that by preaching the glories of Vrindavan in separation, I may one day develop the qualification to serve here forever. Certainly this will be your greatest gift upon me.

I thank you for everything.



Your eternal servant,
Indradyumna Swami

CHAPTER TWENTY



The Past, Present, and Future

| NOVEMEER 9-15, 2005 |

Before leaving Vrindavan for the West, I told Sri Prahlada das that I wanted to take darsan of the famous Deity of Sri Nathji, in Rajasthan. The Deity was discovered on Govardhan Hill by a great devotee, Madhavendra Puri, more than 500 years ago, before the advent of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. The Deity was later moved from Vrindavan to Nathdwar, not far from the present town of Udaipur.

“That would be wonderful,” said Sri Prahlada. “At the same time we could visit a famous astrologer a few hours away in the desert. He is known as a Brighu because he reads one’s future from the Brighu Samhita.”

“Can he really predict the future?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” replied Sri Prahlada. “The science of Brighu Samhita is still valid. Srila Prabhupada confirmed this. At the end of Dwapara yuga, Brighu Muni was concerned that in Kali yuga many astrologers would not be qualified, so he wrote down everyone’s chart and included past, present, and future lives.

“Copies of those charts are kept safely in four different places in India. When you visit a Brighu, you see written in your chart that you would come on that very day for a reading.”

“That very day?” I said.

“Not only the day but the hour too,” Sri Prahlada said.

I went to my room and searched through Srila Prabhupada’s books and lectures on the Vedabase, and to my amazement found the following quotation:

How one can understand past, present, future? Through the sastra ...There are still astrological calculations in India called Brighu-samhita. If you consult Brighu-samhita, immediately they will give you your past, present and future. Immediately they will give. The astrology science is so perfect. What you were in the past life, what you are at the present and what you are going to be. These three things can be known.

[Srila Prabhupada, *Srimad Bhagavatam* class, Dallas, July 29, 1975]

That evening I met Sri Prahlada again. “You know,” I said, “I think I’ll take you up on that proposal to visit the Brighu.”

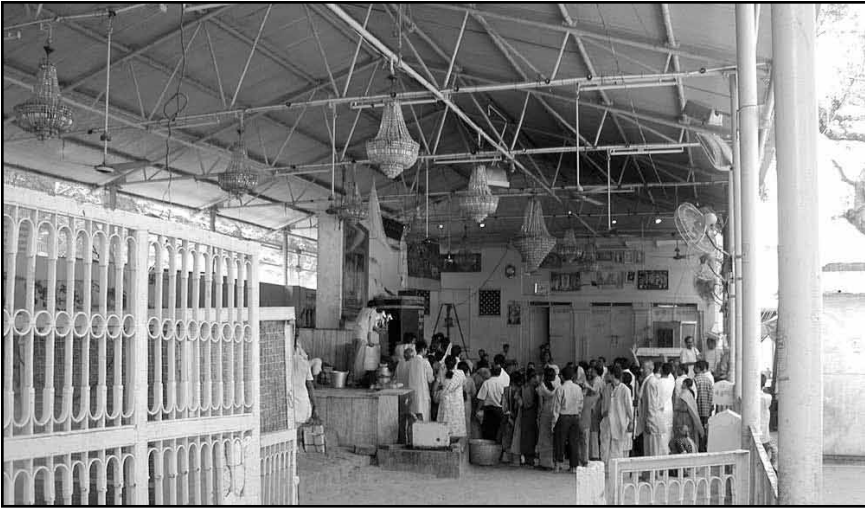
“Really?” said Sri Prahlada.

“Yes,” I said. “I’d be interested to see what opportunities for devotional service lie ahead for us this coming year.”

Two days later, Sri Prahlada, Bimal Prasad das, Dhruva das, and I arrived in Udaipur. After settling in, we took a one-hour taxi ride through rolling hills to the village of Nathdwar, where we visited the temple of Sri Nathji. It was less crowded than when I was there five years ago, and we enjoyed a wonderful darsan.

That afternoon we hired a taxi and drove further into the desert. After four hours we reached an old, dusty village in what seemed like the middle of nowhere.

“How in the world are we going to find the Brighu in this place?” I asked. “There are no street signs, what to speak of house numbers.”



Pilgrims waiting to enter the Sri Nathji temple compound

“The local people will know him,” Sri Prahlada replied. He opened the window and asked in Hindi for directions from a passing rickshaw driver.

“The Brighu’s house is two streets down, on the corner,” said Sri Prahlada, as he closed the window.

As we drove on, I saw an old man in a dhoti, standing on a porch, looking in our direction.

“That must be the place,” Sri Prahlada said.

“How can you be sure?” I asked.

“Because the Brighu is waiting for us,” he said.

“Waiting for us?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s in our charts that we’ll be arriving this morning.”

A shiver went through my body.

We stopped in front of the house and got out. The old man came forward to greet us.

“You’re right on time,” he said with a smile.

I looked at Sri Prahlada. “Right on time?” I said.

Sri Prahlada winked.

The old man invited us into his small house and brought us into a room lit by a small kerosene lamp. I saw old pictures of saints and sages on the wall, and I asked Sri Prahlada about the most prominent one, a white-bearded sadhu sitting with a large book in his lap.

“Brighu Muni,” Sri Prahlada whispered.

“Please write down your place of birth, the date, and the time,” the old man said to me.

Then he reached into an old wooden box and pulled out some papers. He placed one in front of me.

“Close your eyes,” he said, “and put your index finger on one of the diagrams on the sheet.”

I hesitated for a moment, then closed my eyes and put my finger squarely on the paper. When I opened my eyes, I saw I had touched the center of one of approximately 20 circles. In the middle of each circle were various designs and what seemed like numbers.

The old man quickly took the paper and checked the clock on the wall. Then he took a small blackboard and chalk and started writing down various calculations. He reached behind himself and brought forward a cloth, untied it, searched among another pile of papers, and carefully selected one.

Then he sat up straight and started reading from the old paper.

“You were born in America,” he said loudly.

“Well that’s obvious,” I thought. “I just wrote it down.”

“Your father died when you were 17 and your mother when you were 47,” he continued.

I looked at him in surprise.

“You left your country of birth when you were a young man and have been traveling the world ever since in the mission of your guru. You have many places to live, but you don’t stay anywhere. You are always traveling. You were married and had one son, but you left your family to become a sannyasi.”

He broke out in a big grin. “You are much happier as a sannyasi than you were as a married man.”

His expression became serious again.

"Your brother has had a very difficult life. He is presently living with a woman, but he is not married to her. He will not benefit you, but you will benefit him greatly."

I sat dumfounded, staring at him.

"You chant the name of Krishna daily," he said, "and you worship your own set of Deities as well. You have written at least five books to date and you will write many more."

I didn't hear the last part of the sentence clearly. "Many more?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "and whatever you write will be published twice."

"Published twice?" I said.

I looked at Sri Pahlada. He thought for a moment then smiled. "The internet," he said, "You send your diary chapters out on the internet, and at the end of the year they are published in book form."

"This is amazing," I said.

"Your health is generally good because you eat simple foods," the Brighu said, "but you eat too many sweets."

He looked up. "You should stop eating sweets," he said firmly.

"He's not here to flatter you," said Sri Pahlada. "He's just reading what Brighu Muni wrote."

"You must be careful while riding in cars," the Brighu said. "Once you were hit by a car and nearly killed. Is that true or not?"

"Yes." I said slowly. "It's true. In South Africa, in 1992, I was hit by a car and spent many months in bed recovering."

He returned to the reading. "Your most valuable possessions were stolen last year," he continued.

I turned to Sri Pahlada. "I think he's got it wrong on that one," I said. Sri Pahlada seemed tired of my obstinacy. "Remember how all your Deity paraphernalia was stolen by the skinheads in Poland in June 2004?" he said.

"Wow," I said. "That's right."

I was convinced, and I turned submissively to hear more.

The old man looked up, stared at me, and then looked down again at the paper. "One thousand years ago," he said, "you were a

king in Karnataka. You were very wealthy and distributed much of your wealth to hospitals, schools, and temples. At end of that life you retired to the forest.

“In your previous birth you had two wives. At the end of that life you prayed, ‘If I take birth again I don’t want to be a grhastha. I want to be a sannyasi and devote all my life to God.’ So in this birth you took sannyasa at the age of 29. Correct?”

“Yes sir,” I replied. “Correct.”

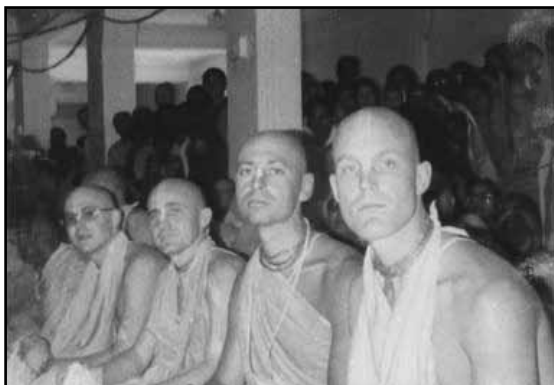
“It is the result of your previous actions and desires,” he said. “In this birth you’ll get immense blessings from your spiritual master. Because your chosen path is bhakti you won’t take birth again. You’ll be liberated at the end of this life. You’ll live into old age, and you’ll die a natural death. You won’t die from a prolonged illness.”

I turned to Sri Prahlada. “Well if this all comes true,” I said, “I’ll do my best to use such fortune in the service of the Lord.”

“All your friends will be good people,” the Brghu continued.

“Part of my good fortune,” I said to Sri Prahlada with a smile.

“From this point on, your affluence will increase day by day,” the Brighu said. “Later in life you’ll construct a large temple for Radha and Krsna. The worship will be gorgeous. If the government tries to impede your efforts, you’ll be victorious over them. At the same place you’ll construct a goshala for cows. There will be a guru-kula and perhaps an orphanage as well.”



Taking sannyasa at the age of 29

He smiled. "Many children will come to you," he said.

"How will I accomplish all that?" I blurted out.

He looked closely at the paper. "Your disciples will help you," he said. "They will raise the funds. They will have some kind of import-export business."

I must have looked a little surprised.

"Brighu has written!" he said strongly.

"Later you will also work in the field of medicine, Ayurveda," he said. "You'll make medicines and give them to people, and they'll become healthy. In your old age you'll become famous for that."

I looked at Sri Prahlada with raised eyebrows.

He looked at the paper again and started nodding his head. "It is said here that you will develop your service in four countries," he said. "What is your present service?"

"I have a big festival program in Poland," I said.

"You'll take it to three other countries," he concluded.

"How in the world will that happen?" I whispered to Sri Prahlada.

"It's written in the stars," Sri Prahlada said, "and one day you'll see how it all comes to pass."

"We are now coming to the end of the reading," the old man said. "It says here that you'll spend time in Vrindavan, Mathura. Do you know that place?"

"Yes, of course." I replied.

"After your 66th year you'll settle there and chant the holy names. Nothing else. You won't care if you eat or not. From time to time you'll visit other places for service, but you'll always come back. Do you have any questions?"

I was stunned by his accuracy, and I had to think for a moment. "How long will my companion Sri Prahlada and I be together?" I asked.

He looked at the paper. "Until you die," he said. "Sometimes he'll go away to do some other service. It is written in the chart that you four people would come together on Chaturdasi, Monday, and that your reading would begin at 2:00 PM and end at 3:00."

I motioned to Sri Pahlada to look at the paper. He leaned over and carefully studied the Sanskrit. "From what I can make out, that's what it says," said Sri Pahlada.

"Who's next?" said the Brighu.

"Sri Pahlada," I said and moved out of the way.

Four hours later, after we all had our readings, we left and got back into our taxi.

"He said my present service would expand to three other countries," I said to Sri Pahlada.

"Yes," said Sri Pahlada, "he did say that."

"It's hard to imagine," I said, as I closed the door of the taxi. "It's a summer event. There's not time to do two countries in July and August, what to speak of four."

I didn't tell anyone in Vrindavan about our meeting with the Brighu. It was too incredible. I busied myself with last-minute shopping for our festival program in Poland, but on the last day in the market, a disciple turned to me. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "why do you keep ordering extra items on your list? What will you do with all of it?"

"Well, we may need it," I said. "You never know. Maybe one day we'll do our festival program in some other country besides Poland."

The disciple raised his eyebrows. "You think so, Guru Maharaja?" he said.

The next day I flew to Warsaw and had two days of meetings with Nandini dasi and Jayatama das about our summer festival tour in Poland for 2006. Then I caught a flight to Buenos Aires. My Godbrother Lokavarnotamma prabhu had invited me to attend their fifth annual Ratha Yatra festival.

It was my first visit to Argentina. When I arrived Gunagrahi Maharaja picked me up. On the way to the temple he filled me in on the history of the yatra. He was excited, as they were just about to sign for a beautiful new temple in the city.

"You'll like it down here," Maharaja said. "The people are pious and soft-hearted, and the devotees love kirtan."



Indradyumna Swami and Gunagrahi Swami

I didn't have to wait long to appreciate Maharaja's words. When we arrived at the temple a blissful kirtan party greeted me and escorted me into the temple room, chanting and dancing all the way. The kirtan continued in the temple room. "It's a fact," I thought. "They do love kirtan."

Afterwards, in my room, I asked one of the older devotees to tell me more about the Argentine yatra. As he spoke, I was amazed how much opportunity there was for spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness. It seemed so different from Poland, where the government is hostile toward our movement and where the Roman Catholic Church gives us endless problems.

"We maintain a farm just outside the city," he said, "and we have a Food for Life program, a restaurant called Krishna, a weekly Harinam in the center of Buenos Aires, and numerous Nama Hatta centers. Now we are planning a yoga center and seminar programs in our new temple."

"Seems like the only thing you're missing is a traveling festival program," I said.

I had meant it as a joke, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized what I had said. The devotee grabbed the opportunity. "Yes," he said, "that's exactly what we need, Maharaja. Why don't you come here and do it? Argentina is the perfect place for festivals, and you're the right person to do it."

I shook my head to say no.

"The summer is only so long ...," I started to say.

"Maharaja," he said, "you must be tired from jetlag. When it's summer in Poland, it's winter here. And when it's winter in Poland, it's summer here."

"That's true," I said. I thought about it for a moment, envisioning myself having to double my fund-raising, start a program from scratch, and struggle to maintain it.

"But it will take years to build up," I said.

"No it won't," the devotee said. "There's an Argentine devotee, Ekanath Gaura das, who visited your festival program in Poland two years ago. He's now doing a similar program, but much smaller, in Peru and Bolivia. I'm sure he'll agree to work with you to organize a big summer festival program here in Argentina."

He handed me a piece of paper. "Here's his email address," he said.

I was intrigued by the idea. I reached for my computer and immediately sent Ekanath Gaura an email.

Thirty minutes later he replied. "Maharaja," he wrote, "whatever experience or inspiration I have is due to you and my Guru Maharaja. Although I have studied organizing events in university, all my practical experience is from watching you. What can I say? I am delighted with your proposal. This coming summer I'm committed to doing my festival in Ecuador, so let's do Argentina in January 2007."

After consulting with Gunagrahi Maharaja, I answered the email. "It's a deal," I wrote. "Please come here next week, and we'll discuss everything in detail."

After sending the email, I sat back in my chair. Everything was moving so quickly. I had just arrived in Argentina and had committed myself to doing a major festival program.

My head was spinning from the jetlag, and I was exhausted. I excused myself and lay down to rest. As I drifted off to sleep I smiled, remembering Sri Prahlada's words: "It's written in the stars, and one day you'll see how it all comes to pass."

In the morning, I came across a conversation from the Veda-base:

Graham Hill: “By looking at ourselves can we [understand] the sort of person we were before?”

Prabhupada: “Yes. There is the Brighu Samhita [an] astrological calculation. You can know your past life, present life and future life. That is the system, Brighu Samhita.”

[Srita Prabhupada, room conversation with Graham Hill, August 26, 1973. London.]

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



A Little Corner of Hell

| NOVEMBER 16–DECEMBER 25, 2005 |

After the Ratha-yatra in Buenos Aires and a week of preaching programs around the city, I was visited by a devotee with a message from Gunagrahi Maharaja: could I visit the ISKCON temples in Chile and Paraguay?

I hesitated for a moment, only because I was trying to figure out where Paraguay was. I finally gave up. I turned to the messenger to agree, but before I could say anything, he handed me an airline ticket. “You leave the day after tomorrow,” he said.

The exchange brought a smile to my face. It reminded me of a soldier receiving new orders from his superiors. In fact, Srila Prabhupada sometimes compared the expansion of Lord Caitanya’s sankirtan movement with a military exercise.

Just as Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa were victorious in the Battle of Kuruksetra, this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement will surely emerge victorious if we remain sincere devotees of the Lord and serve the Lord according to the advice of the predecessors.

[Caitanya-caritamṛta, *Madhya-līlā* 4.79, purport]



Indradyumna Swami in the airport of Buenos Aires

So with my new orders in hand, I happily boarded a flight to Santiago late in November. The prospect of visiting new preaching fields is always exciting for a traveling preacher, not because of a love of tourism but because of the opportunity to share Kṛṣṇa consciousness with others.

The material world holds little interest for a devotee of the Lord. In fact, as my flight descended over the Andes near Santiago and circled the city, I didn't even bother looking out the window, unlike many of the other passengers. I was certain the city would look much like many others I'd seen during the past 35 years. Globalization has brought the same stores, fashions, and advertising to practically every country in the world. Indigenous cultures are quickly disappearing, giving way to a common world order. By the grace of my spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, only the places of the Lord's pastimes, such as the town of Vrindavan, where Lord Krishna appeared, remain dear to my heart.

There are surely many cities throughout the world, each of them blessed by My presence in the form of a presiding Deity who can satisfy the minds of devotees like you. But, my dear friend, I swear to you again and again and with all sincerity, that none brings as much joy to My heart as this humble cowherd village.

[Kṛṣṇa speaking to Uddhava, *Uddhava-sandesa*, Text 8]

Several devotees picked me up at the airport and drove me to the temple in the center of the city. After a short reception I was taken upstairs to my room, where I asked about the schedule for my visit. I was surprised when the devotees told me they were having a Ratha-yatra festival the next day.

In the morning, all of us assembled outside the temple, where a group of devotees were putting the finishing touches on the huge Ratha cart. There were more than 300 devotees, including congregation and friends. Most of them were teenagers.

"Many young people in Santiago are attracted to Krsna consciousness," said Adi Keshava, the temple president. "Every year we make 10 to 15 new devotees. It's like the early years of the movement in America, but here it's been going on for decades."

I was impressed. The mood was upbeat and exciting. Suddenly someone blew a conch, and 40 or 50 youngsters picked up the ropes and started running down the street. As the cart raced off I broke into a jog to keep pace.

"Just their youthful enthusiasm," I thought to myself. "They'll slow down in a minute."

But the pace increased, and my jog turned into a run as the gigantic cart screeched around a corner, barely missing the parked cars.

Hundreds of young devotees were leaping and dancing all over the road. Muscular boys played fast, powerful beats on mrdangas as the kirtan leader chanted loudly, sweating profusely in the warm summer air and smiling broadly.

After thirty minutes and five city blocks, I realized the devotees had no intention of decreasing their speed, so I slowed down to a walk and fell behind.

An hour later the cart turned and raced around another corner, then turned again and headed down a street parallel to the one from which we'd come. I cut through a side street and suddenly found myself at the front of the parade.

"Maharaja," said the kirtan leader, handing me the microphone, "you lead."

“Okay,” I said smiling, “but I can’t sing and run at the same time.”

I slowed the parade and led for 20 minutes. Then I handed the kirtan back to the previous singer, who immediately broke into a fast tempo and raced off with the devotees and cart down the street.

As I looked around, I saw people enjoying the sight. “It’s a fast-track festival of mercy,” I thought. Then I took a shortcut to the festival grounds and waited for the parade to arrive.

An hour later the procession approached the park at a normal speed, with a good-sized crowd of young people following. A few minutes later I gave an introductory lecture about Krsna consciousness from the festival stage and noticed a number of teenagers listening attentively, mesmerized by the philosophy. “All right,” I thought. “If racing with Lord Jagannath through the streets of Santiago is what it takes to bring those kids to the threshold of spiritual life, so be it.”

The only drawback was that the next morning I was so sore I could hardly get out of bed.

Some of the students came to the lectures I gave in the temple over the next few days, and I was happy to introduce them to Krsna consciousness. In fact, I was enjoying myself so much that I was taken by surprise one morning when a devotee reminded me that I had a flight that day to Ciudad del Este in Paraguay.

As I hurriedly packed my gear I found myself again wondering, “Where in the world is Paraguay?”

I arrived at the airport an hour early, and after passing through immigration, I sat at the boarding gate for the first leg of my trip: a flight to Asuncion. I relish such moments, as they are the only time I have to myself. I use them to catch up on correspondence, read, or chant extra rounds.

But this time, I opened my computer, linked it to a wireless connection, and did a quick Google search on Paraguay. I selected the U.S. Department of State’s consular information site. As I read the information, I started to feel uneasy: “Travelers outside the capi-

tal, Asuncion, should consider seeking travel agency assistance, as satisfactory or adequate tourist facilities are very limited in major cities and almost nonexistent in remote areas.”

“Why do tourists even bother going there?” I wondered.

“Most urban streets consist of cobblestones over dirt,” the website continued. “Some roads in Asuncion and other large cities are paved. However, these roads frequently develop potholes that often remain in a state of disrepair. Nearly all rural roads are unpaved.”

“My gosh,” I thought, “it’s even worse than Russia during the communist era.”

“Crime has increased in recent years with criminals often targeting those thought to be wealthy. U.S. citizens have on occasion been the victims of assaults, kidnappings, robberies, and rapes. Under these circumstances, U.S. citizens traveling to or residing in Paraguay should be aware of their surroundings and security at all times.”

“Wow!” I said out loud.

“U.S. citizens should avoid large gatherings or any other event where crowds have congregated to demonstrate or protest. Such activities have resulted in intermittent road closures, including major routes traveled by tourists and residents. U.S. citizens who encounter roadblocks should not attempt to continue the planned travel or to confront those at the roadblock.”

I made a mental note: “Avoid roadblocks.”

As I continued to read, I began to wonder if I had made the right decision in going to Paraguay.

“Organizations providing financial support to extremist groups operate in Ciudad del Este and several high-profile kidnappings for ransom have occurred.”

“Avoid kidnappings,” I thought, half joking with myself.

“Armed robberies, car thefts, and home invasions are common in both urban and rural areas. Street crime, including pick-pocketing and mugging, is prevalent in the cities, particularly during the evening hours in the vicinity of hotels and airports.”

“Better be careful when I land in Ciudad del Este,” I thought.

“Americans living or traveling in Paraguay are encouraged to register with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate through the State Department’s travel registration website and to obtain updated information on travel and security within Paraguay.”

I immediately registered my travel plans on the website.

As the boarding announcement started, I quickly consulted another website. It confirmed what the U.S. State Department’s site had said: “An unruly region of convergence of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, Ciudad del Este is a place of money laundering, smuggling, arms and illegal narcotics, trafficking for extremist organizations and a major location of illicit production of cannabis.”

“Anyway, no reason to be discouraged,” I thought. “Experience has shown that such places often present the best opportunities for preaching.”

After a two-hour flight we landed in Asuncion, where I immediately transferred to a connecting flight to Ciudad del Este. After take-off, a stewardess made an announcement in Spanish. I could catch only a few sentences, something about three stops on the way to Buenos Aires.

“How will I know which stop is Ciudad del Este?” I thought.

I called the stewardess. “Habla ingles?” I said in my best Spanish. “Do you speak English?”

“No, Señor,” she replied, rushing off to her duties.

I soon fell asleep and woke up abruptly 45 minutes later as the flight was landing. Groggy from sleep, I grabbed my hand luggage and quickly got off the flight. I was the only passenger to alight. As I was walking towards the terminal I suddenly realized I wasn’t sure if the flight had actually landed in Ciudad del Este. I looked at the terminal building, but the sign on it didn’t mention anything about Ciudad del Este.

I presented my passport at immigration. “Is this Ciudad del Este?” I asked the officer. Either he couldn’t understand English or he thought I was mad, because he just shook his head and laughed, stamping my passport and waving me forward.

I had only hand luggage, so I quickly walked towards the exit to meet the devotees outside. Along the way I was surprised to see a sign in English, and I stopped to read it.

“Warning! Dengue fever prominent in this area. Transmitted by mosquitoes, it is found mainly in urban areas and around human dwellings. Take all necessary precautions.”

“One more thing to watch out for,” I thought as I walked out the door. But as the automatic doors closed behind me, I realized there was nobody there to meet me. I broke out in a cold sweat. “Maybe Ciudad del Este was the next stop,” I thought.

I pulled out my cell phone to make a call, but there was no connection. I decided to wait, and I sat down on the curb. At that moment a group of 10 or 15 taxi drivers approached me. “Habla ingles?” I said. “Is this Ciudad del Este?”

They laughed. Some said “Si.” Some said “No.”

Immediately all of them moved in and surrounded me. I knew I was in trouble. When I tried to stand up, one of them shoved me back down. The next moment I saw my computer bag being picked up and I grabbed it tightly. Off to my left I saw my Deity box being dragged away and I quickly caught it as well. As the men moved around me, I jostled to keep my bags by my side. Suddenly, a van pulled up and I saw devotees inside. Then, as quickly as they had arrived, the taxi drivers disappeared into the darkness.

“Everything okay?” said a devotee.

“Couldn’t be better,” I said. “You guys arrived just in time.”

“How do you like Paraguay?” another devotee asked as I got into the car.

“So far it’s everything I expected,” I replied.

I was a bit shaken by the incident at the airport, and I was silent as we drove through the night to a small temple on the outskirts of the city. As the van bounced along the cobblestone streets I tried to study the scene outside, but it was too dark. I imagined it would look much like what I’d read—poor, undeveloped, and rampant with crime.

When we arrived a small group of devotees received me, and I then retired to my room. I lay down on my bed, exhausted. It was hot and humid, so I didn't cover myself until the mosquitoes discovered me. Then I wrapped myself up, preferring to swelter under the covers rather than risk Dengue fever.

"A little corner of hell," I thought as I drifted off to sleep.

That night I dreamed that the taxi drivers kidnapped me at the airport, threw me in the back of a taxi, and drove away. They sent a message to ISKCON's Governing Body Commission that it had 24 hours to pay a ransom of two million dollars. The GBC wrote back that it couldn't pay because too many temples were in debt. As the kidnappers prepared to kill me, a host of angels appeared in the sky and started singing, scaring away my kidnappers.

I woke up sweating.

"Was it a dream?" I thought, groggy from sleep.

"Of course it was," I said out loud, sitting up in the darkness. Suddenly I heard the angels singing again. I quickly got out of bed and opened the door of my room. A flood of early morning light entered. I walked outside, and the singing became louder.

A devotee approached me. "Good morning, Maharaja," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Where is that singing coming from?" I asked.

"There's a Christian school just behind the wall of your room," he said. "All morning the children sing beautiful Christian hymns."

"Bless those little angels," I said as I went to take my shower.

Later I walked to the front of our property and was amazed to see a beautiful landscape of simple homes set in serene subtropical foliage.

"Everything OK, Maharaja?" asked a brahmacari.

"Yes," I said, "I'm fine. "It's just that I didn't expect this. I mean it wasn't in the reports I read. It's all so beautiful."

On the way back to my room, I was surprised to meet a God-brother of mine, Jagajivan dasa.

He'd told me he'd been preaching in Paraguay for many years and had established a temple in Asuncion. I could only admire his determination.

I asked him what programs had been arranged for my three-day visit.

"At two o'clock this afternoon you're on national television," he said smiling.

As we drove to the temple's vegetarian restaurant downtown, where the interview was to take place, we passed a crowded area near the River Padana. I noticed a large bridge crossing the river. There was a high fence along both sides of the bridge.

"Why is there such a large fence on the bridge?" I asked Jagajivan.

"So smugglers don't throw goods off the bridge and float them downstream to Brazil," he replied.

"I read about that smuggling," I said.

"Let's take a quick drive over the bridge," Jagajivan said. "It's a good vantage point for seeing the city."

As we neared the bridge we were suddenly caught in heavy traffic. After a few minutes, we weren't moving.

"Is this normal?" I asked.

"No," he said. He rolled down the window to ask some nearby vendors what was happening.

"They said the bridge is blocked by a demonstration," he said. "We'll wait it out."

I immediately remembered the advice of the U.S. Department of State about roadblocks.

"No," I said. "Let's turn around and go to the restaurant. We don't want to be late for the interview."

Along with national television, there was national radio and several prominent newspapers waiting for us when we arrived. It turned out to be more like a press conference. "This would be very difficult to arrange in Europe," I thought. "It's one of the advantages of preaching in a place like this."

The next day devotees told me they had arranged two lectures at a local university. I was thrilled by the prospect.

As it turned out, however, the university was a combined grade school and high school. The first class consisted of 200 children, 8



Kirtan in the school in Paraguay

to 10 years old. As they sat staring at me, I tried to explain the basic philosophy of Krsna consciousness in the simplest terms. But their attention span lasted only a few minutes, and soon most of them were talking among themselves, so I started discussing something they might better understand: kindness to animals.

I was trying to tell them that animals have souls when I noticed a little girl about 9 years old in the front row listening intently. When I said that we should not be cruel to animals, I saw a tear glide down her face. I decided to direct my talk to her alone. When I said that all creatures are part of one spiritual family, her face lit up.

When the recess bell rang, all the other children jumped up and rushed outside, but the girl sat still for a moment, reflecting on what she'd heard. Then she slowly got up and left.

After the break, a group of 300 high-school students entered. I asked Jagajivan prabhu to speak to them. A different scenario unfolded as the students listened intently to his talk.

Suddenly, I saw the little girl from the previous group enter the classroom and walk quietly along the back of the hall and down one side to take her previous seat in front. She immediately became absorbed in the lecture.

After half an hour, Jagajivan prabhu ended his talk and asked me to lead kirtan. I jumped at the opportunity. I wanted the little girl to experience the bliss of Krsna consciousness. As I taught the students the mantra, I saw her repeating it carefully, word for word.

As I started singing, many of the students stood up and started to dance. Perhaps intimidated by the older children, the little girl remained her in chair, but chanted with a concentrated look on her face.

The kirtan became more ecstatic, and other students joined the dancing. At one point they all formed a single line weaving through the classroom. After a while I looked at my watch and realized we'd gone way over our time limit, but when I stopped the kirtan all the students started screaming for more.

I had no choice to but to start again. The campus was small, and I imagined the whole student body hearing the kirtan. I looked through the window across the yard into other classrooms, and I saw students swaying in their seats as they concentrated on their studies. About an hour later I brought the kirtan to a close and glanced at the little girl. She was still in her seat, smiling and radiant, relishing the nectar of the holy names. "She's Yours now my Lord," I thought. "Please guide her to Your lotus feet."

After a few moments she glanced at her watch, jumped up, and quickly ran towards the exit. When she reached the door she stopped, turned around, and smiled at me, a look of deep appreciation in her eyes. Then she was gone.

When all the children had left I sat down and quietly reflected on how I'd been apprehensive about coming to Paraguay. Shaking my head, I looked upward and laughed. "Good Lord," I said, "You can send me to hell anytime you wish, as long as I can hear the angels sing and there are souls like that little girl eager to chant Your holy names."

A Little Corner of Hell

*narayana para sarve na
kutascana bibhyati
svargapavarga-narakesu
api tulyartha-darsinah*

Devotees solely engaged in the devotional service of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Narayana, never fear any condition of life. For them the heavenly planets, liberation and the hellish planets are all the same, for such devotees are interested only in the service of the Lord.

[*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 6.17.28]



About the Author

INDRADYUMNA SWAMI is a traveling preacher in the International Society for Krsna Consciousness. He joined the movement in 1971 in Detroit, Michigan, and soon after went to Europe to help establish Krsna conscious centers in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain. In 1979 he accepted the sannyasa order of life (a renounced monk) and in 1986 began preaching in Eastern Europe and Russia. He continues to oversee the development of the movement there, as well as give guidance to his disciples. For the past 15 years he has also organized a large festival program in Poland that introduces Vedic culture to hundreds of thousands of people. Traveling extensively in many parts of the world, he happily shares his experiences and realizations with others in the form of this diary.

For further information about Indradyumna Swami, his preaching activities, The Festival of India in Poland, and his books and tapes, please visit his official website at www.traveling-preacher.com

