

DIARY OF A TRAVELING PREACHER

VOLUME 7

Indradyumna Swami



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shifting the paradigm

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DEDICATION

To Antoni

who shed tears upon hearing the sound of Krsna's holy names.
One day I hope to cry like you.

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FOREWORD

I know it is pride to think oneself more fortunate than others, but I get to read Indradyumna Maharaja's diary chapters before the rest of the world. How could I not feel lucky? I even get to discuss the diary with Maharaja.

It's like having a front-row seat in a class about Srila Prabhupada's mission. It is all there in Indradyumna Maharaja's life and diary.

"Chant Hare Krishna," Srila Prabhupada says, "and your life will be sublime." Chanting Hare Krishna, of course, is the focus of Indradyumna Maharaja's life, both as an individual – sitting in the temple, getting out of bed, riding in airplanes and cars – and as a sankirtan leader, taking chanting parties out to advertise an upcoming festival.

You can read about an eleven-year-old girl who covered her ears to block the sound but ended up putting on a makeshift sari and running to join the Harinama. And there's the part about the seal in the Baltic Sea who swam along the beach following the Harinam party.

Yet Srila Prabhupada warns us that we may also face danger: “By following His footsteps, you can approach Nityananda Prabhu. Nityananda Prabhu approached Jagai and Madhai at the risk of being personally injured and still He definitely delivered them. The world is full of Jagais and Madhais, namely drunkards, women-hunters, meat eaters and gamblers, and we will have to approach them at the risk of insult, injury and similar other rewards. To face such reverse conditions of life and to suffer thereby the results of actions is considered as the greatest penance and austerity in the matter of spiritual advancement of life.”

Take risks? Maharaja’s diary reads like an adventure movie: being attacked by skinheads and fanatical Muslims, being robbed by corrupt immigration officials, escaping from a dishonest taxi driver in the dead of night on a deserted street – all for the sake of giving Lord Krishna’s holy name to the unfortunate souls.

And we know that giving the holy name also means music, as Srila Prabhupada writes to Upendra Prabhu: “I shall call you and some other students to assemble there to practice sankirtana in a systematic way. Of course, chanting Hare Krishna does not require any artificial artistic sense, but still, if the procedure is presented rhythmically, then the people may be attracted more by the transcendental music.”

It’s too bad we cannot hear Maharaja’s beautiful kirtans just by reading his diary, but anyone who has heard his playing and singing knows that he follows this teaching to perfection, not to mention the dazzling stage shows: dance groups, martial arts, a reggae band, Vedic weddings, and plays based on Vedic scripture.

The plays, though, are only one aspect of scripture in Maharaja’s life.

“There is a limitless stock of Vedic literature,” writes Srila Prabhupada, “and one should study this.”

[Bhagavad-gita As It Is, 17.15, purport]

Diary of a Traveling Preacher gives us a glimpse into the mind of someone who knows the books of Srila Prabhupada and the

previous acharyas. What is amazing is to read how Indradyumna Maharaja always manages to let himself be guided by just the right verse at the right time. Here is a lesson we can all enjoy.

And of course, after reading, comes the next instruction: “Distribute books, distribute books, distribute books.”

Again, Maharaja sets the example, first as an individual. Everywhere he goes – on a plane or on the street – he has a book handy to give to someone, and always with a smooth presentation. And as a leader? You can read about the guests going to the book table at his festivals.

And finally, here is something close to every devotee’s heart: Prasadam. You will smile when you read about the restaurants in one town throwing away tons of meat after the visitors at the Woodstock Festival all went to eat at Indradyumna Maharaja’s prasadam tent.

And there’s more. You will go with Maharaja into the underground temple of salt and the temple of fire, share his heartbreak when his friend Sri Prahlada falls sick and has to stop traveling, and – don’t miss this one – stand with Maharaja on the chariot in Puri as he looks into the big, round eyes of Lord Jagannatha.

Well? Did I leave anything out? No problem. If I forgot it, you will still find it in *Diary of a Traveling Preacher*. I got the first peek, but don’t let that keep you away. Everyone gets a front-row seat to watch Srila Prabhupada’s teachings in action. Welcome to *Diary of a Traveling Preacher*.

Umapati Swami
December 28, 2006



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Indradyumna Swami



REFLECTIONS ON PARADISE

| JANUARY 1 - FEBRUARY 5, 2006 |

After my preaching tour in South America, I flew to Australia via London, a grueling 32-hour trip. I rested in Sydney for a few days and then joined in a week of festivities at the temple. Then I took another long-haul flight, this time to South Africa.



Harinama in Sydney

When I arrived in Durban, I was so exhausted I didn't know whether I was coming or going. Worse yet, the next morning I began to feel a familiar, dull pain in the right side of my abdomen. A visit to the doctor confirmed my suspicion: my liver was swollen again.

"What do you expect?" said the doctor. "You barely gave yourself time to recover and you were off traveling around the world again."

"It's hard to sit still, Doctor," I said. "There's so much service to do."

"That may be," he said, "but your body is telling you something else. Better get some rest again, or you'll suffer the consequences."

On the way back to the temple I thought about his advice. I did not want to stop my service again, but there seemed to be no choice. I considered resting in Durban, but I cringed at the thought of lying low again for weeks on end. Suddenly, I remembered an invitation from my Godbrother BB Govinda Maharaja to visit Mauritius should I ever need some rest. I called Maharaja immediately. He said he would also be there soon and suggested we could do programs together each evening. I liked the idea of preaching while I recuperated, so I booked a flight to Mauritius, and a sympathetic devotee bought a business-class ticket for me.

I boarded the flight a few days later, looking forward to the peace and quiet of the business-class cabin, but a traveling preacher's life often brings surprises, and that day was no exception.

As soon as I entered the cabin, a large group of passengers seated together started laughing at me. They looked like tourists and seemed a bit drunk.

Several of them nudged their friends who hadn't seen me, and the friends also made fun of me.

I tried not to pay attention, but as I was putting my bags in the overhead luggage compartment, one of them said in French, "Cute dress he's wearing." I replied in French. "I'm a monk, Sir," I said. "These are my robes." He looked surprised. "You're not a

monk," he said. "You're dressed like a clown." The entire group laughed wildly.

I looked away and sat down in my assigned aisle seat, which unfortunately was just in front of him and two others in the group.

At that moment a stewardess came around with glasses of juice. First she served the men behind me, and with one glass left on the tray turned to me.

As I leaned forward, one of the men reached over the seat and took the glass.

"Good one!" said one of his friends across the aisle. I expected the stewardess to intervene, but she turned away and came back two minutes later with another glass.

After a while the tourists began laughing again. "Maybe he's a she," said a man loudly. Again his friends burst out laughing. I struggled to control my anger. "Be tolerant," I thought. "They're just a bunch of drunks."

One of the men went to the restroom. On his way back to his seat, he stopped next to me. With a remorseful look on his face he put out his hand. "I'm sorry for the way my friends spoke to you," he said. As I put my hand out to shake his, he grinned and pulled his hand back. Once again his friends could not contain themselves. I'd had enough. I decided to go to the cockpit and complain to the captain, but as I was getting up, the man directly behind me pushed my seat forward with such force that I fell onto the back of the seat in front of me. "Clown!" he yelled. I turned to confront him, but just at that moment, four security guards walked into the cabin. Everyone looked up. A hush came over the entire cabin. The guards stood, silently surveying the passengers for a few moments, and then turned to speak quietly with the people sitting in the first three rows, apparently asking them to move. The passengers stood up and the stewardesses escorted them to the last few rows in business class, which were empty.

When the passengers had been relocated, the security guards took one last look around and then were gone as suddenly as they had appeared.

After a few seconds, another two security guards came in. They stood silent and motionless. Suddenly, Nelson Mandela and his wife came into the cabin, followed by several aides. All the passengers gasped. Mr. Mandela casually looked around. When he saw me, he broke into a smile.

“Hello,” he said, giving me a little wave and nodding his head.

I stood up. “Mr. President,” I said. I started to move towards him to shake his hand. From the corner of my eye, I saw some of the passengers who had been teasing me. Their mouths were open in surprise. One of the bodyguards stepped between Mr. Mandela and me. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said politely but firmly.

I stopped, but I was pleasantly surprised when the same bodyguard led Mr. Mandela to an aisle seat almost opposite me, just one row in front. The aides took the seats that had been cleared in the first three rows.

Mr. Mandela sat down. Then he looked back and smiled at me again.

“Mandela smiled at him,” said the man in the seat behind me. I could not tell whether Mr. Mandela remembered me personally or was simply acknowledging me as a Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee. In 1992, when he was leader of the African National Congress, he visited our temple in Durban and humbly bowed before the form of Śrīla Prabhupada. He was given a tour of the temple and was served a feast at Govinda’s restaurant.

At Diwali in November 1994, he came to the temple again, this time as the president of the country, accompanied by an entourage of ministers.

Thousands of locals thronged to the temple to hear his address to the community.

In April 1997 he was once again the temple’s special guest at our Festival for the Children of the Rainbow Nation, held at a large soccer stadium in Durban. It was an extravaganza with ethnic groups performing, including our devotees who held kīrtan. We had invited 50,000 schoolchildren, hundreds of teachers, 50



Nelson Mandela at the Children of the Rainbow Nation-festival

members of Parliament, the Mayor of Durban, and the King of the Zulus. Devotees distributed lunch packets to each and every child. President Mandela even cancelled the rest of his day's appointments to stay longer at the program.

Afterwards, as I escorted him back to his car, we talked about the need for spirituality in modern society. Just before he left, he turned to me. "Maharaja," he said, "this was the best day of my life."

The next day his words appeared in the headlines of one of the country's biggest newspapers.

During the four-hour flight to Mauritius, Mr. Mandela looked back several times and smiled graciously at me. I smiled in return each time, acknowledging his kindness.

After landing, he was quickly escorted from the plane, but he turned once more and waved at me.

As I was leaving the plane, I met the captain. "Do you know why Nelson Mandela has come to Mauritius?" I asked. The captain smiled. "For a vacation," he said, "just like the rest of you."

As I walked to immigration, I thought about the captain's words. They were almost accurate but not quite. It was true we had all come for a rest, but whereas the others had come to put their work aside, I had come to get back to mine. I would be counting the days until I could take up my normal service.

Some devotees picked me up at the airport, and as we drove to the beach house where I would spend two weeks recuperating, I was surprised to see that Mauritius had changed dramatically since my first visit, in the early 1980s. The old dirt roads were now paved with asphalt and lined with proper road signs and modern petrol stations.

But the island was still the paradise immortalized by the words of Mark Twain: "First God saw Mauritius, then He created heaven." Amidst the endless sugarcane fields, I caught glimpses of tropical fruit trees: mangoes, litchis, mandarins, oranges, grapefruit, papayas, passion fruit, jackfruit, guavas, and custard apples. Beautiful white sand beaches with clear blue water encircled the island.

"It's not the lazy island I remember," I said to my driver. "In many ways it still is," he said, "but things have changed. The economy has improved much during the past 10 years, with a surge in demand for Mauritius sugar, and there is a new textile industry.

"You won't recognize Port Louis," he continued. "The capital now has its own share of big buildings, hypermarkets, car-parks and a well-groomed downtown area. There is all facility to spread Krsna consciousness, and fulfill Srila Prabhupada's prediction for Mauritius."

"What prediction?" I asked.

"Srila Prabhupada visited Mauritius twice and predicted it would be the first Krsna conscious country in the world," he replied.

"He did?" I said.

The driver smiled. "Oh, yes," he said.



Krsna Balarama temple in Mauritius

“Is he hinting that I should preach in Mauritius?” I thought. “Hmm... Maybe I could... but then, I have my festival programs. I can’t get involved here.”

I decided to change the subject. “How are the politics in the country?” I said. “What’s our relationship with the government?”

“There are just over a million people in Mauritius,” he said. “Two thirds of the population is of Indian origin, and most of them are Hindus. The prime minister was the special guest at our farm community for the opening of our Krsna Balarama temple in the year 2000.” We entered the driveway of the beach house. “Maharaja,” he said, “Did you know there’s not a single poisonous insect or reptile on the island. It’s a...”

“Paradise on earth,” I broke in. He smiled.

As I was settling into my room, I looked out the window at the turquoise-blue water just off the beach, 15 meters away.

“Preaching in paradise,” I joked to myself. “That would be something new. I’m always preaching in tough spots, like Russia, Poland, and the Balkans. At least there won’t be any danger here, like skinheads, anti-cult groups, or religious fanatics.”

I paused for a moment and let my mind sober up. “Don’t kid yourself,” I thought. “Any form of material opulence is dangerous for a sannyasi.” I looked out again at the heavenly scene. “And don’t forget it,” I said softly.

I fell asleep quickly that night, listening to the small waves breaking on the beach just outside my window.

I got up in the darkness of early morning and walked the few steps to the beach. As I sat there chanting my japa, the sun rose on the horizon. It was a spectacular scene, with the beautiful rays tinting the clouds orange against the deep blue water of the ocean.

“Hello paradise,” I said, as the sunlight slowly revealed the beauty of the tropical scenery around me. I could not have imagined a more perfect scene anywhere in the world. It was one of those rare moments where life comes to a standstill in an idyllic setting and one becomes calm and peaceful. But a devotee is trained to see the world not through his imperfect physical eyes but through the eyes of scripture. For all its beauty, I knew this environment would fade in time.

The only true paradise is the eternal one, and it remains unaffected by the changes of this imperfect world.

*paras tasmāt tu bhavo ‘nyo
‘vyakto ‘vyaktat santanah
yah sa sarvesu bhutesu
natyatsu na vinasyati*

“Yet there is another unmanifest nature, which is eternal and is transcendental to this manifested and unmanifested matter. It is supreme and is never annihilated. When all in this world is annihilated, that part remains as it is.”

[Bhagavad-gita 8.20]

After finishing my rounds, I sat reflecting on Srila Prabhupada's prediction that Mauritius would be the first country to become Krsna conscious. "It would be an honor to help fulfill Srila Prabhupada's prophecy," I thought. "Maybe one day I'll return and do some preaching here. I can't imagine when that would be, but I'll keep the option open."

Although early, it was getting hot, so I walked back to the beach house.

Later that morning my cell phone rang. It was Guru Gaurangadas, a disciple of Bhakti Charu Maharaja.

"I sent you an important email several days ago," he began, "and I haven't received a reply." "I'm sorry," I said. "I've been on a tight schedule and haven't checked my mail for a few days. I'll get right on it and send you a reply this morning."

That morning, when I downloaded my email and read Guru Gauranga's letter, a new chapter opened in my life. Here was a chance to preach in paradise, and to show the people of Mauritius what paradise really is.

Dear Indradyumna Swami,

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

I have been keeping up with your travels through your diary. Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences on the road with us.

I heard you are on your way to Mauritius.

As you know, by Krsna's grace I run a successful business on the West Coast of America. For a long time I have wanted to do some significant service for ISKCON. When I read in one of your recent diary chapters that an astrologer predicted you would take your festival program to several countries, I got an inspiration.

If you would agree to do a large festival program in Mauritius, similar to what you do in Poland, I will provide all the financial backing you need. I will purchase all the necessary materials, including buses, trucks, stages, and tents. I will also buy a piece of land and

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build accommodation for the devotees in your program, as well as a warehouse to store all your paraphernalia.

I would also like to help the Mauritius yatra by assisting BB Govinda Maharaja in building the new temple in Phoenix. I plan to relocate my business and family to Mauritius in the near future.

I am convinced that a new temple in Mauritius and a festival program such as yours will flood the country with happiness and begin to fulfill Srila Prabhupada's dream that Mauritius will be the first Krsna conscious country in the world.

I know you have a busy schedule, but I am hoping you will accept my offer and spend one or two months a year in Mauritius doing festivals in all the towns and villages.

Please let me know your thoughts on the matter.

Your servant,
Guru Gauranga das



THE BEST OF ALL COMPANIONS

| FEBRUARY 6 - MARCH 1, 2006 |

After regaining my health in Mauritius, I began to wonder about taking precautions for my flight to India. I wanted to avoid situations like the group of drunken tourists who had harassed me during my last flight. One option was to travel with a servant, but that would prove too expensive.

Another was to travel in ordinary clothes, but that would be too much of an austerity.

I'd simply have to depend on the mercy of the Lord, who is the protector of His devotees. So as I boarded my flight to Mumbai, I chanted a prayer I had memorized after the incident with the tourists:

*udaya ravi sahasra dyotitam ruksa viksam pralaya jaladhi nadam
kalpa krd vahni vaktram sura
pati ripu vaksah ksoda rakta ksitangam pranata bhaya haram tam
nrsimham namami*

“Lord Nrsimhadeva’s countenance is as brilliantly illuminated as thousands of suns rising together. He vibrates a roaring sound



Indradyumna Swami and Radhanath Swami take darshan of a Deity of Lord Caitanya worshiped by Narottam das Thakur

like that of the waters of the ocean of universal devastation, as if He Himself is prepared to create a new era by destroying the universe. His face is like fire, and His body is spattered with drops of blood as He pulverizes the chest of the enemy of Indra. Unto that Lord Nrsimhadeva, who removes the fear of the surrendered, I offer my obeisances.”

[Sri Nrsimha Stuti, Verse 1]

On the flight I read a new edition of *Narottam-vilasa*, by Sri Narahari Chakravarti Thakura, who lived not long after the disappearance of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. The book is about the great saint Srila Narottam das Thakur, and the translation was edited by my Godbrother, Purnaprajna dasa.

The life and teachings of Narottam das Thakur have been a constant source of inspiration throughout my devotional career, and I planned to celebrate his appearance day in Vrindavan.

I had read several other editions of the book, but like all activities in spiritual life, reading the book again was new and fresh, as if I were reading it for the first time. I was particularly attracted by

the pastimes of Narottam das Thakur's foremost disciple, Ganga Narayana Chakravarti.

On the order of Narottam das Thakur he had gone to Manipur, a wild and undeveloped region of India at the time, and converted the king, who was a worshipper of the demigoddess Kali, into a Vaisnava, a devotee of Krishna.

The king in turn made the entire population into Vaisnavas.

In January 2005, I had visited the ancestral home of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti in Bengal, where I took darshan of a Deity of Lord Caitanya worshiped by Narottam das Thakur, and of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti's own Deities, Sri Radha-Gopinatha and his 18 salagrama-silas.

Narottam-vilasa goes into detail about the life of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti, and I was just finishing the book as my flight landed in Mumbai. One of the last verses reads as follows:

"Ganga Narayana received the title Chakravarti. Even today everyone in Vrindavan sings his glories. He has many branches and sub-branches of disciples."

I gathered my hand luggage. "By serving the movement of Lord Caitanya, I am also assisting great souls like Ganga Narayana Chakravarti," I thought. "I pray that one day he will bestow his mercy on me, so I can be fearless, as he was, in serving the orders of my own spiritual master."

A disciple whom I had affectionately named Narottam das Thakur das picked me up at the airport. I planned to spend two days at his home before proceeding to a big festival in Ujjain.

"Guru Maharaja," said Narottam as soon as he saw me, "I read the last diary entry, and I'm concerned about your safety. I'm angry with those drunken tourists who treated you so improperly on the flight to Mauritius. It's not good for you to travel alone."

"For now there is no other option," I said.

"Well," said Narottam, "I'm going to pray to Srila Prabhupada and Lord Krsna to arrange something."

"Thank you," I replied. "The prayers of a sincere Vaisnava never go in vain."

As we drove to Narottam's apartment we discussed the celebrations for the appearance day of Narottam das Thakur.

"What will you speak about this year on his appearance day in Vrindavan?" Narottam asked.

"I think I'll speak about the disciples of Narottam das Thakur," I replied, "in particular, Ganga Narayana Chakravarti."

Early the next morning, as I was preparing to do my Deity worship, there was a knock on the door.

"Guru Maharaja," Narottam called, "there is someone here to see you."

"It's too early," I replied. "Can he come back later? I have to do my puja."

"It's a special guest, Guru Maharaja, a very special guest."

"I'll be there in two minutes," I said.

When I walked into the living room, I was surprised to see a small, elderly man dressed in dhoti and kurta, sitting quietly in a chair.

"Guru Maharaja," said Narottam, "I'd like you to meet Goswamiji, a descendent of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti, the foremost disciple of Narottam das Thakur. Actually, he called me several times during the year. I forgot to tell you."

"Really?" I said. "A descendent of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti? Here in Mumbai? In your living room?"

I stood speechless for a few moments, my eyes fixed on the sadhu.

"Guru Maharaja," said Narottam, "are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm fine. It's just that . . ."

"He's come to meet you," Narottam said.

"Me?" I said.

The sadhu sat looking at me. "Yes, Indradyumna Swami," he said. "I've wanted to meet you for some time. You visited my home last year, but I was away on pilgrimage. My brother and aunt told me everything about your visit, how you took darshan of our Deities as well as the samadhis of Narottam das Thakur and Ganga Narayana Chakravarti."

"Yes, of course," I replied. "It's an honor to meet you, Goswamiji."

He looked down. "There is no honor in meeting me," he said. "I am but a simple servant of the Lord."

He looked up. "I've come with a request," he continued.

"How can I serve you, sir?" I said.

He looked me straight in the eye. "I'd like to give you my temple," he said.

"Give me your temple?" I said.

"Yes," said Goswamiji. "The residence of Ganga Narayana Cakravarti. If you take possession, I know you'll fix up the dilapidated building and send your foreign disciples to do the puja."

I was speechless again.

"The standard of worship has decreased drastically through the years," he continued, "and I fear that after I am gone it will decline even more. My own son is no longer interested in the worship. He has left home to pursue an education and eventually get a job in Kolkata. What's more, even the villagers have lost interest in the worship. As a result, we get few donations and have run into debt."

"Debt?" I said.

"Yes," he replied, "serious debt."

I thought for a moment. "Does your offer imply that I would pay off the debts?" I said.

"Unfortunately, yes," he said lowering his eyes. "But that's not why I'm here. I'm most concerned about . . ."

"The Deities," I said. "I understand. You're concerned about the Deities and maintaining the sanctity of such a holy place. Nevertheless, I'm not sure I could afford to pay off those debts."

He raised his eyes. "It's not only the debts," he said. "We have to convince some of my relatives to give the temple to you."

His voice became angry. "They're eating better than the Deities," he said.

"It sounds quite complicated," I said.

“It is,” he replied, “but we have to try. We’re talking about the beloved Deities of Narottam das Thakur and Ganga Narayana Chakravarti. During the past six months thieves have tried to steal Them on four occasions.”

“How is that possible?” I said

“I can’t afford security,” Goswamiji said, his eyes welling with tears.

“They’ve stolen the wooden sandals of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti, many of his manuscripts, and all of the Deities’ paraphernalia.”

I hesitated to ask why the Deities weren’t stolen.

Goswamiji seemed to read my mind. “The only reason they didn’t take the Deities,” he said, “is because of the king cobra.”

“The king cobra?” I said.

“Yes,” he replied. “My great-grandfather said that the cobra lived under the house even when he was a child. Every time a thief comes to steal the Deities, the cobra appears and wraps himself around the Deity of Lord Caitanya, threatening to bite anyone who comes near. I’ve seen him myself.”

“You’ve seen the cobra?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “He’s very large. Last month a thief entered the house at night and soon came running out of the Deity room. When I went into the room, I saw the cobra wrapped around the Deity of Lord Caitanya. His body covered the entire Deity. His head was swaying about and he was making a horrible hissing sound. I also ran away. Nevertheless, if someone is very determined, I can’t imagine what would happen.”

“I see,” I said.

He stood up. “Please come to Bengal with me and speak to my relatives,” he said.

I hesitated. I was on a tight schedule.

“I’m sure it will help,” he said. “Let’s solve the problem of my relatives first. Later Krsna will help us find the money for the debts.”

Narottam turned to Goswamiji. “Guru Maharaja has a very busy itinerary,” he said. “We’re expected in Ujjain the day after tomorrow. But after the Ujjain festival, I can go to Bengal with you.”

“That’s a better idea,” I said. “Narottam can deal more effectively with your family.”

A week later, after the festivities in Ujjain, Narottam and Goswamiji left for Bengal. I went on to Vrindavan and waited anxiously for Narottam’s call.

Early one morning my cell phone rang.

“Guru Maharaja,” he began, “the situation is even more complicated than we thought. The villagers became suspicious when I arrived with Goswamiji.



The ancient Radha-Krsna Deities of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti

Somehow they learned of his intention to give his property away. One man in particular became very belligerent. He's part of a gang of local criminals.

They call him the black sadhu because he wears black tantric dress. If the temple changes hands, he stands to lose the money he takes from the donations."

"You must be very careful," I said.

"Yes, Guru Maharaja," he said. "I'm being careful. Today the black sadhu called all the villagers together and made a speech on the steps of the temple. He said that for many years there has been no disease or famine in the village, no one has died untimely, and 'except for this foolish Goswami in charge of the temple,' no one is in debt. He said if the Goswami gives the temple property away, the Lord will condemn the entire village. The people are very agitated. Groups of them are going around saying, 'No one shall get the temple.'"

"I think you should leave immediately," I said.

Suddenly Narottam gasped. "My God!" he exclaimed. "Two police vans have arrived! I have to hang up."

Three hours later he called again. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "the police came and were looking for me. I had to hide in the jungle. Probably the black sadhu bribed them. Goswamiji is so upset. He's lamenting that the local criminals have so much influence on the temple and the Deities."

As he was speaking I was also lamenting. "It's to be expected," I said.

"It's Kali-yuga."

I remembered a verse from Srimad-Bhagavatam.

"The Deities seem to be crying in the temple, lamenting and perspiring. They seem about to leave. All the cities, villages, towns, gardens, mines and hermitages are now devoid of beauty and bereft of all happiness. I do not know what sort of calamities are now awaiting us."

[Srimad-Bhagavatam 1.14.21]

Narottam continued. "Rumor has it that the black sadhu is going to try to stop us from leaving tonight," He said. "He plans to bring us before all the villagers tomorrow."

"Okay," I said. "Leave now. Do you have a taxi?"

"Yes," Narottam said. "We'll leave in a few minutes. Goswamiji wants to take me to have a personal darshan of the Deities. After that we'll leave."

I will be forever indebted to the great saint Ganga Narayana Chakravarti and his descendant Goswamiji for what happened next.

At dusk Narottam and Goswamiji went to the temple and entered the inner chambers. With Goswamiji present, Narottam was able to go right up to the Deities. He stood before the beautiful form of Lord Caitanya and prayed for His mercy. He also beheld the ancient Radha-Krsna Deities of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti.

Goswamiji's eyes filled with tears. "They receive only one offering of food a day," he said. "And just see how simply They are dressed."

Narottam prayed that somehow the Deities would remain safe and that some day Their worship would be reestablished in its original glory.

Narottam looked at the 18 salagrama-silas and thought about how wonderfully they must have been worshiped by Ganga Narayana Chakravarti.

Goswamiji spoke in a hushed voice. "We have to go now before it gets dark,"

he said. "But before we leave, I want to give you something for Indradyumna Maharaja. At least let proper care be taken of one of these precious Deities."

He reached onto the altar and picked up one of the ancient salagrama-silas.

"This was the salagrama that my forefather, Ganga Narayana Chakravati took with him to Manipur when ordered by Narottam

das Thakur to go and convert the King to Vaisnavism. Please give it to your spiritual master.”

Narottam was stunned. Because it was getting dark he couldn't see the Deity clearly. “Who is He?” Narottam asked. “Which incarnation?”

Goswamiji brought the salagrama closer. “He's a ferocious form of Varaha-Nrsimha,” he said.

Narottam was amazed to see the tawny-colored salagrama-sila, with His huge gaping mouth and two large uneven cakras inside – sure signs that He was a Nrsimha-salagrama. A protruding tusk on the left side indicated He was also Lord Varaha.

“Your spiritual master can take care of the Deity from now on,” said Goswamiji. “And rest assured, the Deity will take care of your spiritual master.”

“Will there be any problem with the villagers if the Deity . . .” Narottam started to say.

“I am a blood descendent of Ganga Narayana Chakravarti,” Goswamiji said firmly. “It is my responsibility to insure that these Deities are properly worshiped.”

Goswamiji looked wistfully at the other Deities. “Let us go quickly,” he said, “before the black sadhu and his friends come.”

As darkness descended they left in the taxi, and arrived six hours later at the Kolkata airport without incident. Narottam called me.

“Guru Maharaja,” he began, “The most amazing thing happened. You won't believe it.”

“What is it Narottam?” I asked. “Did the relatives of Goswamiji agree to give us the temple?”

“No,” he replied, “not yet. We'll keep trying. But the Lord answered my prayers, Guru Maharaja.”

“What prayers?” I asked.

“For your protection,” he said. “Remember you said my prayers wouldn't go in vain?”

I was silent for a moment. “So what happened?” I said.

“Guru Maharaja,” he said, “Goswamiji gave Ganga Narayana Chakravarti’s personal Varaha-Nrsimha salagrama to you.”

“What?” I said, “He did?”

“Yes!” Narottam said, almost shouting. “When you return to Mumbai in a few days He’ll be waiting for you. From now you’ll have the best of traveling companions, and nothing more to fear.”

The next day, I received an e-mail from Narottama. “Dear Guru Maharaja,” he wrote. “I would like to inform you that the salagrama belonging to Ganga Narayana Chakravarti Thakur was given to you on 13 Feb 2006, Srila Narottam das Thakur’s Appearance Day.”

“Regarding your questions, are the Spiritual Master and the Grand Spiritual Master consciously aware of the prayers of a sincere devotee who prays in love to Them? The answer is that no conscious prayers go in vain. They are transmitted positively. Any prayer you offer to your Spiritual Master and Superior Spiritual Master is conveyed to Krishna. No sincere prayers go in vain.”

“Your ever well-wisher,

“A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami”

[Letter to Mahananda, Los Angeles, April 26, 1970]



CITY OF THE GODS

| MARCH 2 - 15, 2006 |

George Harrison once entitled a song All Things Must Pass. It's an old saying. Everybody has heard it. Even Lord Krsna speaks of the temporary nature of this world in Bhagavad-gita:

*mam upetya punar janma duhkhalayam asasvatam napnuvanti
mahatmanah samsiddhim paramam gatah*

“After attaining Me, the great souls, who are yogis in devotion, never return to this temporary world, which is full of miseries, because they have attained the highest perfection.”

[Bhagavad-gita 8.15]

One may read Bhagavad-gita many times, but the philosophy can take years, or even lifetimes, to assimilate, and even a devotee may lament when he loses something or someone dear to him in this world. The day before I left India for America, I received an email from my dearest and most beloved friend, Sri Prahlada das:

CITY OF THE GODS

Dear Srila Gurudeva,

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

You know that I have been suffering with back pain for the past several years. Last summer things became worse and I could hardly walk for three days. Since the summer tour the pain has continued. Recently, even carrying a light shoulder bag puts heavy strain on my neck and back and causes excruciating pain.

Last week I finally found time to visit a physiotherapist. The x-rays he took show a condition worse than I ever expected. The space between several disks in my vertebrae has greatly diminished and there is abnormal bone growth in several places.

The doctor said the causes are overexertion, lifting heavy weights, and constant traveling in cars, trains, and planes. He said there is no quick solution to the problems. He strongly recommends I immediately change my lifestyle, or suffer serious consequences.

Please instruct me.

Your servant, Sri Pahlada.



My dearest and most beloved friend, Sri Pahlada das

Suddenly I had an empty feeling in my stomach. Sri Prahlada would have to stop traveling, and our long association of preaching together was coming to an end. For a few moments my mind raced, trying to find alternatives, but I knew the doctors were right.

I thought of the many adventures we had shared spreading the sankirtan movement of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, most notably our festival program in Poland. The program had made Hare Krsna a household word throughout the country and defeated the efforts of the anti-cult movements to defame and demolish our movement. Preaching naturally attracts opposition, and Poland was only one of the many challenges we had faced together as we forged a strong friendship.

I sat thinking about our 16 years of service together. I could still see the Muslim soldiers in Sarajevo attacking our sankirtan party, beating us mercilessly as we tried to fight back. Sri Prahlada had stood firm, like a courageous lion, calling out the names of Lord Nrsimha. When I yelled that he should step back from the brawl, he did so, but only at my request.

My mind flooded with many sweet experiences as well, in particular Sri Prahlada's melodious kirtans, which charmed the hearts of everyone who heard him. I would miss our intimate talks together, sharing our realizations, hopes, and despairs – things we could tell only each other. Who would I engage in such loving exchanges with now?

The reality of the situation sunk in, and the emptiness in my stomach deepened. I hesitated to reply, but I had to. I picked up the phone and called him in Mayapura. In a serious tone, like a father, I said it was best he stay in Mayapura, in the apartment we had bought for him and his wife, and work on the correspondence courses he had recently started with a university in New Zealand.

We both struggled to find things to say. Finally we said goodbye. When I hung up, I closed the door to my room, lay down on my bed, and cried myself to sleep.

When I awoke the next morning, I thought I had dreamt the whole thing, but I soon realized it wasn't so. I began thinking of my coming tour of the American temples and how difficult it would be because so many places would remind me of Sri Prahlada and our previous visits there. I decided to first visit another country and immerse myself in preaching.

I recalled that several months earlier the president of the Mexico City temple, Darshan das, had invited me there. I quickly sent an email asking if he was still interested. His immediate reply confirmed he was, and three days later I found myself on a flight to Mexico City.

As the flight circled the airport waiting for permission to land, I thought about my two previous visits to Mexico, one as a teenager in 1966 and the other as a devotee in 1981.

Growing up in California, I had studied much about Mexico, and like many young American boys, I had been especially intrigued by the Aztec Indians.

Some scholars say the Aztecs were a nomadic North American tribe who came to Mexico during the 13th century. There they established one of the most advanced civilizations in the Americas, including cities with pyramids and temples. Some of their cities were as large as any in Europe.

The Aztecs honored a number of gods. They constructed towering temples and huge sculptures and held ceremonies that included human sacrifice. The Aztec empire was conquered and destroyed by the Spanish in 1521.

My mother became concerned when she saw my interest in a civilization that worshiped numerous gods and held human sacrifices. While I certainly didn't believe in the sacrifices, I was intrigued by the idea that the universe could be controlled by conscious beings.

"It doesn't seem impossible," I told my mother. "Why couldn't God put others in charge of running the universe?"

"That's neither religious nor scientific," she answered.

It remained a contentious point between us for years. In the summer of 1966, I decided to go to Mexico to see the remains of the Aztec civilization and discover more about the mysteries of the universe. But I didn't dare tell my parents where I was headed. I told them I was going surfing in Southern California. As surfing was one of my passions, they didn't object.

It was my first time out of the United States, and I was nervous crossing the border at Tijuana. The Mexican immigration officer asked me why I was coming. "To see the Aztecs!" I blurted out.

He laughed. "Well, you're a few hundred years too late," he said, "but we'll let you in anyway."

I was heading just north of Mexico City, to the ancient capital of the Aztecs, Teotihuacan, the 'City of the Gods'. The Aztecs built it on the ruins of a settlement established before the birth of Jesus Christ. I was most interested in the two pyramids – one dedicated to the sun and the other to the moon. "Surely," I thought, "they must hold clues to the mystery of the universe and of God Himself."

But the same youthful nature that pushed me to explore the world also pushed me to enjoy it, so when I met a group of American surfers on their way to Mazatlan, a surfer's paradise on the south coast, I joined them. I spend the next month blissfully surfing the waves there, putting the higher purposes of life aside for the time being.

My quest for deeper knowledge was eventually satisfied when I joined the Hare Krsna movement. By reading the Vedic literature, I learned that the Lord does indeed delegate the administration of the universe to pious souls called demigods, such as Indra, Candara, Surya and Vayu. Empowered by the Supreme Lord, they manage the heat, light, rain, wind, and all the other functions of material nature.

When I visited our Mexico City temple as a devotee in 1981, I was still curious about Teotihuacan, but I was too busy with

preaching programs throughout the city, and I didn't manage to go there.

Now I was starting my third visit to Mexico. As our flight landed, I realized I still wanted to see the pyramids of the sun and moon at Teotihuacan. I laughed to myself. "Well," I thought, "I certainly won't let anyone know."

I was greeted by several devotees and taken to the temple, near the center of the city. A blissful reception awaited me, and I gave a lecture to a packed temple room. Afterwards a devotee approached me with an old cassette tape. He put it into an equally old cassette player and turned it on.

"It's a kirtan you led when you were here in 1981," he said. "I listen to it every day."

"Every day?" I said. I could not help wondering whether I was blushing.

"Yes," he replied. "Not many senior devotees visit us here in Mexico."

I spent several days leading kirtans and giving classes in the temple. One morning Darshan dasa announced that we would be going to Cuernavaca, a city three hours from Mexico City, for an evening Harinama.

"Cuernavaca means the City of Eternal Spring," he told me.

"It sounds like a special place," I said.

"It certainly is," said another devotee excitedly. "The reason is that –"

Another devotee interrupted him, asking for directions to the town. After that someone else came forward with yet another question. Soon we were on our way, and I hadn't found out why Cuernavaca was so special.

In Cuernavaca, we walked to the central plaza, where 50 devotees were waiting for us. As dusk settled in, I saw people strolling in the warm spring air. Children played together, chasing their dogs or throwing Frisbees. Young couples stood around joking and laughing, and older couples sat on benches chatting. A nearby band played traditional Mexican music.

It was a typically rural Mexican scene, and I wondered how we would be received. But I had been in this kind of situation hundreds of times, and I sensed that the holy names would quickly become the main attraction of the evening. I picked up a mrdanga, started chanting, and closed my eyes. A minute later I opened them again and saw several hundred people crowded around us. After 10 minutes, I stopped the kirtan and began to lecture.

"We never do this," I heard a devotee say nervously behind me.

But I was used to it. On our Harinamas in Poland, I lecture every half hour to the crowd. It's one of my favorite activities.

I felt especially enlivened in this new setting with pious Mexican people listening attentively. I spoke for 30 minutes, and no one moved an inch. When I finished, a woman ran forward and quickly put her arms around me. Before I could do anything, she kissed me squarely on the lips. The crowd roared with approval.

I struggled to regain my composure. After a minute, I laughed to myself. "What don't I go through to spread the chanting of the holy names!" I thought.

I led kirtan again and then gave another lecture. Again the crowd stood listening. When I finished, I turned to a devotee. "It's true," I said. "This is a special place."

"Very special," the devotee said with a smile.

"Very special?" I asked.

"Yes," he said with a broad smile. "Srila Prabhupada came here in 1972 and gave a lecture right on the very spot where you are standing."

"What?" I said. "Srila Prabhupada stood right here?" I stepped back a few feet.

"That's right," he said. "In June 1972, Citsukhananda dasa brought Srila Prabhupada here. After a kirtan Srila Prabhupada lectured to a crowd of several hundred people. As he was lecturing, Haihaya das arrived with 50 copies of Krsna Consciousness, the Topmost Yoga System, in Spanish."

“The books had just arrived from the printer that day,” the devotee continued. “Srila Prabhupada stopped his lecture. ‘Now you can all take one of these books and read them,’ he said to the crowd. People came forward and Srila Prabhupada quickly sold all 50 copies. The people asked him to autograph the books and he signed every one of them.”

I stood there dumbfounded. “My spiritual master came out here to this remote plaza and chanted, lectured, and distributed books,” I thought.

I grabbed a book from a nearby devotee.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I called out, as my translator scrambled to come forward. “My spiritual master translated these ancient books from India, printed them, and then 34 years ago came here to your beautiful city to distribute them. To mark that historic occasion we are offering you the same amazing books. Please come forward and receive his mercy.”

Only a few people came forward, but I was happy to be following in the footsteps of my spiritual master.

“Maybe four or five bought books from you,” said a devotee.

I smiled. “That’s the difference between the master and the disciple,” I said.

That night we stayed at the house of Hari Katha das, in nearby Tepoztlan. The next morning, while I was brushing my teeth, I moved in close over the sink to look in the mirror. Then I stepped back, and just at that moment, the heavy porcelain sink came crashing to the ground with a loud noise. It nicked one of my toes, drawing blood.

I stood there stunned. Had I stayed close to the mirror, the sink would surely have broken both my legs. I remembered Srila Prabhupada’s statement that when a devotee experiences a minor injury, he thinks it only a small token of what he should have received. Not only does Krsna protect His devotee but He also reminds him of the dangerous nature of the material world.

That day we traveled four hours back through Mexico City, north to the town of Tulancingo. I had fallen asleep in the heavy

traffic and awoke an hour later as we drove through the countryside outside the city. The dry terrain was not very interesting, and I was about to open a book when suddenly I saw two huge structures rising from the plains in the distance.

“My gosh!” I shouted. “It’s Teotihuacan! Those are the Aztec pyramids to the sun and the moon!”

The devotees in the car looked at me. “You want to visit them, Maharaja?” said the driver.

I tried to cover my enthusiasm. “Uh, no,” I said, feigning calmness. “I just woke up and was surprised to see pyramids in the middle of nowhere.”

“You knew their names,” a devotee said.

“Why don’t we visit Teotihuacan on the way back to Mexico City this afternoon?” said the driver. “I heard the Indian Ambassador is there on a special visit.”

That was my cue. “Well in that case,” I said, “I suppose we should go.”

It wasn’t the most valid of reasoning, but I was finally going to Teotihuacan, after 40 years.

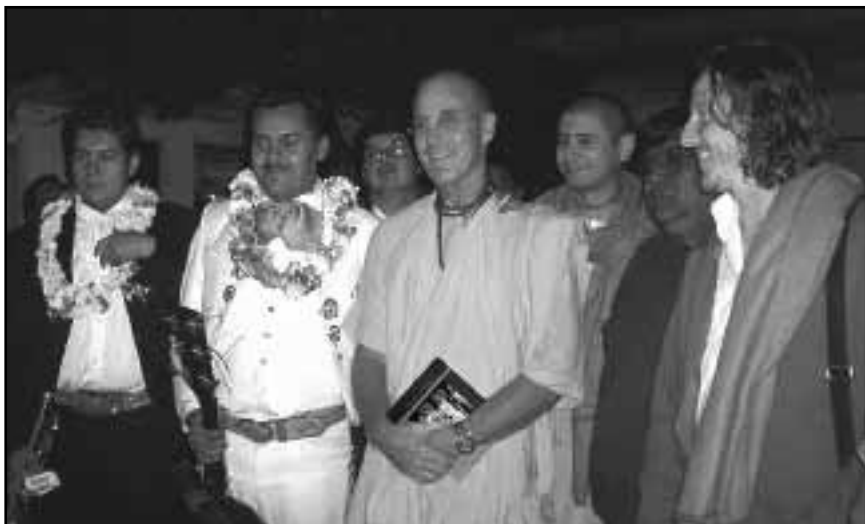
We did a house program when we arrived in Tulancingo. During the bhajan, I noticed a girl of about eight with a large parrot on her shoulder. I was so surprised that I temporarily lost the beat on my mrdanga.

I closed my eyes, picked up the beat again, and started chanting Hare Krsna with fixed attention. It was a sweet kirtan, and the guests responded enthusiastically. With my eyes still closed, I started chanting louder and louder. Suddenly I heard a loud squawk, and felt sharp claws digging into my scalp.

I opened my eyes and saw a shocked audience staring at the parrot on my head. The girl looked embarrassed as she ran forward and retrieved him. I wiped a few drops of blood from the top of my head with a tissue and continued the kirtan.

Afterwards the girl came up and apologized.

“Why in the world did he fly onto my head?” I asked her.



At the house program in Tulancingo

She smiled. “His name is Krsna,” she said, “and you were singing his name with so much love that he couldn’t resist you!”

Soon we were on our way back to Mexico City...and Teotihuacan.

“Do you know anything about Teotihuacan?” asked our driver.

“Well,” I replied with a touch of confidence, “actually I do. As a boy I read a lot about Aztec civilization, and even tried to visit here. I was interested in the Aztec worship of the deities that control the material world. That curiosity waned when I came in contact with Krsna consciousness and found a detailed description of how the demigods manage the universe under the direction of the Lord.

“But my interest was again aroused when I read about how Vedic culture once flourished all over the world. I remember attending a lecture by Srila Prabhupada in New York on July 25, 1971. ‘Bharatavarsha is not only the name for India,’ Srila Prabhupada said, ‘but it is the name for this planet. Formerly,

5000 years ago, the whole planet was known as Bharatavarsha. The Vedic culture was all over the world, even in America, [with] different types of worship or concepts of God.”

“You see,” I continued, “Like the Vedic culture, the Aztec culture had a pantheon of gods, although, they didn’t believe in a Supreme Deity. The main Aztec gods were very similar in character to the Vedic demigods, though depicted differently.

“Studies have showed similarities in Aztec and Vedic culture in architecture, customs, art motifs, time measurement, calendars, and knowledge of astronomy. The Aztecs placed importance on the east-west path of the sun in the same way most Vedic temples are built to face the rising sun in the east.

“One major difference between the Aztec and Vedic worship is that there was no Vedic custom of human sacrifice. The Aztecs had fallen away from the true Vedic lifestyle.”

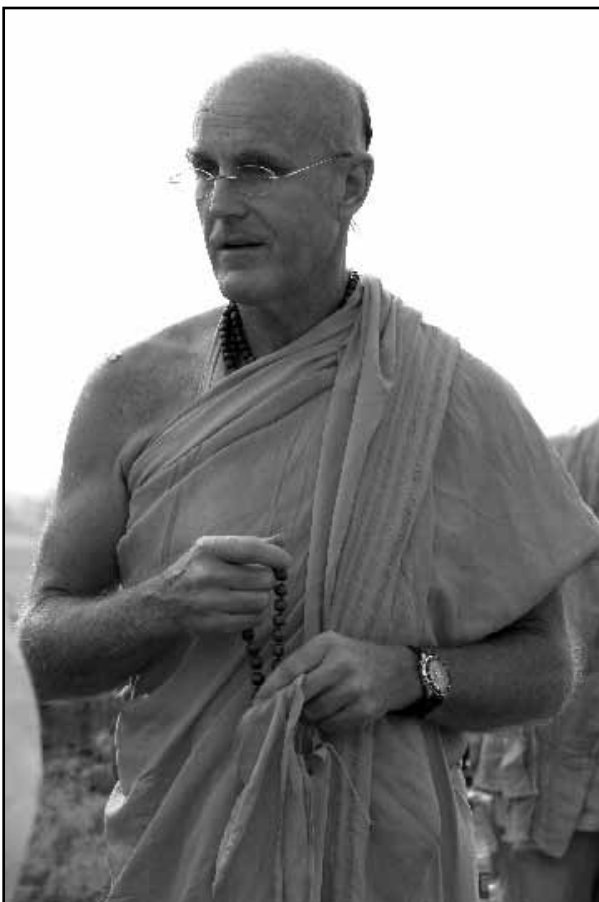
I smiled. “I’m coming here to marvel at the evidence that Vedic culture once existed all over the world and had surely influenced the Aztecs.”

An hour later we drove into Teotihuacan. I was awed by the massive pyramids to the sun and moon. The sun pyramid is the third largest pyramid in the world. As we walked down the Avenue of the Dead, a broad road that links the two structures, I was stunned that even though the city today was nothing compared with its original glory, it still impressed me as a testament to the grandeur of Aztec civilization.

We had wandered through the ruins for about an hour when a devotee broke my mood of awe. “You know,” he said to me, “they sacrificed 20,000 to 50,000 of their own people each year.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Let’s go. This visit has finally laid to rest a childhood curiosity. We’re fortunate to be following the original Vedic culture.”

Back at the temple, I gave the Sunday feast lecture and stressed with renewed enthusiasm that when Srila Prabhupada preached Vedic culture all over the world, he was not introducing it but reviving it.



Chanting japa on a morning walk in Mexico

“Remnants of Vedic culture can be found all over the world,” I concluded. “But they can’t compare with the culture in its entirety. Let us all work under Srila Prabhupada to help people realize the one original spiritual culture of the planet, Vedic culture, or Krsna consciousness.”



“From early histories it appears that the entire earth was under one culture, Vedic culture, but gradually, due to religious and cul-

tural divisions, the rule fragmented into many subdivisions. Now the earth is divided into many countries, religions and political parties. Despite these political and religious divisions, we advocate that everyone should unite again under one culture – Kṛṣṇa consciousness. People should accept one God, Kṛṣṇa; one scripture, Bhagavad-gītā; and one activity, devotional service to the Lord. Thus people may live happily upon this earth.”

[Caitanya-caritamṛta, Mādhya-līlā 25.193 purport]



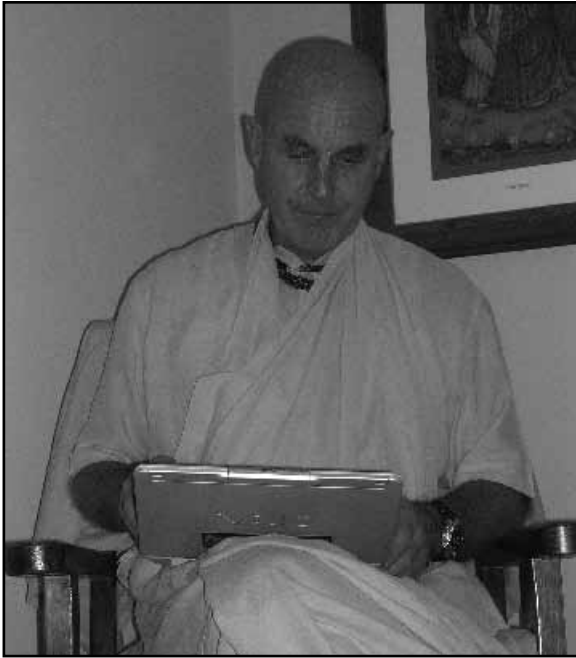
MY MUSLIM BROTHER

| MARCH 16, 2006 |

Each day, before downloading my email, I mentally prepare myself for dealing with the good, the bad, and the ugly. With hundreds of disciples and many other devotees regularly corresponding with me, the laws of nature force me to see the gamut of situations in this world.

March 16, 2006, was no exception. There were names to be given for babies, condolences for the families of departed souls, blessings for disciples (and chastisements for two), guidelines for a new marriage, and a plea for a departed student to return.

One name on the list in my mailbox caught my eye. It was Jahnukanyaka dasi, a devotee from Sarajevo, Bosnia. I had met her years ago, on my first visit there. She risked her life to preach throughout the three-year war that took over 100,000 lives there in the early 1990s. Such a devotee deserves attention, so I immediately opened her email. I was hoping to read of the recent success the Sarajevo devotees had had in book distribution, but instead I learned with great sadness of the departure of a good friend of mine, Doctor Abdulah Nakas.



One name on the list in my mailbox caught my eye

I first met Dr. Nakas in April, 1996 in the bloodstained hallways of the partially destroyed central hospital in Sarajevo just days after the war had ended. Our Harinama party had been attacked by knife-wielding Muslim soldiers that day, and several of our devotees had been seriously wounded.

After taking the other devotees back to the temple, I went to the hospital to check on the injured. When Dr. Nakas heard that a leader of our movement was there, he came out to meet me. "Your people's wounds are serious," he said, "but not critical. They will live."

He raised his arms in the air. "I am a devout Muslim," he said, "but I am ashamed of what my people have done. The war is over, but now we are spilling the blood of foreigners in our town. Please forgive us."

He put out his hand. "We are brothers," he said, in a gesture of humility I will never forget.

I took his hand, red with the blood of the devotees and still holding a scalpel. "Doctor," I said, "you are not to blame, and neither is your religion. This is the act of a fringe element."

He once again turned his attention to the injured devotees.

While I was waiting, some of the soldiers who had attacked us came to the hospital to finish the job. They surrounded me and spit in my face. Dr. Nakas heard the commotion. He rushed out of the operating room and screamed at the soldiers to leave. Although he was defenseless and had no weapons, they backed down and went away.

Jahnukanyaka told me that day that everyone in Sarajevo respected him because of his selfless service during the war. For three years he operated continuously, day in and day out, and often throughout the night on the endless casualties. He performed surgery under the worst of circumstances, often with no water or electricity and few medical supplies. During the last two years of the war the hospital had no anesthesia. He barely ate or slept. And several times the hospital itself was attacked and severely damaged by rocket fire.

"How was it possible?" I asked her. "Where did he get the strength?"

She smiled. "During the war," she said, "several devotees and I would regularly visit the hospital, bringing prasadam and sometimes having programs for the patients and medical staff. During those days it was dangerous just to walk outside because the Serbian Army had encircled the city and would indiscriminately fire rockets and shoot citizens daily."

"It was there at the hospital that I met Dr. Nakas," she continued. "Somehow or other, he had acquired a Bhagavad-gita and would read it to his colleagues before the surgeries. He said it helped him realize the immortality of the soul and gave him strength as he watched people die before his eyes."

"I was amazed that a staunch Muslim, who visited his mosque daily, was not only reading Bhagavad-gita, but sharing it with others. When I was doing sankirtan at that time, most of the Muslim doctors I approached bought Bhagavad-gita because they knew it was Dr. Nakas's reading material."

"That makes everything clear," I said.

Now, years later, I was sitting in front of my computer, remembering our conversation and feeling overwhelmed by that morning's email. I found Jahnukanyaka's phone number in Sarajevo and called her.

"I received your email about Dr. Nakas," I said. "I'm sorry to hear of his departure. He was an amazing person, able to bridge gaps that often separate men because of nationality, race, and religion."

"Here in Sarajevo," she said, "he is being mourned by everyone, Muslims, Christians, and Jews."

"Did he remain connected to us and maintain an interest in Bhagavad-gita after the war?" I said.

"Yes, he did," she replied. "After the war I visited London, and when I came back to Sarajevo, I brought prasadam to Dr. Nakas. During our discussion he offered to help us find a building for a new temple in Sarajevo. I was amazed because I knew it would not be an easy thing. Bosnia is primarily a Muslim country."

"During the war I developed a hernia from carrying so many books, and when I told Dr. Nakas he offered to operate on it for free. He told me I was his Goddaughter. The nurses told me that while performing the operation he recited many verses by memory from Bhagavad-gita."

"He never took a vacation in his entire career. After the war he just continued doing his service, operating every day. Recently he had a heart attack. He was operated on but lapsed into a coma. He was in intensive care and only the medical staff were allowed entry. I called his brother, the director of the hospital, and begged him to let me go to his brother's side."

“To my surprise he let me go, after making sure I was properly dressed in a surgical mask and gown. There were many doctors and nurses present when I entered Dr. Nakas’ room. He was such a famous, much-loved, and respected man. They were trying everything to save him.

“Initially, I was shocked seeing all the tubes and machines keeping him alive. Despite the fact that most of the medical staff there were Muslim, I began reading out loud from his favorite chapter of Bhagavad-gita, chapter 9. All the doctors and nurses bowed their heads respectfully and remained silent as I read the entire chapter.

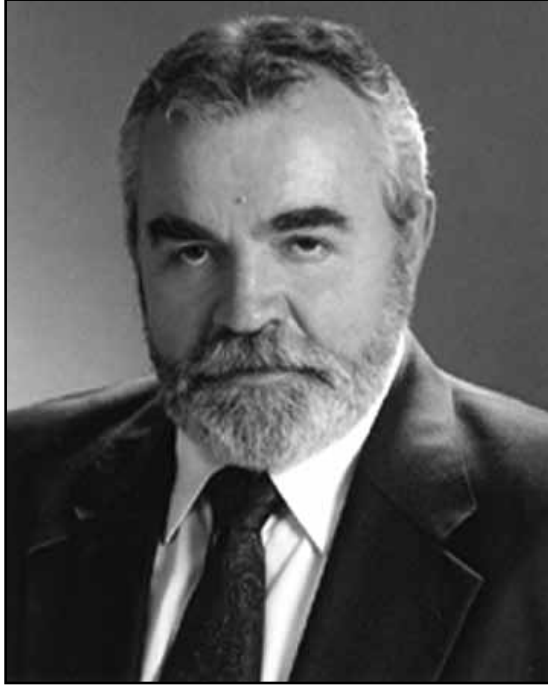
“Several days later they contacted me and asked me to come back a second time. I saw it as a special arrangement of Kṛṣṇa for Dr. Nakas. On that visit I sang the Damodar-astakam prayers and the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra, and read the seventh chapter of Bhagavad-gita. Again the entire staff listened respectfully. They knew it was what Dr. Nakas would have wanted.

“Two days later he died. I went to his funeral with some devotees. There were more than 10,000 people attending. He was a national hero. The people of Sarajevo loved him so much. He was buried according to the Muslim tradition. But you can imagine – there we were, dressed in our traditional Vaisnava attire. No one complained. They all knew how much he loved us, and we him.”

As she spoke I couldn’t hold back my tears, and they were not only for the fact that Dr. Nakas had so much appreciation for the immortal wisdom of Bhagavad-gita and had helped devotees at the end of the war and after, but because of my own encounters with him. I could still envision him apologizing for the wrong his Muslim brothers had inflicted upon us and his screaming at the soldiers who had come to kill me. They were some of the most intense moments I have ever experienced, and he had played an integral part in saving my life and those of our wounded devotees.

When I finished my call with Jahnukanyaka I went before my Deities, bowed down, and prayed that the Lord would honor the

devotional service Dr. Nakas had performed as a devout Muslim and as a follower of the sacred wisdom of Bhagavad-gita. The world has much to learn from Dr. Nakas: how to live peacefully together with respect and appreciation for other cultures and religions.



Dr. Abdulah Nakas, my muslim friend



“In India, even in the interior villages, all the Hindu and Muslim communities used to live very peacefully by establishing a relationship between them. The young men called the elderly members of the village by the name caca or kaka, uncle, and men of the same age called each other dada, brother. The relationship

was very friendly. There were even invitations from Muslim houses to Hindu houses and from Hindu houses to Muslim houses. Both the Hindus and the Muslims accepted the invitations to go to one another's houses to attend ceremonial functions. Even until 50 or 60 years ago, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims was very friendly, and there were no disturbances. We do not find any Hindu-Muslim riots in the history of India, even during the days of the Muslims' rule over the country. Conflict between Hindus and Muslims was created by polluted politicians, especially foreign rulers, and thus the situation gradually became so degraded that India was divided into Hindustan and Pakistan. Fortunately, the remedy to unite not only the Hindus and Muslims but all communities and all nations can still be implemented by the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement on the strong basic platform of love of Godhead."

[Caitanya-caritamṛta, Ādi-līla 17.149, purport]



SUCH MERCY

| MARCH 17 - APRIL 31, 2006 |

After my visit to Mexico in mid-March, I went on a whirlwind preaching tour of the temples in the United States until the end of April. I kept a record of the programs I did in those six weeks, and I was surprised to see they totaled over 100.

I must have done thousands of such programs throughout my career as a traveling preacher, and as I thought about my 57th birthday, just weeks away, I smiled. “Physically, the tour been exhausting,” I thought, “but spiritually, I’m more enlivened than ever.”

*ayur harati vai pumsam udyann astam ca yann asau tasyarte
yat-ksano nita uttama-loka-vartaya*

“Both by rising and by setting, the sun decreases the duration of life of everyone, except one who utilizes the time by discussing topics of the all-good Personality of Godhead.”

[Srimad-Bhagavatam 2.3.17]

In San Diego, on one of the last days of the tour, I visited the home of Guru Gauranga dasa, the sponsor of my festival program on the island of Mauritius. We made plans for the program and decided that we would hold it in April next year.

When I looked at his altar, I was taken by the beauty of the only Deity present, a salagrama-sila. Having worshiped salagrama-silas for years, I immediately saw that this Deity was special. He was small, perfectly round, smooth, and shiny. I remembered a verse from the Padma-purana, where Lord Visnu tells Brahma that smaller salagramas give the most auspicious results:

“O Brahma, in that sila, small like an amalaki fruit, I remain eternally with My divine consort, Srimati Laksmidevi.”

I looked closer. The salagrama had a beautifully formed mouth exactly in front. “A most auspicious cakra,” I said aloud.

“He has a small flat surface on the bottom too,” said Guru Gauranga.

I shook my head in amazement. “He’s the perfect salagrama,” I said, “the kind sought by every pious brahmana in ancient India. Many temples in India would give lacs of rupees for such a sila. Where in the world did you get Him?”

“It’s a long story,” Guru Gauranga replied. “If you have the time, I’ll tell you.”

I smiled and sat down. “What better way to spend our time?” I said.

“In 1992,” he said, “I was serving in Mayapura as a young brahmacari, when word came that the devotees in Bangladesh needed brahmacaris for a traveling festival program. At first I hesitated because Bangladesh is a Muslim country, but local devotees told me that there are hundreds of thousands of Vaisnavas in Bangladesh, many of whom regularly attend our programs, so I stepped forward.

“For several months we traveled throughout the country holding outdoor festivals in the villages, and sometimes as many as twenty thousand people would attend. In many places the locals

had never seen white-skinned Westerners. The Muslims left us alone, and the Vaisnavas thronged to our programs.

“One night in a remote jungle village in the north, we had a late finish to our program. Along with the other brahamacaris, I lay down exhausted on the floor of the large pandal, but I had trouble sleeping because of the heat, the humidity, and the mosquitoes. I stood up and leaned against the wall of the tent. A young man dressed in a saffron-colored dhoti came up to me and asked why I wasn’t sleeping. I told him of my difficulties, and he offered to take me to an asrama where he lived, further into the jungle. ‘You’ll sleep peacefully there,’ he said.

“After an hour and a half of walking, I began to feel concerned, as we had still not reached our destination. Suddenly we came to a clearing where I saw fifteen large mud-brick huts, and nearby, a large stone temple. Judging from its appearance, the temple was very old.

“The young man took me to one of the huts. ‘Please sleep here,’ he said. ‘The mosquitoes won’t bite you. We burn a special wood inside to keep them away.’

“Within minutes I was sound asleep.

“I awoke in the morning, just as the sun was rising. I looked out the window and saw a beautiful scene of antiquity.

“Young brahmacari monks sitting on the banks of a nearby river were softly chanting on their japa beads. Beautiful Vaisnava tilaka adorned their bodies, and their saffron clothes rivaled the beauty of the sunrise. From the temple I could hear people singing a familiar bhajan, *Lalasamayi-Prarthana* by Narottam das Thakur.

“Several brahmacaris came and took me to the river to bathe. As we walked, we passed the kitchen, and I could smell the cowdung fires cooking breakfast. While I bathed, the brahmacaris sat nearby and chanted japa.

“I looked around. ‘This is what life must have been in devotional asramas hundreds of years ago,’ I thought, ‘when young male students lived and studied with their Vaisnava gurus.’

“I wondered why no guru was present.

“ ‘How long will you stay with us?’ one of the boys asked as we walked towards the temple.

“ ‘Just a few more hours,’ I replied, ‘but I’d like to stay forever.’

“When we reached the temple, we entered and paid obeisances, but when I stood up, I was surprised to see there was no altar, only four decorated walls.

“Where are the Deities?” I asked.

“The boys smiled. ‘Be patient,’ said one of them, ‘and you’ll soon see the most beautiful Deities.’

“ ‘And famous,’ said another.

“ ‘Famous?’ I said. ‘Here in the middle of the jungle?’

“Suddenly a conch shell blew, and one of the giant walls slid open to reveal a beautiful marble altar. An intricately carved silver *srngasana* towered over graceful Radha-Krsna Deities. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I simply stood there.

“ ‘The altar is hidden to protect the Deities from Muslim attacks,’ said one of the young men. ‘They’ve remained safe like this for five hundred years.’

“ ‘Five hundred years!’ I said. I moved in closer to get a better look.

“Krsna was made of black stone, and Radharani of brass. I could see they were indeed very old Deities. Near Krsna’s feet I noticed a silver *srngasana*, with three beautiful *salagrama-silas*. Then – I don’t know what made me do it, perhaps the excitement of the moment – I blurted out, ‘Can I have one of those *salagrama-silas*?’

“The *brahmacaris* turned to me with looks of astonishment.

“I mumbled something about a long-cherished desire to worship a *salagrama-sila*, but they remained silent, taken aback by my outburst.

“ ‘Well,’ said one, ‘you can ask our guru. He wants see you after breakfast.’

“ ‘Where is he now?’ I said.

“ ‘He’s finishing his one lac of japa,’ said another boy.

“ ‘One lac of japa before breakfast!’ I exclaimed.

“After breakfast, one of the older brahmacaris took me to a small hut not far from the temple.

“ ‘Does the guru have many disciples?’ I asked as we walked.

“ ‘More than 5,000,’ he replied.

“ ‘How old is he?’ I said.

“ ‘Ninety-two,’ he said.

“ ‘He must have traveled a lot,’ I said.

“ ‘Actually,’ said the brahmacari, ‘he’s never left this village. It’s one reason he’s eager to meet you. He often quotes the prediction of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu mentioned in Caitanya-Bhagavata.’

*prthivite ache yata nagaradi grama sarvatra pracara
haibe mora nama*

“In as many towns and villages as there are on the surface of the earth, My holy name will be preached.”

[Chaitanya-Bhagavat, Antya 4, text 126]

“ ‘You know,’ said the brahmacari, ‘several times I’ve seen him shed tears as he talked about how the mercy of Lord Caitanya will one day leave India and flood the world with love of God. This morning, when we told him a Westerner dressed as a Vaisnava had arrived, he became very excited. I will translate for you when you meet him.’

As we entered the hut, I saw the guru, dressed only in a loin-cloth, sitting absorbed in chanting his japa. He opened his eyes and looked at me. ‘So, it is true,’ he said slowly.

“I paid my obeisances, and when I got up he called me to go near him. His disciples had told him of the program in the nearby village, and he asked a few questions about it. He paused for a moment.

“ ‘Who has done this service for Mahaprabhu?’ he said. ‘Who has introduced you Western boys and girls to the chanting of the holy names?’

“ ‘His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada,’ I said proudly. ‘He went to the West from India and gave us the chanting of Hare Krishna.’

“ ‘Please tell me more,’ he said.

“For over an hour he listened intently as I told him about Srila Prabhupada’s life: his childhood and youth, his meetings with Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, his attempts to preach in India, and his eventual journey to the West. Several times the guru’s eyes welled up with tears.

“At the end he shook his head. ‘It was my great misfortune not to have met him, the person who fulfilled the prediction of Mahaprabhu. I can only offer him my dandavats.’

“He placed his folded hands above his head, and recited prayers for a long time. Then he turned to me. ‘You have asked for one of our salagrama-silas?’ he said.

“I was surprised. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I did.’ From the corner of my eye, I saw several brahmacaris looking intently at their guru.

“ ‘I will think about it,’ he said. The brahmacaris’ eyes opened wide.

“ ‘You must know the history of those Deities,’ he said. ‘It is written in our temple records. Five hundred years ago, my forefathers were sevaites [priests] in the temple of Gopal Bhatta Goswami in Vrindavan. Goswami engaged several families in the service of his beloved Deity, Radha-Raman. Do you know the history of Radha-Raman?’

“ ‘Yes, I do,’ I replied. ‘He is self-manifested from one of the salagrama-silas that Gopal Bhatta Goswami found in the Kali Gandaki River in Nepal.’

“The guru nodded his head. He seemed pleased that I knew the pastime. ‘In my family line,’ he said, ‘there were three brothers helping with that puja. One day in 1498 [1576 on the Western calendar], Gopal Bhatta Goswami asked them to come here, to what was formerly East Bengal but is now Bangladesh, to spread the teachings of Mahaprabhu.

“ ‘It was a great challenge, as the journey was long and dangerous and they would be on their own preaching Gauranga’s message. What’s more, he knew they would experience intense separation from Radha-Raman and from him himself, and also from Raghunatha Bhatta Goswami and Jiva Goswami, who were still living. So on the day of their departure, Gopal Bhatta Goswami called all of the brothers, and in the presence of Radha-Raman gave each of them a salagrama-sila. These are the three salagrama-silas you see on our altar.’

“He stopped talking and with closed eyes returned to chanting on his beads. I paid my obeisances and with the other brahmacaris left his quarters.

“I went and sat alone on the bank of the river, thinking about everything that was happening. I felt fortunate to have come to that peaceful asrama and met the guru and his disciples, but I felt embarrassed to have asked for such a special Deity.

“After a while I began wondering if it was all really true. I had never read that Gopal Bhatta Goswami had sent preachers out to spread Lord Caitanya’s message. ‘But then again,’ I thought, ‘it’s certainly possible. Little is actually recorded about those historic times.’

“I thought about a verse from the Bible I’d learned as a boy: ‘And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.’

[John 21:25]

“Then I thought about that gentle sadhu. He seemed the repository of all good qualities, and I felt ashamed that I might doubt his truthfulness.

“I finally concluded that I did believe him, but thought there was no chance he’d give me one of those historic salagrama-silas.

“Suddenly I looked at my watch. ‘Oh no!’ I thought. ‘I’m late. It’s almost noon. I have to get back. The devotees must be wondering where I am.’

“At that moment one of the brahmacaris came running.

“ ‘Guru Maharaja wants to see you!’ he said breathlessly.

“We walked to the temple, entered, and paid our obeisances. The guru was sitting in front of the altar chanting softly on his beads, eyes closed.

“Although he must have known we’d come in, he didn’t immediately acknowledge our presence. He remained absorbed in chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. After some time he opened his eyes and looked at me.

“ ‘I have decided to give you one of the salagramas,’ he said.

“My heart was pounding.

“ ‘I feel that Mahāprabhu will be pleased that such a Deity is being worshiped by a Vaiṣṇava from the West,’ he said. ‘It was His desire that His names be chanted in every town and village of the world. I have one request, however. Pray to that great ācārya who delivered your people to kindly put the dust of his feet upon my head.’

“He motioned to one of the brahmacaris to take one of the salagramas from the altar. The boy sipped acamana from a small cup, went on the altar, and picked up the salagrama in the center. The brahmacari came back down, and the guru took the salagrama in the palm of his hand, looking at the sila affectionately for a long time. Then he touched the salagrama to his head, put some tulasi leaves and flowers around Him, and slowly placed Him in my trembling hands.

“Still trying to fathom my good fortune, I paid obeisances and tried to express my appreciation. But that saintly person had already closed his eyes and again returned to his chanting. I paid my obeisances one last time and left the temple.

“As I stepped outside I heard my name being called. ‘Guru Gaurāṅga! Guru Gaurāṅga! Where are you?’

“It was a devotee from the festival who had come looking for me.

“I’m here,” I called out.

“‘You’re in big trouble,’ he said. ‘Everyone’s been looking for you.’

“We walked quickly back to the village where we’d held the festival and left shortly thereafter.

“That was 14 years ago,” Guru Gauranga said.

I sat spellbound. I had not moved an inch the entire time.

“Such mercy!” I said, gazing at the salagrama, which somehow seemed infinitely more beautiful than before.

“Yes,” Guru Gauranga said, “and mercy is something that should always be shared.”

It was more the way he said it than what he said that made me look up.

“Actually” he said, “I’ve been discussing with my wife how I’ve become so involved in my business nowadays that I hardly have time for puja. You know I’ve promised to help finance your festival program in Mauritius. On top of that, I’ve recently helped my own spiritual master, Bhakti Charu Maharaja, with the construction of his new temple in Ujjain. As a result, I’ve been working day and night.

He paused. “So we decided to ask you if you would take the Deity and worship Him.”

I looked at the salagrama. My mind was racing. “He was offered in service by the lotus hand of one of the Six Goswamis,” I thought. “What an honor it would be!”

Absorbed in my thoughts, I heard Guru Gauranga say in the background. “So will you accept Him?”

My meditation broke. “Yes,” I said, “of course. Thank you. What can I say? I’ll worship Him with all the love and devotion I can.” He handed me the Deity, and we talked about the details of his worship. Then I left for another appointment. As I drove through the suburbs of San Diego, I was now the one trying to fathom my good fortune.

“I can hardly believe it,” I thought. “What a wonderful conclusion to my preaching tour in America!”



Indradyumna SwamI worshipping his salagrama silas

I prayed to become a worthy recipient of the mercy I'd just received. I had a most wonderful incentive now: a Deity given twice over for the purpose of inspiring a preacher in his service to Lord Caitanya and the Six Goswamis of Vrindavan.

krsnokirtana gana nartana parau premamrtambho nidhhi
dhiradhira jana priyau priya karau nirmatsarau pujitau sri cait-
anya krpa bhara bhuvi bhuvo bhavahantaraka vande rupa
sanatanau raghu yugau sri jiva gopalakau

"I offer my respectful obeisance to the six Goswamis, namely Sri Rupa Goswami, Sri Sanatana Goswami, Sri Raghunatha Bhatta Goswami, Sri Raghunatha das Goswami, Sri Jiva Goswami, and Sri Gopala Bhatta Goswami, who are always engaged in chanting the holy names and dancing. They are just like the ocean of love of God, and they are popular both with the gentle and the ruffians, because they are never envious of anyone. Whatever they do, they are all-pleasing to everyone, and they are fully blessed by Lord Caitanya. Thus they are engaged in missionary activities meant to deliver all the conditioned souls in the material universe."

[Sri Sad Goswami-astaka, Srinivasa Acaraya, Verse 1]



MY TWO MOST IMPORTANT SERVICES

| MAY 1 - JUNE 21, 2006 |

Much of my year is spent in preparation for our Festival of India in Poland. The festival lasts only two and a half months, but because of its size it needs much planning, organization, and fundraising.

On the first of May, I flew out of the United States to England and on to Ukraine for my Vyasa-puja celebration. I was excited at the thought that the festival tour was just six weeks away. After Vyasa-puja, I would take only two short trips before the festival, one trip to England and one to Russia.

But as I got off the plane in London, Krsna gave me a warning that I might be extending myself too much. As I approached an inbound security control, I suddenly felt faint, and I dropped to one knee. I was able to stand up before anyone noticed, and I held on to a handrail as I slowly walked to the checkpoint.

An hour later, I boarded my flight to Kiev. As the plane took off, I thought about how much effort the other devotees and I have put into preaching Krsna consciousness in Poland. "And

we're still facing opposition after two decades," I thought. "With a new conservative government in Poland, this year may not be much better."

Tired, hungry, and still reeling somewhat from my short faint, I let my mind get the better of me and I became a little despondent. "I hope one day the Polish people will appreciate Kṛṣṇa Consciousness," I thought.

I decided to read my email, which I had downloaded in the airport lounge, and I found a message that lifted my spirits. It was from an 11-year-old devotee girl whose family I had recently visited in New Jersey. I'm a bit embarrassed to include it here because the girl seems to be glorifying me, but in reality she is glorifying the mercy that Lord Caitanya has spread far and wide, and these deep insights of a child have touched my heart.

Dear Indradyumna Maharaja,

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

I know this is a little early, but I wanted to send you my Vyasa-puja offering today.

This morning in violin class, my teacher, Mrs Kowalska, asked whether I would like to participate in a summer music camp. When I said I was going to Poland she looked surprised.

'Poland!' she exclaimed. 'I was born in Poland. Why are you going there?'

'To join the Festival of India,' I replied. 'Do you know that festival?'

'Of course,' she replied. 'I have been to one of them.'

'And do you know Indradyumna Swami?' I said.

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'He's the organizer of the festivals. I greatly admire him.'

Guru Maharaja, I was astounded, especially that she knew you. She told me I should take my violin to Poland and play some Hare Kṛṣṇa tunes at the festival. If you permit me, I will. And if it's any help to you, I have also been learning Bharatnatyam dance for eight years.

Anyway, your preaching has already yielded great success if a violin teacher in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, knows you.

Please bless me so I can give better service to you, to Srila Prabhupada, and to the Lord.

Aspiring to be your servant,
Sridevi dasi”

I read the letter again. “Thank you, Krsna,” I said softly. “And thank you too, Sridevi.”

In Kiev, I took a connecting flight to Dnepropetrovsk where the Vyasa-puja festival was to be held two days later. By the time I arrived at the local temple I had been on the road for 37 hours. I fell asleep quickly that night.

The next morning, as devotees drove me to the day’s program, someone told me that Niranjana Swami would not be coming because of ill health. We had planned to do our Vyasa-pujas together, and I suddenly realized that except for BV Madhava Maharaja, who would arrive two days later, I was going to be the only older devotee present to lead the others.

At the hall I walked up the back stairs onto the stage and sat on the asana. The stage lights were bright, and I couldn’t see the audience.

I turned to one of the organizers. “How many devotees are here?” I asked.

“Two thousand five hundred,” he said.

I asked for a harmonium, but there was none. I asked for a mrdanga, but there was none. I asked for karatalas, and I was given a pair of small ones. I closed my eyes and prayed to Srila Prabhupada for spiritual strength. How could I, armed with only a set of tiny karatalas, inspire 2,500 devotees?

Two days later the devotees celebrated my Vyasa-puja. This is always the worst day of the year for me as I sit listening to praise and honor bestowed upon me by my disciples. I usually keep my eyes closed as they read their offerings, thinking of Srila Prabhupada and a number of my Godbrothers who inspire me.



How could I, armed with only a set of tiny karatalas, inspire 2,500 devotees?

But one offering in particular made me open my eyes. A blind devotee, Kunja Kishori dasi, was revealing her innermost feelings of love for her spiritual master as well as for Srila Prabhupada and the holy land of Vrindavan.

I first met Kunja Kishori dasi in 2001, when she was a guest at a public program in St Petersburg. During my lecture I noticed her sitting motionless, staring straight ahead.

Later, she came on the stage to meet me, and I mentioned how she had appeared so attentive during the talk. “Yes,” she replied, “through your words I see everything clearly.”

I looked closer and saw that she was blind. Later she told me that a childhood disease gradually caused her to go blind by the time she was 17.

“It was a mixed blessing,” she said. “Now I am not distracted by seeing the things of this world, and I can focus on understanding God and the spiritual sky.”

The next day I spent hours with her describing the glories of Vrindavan, the Lord's abode in the spiritual world. At one point, I mentioned again how she seemed especially attentive. "Yes," she said, "if one loses one's sight, one's hearing becomes keener."

When I told her that Goloka Vrindavan had appeared on earth as Gokula Vrindavan, where Lord Krsna sported 5,000 years ago, she said she wanted to go there.

"How can she go?" I thought. "It will be difficult for a blind person to move around a rural village like Vrindavan. And besides, she won't be able to see anything."

The next year I initiated her, and soon after, by her strong determination, she went to India and spent months in the association of devotees traveling all over the country to holy places, including Vrindavan.

Now, in Dnepropetrovsk, I marveled at the Lord's mercy: although she was blind, she had developed a deep appreciation and understanding of Vrindavan. This blind devotee made me see that there is no handicap in achieving pure devotional service to the Lord if one is eager for it.

Dear Srila Gurudeva, [she began]

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

I am very happy to be here at the celebration of your Vyasa-puja and to have the opportunity to thank you for everything, especially for sharing with me the most intimate treasure of love and affection for Sri Vrindavan Dhama.

The scriptures state that we awaken an attachment to Goloka Vrindavan in the spiritual world by developing an attachment to Gokula Vrindavan in the material world. You, my dear spiritual master, love Vrindavan so much that you spread this infectious love to all of us. As a result, we cannot but appreciate Vrindavan and give our hearts fully to that holy place.

I remember clearly the second day I met you. You asked, 'Have

you heard of Vrindavan? It's a most amazing place. One day I will take you there.'

Obviously I knew nothing of Vrindavan at the time, but your description made me want to run there. After some time the dream came true, and I went to that sacred place. Through your words, based on the Vedic scriptures, I was able to understand the transcendental abode.

My dear spiritual master, by your grace I could see Vrindavan. Krsna is forever performing His pastimes there, but we cannot see them because of our conditioning in the form of our material desires, resulting in lust, anger, and greed.

I remember how we were on parikrama at Kaliya-ghat. You were telling us the pastime of Lord Krsna chastising the Kaliya serpent. I was thinking, 'How wonderful it is that we, people born in Western countries in the age of Kali, are able to sit in Vrindavan under a kadamba tree that was touched by the lotus feet of the Lord!'

How was it possible? Only by your mercy and that of Srila Prabhupada.

Srila Gurudeva, I am grateful to you for giving me back my sight, allowing me to appreciate the most precious things in life: the all-attractive Lord and His eternal abode of Sri Vrindavan Dhama.

Forever your servant,
Kunja Kishori dasi.

As she spoke, I could not hold back my feelings, and I bowed my head so the devotees would not see the tears in my eyes. When she finished I thanked her.

Later, when I gave my Vyasa-puja address, I told the devotees that I was happy serving as a spiritual master. Then I paused. The statement might be misunderstood, I thought, so I added that what I relish is the sweet, loving exchanges between guru and disciple.

The next day I flew back to Warsaw and on to London for a two-week preaching tour of the British Isles. I was exhausted, and



Kirtan at Bhaktivedanta Manor (London)

as the days passed, I began thinking I would need a break after the forthcoming tour of Russia, so I emailed my dear friend Giriraja Swami in California, asking if I could spend time with him. He kindly agreed. At the end of my tour of Great Britain, I arrived at Heathrow Airport for a flight to Warsaw and on to Moscow. But as I walked to the boarding gate, I fainted again. This time I fell to the ground, and several people rushed to help me. I regained consciousness quickly and declined their offer to call a doctor.

I sat alone on a chair for 20 minutes and then emailed Giriraja Maharaja. I told him I was canceling my trip to Russia and asked if I could come straight to California and stay until the festival tour began. He agreed, and I was soon on my way to the United States.

As I boarded the flight, I thought about how painful it would be to retreat from action for so long. I had already taken a break earlier in the year for the same purpose.

MY TWO MOST IMPORTANT SERVICES

But it was necessary. It would be an investment in my two most important services: taking care of my loving disciples and continuing with festival programs for many years to come.

“You should take rest. If you don’t take care of your health, then later, even if you are enthusiastic to preach, you won’t be able to.”

[Srila Prabhupada, Room Conversation, November, 1977]



JAGANNATH SWAMI

| JUNE 22 - 29, 2006 |

I took a five-week break in America and focused on my health. I exercised almost every day, rested, and honored healthful prasadam. I kept my correspondence to the minimum to avoid stress and used the extra time to study. By the fourth week I had completely recovered and was feeling better than I had in years. I was ready to return to Poland for our summer festival tour.

Then one morning I received a phone call from my Godbrother Radhanath Swami.

"I'd like invite you to join our yatra's pilgrimage to Jagannath Puri in two weeks," he said. "More than 3,000 of us will be going for the annual Ratha-yatra parade. I would appreciate it if you could come and lecture and do kirtans."

My first thought was to say no. My heart and soul were already in Poland. But I paused for a moment and thought about the great spiritual benefit of going to Ratha-yatra in Puri in the association of Radhanath Swami and his disciples. Ever since I first heard my spiritual name, Indradyumna das, at my initiation

ceremony 36 years ago, I have had a strong desire to attend the Ratha-yatra in Jagannath Puri.

Indradyumna Maharaja is the famous king who ordered the carving of the original Jagannath Deities and established Their worship in the temple in Puri thousands of years ago. The annual Ratha-yatra parade, in which the Deities of Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balarama are taken from the temple and pulled by devotees on three magnificent chariots, is renowned throughout the world.

As Radhanath Maharaja continued describing the plans for the pilgrimage, I glanced at my calendar and saw that the Ratha-yatra was only a few days before our festival tour in Poland would begin.

“It’s possible to go,” I thought, “but it means arriving back in Poland just before the first festival. Let me check with Jayatama das and Nandini dasi in Poland and see if they would agree that I arrive then.”

I called Jayatama and Nandini, and after some discussion we concluded that the tour devotees could prepare for the first festival without me. Nandini even suggested that Jayatama go with me.

“He can take photos,” she said, “and we can use them for a new exhibit.”

Two weeks later Jayatama and I arrived in Puri. Ratha-yatra would begin in two days, and the area was bustling with preparations. After five weeks of solitude in America, I suddenly found myself in the midst of thousands of pilgrims converging on Jagannath Puri.

I was surprised to find the three gigantic chariots already parked in front of the main temple. They were decorated with bright mirrors, white yak-tail whisks, pictures, brass bells, and silk cloth. Crowning the chariots were colorful canopies and beautiful flags.

As I inspected the chariots, a local brahmana told me it took 100 craftsmen an entire month to construct each one. I estimated that Lord Jagannath’s chariot alone was over 50 feet high and I

counted 14 huge wooden wheels on it. I was even more surprised when the priest told me there was no steering wheel or brakes on the chariots.

“We put logs in front of the chariots to stop them,” he said with a smile, “but actually, it is the will of Lord Jagannath whether the chariot moves or stops.”

The following afternoon, we met Radhanath Swami and his disciples at Sweta Ganga, a small lake in a quiet corner of Puri. When we arrived, Maharaja was sitting under a huge banyan tree with 3,000 disciples around him. It was like a scene from antiquity: the guru and his disciples engaged in spiritual discussions in a holy place.

I quietly took my seat next to Maharaja and sat spellbound as he spoke about the glories of Jagannath Puri. Maharaja has an uncanny ability to relate in great detail long passages from scripture combined with colorful stories and anecdotes for many hours. As



Indradyumna Swami and Radhanath Swami at Sweta Ganga

he spoke, I realized the way to enter into and perceive the holy dhama is through the descriptions and words of a sadhu.

Anticipating huge crowds at the parade, all of us gathered early the next morning in front of the Jagannath Temple. The area ahead of the chariots was cordoned by ropes, and hundreds of policemen and soldiers were busy with security arrangements. I saw army snipers taking their places on the rooftops. There had recently been bombings in Delhi and temples around the country, and I had read warnings in a local paper that morning of possible terrorist attacks during Ratha-yatra.

We started kirtan outside the cordoned area while masses of people began to arrive. Soon the broad, three-kilometer road was packed with pilgrims, and it became impossible to move. The temperature had already soared to 48 degrees, and with the high humidity, I was finding it difficult to breathe. I wondered how I could stay for hours in the middle of a crowd estimated at one million. Suddenly I saw Sriman Pandit dasa, an Indian devotee from England, waving to me from inside the cordons.

“Come quickly,” he yelled over the kirtan parties. “I have some VIP passes for this area.”

I grabbed Jayatam, and we pushed our way through the dense crowd into the VIP area. Other devotees followed us.

“I was given only five passes for our sannyasis,” Sriman Pandit said. “But now there are more than twenty devotees here.”

I told Jayatam to separate from the group and start taking close-up shots of the chariots. I gave him my pass. “If we get thrown out,” I said, “at least you can get pictures for the devotees back in Poland.”

Sure enough, within minutes the police began rounding us up. “All of you, out!” shouted an especially bellicose officer.

“But we have passes,” said a devotee.

“It doesn’t matter!” screamed the officer. “Out!”

Sriman Pandit turned to me. “Many of the pandits [priests] in the temple don’t like ISKCON devotees,” he said, “and they

have complained to the police commissioner that we have come to take over the parade, so we've been ordered to leave this area."

The temple already has a strict policy against non-Hindus entering, and priests have been known to beat the unauthorized. Though such restrictions are not condoned by scripture, the biased policy was now being enforced outside the temple as well, on the street, where Lord Jagannath comes to give His merciful darsan to everyone.

Suddenly we were surrounded by security men and pushed toward the ropes. In the background I saw some of the temple priests laughing.

The devotees politely resisted, but the police became increasingly angry and began to shove us. When we reached the ropes some devotees dove over them or under them, but in the confusion I found myself pushed up against a rope unable to move. Just at that moment the policeman who had started rounding up the devotees arrived in front of me.

"Out!" he shouted. "You're white! You're not Hindu!"

When he raised his baton to strike me I put my arms up to protect myself. Suddenly he jumped forward and shoved me backwards, and I rebounded off the rope behind me and back on to him. He punched me hard in the nose, and I fell to the ground. I lay there, momentarily dazed.

I came to and scrambled to find my glasses on the ground. Then I rolled under the rope to the other side. Looking back I saw his angry face. I couldn't hear what he was saying because of the noise of the crowd, but I could read his lips: "Not Hindu!"

I wasn't about to let him spoil my pilgrimage to Puri. I felt thankful that my nose was not broken, and I shrugged the whole thing off and started walking back to the ISKCON chanting party in the midst of the crowd. Halfway there, I met Sriman Pandit again.

"Come with me," he said. "I think I can get us back in the secured area."

"I'm not so sure I'd like to go back in there," I said.



Lord Balarama

He grabbed my arm and pulled me back under the ropes. From a distance I saw Jayatama happily taking photos of the chariots from all angles. Suddenly conch shells and trumpets heralded the arrival of Lord Balaram, the first Deity to be carried out of the temple. A huge roar arose from the crowd. Fifty or more priests started banging brass gongs.

Within moments Lord Balaram appeared, moved along by many men. It was an amazing sight. The men would put big cushions in front of the Deity and rock Him forwards, His huge headdress moving to and fro. It took a full hour to bring Him from the temple, up the ramp, and onto the chariot.

Next the priests came out of the temple carrying Lady Subhadra. "She's a lady," said Srīman Pandit, "so they carry Her lying down."

Just as Subhadra was being carried up the ramp of Her chariot, the police officer who had punched me saw me again. He rushed



*I cringed seeing the massive crowd of a million people packed together,
sweltering in the heat*

forward, but just as he reached me, a temple priest appeared from nowhere and stepped between us.

“Leave him alone,” said the priest. “He’s a Vaisnava, a devotee of Lord Jagannath.”

“He’s white,” sneered the officer.

“That may be,” replied the priest, standing directly in front of me, “but he’s a Vaisnava nonetheless.”

Suddenly they switched to speaking the local dialect and the argument became heated. But in the end the priest prevailed, demonstrating the power the brahmanas still wield in Jagannath Puri.

“Stand over here with your friends,” he said to me. “I will protect you.”

I was grateful for his intervention and for the fact that I now had a wonderful vantage point to watch the initial proceedings of the Ratha-yatra. Looking back, I cringed seeing the massive crowd of a million people packed together, sweltering in the heat. But they didn’t mind. They were all devotees of Lord Jagannath and had come to take part in His Ratha-yatra. They could easily put up with any inconvenience. As for me, I was thankful that Lord Jagannath had made other arrangements for some of us Western devotees not used to such austerities.

Finally Lord Jagannath was carried out of the temple and placed on His chariot with great pomp. It was like watching a scene from a thousand years ago, as the brahmanas, straining and sweating, rocked the Lord along the road up to His chariot, accompanied by many others blowing conch shells, chanting mantras, and waving yak-tail fans. The synchronized banging of 50 gongs was overwhelming.

Suddenly, Lord Balaram’s chariot started moving as hundreds of pilgrims pulled the long, thick ropes. The chariot moved quickly and seemed to float along a sea of people. Every once in a while the chariot would stop and the kirtan parties would roar with approval, while moving in to get a closer look at the Deity.

The people's enthusiasm was based on the deeper, esoteric understanding of Ratha-yatra: that they were taking Kṛṣṇa back to Vrindavan, His childhood home.

The scriptures tell how Kṛṣṇa, on the plea of killing the demoniac King Kamsa, left His village of Vrindavan at a young age. Though He promised His devotees He would quickly return, He didn't, and He eventually settled further south, in Dwarka, where He reigned as a king with 16,108 queens and palaces.

The deep separation felt by His devotees in Vrindavan is the subject of many devotional scriptures in India.

When Kṛṣṇa finally met His Vrindavan devotees again, on the occasion of a lunar eclipse at Kuruksetra, they convinced Him to return to the pastoral setting of Vrindavan. Placing Him, Balaram, and Subhadra on chariots, they pulled the Lord back to Vrindavan and into their hearts. The festival of Ratha-yatra in Puri is a re-enactment of that loving pastime, giving great joy to devotees.

*bahira haite kare ratha yatra chala
sundaracale yaya prabhu chadi nilacala*

“Externally He gives the excuse that He wants to participate in the Ratha-yatra festival, but actually He wants to leave Jagannatha Puri to go to Sundaracala, the Gundica temple, a replica of Vrindavana.”

[Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Madhya 14.120]

Eventually Subhadra's chariot left, and half an hour later so did the massive chariot of Lord Jagannath. Radhanath Maharaja, Sacinandana Maharaja, and I soon caught up with the ISKCON kirtan in front of Jagannath's chariot. I will never forget the five-hour kirtan we did along the crowded route on the way to Gundica Temple.

We were exhausted from the heat and humidity, but we were enlivened by the historic opportunity to chant and dance directly in front of Lord Jagannath's chariot. I'll never know whether any



I will never forget the five-hour kirtan we did on the way to Gundica Temple

other kirtan groups wanted that choice spot, but they never had a chance. The sheer magnitude of 3,000 ISKCON devotees chanting enthusiastically guaranteed us the place.

And we took full advantage, as Radhanath Maharaja, Sacinandana Maharaja, Sri Prahlada, and I traded off leading the kirtan. We were sweating in the heat, and we drank water by the liter along the way. At one point, I felt I might not be able to continue. I had not eaten all day and I was tired and hungry. Suddenly, the temple priest who had protected me from the police officer appeared and gave me a small plate of maha-prasadam from Lord Jagannath. I honored it with gusto, and it gave me the strength to continue chanting and dancing.

When we finally arrived in front of Gundica Temple we were the only kirtan still going strong. By the Lord's grace, I was leading, and I chanted loudly and from my heart as Jagannath's chariot

passed us and stopped in front of the temple. We kept the kirtan going for another hour and finally moved in front of the chariot, where we sat down in a group and continued with a soft bhajan.

The chariots remained where they had stopped. The next evening the Deities would be taken from the chariots and into Gundica Temple.

People began climbing up and swarming all over the chariots to take darshan of Lord Jagannath.

"Why not?" I thought, and I also jumped up and started making my way to the chariots.

Sri Prahlada caught hold of my arm and smiled. "Sorry," he said. "Hindus only."

I shook my head. "Lord Jagannath means the Lord of the universe," I said, "but many of these priests think He is only the Lord of Puri. Everyone in the universe should have His darsan."

I took a deep breath. "Somehow," I said, "today or tomorrow, I'm going to get up on that chariot and take darsan of the Lord."

Late that night we went back to our hotels, exhausted from the long parade, and we went to sleep.

The next day, at 7:00 AM, we went back to the chariots. There were hundreds of people fighting to climb up the chariots and get close to the Deities. The priests on the chariots were moving the people along quickly, sometimes abruptly.

"Now is my only chance," I thought. "I've come all the way to Jagannath Puri at a time when the Lord comes out of His temple. At any other time of the year it would be impossible for a Westerner like me to have a close darsan of Him."

I mingled with the crowd of people climbing up Lord Balaram's chariot, and I managed to pull myself up to the landing around the inner altar, where people were crowding to have His darsan. I quickly moved forward, but a priest noticed me, and he moved forward with a big stick raised to hit me.

"Only Hindus," he screamed. I quickly turned around and scrambled down off the chariot. Looking back up, I saw him angrily waving the stick at me.

Next I tried Subhadra's chariot. There were fewer people on it, so I managed to climb up more quickly. On the landing, I went straight for the inner altar. I managed to get within a few meters of Subhadra when I was again noticed by a stick-wielding priest. I ran and quickly climbed down the chariot.

I felt frustrated. "I'm not going to have darsan of Lord Jagannath," I thought.

At that moment a priest appeared. "For 100 rupees I'll take you up the chariot and directly in front of the Deity," he said.

"Why not try?" I thought.

I gave him 100 rupees, and he led me to the back of Lord Jagannath's chariot and helped lift me up to where I could get a footing. But as I raised myself further up, another priest with a menacing look suddenly appeared over the railing just above me, brandishing an even bigger stick than the previous priests.

I looked back down for the priest I had paid to help me, but of course he was gone.

At that point it was either accept defeat again, or face the stick. But after all I had gone through I wasn't about to accept either. I yelled out "Jai Jagannath," leaped over the railing, past the priest and into the crowd surging towards the Deity. I crawled on my hands and knees so as not to be noticed, and I was swept forward by the force of the crowd.

Bruised and scratched I finally stood up, and to my amazement found myself standing directly in front of Lord Jagannath. His massive unblinking eyes stared at me as I wondered what to do next. I didn't have long to act, as the crowd of pilgrims behind me were pushing and shoving, jostling to get to the exact spot where I stood.

But I was taller than the Indian people swirling around me, and the four priests guarding the Deity suddenly noticed me. As they simultaneously raised their sticks to hit me, I realized that because of the crowd I couldn't move to avoid their blows. I was standing only inches from Lord Jagannath, so I folded my palms and pleaded, "My Lord, please be merciful."

From the corner of my eye I saw one of the priests appear to have a change of heart. Smiling slightly, he grabbed my sikha and thrust my head downwards to the feet of the Deity. Spontaneously, I reached out with my arms and embraced Lord Jagannath around His lower waist. My arms barely reached halfway around His transcendental form.

I was stunned by my unprecedented good fortune. Although the noise around me was tumultuous, it seemed for the moment that everything went quiet. "Here I am," I thought, "embracing the Lord of the universe, whose audience in Puri any Westerner could only dream of." With the priest pushing my head down even harder, I tightened my embrace of the Lord and prayed.

"My dear Lord," I began, "it is the causeless mercy of my spiritual master that I have been given this rare opportunity to have Your darsan. Please purify my heart and awaken my pure devotion to You. At the end of my life be kind upon me by remembering whatever little service I have done for You, and take me home to Sri Vrindavan, Your transcendental abode in the spiritual sky."

As I finished my prayer I felt the priest's grip on my sikha loosen, a sure sign that my darsan of the Lord was finished. But as I raised my head, he once again caught hold of my sikha and pushed my head back down on the feet of the Deity.

"A chance for one more benediction," I thought.

I tightened my hold on the Lord. "My dear Lord," I prayed, "I also ask You for the privilege of always distributing Your mercy to those less fortunate than I. Be kind and look favorably on our efforts to preach Your glories through our festival program in Poland for many years to come."

Suddenly the priest yanked my head up, and I again found myself standing before the angry brahmanas. I shook my head and freed myself from the grip of the priest. I fell to the ground and quickly moved out of the area on my hands and knees. As I approached the railing I saw yet another priest with a stick. "I won't even mind if he hits me," I said laughing. "I got so much mercy today."

I avoided him and was soon scaling down the side of the Ratha-yatra chariot. When I reached the bottom, I turned and offered dandavats to Lord Jagannath on the ground.

The next day, as Jayatama and I took a taxi to Bhubaneswar for our flight back to Poland, I thought about on the unbelievable experience I'd had in witnessing the Ratha-yatra festival of Puri. But most of all, I wondered at the mercy I'd received from Lord Jagannath Himself. No doubt it was meant as an inspiration to increase my service to His lotus feet. And that service was clear: I was returning to Poland to share my good fortune with all those who would attend our summer festivals.

As we approached the city limits of Puri, I looked back and prayed that I would never forget Lord Jagannath's special mercy upon me.

*ratharudho gacchan pathi milita bhudeva patalaih
stuti pradurbhavam prati padam upakarnya sadayah
daya sindhur bandhuh sakala jagatam sindhu sutaya
jagannathah svami nayana patha gami bhavatu me*

“When Lord Jagannath moves along the road on His Ratha-yatra car, at every step large assemblies of brahmanas loudly chant prayers and sing songs for His pleasure. Hearing their hymns, Lord Jagannath becomes very favorably disposed towards them. He is an ocean of mercy and the true friend of all the worlds. My desire is that Lord Jagannath Swami, along with His consort Laksmi, who was born from the ocean of nectar, be the object of my vision.”

[Sri Jagannathastaka, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu]



THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE

| JUNE 30 - JULY 17, 2006 |

Though I relished every minute of my pilgrimage to Jagannatha Puri, I was worried about the Polish tour. With Jayatama dasa and me in Puri, all the responsibility for organizing the tour was on Nandini dasi. Nandini is certainly capable, but taking care of the whole tour is a lot for one person.

This year we had bigger plans than ever. We had chosen “A Summer of Yoga” as the tour’s theme. Jayatama and Nandini had both taken intensive teacher-training courses in yoga during the year in order to give lessons at the festivals. The Polish media had picked up on the theme, and the main national radio in Poland, Program One, was talking about the festivals every day. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the country’s biggest newspaper, was also advertising the festivals in its daily “Summer Recreation” section.

Just before I left for Puri, Nandini had been busy arranging visas for 250 Russian and Ukrainian devotees, mobilizing 25 tons of equipment kept in storage through the winter, arranging a base in a school on the Baltic coast, and signing contracts for 42 festivals.

But during our stay in Puri neither Jayatam nor I had any contact with her. Our cell phones didn't work, most likely because connections were jammed from the one million other pilgrims using the town's strained telecommunications system.

As soon as we arrived at the airport in Madras for a flight back to Europe, my cell phone started ringing with text messages stored during the previous week. The first one I opened read, "Urgent. Contact me immediately. Fierce opposition. Already one festival canceled. Nandini."

I called Nandini immediately, but because it was late at night in Poland, she didn't answer. I couldn't sit still during the flight back to Europe.

"What sort of problems do you think we're facing?" I asked Jayatam.

"I won't speculate," he said, "but I was expecting trouble this year because the new government is extremely conservative."

Later in the flight I was startled to find an article in the International Herald Tribune entitled "Stung by EU judgment, Poland has a rebuttal."

"Two weeks ago," it began, "the representatives of the European people [European Parliament] sitting in Strasbourg passed a resolution that expressed general alarm at the increase of racial hatred and xenophobia in Europe, mentioning several countries that have had violent racial or religious incidents, but expressing a particular concern for Poland."

Immediately upon arriving at Frankfurt, I called Nandini again. This time she answered and quickly updated me.

"The Catholic Church is closely aligned with the new government," she began, "and it is taking every advantage to assert itself. We have attracted attention with the unprecedented media publicity advertising our festivals."

"There is now a parallel campaign called 'Summer Against the Cults.' In all the media, people are being warned about cults taking advantage of the summer season to spread their propaganda."

“For the past few weeks the priest in the main church in Kolobrzeg, the biggest city on our tour, has been vilifying us in his Sunday sermons. It’s all he talks about. The result is that the city has revoked permission for the choice spot near the beach that it had allocated for our festival in two weeks.

“The priest in Siemysl, where we have our base, is also stirring up sentiment against us. He tells his Sunday congregation to watch their children carefully while we are in town. He’s posting daily warnings about us on a public notice board just outside the church. The mood in the village is tense. There’s more, but I’ll wait until you arrive to tell you everything.”

I mulled over the situation on the flight from Frankfurt to Warsaw. “When I was in Puri,” I thought, “I prayed to Lord Jagannatha for the blessing that I might always distribute His mercy to those less fortunate than I, but such mercy may not always be appreciated by those for whom it is intended. Therefore a preacher has to be tolerant.”

At our tour meeting the next afternoon, I spoke to Nandini about the canceled festival in Kolobrzeg.

“The Indian Ambassador to Poland is supposed to be the guest of honor at that festival,” I said. “It will be a big embarrassment for the Polish government if we have to tell the ambassador that the event has been canceled because of religious discrimination.”

“I’m aware of that,” Nandini said, “and I plan to discuss it in my meeting with the mayor of Kolobrzeg at the end of the week.”

I looked at all the devotees present. “None of us should be discouraged,” I said. “The opposition we’re facing is nothing new. We’ve had opposition every year.”

“But they’re particularly aggressive this year,” said Jayatam, “especially after the recent elections. Our security manager, Raksana dasa, is getting threatening text messages on his cell phone every day warning us not to do any festivals this year.”

“Let’s wait and see the reaction of the people,” I said. “When we go on Harinama tomorrow, we’ll be able to judge the situation.”

The next day the others and I headed for the beach in Pobierowo to advertise that night's festival. As I thought about the concern of the European Parliament about xenophobia in Poland and the bad publicity from the "Summer Against the Cults" campaign, I was apprehensive, to say the least.

As we stepped out of the bus, I looked around. "Maybe the people won't even accept our invitations," I thought.

But the effect of doing festivals for 17 years along the coast was not going to disappear so quickly. As soon as we walked onto the beach the will of the people was manifest, despite the government's opposition.

"A nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood of ideas in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people."

[John F. Kennedy]

The moment our colorful procession of 100 devotees stepped onto the sand, the onlookers grabbed their children, but not in fear. They were pushing the children forward to take photos with us. The devotee women took off the silk garlands I had bought on my trip to Puri and put them around the necks of the kids.

It created a sensation. Everyone wanted to put on a silk flower garland and take a photo with us. But with so many people crowding around us for photos, we were moving down the beach at a snail's pace.

I turned to Amrtananda dasa. "It's great," I said, "but how will the festival ever get advertised at this rate?"

Amrtananda laughed. "I don't think you could get better publicity than this," he said.

As we chanted along the beach, people waved and smiled. And for the first time, many people called out "Hare Krsna!" or "Hare Hare!"

I shook my head. "Things are certainly changing," I said softly, "and for the better."

As we neared a family of sunbathers, a girl of about seven sat up straight when she heard the kirtan. Immediately I saw she was blind. As the Harinama party proceeded she turned her head slightly. She began to smile, and as we got closer she reached into a bag and fumbled to find something. Then she ran forward with a big smile and gave me a one-zloty coin.

“Hare Krsna,” I whispered in her ear.

Another hundred meters down the beach we met the day’s only opposition. A woman came up to the kirtan party and started complaining loudly that we were disturbing (of all things) the wildlife in the area. She pointed to the seagulls that had been scared away by the sound of the Harinama.

“You’re disturbing the poor animals, birds, and fish with your loud racket!” she screamed, attracting a lot of attention from the sunbathers.

Suddenly a young seal poked its head out of the sea just a few meters from us. It slowly swam to the shore and lumbered on to the sand, stopping just two meters from the chanting party. It cocked its head and sat there listening to the kirtan. The people were laughing, and the woman had a look of shock on her face.

“It must be seal that followed us in the water along the beach last year,” I said to the devotees. “Let’s see if it follows us again.”

Sure enough, as we started chanting down the beach the seal jumped back in the water and swam alongside us. Every time we’d stop it would lift its head to watch us.

That evening our festival site was inundated with people. A local schoolteacher came with 50 little girls to the fashion booth, where we dress visitors in saris.

“There’s a wedding in town in one hour,” the teacher said, “and my class has been invited. All the girls want to wear saris from the Hare Krsna festival.”

We had to call in reserves to help dress the girls in time for the event.

At the same time, devotees in the gopi-dot tent almost fainted when a camp counselor appeared with 320 young girls who



The dancers from Bali

wanted their faces decorated. It took the entire evening to complete the task.

As soon as the stage program started, people flocked towards the front to get seats. They sat mesmerized as the dancers from Bali performed the Ramayana in their beautiful traditional costumes.

The next day we went on Harinama on the same beach to announce the evening's performance. The weather was perfect. It had not rained in weeks. In fact, devotees told me they had not seen a cloud in the sky for a month. It was an unusually hot summer, with temperatures in the high 30s.

The situation was ironic, however, because local authorities had banned swimming in the Baltic Sea. They feared the difference between the soaring temperatures and the cold water would be too much of a shock for people. As we chanted along the beach people lay sunbathing, but with no way to get relief from the heat.

I was also feeling the heat. In order to advertise our programs we spend four hours a day chanting in the sun along the beaches. With six festivals a week, it comes to 24 hours of Harinama, and it can be exhausting.

“I’m already tired,” I thought, “and it’s only the first week of the tour. We have seven more weeks to go.”

Then I noticed a number of people on the beach reading Srila Prabhupada’s books, which they had bought at the festival the night before. I couldn’t think of a greater reward for all the austerities, and I felt a surge of renewed energy.

On the way to the festival that evening, I was talking with a devotee. “The Harinama parties are really powerful,” I said. “They awaken people’s appreciation for Krsna consciousness.”

“But unfortunately,” he said, “many thousands of them don’t come to the festivals.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “The Harinamas are festivals in themselves. People get so much benefit just seeing them.”



The Harinamas are festivals in themselves

“Trivikrama Swami told me a story recently,” I continued. “One time he went to see Srila Prabhupada after a Harinama.

“ ‘Did the people like the Harinama this afternoon?’ Srila Prabhupada asked.

“ ‘Yes, Srila Prabhupada,’ he said. ‘Many people enjoyed it.’

“ ‘That’s good’ Srila Prabhupada said. ‘Even if they just appreciate in their minds, they will make spiritual advancement.’ ”

Two days later our festival moved to Revel. During that program, a woman walked around the festival criticizing devotees. Then she came up to me.

“Hey, everyone!” she shouted. “Just look! A wolf in sheep’s clothing! He calls himself a holy man, but his intentions are evil!”

To my surprise, the police quickly arrested her for disorderly conduct and later fined her 800 zlotys.

The next day, Nandini met the mayor of Kolobrzeg. He knew that our festival had been canceled, but he had not been involved in the matter. Nandini pressed him to override the decision and give us back the choice spot by the beach.

“That, I cannot do,” the mayor said, “but because the Indian Ambassador is coming, I will give you another venue – the square in the center of town. It’s full of tourists all summer long.”

His secretary gasped. “Mr. Mayor,” she said, “You’re a brave man to give them that square. Remember, there are elections this fall.”

A week later we began a three-day festival in the square. The weather was beautiful, and thousands flocked to the site. In addition to our normal program, a group of dancers from Rajasthan, organized by the Indian embassy, enchanted the crowd.

My Australian Godbrother Kurma das also pleased the crowd with his cooking demonstrations in one of our tents. And Jayatām’s yoga tent was packed with young and old for the entire festival.

On the last day, we held an Indian wedding. Subuddhi Raya das and his bride, Radha Katha dasi, took their vows before a

thousand people. The crowd on the broad square was so large that no one could move.

After the wedding the Indian Ambassador and the mayor spoke from the stage. I was in the sound tent relishing every minute, as the ambassador praised our efforts to share the culture of India with the people of Poland. As I looked over the huge audience, I marveled at how, despite the carefully orchestrated opposition, our festivals were bigger and more successful than ever.

And as if to put the icing on the cake, the Lord sent a message of assurance in a phone call from Pracarananda dasa, who is in charge of our movement's relations with the government.

"Maharaja," he said, "you may be interested to know that the Ministry of Internal Affairs has just released a report on the cults in Poland. It's a comprehensive study of each and every group the government considers dangerous. To my amazement, we're not listed. In fact, we're not even mentioned once. Things are changing. Of course it's not the end of our problems with the opposition, but it's a big step in the right direction."

I was so elated by the news that I walked around the festival site in a state of euphoria. And the cherry was put on the icing when a devotee who had been in the Questions and Answers tent came up to me.

"Maharaja," he said, "a teacher from a local high school came to the tent. She really appreciated the ambassador's praise of our festival, and you'll be stunned by what she said."

"Please tell me," I answered.

"She told me that the Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement is just what the youth of Poland need," he said, "and that we should join forces with the government to fight the cults."

Once again, the truth of Srila Prabhupada's words came to my mind:

"We have no business creating enemies, but the process is such that non-devotees will always be inimical toward us. Nevertheless, as stated in the sastras, a devotee should be both tolerant and merciful. Devotees engaged in preaching should be prepared to

be accused by ignorant persons, and yet they must be very merciful to the fallen conditioned souls. If one can execute his duty in the disciplic succession of Narada Muni, his service will surely be recognized. We must sincerely serve the Lord and not be deterred by so-called enemies.”

[Srimad-Bhagavatam 6.5.39, purport]



FOR THE BENEFIT OF EVERYONE

| JULY 18 - JULY 22, 2006 |

Amritananda dasa and I were on our way to set up a festival when we stopped at a car lot in Trzebiatow to look at a truck. We were greeted by the owner of the lot, a man in his 70s.

“You have not been here for a long time,” he said. “For years you held your festival every summer here. Then you stopped, and you started doing them nearby, in Mrzezyno.”

“More people,” I said quickly. I was anxious to see the truck and get to the festival.

“Do you know how much the people of Trzebiatow miss your festivals?” he said. “We’re a small country town, and nothing ever happens here. Your festivals were the highlight of the year for us.”

Suddenly the truck wasn’t important any more. “How could I be so callous?” I thought. “How could I not reciprocate with this man’s interest in Krsna consciousness?”

We spoke for a while, and after a brief look at the truck, the three of us walked back to the van. “I’ll be at the festival in

Mrzezyno tonight with my granddaughter,” the man said. “She’s ten and has been going to your festival since she was five.”

As we drove away, I thought about how a devotee should never be so busy that he can’t address someone’s interest in devotional service to the Lord. Sharing Kṛṣṇa consciousness is the very essence of a devotee’s life.

“After all,” I thought, “it wasn’t so long ago that I was also in forgetfulness of the Lord. Had Viṣṇujana Maharaja not taken the time to preach to me, where would I be now?”

I thought of a passage from Sri Caitanya Caritamṛta:

“Although Vasudeva Vipra was a leper and had suffered greatly, still Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu cured him. The only return the Lord wanted was that Vasudeva preach the instructions of Kṛṣṇa and liberate all human beings. That is the process of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. Each and every member of this Society was rescued from a very abominable condition, but now they are engaged in preaching the cult of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.”

[Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta Madhya 7, 148 purport]

When we arrived at the festival site in Mrzezyno I was surprised to see that the stage crew and tent crew had not yet begun setting up. Then I saw Nandini dasi talking nearby to some frowning men.

“What’s happening?” I asked a devotee.

“The shop owners in the area don’t want us to set up the festival here,” he said. “They say it detracts from their sales. They’ve blocked our semi-trailer from entering the area.”

Although it was getting late, I decided not to intervene. I would let Nandini handle the situation. Negotiating under pressure is her forte.

After an anxious half hour she came over to speak to me.

“Guru Maharaja,” she said, “they are adamant about not letting us use the same spot we had last year. It blocks the view of their stores. Although we legally have permission to set up where



The new location proved to be better than ever

we want and could force the issue, I don't think it would be wise. These people will be here every year and become more and more antagonistic. I suggest we compromise."

My initial reaction was one of anger and a desire to assert our rights, but when I heard Nandini's cool-headed suggestion, I calmed down and agreed. Our willingness to cooperate softened the hearts of the store owners, and they suggested a spot nearby. Coincidentally, it faced their stores, making them appear to be part of our festival. Later that evening, I visited one of the stores to buy some fruit.

"How's business?" I asked the owner.

He smiled. "Better than ever," he said.

By the Lord's arrangement, the new location proved to be better for us than the other one, and the preaching too was better than ever in Mrzezyno. During the festival, I complimented Nandini on her diplomatic handling of the affair, as even a devotee must sometimes use diplomacy:

"A diplomat in the material world knows how to deal with people, especially in political affairs. In many instances we have

seen the diplomacy of Rupa Gosvami, Raghunatha dasa Gosvami and Ramananda Raya employed in the service of the Lord. When Raghunatha dasa Gosvami's father and uncle were to be arrested by government officials, Raghunatha dasa Gosvami hid them and personally met the government officers and settled the affair diplomatically. The conclusion is that diplomacy used for the service of the Lord is a form of devotional service."

[Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Madhya 12.45, purport]

I have often seen devotional service soften a person's heart, as the hearts of the storeowners were softened, and such transformations deepen my faith in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. In fact, I live for such moments because for me they are manifestations of Gaura-sakti, the internal spiritual potency of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu. They are the reward for whatever austerities a preacher goes through in spreading the teachings of the Lord.

Another case came later in that evening.

As always, thousands of people came to the event. At the end, when we were having the final kīrtan, I noticed Nandini sitting and talking with a gentleman. Even the roar of the kīrtan and the fact that 100 children were dancing with us, causing a cloud of dust to rise above the festival, didn't disturb their conversation. Only when we had finished and most people had left the festival grounds, did Nandini and the man finish and say goodbye.

I asked Nandini about the man. I could see that she had been touched by Lord Caitanya's mercy upon a fallen soul of Kali-yuga.

"He's in charge of cultural affairs in Trzebiatow, nearby," Nandini said. "He helped us get permission and organize our festivals there for years. He was sad that we don't hold them there any longer."

I thought of the elderly man at the car lot. "Yes," I said, "I know someone else in Trzebiatow who feels the same way."

"Well," said Nandini, "This gentleman said he remembers how we shared many things about Kṛṣṇa consciousness with him

over the years. 'I was always listening to you,' he told me, 'but nothing really made sense to me at the time.'

"Then several months ago, his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was devastated. He had no one to turn to for solace. Watching his mother die, he said, was the most agonizing time of his life.

"Then suddenly, he began remembering little bits and pieces of the knowledge we had given him in personal discussions and at the festivals. 'I remembered about karma,' he said, 'and reincarnation and the temporary nature of this world and the reality of the spiritual world.' It all worked like a balm to sooth his suffering soul, he said.

"As the days went by and the situation became tense, he said he found himself becoming calmer and reflecting on the wisdom we had shared with him. When his mother finally died, it was painful for him, but he was able to tolerate it. He told me, 'I came here today to thank you for the spiritual knowledge you gave me.'

"I told him that we were happy to share with him what had also saved us. I wanted to reciprocate with him for all he had done for our festivals in Trzebiatow, so I took him to the gift shop to give him some presents.

"When he realized what I was doing, he said, 'The real gift you can give me is not in here.'

"Then he took me outside the gift shop and to the book table. He picked up a Bhagavad-gita and said, 'This is the best gift anyone can receive.'

"Then, to my amazement, he picked up a set of japa beads from the table. 'This too,' he said.

" 'I have to reciprocate with your kindness in a spiritual way,' he said. 'The little I have learned has helped me so much. I can only imagine how much there is to be gained by going deeper.'

"With that he left a donation and walked back to his car. I am amazed, Guru Maharaja, how this festival program is changing the hearts of so many fallen souls."

“I am too,” I replied, shaking my head. “There must be many similar stories among the thousands of people who come to our festivals. Let us pray for the privilege to be engaged in this way for many years to come. Such festivals are the desire of the Lord and His pure representatives, who long ago chalked out a plan to flood the world with the ocean of love of God.”

That evening, before I went to bed, I came upon a passage in *Prema Vilasa*, by Sri Nityananda dasa:

“One morning Jiva Goswami summoned Srinivasa Acarya and Narottam das Thakur.

“ ‘Both of you take permission from your spiritual masters before departing for Bengal with the books,’ he said.

“The two prabhus first went to Lokanatha Goswami.

“Lokanatha Goswami said, ‘What you are about to do is the perfection of everything I have taught you. Remember to practice renunciation; do not use perfumed oil or other luxurious items. Eat simply – and only once a day.

“ ‘Serve the Vaisnavas with the same love and devotion you serve Krsna. Remain always vigilant and avoid offenses while rendering devotional service.

“ ‘And most important, perform sankirtan and hold grand festivals for the benefit of everyone. That is my order.’ ”

[*Prema Vilasa*, Sri Nityananda das, Twelfth Vilasa]



THE NEW SITE

| JULY 23 - 26, 2006 |

Our festivals continued, unaffected by the deceitful anti-cult campaign of the government. At least for the time being, we had the upper hand: our programs were entertaining tens of thousands of people every week, giving us good publicity. Still, I had learned long ago never to underestimate the enemy.

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, your victory will not stand in doubt.”

[The Art of War, Sun Tzu, Chapter 10, Text 31]

So it came as no surprise when we received what appeared to be a blow to our plans for the upcoming Woodstock festival. One morning Nandini dasi had a call from the organizer of the event, our good friend Jurek Owskiak.

“I’m getting pressure from higher up,” Jurek said, “so I’m going to have to ask you to decrease the size of your village at Woodstock this year. You’ll also have to move from the hill overlooking the festival where you were last year to a corner of the site.”

Nandini was struck. “What happened?” she said. “Why such a big change?”

“You know the present political climate, as well as I do,” he said. “A big site like you had in previous years attracts too much attention and puts the whole Woodstock festival in jeopardy. Don’t forget, we have a common enemy.”

Nandini came to me and told me about the call.

“Do what he says,” I told her. “When selling an elephant one shouldn’t haggle over the price of the trident for controlling it.”

The next day Nandini, Jayatam das, and Bhakta Dominique drove 300 kilometers to Kostrzyn, the town where Woodstock would be held. Jurek’s secretary showed them a small spot near the entrance to the festival.

“You have 50 meters by 50 meters,” he said.

The devotees stood dumbfounded, looking at the tiny area.

Nandini, with her usual sharp intelligence, came up with an idea. “It’s not practical from the point of security,” she said. “You know how much the kids love our village, especially the food distribution. Last year we distributed more than 110,000 plates. There’s not enough room here. There will be a riot for the food.”



The kids love our festival...and the prasadam

“Hmm,” said the secretary, “that’s true. All right, 100 meters by 100 meters, but not a centimeter more.”

Nandini called me as they drove back to our summer base.

“Guru Maharaja,” she said, “I know we like to do our festivals in a big way, but we’ll have to resign ourselves to something smaller this year. Nevertheless, Jayatam, Dominique, and I think the location and size of the new site are not so bad. All the kids will see us as they come into Woodstock. What’s more, our site will be packed. It will be an intimate mood.” Two weeks later,



All the kids will see us as they come into Woodstock

we finished the first half of our program along the Baltic Coast. We packed up everything, and with all 250 devotees, drove to Kostrzyn. I went straight to the new site. Dominique had already set up the main tent, one-third the size of last year's.

I was impressed, and I could not help smiling. "Actually," I said to Dominique, "I think this spot is better. We're right in the thick of things with the kids."

As I walked around inspecting the site and the preparations, Jayatam came up to me.

"Guru Maharaja," he said, "the elderly man over there is asking if he can buy the large painting of Radha and Krsna, the centerpiece in the backdrop behind the stage."

"It's huge," I replied.

"He doesn't mind," Jayatam said. "He wants to put it in his home. He said we come once a year and then go away. He misses us all year, but if he has the painting, he'll always feel close to God."

"Tell him he can pick it up the day after Woodstock," I said.

"What's the price?" Jayatam asked.

"Give it to him," I said. "Who can put a price on love of God?"

As we drove away from the site, I saw a young man in his 20s with long hair walking in with a backpack.

"He's arriving early," I said to Amritananda das.

Then I noticed he had a japa bag in his hand and was chanting.

"Look," I said to Amritananda, "he's chanting. Is he one of our men?"

Amritananda looked closer. "I don't think so," he said. "I've never seen him before."

"Call him over," I said.

The young man came up to the car. "Are you a Hare Krsna devotee?" I asked him.

He looked puzzled. "I... uh... like to read Bhagavad-gita," he said.

"Do you live in a temple?" I asked.

"A temple?" he said.

"Well," I said, "where did you learn to chant on beads?"

"From Bhaktivedanta," he said.

Amritananda and I looked at each other.

"Some time ago," he said, "I went on the internet looking for spiritual knowledge and came across the Bhagavad-gita As It is. I ordered it and began reading. Several times Bhaktivedanta mentioned the importance of chanting Hare Krsna. I eventually discovered that chanting means chanting on beads. So that's what I do."

"And you've never met devotees?" I said.

"Devotees?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "You see over there? There's a whole village being erected called Krsna's Village of Peace. For the next week you can meet devotees of Krsna and learn more about chanting Hare Krsna."

"Well... Okay," he said.

"We'll speak more over the next week," I said as we drove off.

For the next few days we worked feverishly to construct the village. I was tired from a month of festivals along the coast, but the fatigue soon vanished as I thought about the prospects ahead.

"Three hundred thousand people will get a strong dose of Krsna consciousness," I said excitedly to Amritananda as we helped unload 22 tons of foodstuffs from a truck into a kitchen. "One may have to wait many lifetimes for such an opportunity."

Nandini saw a hint of the success ahead when she went to a public school where we wanted to board our devotees and to cook for the festival. Nandini was apprehensive. Last year she had received a cold reception from the headmistress of the school.

But this time the headmistress greeted her warmly. "I am so happy you have come back to Kostrzyn," she said to Nandini.

“You are welcome to use the school facilities during the Woodstock festival.”

“Thank you,” Nandini said. “But you are very different from last year. What made you change?”

The headmistress smiled. “I visited your village at Woodstock last year,” she said. “When I came, one of your leaders was speaking on the stage. After listening to his talk, I understood that the values you uphold are everything we try to impress on the children we teach. But the real change came when I walked through the whole Woodstock festival. I quickly went back to your village, grateful for the atmosphere of peace, tranquility, and cleanliness.

“The next day I returned to your village, but for a different reason. My father had recently died, and I was deeply affected. I was looking for answers to many questions about life. I ended up in the yoga tent, and the instructor taught us about asanas as well as philosophy. I found much relief from my difficulties. Since then I practice yoga three times a week and have introduced yoga classes in the school.”

“That’s wonderful,” Nandini said. “I’m glad to hear we made such a difference in your life.”

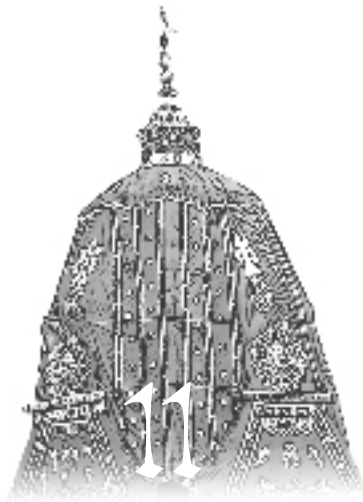
“Can I ask one more favor?” the headmistress said. “I am looking for an English teacher for the school, but I want someone high-class, with spiritual values. Out of love for the children, I can’t imagine employing anyone with lower standards. I’ll provide a good salary, a nice house, insurance – everything. Just get me a Hare Krsna to teach the children.”

Nandini laughed with pleasure. “I’ll try my best,” she said.

The headmistress walked Nandini to the door. “I’m looking forward to this year’s festival,” she said, “and I’d like to compliment you on your new site. It’s perfect, right at the entrance of the festival, a good place for spreading your message. From what I’ve heard, the whole town of Kostrzyn will be visiting Woodstock, or better yet, Krsna’s Village of Peace.” Nandini could not help smiling and laughing the whole way as she drove back to the festival.

“People are praising our activities,” Srila Prabhupada once said. “If we keep our standard, then they will appreciate. They’ll say, ‘Oh, it is very nice, these people are good.’ Sometimes in [news]papers they say, ‘These Hare Krsna people are nice. We want more of them.’ ”

[Srimad-Bhagavatam class, Los Angeles, December 7, 1975]



MODERN-DAY PASTIMES

| JULY 27 - AUGUST 1, 2006 |

Devotees worked day and night for a week to get Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace up and running in time for the Woodstock Festival. In the evenings, people from the nearby town of Kostrzyn would drive out to the site and sit on the grass watching devotees set up the tents. Whenever a piece of framework for the large tent was raised or a lamppost installed, they would clap and cheer.

"The first year we came, the townspeople stayed away from our village out of fear," said Jayatām das one evening. "The second year they came out of curiosity. But this year they seem to be coming because they really like us."

At that moment a group of young priests walked by without acknowledging us.

"I wish that were true for everyone," I said.

Two days before the festival began, I went with Jayatām and Nandini dāśī to the main stage to meet the organizer, Jurek Owsiak. I hadn't seen Jurek since last year's festival, so I asked Jayatām if he was in good health.

“He’s fine,” Jayatam replied. “He was concerned about getting enough security, but it’s been resolved. Good weather is predicted, so he’s in good spirits. But there is one thing that’s bothering him. It comes up every year.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“A certain Christian group,” he said. “Every year they come with a heavy proselytizing mood, creating an atmosphere of animosity. Although he welcomes everyone, he’s thinking to refuse them this year.”

As we came around the back of the big stage we ran into Jurek. Immediately, he and I hugged each other. “Maharaja,” he said, “we’ve built this event up together for the past 11 years. It’s been a success every year because of our cooperation. Leaders of the Christian group that was antagonistic the last few years visited me this morning. You’ll be pleased to know that this year they’ve agreed to work with us in a spirit of reconciliation. I’m leaving it to both of you.”

My eyebrows went up. “Really?” I said, “Last year they were openly critical of you and us.”

“Yes,” he replied, “but this year they want to share their message of love.”

“I hope it happens,” I said.

On the way back to our village, Jayatam updated me on the activities planned for our village at Woodstock.

“In our tents we’ll have yoga classes, bhajans, questions-and-answers, face painting, astrology, books and various exhibits. In the big tent we’ll have a stage program continuously for 15 hours a day. And we’ll be distributing prasadam non-stop, 24 hours a day, for 3 days from the food distribution tent. On top of that, Harinama samkirtan will be going out daily.”

“And six Ratha-yatras!” Nandini piped up.

“What?” I said. “Six Rathayatras? Really?”

“You weren’t at the meeting last night, Guru Maharaja,” Nandini said. “We decided to put more energy into taking our

message to the kids with Ratha-yatra. We'll have the parade twice a day through the main areas of Woodstock."

Black Summer Crush, a rock band from America, arrived that night. I had met the band's leader, a devotee named Bhakta Scott, during a visit to the Laguna Beach temple in April. When I sent a CD by the band to Jurek, he asked that they play on the main stage at Woodstock and gave them prime time.

The other band members were also favorable to Krsna consciousness, but when we took them to their Spartan quarters in one of the schools we were renting, they balked. Nandini decided to find a hotel for them, even though it was late at night. But as she called around it became apparent that because of Woodstock, all hotel facilities had been booked months in advance. On her last try, by Krsna's grace, she found something more than adequate.

She called a hotel 120 kilometers away. "Sorry," said the woman at the hotel, "all the rooms have been booked for months. Wait! I recognize your voice. You phoned me two years ago looking for a spring base for the members of your Festival of India. Do you remember?"

"Let me think," said Nandini. "Yes, I do remember now."

Nandini laughed. "At that time you also said there was no room," she said.

"But we had such a nice discussion about life," the woman replied. "Many things you said have helped me since then. And I'd like to help you now. I own a special facility for conferences and banquets that I rent only to VIPs. The last people to rent it were a group of politicians from Germany three months ago. I would be more than happy to rent several rooms for your band."

"Where is it?" said Nandini.

"Fifteen minutes' drive from Woodstock," the woman said.

We opened our village early the next morning, a day before the festival – a tradition we have maintained for years. Within minutes, long lines of young people formed in front of our food-distribution tent. I joined the servers, and the first person who



"I've been waiting a whole year for this meal, he said."

came forward greeted me with a smile. "I've been waiting a whole year for this meal," he said.

Later in the morning 100 devotees gathered in front of our huge Ratha-yatra cart on the field. I gave a short talk about the meaning of Ratha-yatra and brought out 20,000 colorful invitations for devotees to distribute. As we pulled the cart along the main road of the festival grounds, many young people joined the parade, chanting and dancing with us. I noticed that very few of our invitations ended up on the ground. I made a mental note: "It means many people will come to our village over the next three days."

Sure enough, that evening our village was packed as the kids enjoyed prasadam along with our stage show and the activities in our tents.

The next day was the first official day of Woodstock. Out of curiosity, I sent Nandini and Jayatam to the hill where our village

had been situated last year. Two circus tents stood on the spot, and a number of well-known writers, poets, and entertainers were scheduled to speak during the festival.

When Jayatam and Nandini arrived a film crew was interviewing one of the speakers. Jayatam and Nandini immediately recognized the woman conducting the interview as a reporter for Channel One, the main television station in Poland. For the first time, Jurek was allowing national television to film Woodstock.

Jayatam and Nandini waited patiently and when the interview was finished, they stepped forward and introduced themselves. After a few minutes of discussion, the woman accepted their invitation to visit our village below.

As Jayatam and Nandini walked back down the hill, Jayatam called to me. When he came up to me, he whispered that national television was coming to film the food distribution. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Within minutes the television crew was filming the distribution and interviewing the kids.

"I come to Woodstock for three things," said a boy with a Mohawk haircut into the camera. "Music, beer, and Hare Krsna food."



"Music, beer, and Hare Krsna food."

The woman interviewed one of our cooks, Krsna Sambandha dasa. The woman kept the camera rolling as he methodically listed the amount of bhoga we were cooking. “Four tons of rice,” he said, “two tons of semolina, two tons of sugar, two tons of frozen vegetables, and two tons of dhal.”

“And it’s all offered to God, to Krsna,” he concluded with a smile.

After filming, the reporter accepted prasadam. She looked around at our colorful village, buzzing with activity. “There’s so much to write about here,” she said to her cameraman.

That night the story was on prime-time evening news, with an audience of millions.

Jayatam told me about the newscast. “You know,” he said, “Jurek moved us down here to avoid publicity, but in the end we got more publicity than we could ever have imagined.”

“You and Nandini get the credit for that one,” I said with a smile. “You went up the hill and found the television crew. There’s a saying: If the mountain will not come to Muhammad, then Muhammad will go to the mountain.”

Jayatam looked puzzled. “Mountain? Muhammed?” he said.

I laughed. “I’ll explain after the festival,” I said.

That night Black Summer Crush played on the main stage to a crowd of 150,000. They enthralled the kids with their unique style of rock ‘n’ roll and then thrilled the audience by chanting Hare Krsna as their last song. As Bhakta Scott’s wife, Carmen, led the kirtan, many in the audience stood transfixed by the transcendental sound vibration.

On the second and last day of Woodstock, we took our Rathayatra cart out early for the first parade of the day. As we started pulling it down the crowded road, suddenly another camera crew appeared, and after panning the large crowd chanting and dancing, started filming the arati being offering to the Jagannatha Deities on the cart.

“Who are they?” I shouted to a Polish devotee.

“Channel Two,” he shouted back, “the second biggest station in Poland!”

I looked up at the cart and saw a mountain of fruit on the platform near the Deities. “Haribol!” I shouted to the pujaris. “Start throwing the fruit to the crowd!”

“But the arotika is going on,” one called back.

“It doesn’t matter!” I yelled. “National television is filming!”

They all stood staring at me, looking puzzled.

I ran to the cart, jumped up on one of the big wheels, pulled myself over the railing, and grabbed some fruit. I turned around and began throwing apples, bananas, and oranges to the crowd. The people roared with pleasure and raised their arms to catch the fruit as it sailed through the air. Some people made fantastic catches. Others, less coordinated, fumbled with the fruit as it fell. One boy, in his eagerness to catch a banana flying by, put up both hands and the banana exploded into mush all over him.

A number of kids were simultaneously chanting and dancing . . . and eating fruit.

That evening the blissful scene was aired on Channel Two news. The loud chanting of Krsna’s holy names resounded in the background.



The kids were simultaneously chanting and dancing... and eating fruit

Later that day Rasikendra dasa, our head cook, assured me that we would distribute more plates of prasadam than last year. “We’ll do more than 115,000 plates this year,” he said, exhausted but blissful.

As I passed the Question-and-Answer tent in the afternoon, Trisama das, the devotee who was speaking at the time, came outside briefly to talk with me.

“The quality of the kids at Woodstock is better than ever,” he said. “The Yoga tent has been packed since the day it opened. These kids are eager for Kṛṣṇa consciousness like never before.”

Late in the afternoon the Ratha-yatra parade pulled out for its sixth and final procession. The majestic cart with its canopy of red, yellow, and white billowing in the soft breeze seemed to be sailing through an ocean of people.

It seemed to me that this Ratha-yatra was even more blissful than the one I had seen in the holy dham of Jagannatha Puri because now Lord Jagannatha was giving His blessings to these Western boys and girls who are so conditioned by material life.

“Śrīla Viṣvanatha Cakravartī Thākura points out that just as a lamp does not seem to shine as brightly in sunlight as it does in the shade, or as a diamond does not seem as brilliant on a silver platter as it does on a plate of blue glass, the Lord’s pastimes as Govinda do not seem as amazing in the transcendental abode of Vaikuntha as they do within the material realm of Maya. Lord Kṛṣṇa comes to the earth and within the darkness of material existence these brilliant, liberated pastimes give unlimited ecstasy to the surrendered devotees of the Lord.”

[Srimad-Bhagavatam 10.14.37, purport]

As we chanted down the road for the last time through the thousands of kids, many called out to us:

“Hare Kṛṣṇa!”

“Great food!”

“We love your village!”

At one point I stopped the cart and took the microphone. I started leading the kīrtan, quickly building it up to a peak.

Suddenly a young man in a drunken stupor came stumbling into the kirtan. He was a fearful sight with his disheveled hair and his body covered with dirt. His clothes were torn, one arm was in a cast, and a knife was tucked into his waist. He stood before me, mumbling incoherently with a wild look in his eyes.

My first reaction was one of fear and then shock. Then I calmed down. "Let's see the power of the holy names," I thought.

I took the young man's hand and began to dance with him. His half-closed eyes opened in astonishment as we danced together in front of Jagannatha, Lord of the Universe. Seeing us, the devotees became more enthusiastic and the pace of the kirtan increased. Suddenly my new friend and I were dancing wildly. A big smile appeared on his face as he tried his best to utter the words of the mahamantra.

Because of his drunken state, he was soon exhausted. I started chanting, "Nitai Gaura Hari Bol!"

Suddenly the young man opened his arms, rushed forward, and hugged me. Then as the devotees wildly applauded, he kissed me on the cheek, grabbed the microphone, and began singing in a sweet voice: "Nitai! Nitai! Nitai!"

Then he grabbed a ceremonial broom hanging in front of the chariot and began to sweep the road in front of Lord Jagannatha. Taking it as a sign from the Lord, I signaled to the devotees to start pulling the ropes and we started down the road again, our friend sweeping the road all the way. We were all mesmerized, witnessing the modern-day pastimes of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu.

Suddenly, as we rounded a corner I was surprised to see a group of some 400 Christians led by several priests, chanting, dancing, and waving flags down a road that would intersect ours 50 meters ahead.

"What should we do?" I thought. "Turn around and avoid a confrontation or slow down and let them go ahead of us?"

The other devotees looked at me for a sign. I smiled. "The moment of reconciliation," I said to myself. I motioned to proceed forward.

Within minutes the two chanting parties converged. Moving together down the broad avenue packed with festival-goers we continued chanting our praises of God. The mood was amicable and respectful. As we walked along together I exchanged several smiles with the priests. Many of the young people walking by noticed the friendly interaction and gave the thumbs up. After 15 minutes, the Christian group branched off on another side road.

It was such a change from the past that I wished Jurek and many more could have seen it.

I suppose the Lord did, however, because that night an article appeared in the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the biggest newspaper in Poland. It was headlined, “Hare Krsna and Jesus – Tolerance at the Woodstock Festival.”

The last paragraph summed up the encounter:

“On Wednesday, Lord Krsna’s chariot was being pulled down the main avenue of Woodstock by his devotees, when it met a parade of Christians. ‘Hare Krsna!’ sang one group as the two approached. ‘Lord Jesus!’ called out the other. When they met, two happy dancers – one a Catholic priest and the other a devotee of Krsna – came forward. To the amazement of all present they stood face to face smiling and swinging to the rhythm of their own melodies. It lasted 20 minutes, though we hoped it would last forever.”

As we chanted on our way back to the festival site and the remaining hours of Woodstock, I remembered Jurek’s words of assurance just before the festival began: “They’ve agreed to work with us in a spirit of reconciliation. I’m leaving it to both of you.”

Whether it was the cowherd boy Lord Krsna or the young shepherd Jesus Christ, it appeared the great Woodstock Festival had been purified of all animosity and both groups were now free to peacefully share their message of love.

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb; and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”

[Holy Bible, Isaiah 11.6]



NO ORDINARY FESTIVAL

| AUGUST 2 - 7, 2006 |

After Woodstock, we moved our operation back to the Baltic coast. It wasn't easy. Our 250 devotees were tired from the 18 festivals in July, not to mention Woodstock. Only their determination to serve guru and Gauranga enabled us to set up a festival in the town of Dzwirzyno after a break of only three days.

We held Harinama in the morning to advertise the program, and more than 5,000 people came that afternoon. Certainly the demigods helped: it was sunny while we did Harinama on the beach, but by late afternoon the sky had become overcast and most people left the beach and came straight to our event.

*devan bhavayatanena te deva bhavayantu vah parasparam
bhavayanta sreyaḥ param avapsyatha*

“The demigods, being pleased by sacrifices, will also please you, and thus, by cooperation between men and demigods, prosperity will reign for all.”

[Bhagavad-gita 3.11]



It was sunny while we did Harinama on the beach

After the grandeur and majesty of Krsna's Village of Peace at Woodstock, the festival seemed small, but that didn't diminish the quality of those who attended. I went into the Book tent and saw people photographing our beautiful Deities, Sri Sri Gandarvika-Giridhari on Their altar, while others browsed through Srila Prabhupada's books.

As a young girl and her mother left the tent, Radha Caran das approached me. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "that 11-year-old girl was one of the most amazing children I have ever met. She came in with her mother and went straight to the altar. She stood there with folded hands gazing at the Deities for a long time.

"Her mother told me this was the first time they had met us, but her daughter was displaying an amazing amount of devotion for everything we do. She said, 'Since my daughter was a small

child, she was always saying Hare Krsna. I don't know where she learned it. I never taught her. I knew nothing about you.

“ ‘One day, she asked me to buy her a sari. Can you imagine? Where was I going to buy a sari in a small Polish village? Two years ago she shocked the priest and the congregation at mass when she refused the wafer. She told the priest she was Krsna's devotee.

“ ‘This year in religion class she told her teacher that all religions are good, but only in India do people know who is God. She became defiant when challenged that Hindus are crazy for not eating meat, saying that the killers of animals will suffer for many births. My little daughter, preaching reincarnation!

“ ‘When she saw you people singing on the beach this morning her face lit up like never before, and she insisted on going to your festival. When we saw you singing on the stage she announced that this is the best way to pray, and now I can't get her away from your altar. Just look. She's staring at the statues as if she were in love.’ ”

Radha Caran stood there, beaming. “What do you think of that Guru Maharaja?” he said.

“You know,” I said, “I think there are many devotees taking birth all over the planet who will continue the work that Srila Prabhupada started.”

*purvabhyasena tenaiva
briyate hy avaso 'pi sah
jijnasur api yogasya
sabda-brahmativartate*

“By virtue of the divine consciousness of his previous life, he automatically becomes attracted to the yogic principles – even without seeking them. Such an inquisitive transcendentalist stands always above the ritualistic principles of the scriptures.”

[Bhagavad-gita 6.44]

As I left the Book tent I saw the head of the security company that guards our festivals. He was part of a team of four security men protecting the festivals during the month leading up to Woodstock. Another group from the company has since replaced them, but he was in uniform and appeared to be on duty.

"What a surprise!" I said. "I thought you had gone home for a vacation."

He laughed. "Yes," he said, "I am on vacation, on your tour. When I got home I missed the festivals so much I decided to come back with my family. They're watching the stage show, and I'm guarding the event."

"Really?" I said. "You mean you're working during your vacation?"

"I don't consider it work," he said. "It's pleasure."

"He's truly on his way back to Godhead," I thought. "He's rendering devotional service with no thought of material reward."

As I approached the restaurant I saw a man I had noticed earlier on Harinama. As our chanting party stepped on to the soft sands of the beach that morning, most devotees took off their shoes. One devotee was in charge of putting them all in a large plastic bag to carry over his shoulder behind us, in case any devotees needed their shoes again.

As soon as we started down the beach a man got up from sunbathing and asked if he could carry the bag. At first I thought he was joking, but then he took the bag and followed us for an hour, all the way down the beach and back. I had the impression he might be mentally impaired, but when I saw him at the festival – dressed in fine clothes, with his equally well-dressed wife and two children – I understood that he was a professional person.

"Amazing," I thought. "Such a high-class person inspired to perform such a humble service for the devotees."

Just then I saw Nandini dasi speaking to a man and woman at a table next to the restaurant. She motioned for me to come over and introduced them as father and daughter. The man was the baker in the town where we have our summer base.

"His wife died recently," Nandini said.

The young woman turned to me. "Nandini has been so kind in helping us come to terms with my mother's death," she said. "Your philosophy makes so much sense. My mother is gone, but I know she is living elsewhere, continuing on her path back to God. Previously I was attracted to the cultural aspect of your festival – the music, dance, and theater, but now I realize it has much more to offer. Your philosophy gives a sense of purpose and higher meaning to life."

Another woman at the same table spoke up.

"Excuse me," she said, "I hope I'm not being rude by interrupting."

"Not at all," Nandini said.

"I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with this young lady," the woman continued. "I must say I am also impressed with your philosophy. This is the second time I have come to one of your festivals. Last year I was so skeptical I wouldn't even speak to any of you. I simply looked around. In fact, I don't know what brought me back again this year. But after hearing what this lady has to say about her mother I've changed my opinion. The solutions you propose to the problems of life are truly remarkable."

"May I ask who you are?" said Nandini.

The woman smiled. "I'm a lawyer from Warsaw," she said.

Nandini turned to the woman's husband. "And what do you do?" she said.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he said.

"He's one of the most prominent politicians in Poland," his wife said.

Just at that moment I received a signal from the stage manager that I was due to give my lecture in five minutes.

I excused myself. "We'll be listening to learn more," the husband said.

As I walked up the steps of the stage I reflected on the hundreds of lectures I give on the tour. "I must always remember how important they are," I thought. "For some, like the father and



The knowledge we give relieves them from material miseries

daughter I just met, the knowledge we give relieves them from the miseries of material existence.”

From the stage I looked out at the audience and saw among the crowd the mother and her 11-year-old daughter, the head of the security company, the man who carried the bag of shoes, the baker and his daughter, and the lawyer and the politician – all eager to hear.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” I began, “I thank you for being present today and participating in this great event. As many of you have already experienced, this is no ordinary festival: it presents a spiritual culture that elevates us to the transcendental platform. We encourage you to stay with us this evening and experience the wonderful world of Krsna consciousness, a world far beyond

the dualities of material life, a world of eternity, knowledge, and bliss.”

As I spoke, all the special people I had met that evening nodded their heads in appreciation. What could be more satisfying for a servant of the Lord?

“Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu personally traveled to different regions of India to spread the bhakti cult throughout the country. By His personal behavior He has given an example for devotees to follow. That is, one should broadcast the cult of devotional service. A Vaisnava is especially interested in para-upakara, doing good to others. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu also wanted His mission spread all over the world. Following in His footsteps, we are trying to broadcast His message. By His mercy, people are taking this movement very seriously.”

[Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta, Madhya 25.264, purport]



GIVING AND RECEIVING GIFTS

| AUGUST 8 - 25, 2006 |

During the final phase of our summer tour, more and more people were coming, as many as 6,000 on some days. The mayor of a beach town told us that just before summer his secretary had been inundated with calls asking whether our festival was coming. By the time we were due, there wasn't a single room to rent in town.

"The hotels are all saying that people are here for your event," said the mayor. "Even I myself had to open my house to a family who had come for your festival but couldn't find a place to stay."

But as always, our success was the envy of our opposition, who stepped up their campaign to discredit us. The local priest in the town where we stayed continued his daily postings on the town bulletin board, sometimes going beyond the ridiculous: "Attention, citizens! The Hare Krsna cult is now growing rice in the football field to feed the guru."

But serious measures were being taken against us as well. A newly formed National Committee for Protection from Cults

was distributing tens of thousands of pamphlets along the coast telling people how to guard against cults and where to find help if needed. "If we don't fight the cults in Poland," said the head of the committee in a media statement, "we will have a real Armageddon."

"I thought we were no longer classified as a cult," I said to Jayatam das.

"That's true," he said, "but the damage has been done, and the image will remain for many years. Besides, the Church considers us as dangerous as ever."

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, who had initiated a "Summer against Cults" campaign, sent a comprehensive report to every police station in the country asking them (and the military!) to monitor all groups perceived as cults, including us.

"Mainly us," Jayatam said.

As a result, the police chief in the town where we were based showed up at one of our festivals. "I'm here on business," he replied curtly when Nandini das greeted him, "and I have nothing to discuss with you."

He spent an hour walking around the festival site and then, apparently for want of anything else to do, sat on a bench among the large crowd watching the stage show. When the crowd cheered loudly at the end of the Balinese dance performance, he looked surprised. When the master of ceremonies, Tribuanesvara das, called all children on to the stage to sing with him, more than 60 responded. As they began singing and dancing to a rhyme about Krsna – giggling and laughing all the while – I saw the police chief's heart melt. The coup de grace came at the end of the Ramayana play. As the actors bowed, the crowd clapped wildly. When a few people near the police chief rose for a standing ovation, he stood with them clapping his hands loudly and yelling, "Bravo! Bravo!"

"That's a relief," I said softly. "If there's any police chief we'd like on our side, it's the local one."

But winning a battle is not the end of a war, so I kept my eyes open for the opposition's next move. I didn't have to wait long.

The next evening, at our festival in Kolobrzeg, I was giving my lecture when Trisama das came up front and made a sign that I should finish immediately. It was unusual, but I heeded his call and wrapped up my lecture. As I sat down to begin the final kirtan, he came on stage and walked up to me. "Maharaja," he whispered, "there are credible rumors that a large gang of skin-heads are coming in a few minutes to break up the festival. Police are on their way, but security says we should stop the festival immediately."

Though my mind was racing, I stood up and calmly bid our guests goodbye. As I stood watching them leave, Jayatam came running up to me and grabbed my arm. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "you have to get into your van immediately."

Surrounded by several security men, he escorted me to my van, opened the door, and put me inside.

"What about all the other devotees?" I said.

"We're not telling them what's happening," Jayatam said. "We don't want them to panic. We're rounding them up and getting them into the buses as quickly as possible."

I burst out of the van. "What?" I said angrily. "Don't expect me to sit in there while the devotees are still on the field."

In 10 minutes we had everyone in the buses and on their way.

Our eight security men were soon joined by two vans of policemen, preparing for a fight. "We've never had a threat like this on the summer tour" I said to Jayatam. "It's always very peaceful. What's going on?"

"Probably someone sent them," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

He just looked at me. There was need to reply. We both had the same suspicion. "Yeah," I muttered. "They must want all that rice in the football field."

I scanned the edges of the festival site, looking for trouble. "It's like war," said Jayatam.

"Yes," I said shaking my head, "but I never thought here on the Baltic."

When we arrived back at the base we waited anxiously for a call from Raksana dasa, the head of devotee security. Eventually he phoned Jayatam.

"The skinheads didn't come," Jayatam told me. "They must have seen that our security and police were too much for them."

"Did the devotees figure out what happened?" I said.

"Some," he replied.

"Keep it quiet," I said. "Devotees are happy on this tour. I haven't told them about the bad publicity we're getting."

"What do we do now?" Jayatam said.

"Keep preaching," I said. "There are more people who love this festival than oppose it."

Jayatam nodded his head.

As I retired to my room I realized how much these threats were taking their toll on me. I was becoming overanxious. Even little problems began disturbing me. In particular, a bus driver we'd hired was getting on my nerves. Antoni was a short, pudgy, elderly man, with a red nose (probably from drinking), always in a cranky mood. He would shout at devotees for the slightest things.

"He drives way too slow," I said one day to Jayatam while we were following the bus. "It's dangerous. Look at the line of cars behind us."

"Not only that," Jayatam added, "but he often gets lost. And the devotees complain that he smokes in the bus."

I was astounded. "I'm going to tell him a thing or two when we arrive," I said.

At our destination I quickly got out of the car and walked towards the bus. "Where's the driver?" I asked a devotee.

"He just stormed off," came the answer. "He had an argument with a devotee, and he walked away cursing. The problem is that

he has the keys to the storage bays in the bus. We can't get the instruments."

"That's the last straw!" I said. As we sat waiting for him to return, I became increasingly angry. After half an hour Antoni appeared. While the devotees removed the instruments, I prepared to chastise him.

"He's such a nonsense," I thought. "No brains."

I walked up to Antoni. "I want to speak with you," I said firmly. He looked surprised. "Oh," he said, "I wanted to talk to you, too."

"Okay," I thought, "let him speak first. I'll get more on him that way."

"First of all," he said, "I don't like the theater performance you do at your festivals, nor do I like the dances of those people from Bali."

"Keeping talking," I thought. "You'll soon be out of a job."

"I don't like your food either," he continued, making a face. "And I can't stand it when all the little kids get on the stage."

"That's enough!" I thought. "Now is the time to chew him out."

"Now listen here . . ." I said raising my voice.

But before I could say anything more he interrupted me. "But there's one thing that I really love," he said. "It's when you sing on the stage at the end of the festival. Something happens to me when I hear you sing that beautiful song about Krsna."

I was speechless.

"You know," he went on, "I'm an old man with a very bad nature, but as you say in your lectures, I have a deeper spiritual nature."

He pulled a battered card out of his pocket. "I'm always praying to Mary to help me," he said.

I saw a picture of the Virgin Mary on one side of the card and two prayers in Polish on the other.

“I pray every morning and every night,” he said softly, looking at the card. “I’ve had it since I was a boy. My mother gave it to me. It’s the most precious thing I own.”

He carefully put the card away. “You’ll be singing again tonight won’t you?” he said. “The other night someone else sang. It wasn’t the same.”

“Well, uh, it’s not me,” I said. “It’s the nature of the song. Believe me.”

He laughed. “You’ll never convince me of that,” he said. “Anyway, what did you want to tell me?”

“Uh ... Oh, nothing,” I said. “I mean, it can wait.”

As I walked back to my van to get ready for Harinama, I felt like a fool. “Such a pious man,” I thought, “and I saw no good in him.”



Kirtan at the festival

On the road back to the base, I was silent. At one point Amritananda das turned to me. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "is everything okay?"

"It is now," I replied. "I just figured out who actually is the opposition."

Amritananda laughed. "The church or the government?" he asked.

"Neither," I said. "It's the impurities in my heart. One time Srila Prabhupada said he had a plan to take over the world in 18 days. When a disciple asked about the plan, Srila Prabhupada said, 'But you boys and girls aren't ready yet.' Now I understand what he meant."

The festivals continued without any major incidents. One day Nandini dasi received a call from the woman in charge of the Miss World Pageant, which was going to take place in one month in Warsaw.

"I was at your festival the other day on the Baltic Coast," she began. "It was wonderful. This year we want to open the pageant in Warsaw with an Indian flare. We'd like you to open the show with some of your singing, dancing, and theater. It will be broadcast throughout the world."

"Most of our devotees are foreigners," Nandini said, "and their visas will run out before your pageant begins. But I'll see what we can do."

One evening I asked Amritananda to invite Antoni to sit on the stage with us for the last kirtan. When Amritananda returned he was laughing.

"He said he wouldn't come up on the stage in a million years. He's nervous around crowds. That's why he stays in his bus for most of the festival. He comes out only when you start to sing, and even then he's way at the back of the crowd where there's no lighting."

Finally, the last festival of the season arrived. It was a day of mixed emotions for all the devotees. On the one hand, all 230 of us were tired. We had done 46 festivals, with hardly a break. But

on the other hand, we couldn't imagine life without the excitement of spreading Lord Caitanya's mercy. All the devotees felt purified and uplifted by so much service. I heard that even Antoni had had a change of heart. He was now polite to the devotees and would help them whenever needed. Each night he continued his ritual of sitting at the back of the crowd, almost in darkness, watching the final kirtan on stage.

As I was sitting in my van, resting before the final kirtan, Amritananda came up to me. "Antoni asked me to give this to you," he said. "He's too shy to approach you personally. He said it's a surprise."

Amritananda handed me the old picture of the Virgin Mary.

"Huh?" I said. "It's his most precious possession."

Amritananda smiled. "Yes," he said, "that's exactly why he's giving it to you."

I looked at the picture for a long time.

When the moment for the final kirtan arrived I walked onto the stage in front of a huge crowd. Deep in thought about Antoni, I was at a loss what to say. After a few moments of silence, I began: "Ladies and gentleman, as you all know this is the final performance of the night. It's also the final moment of our festival season."

I paused for a few seconds. "And now," I continued, "I'd like to dedicate this final kirtan to a very dear friend who means a lot to me. He taught me to see good in others. He taught me humility. And he gave me faith that God's holy names can purify everyone's heart."

I paused again. "It's our bus driver, Antoni," I said.

The crowd burst into applause.

I took the picture of the Virgin Mary out of my pocket and held it up. "And he gave me the best gift I have ever received," I said, "a gift from his heart."

I looked out over the crowd. "Antoni," I said, "if you're out there, this kirtan's for you."

As devotees joined me on the stage I began the kirtan. Within 15 minutes we were all chanting and dancing blissfully. A big group of children were dancing in the front of the stage.

I was chanting with my eyes closed. When I opened them, I saw Antoni coming through the back of the crowd toward the stage. He took a seat in the front row and sat with his eyes closed, listening intently. In a few moments tears were rolling down his cheeks.

“My Dear Lord,” I said softly, “just see the power of Your holy names.”

After 45 minutes I brought the kirtan to a close. As I stood to say the final goodbye of the night – and the season – I saw Antoni still sitting in the front row, his head bowed.



Antoni and Radha Caran das

“Ladies and gentleman, before we all part, I’d like you to welcome to the stage the person who gave me that special gift tonight: Antoni.”

The people applauded, and Antoni looked up. For a few moments he fidgeted nervously, then looked at me and smiled. He stood up slowly and started walking to the stage. The closer he came, the louder the applause became. As he walked onto the stage we hugged each other. But this time, I was the one with the surprise. I reached behind me, picked up a gift-wrapped box, and handed it to him. “Today,” I said into the microphone, “I bought a gift for my favorite bus driver.”

The audience laughed, and Antoni opened the present. His eyes got big when he saw the CD player inside. Along with it was a CD of all the bhajans we had performed throughout the tour. His eyes filled with tears again as he turned and kissed me on each cheek.

“Ladies and gentleman,” I said, “what a fitting way to end our festival tour. We bid you farewell. May we meet again next summer, at this festival of love.”

I struggled to hold back my own tears.

“If the opulence or knowledge of many millions of universes were clustered together, they would hardly equal a small fragment of the glory of Krsna’s holy name. Krsna’s holy name is my life. It is the goal of my life. It is the means I will employ to attain the goal of my life.”

[Srla Rupa Goswami, Padyavali, Text 23]



OUR FERVENT PRAYERS

| AUGUST 26 - SEPTEMBER 8, 2006 |

After the Polish festival tour, I went to New Vraja Dhama in Hungary. Under the guidance of Sivarama Swami, it has become one of the most successful communities in ISKCON. I had planned to read and chant in the spiritual atmosphere there, but instead I found myself giving most of my time to my disciples, some of whom had even come from Croatia, Bosnia, and other neighboring countries to see me. And I, having been away from them for a year, was just as eager to see them.

Then I went to Ukraine and participated in the yearly one-week devotee festival in Odessa. Once again, every minute was spent teaching and counseling my disciples. I often ask my disciples how they joined the Krsna consciousness movement, and in Odessa I found the story of a mother and daughter, particularly interesting. It is often miraculous how fallen souls are reunited with the Lord and His devotees.

Kishori dasi, 91, was born into a poor but pious Russian family in 1915. In her youth, she saw her grandfather, who had



During darshan with disciples

never been sick a day in his life, pass away at the age of 115 in a church while reciting the names of God.

“But why should we talk about my past life?” Kishori humbly protested. “It was only suffering and misery.”

“Sometimes it’s good to remember our past,” I said, “so we can appreciate our good fortune in the present.”

Reluctantly, she continued. “We lived in a small village in the Russian countryside,” she said. “I was the youngest of 11 children. My mother died when I was two, and my father struggled to maintain us by working in a factory. As soon as we children were capable, we worked in the fields. I remember hot summers harvesting hay and harsh winters huddling around the fireplace with my brothers and sisters in our wood cabin.

“We never had much time to play. Our only solace was going to church on Sundays. We’d walk 12 kilometers there and back. I always prayed to God to take me to heaven. I told him I wasn’t happy on earth.

“But things got worse before they got better. When I was 12 my father died, and we children became orphans. All of us had no choice but to stop school and go to work. It was either work or starve. I found work in the same factory my father had served in most of his life.

“Fortunately, a teacher in a local school took pity on me and tutored me in her spare time. Going to church and praying to God was all that made sense in life at that time, but as I grew older, I became dissatisfied with the sermons, as they didn’t explain enough about God. I was frustrated. ‘How will I ever know Him?’ I often said to my friends.

“Life in the village was always the same. The main activity of the men was getting drunk and fighting. I wanted to escape, but where could I go? Again I prayed to God for help.”

Kishori paused for a moment. “Guru Maharaja,” she said, “who will care to hear my story? Most Russians have a similar story: a hard struggle for existence.”

“I agree,” I said, “but I’m sure it will make the final chapter of your life all that more relishable. Please go on.”

She sighed. “Yes, Guru Maharaja,” she said. “My tutor taught me accounting, and when I was 18 I was able to get a good job at military base 100 kilometers away. I moved there, eventually met an officer, and married him.

“But our happiness was short-lived. World War Two started, and he was sent to the front. I was alone for four years. I was fortunate that at the end of the war he came home, although severely wounded. But at least he came back. Most of his fellow officers didn’t. I had to give solace to many widows.”

As Kishori was speaking a number of children came into my room to see me. Kishori turned to them. “Guru Maharaja is asking me to speak about my life,” she said. “But real life began when

I met the devotees of Krsna. Before that it was only one sad story after another. Take my advice and always take shelter of guru and Krsna. Never stray from the instructions they give you.”

The children just stared at her with blank faces.

“Before the war I had given birth to Thakurani dasi,” Kishori continued. “Of course, she wasn’t called Thakurani then. Neither of us could have ever imagined one day we’d be devotees of Lord Krsna. She was my only daughter, and as she grew up we became very close, especially after my husband died. Thakurani and I spent a lot of time at the church, but my frustration with finding answers to my deeper questions rubbed off on her.

“After she married, she was shocked when her husband, a staunch follower of the Communist Party, began denouncing God. She couldn’t bear it, and she eventually divorced him. We became despondent, caught between a religion unable to answer our soul-searching questions and a government steeped in atheism. We often prayed that God would lead us to the truth.

“In the early 1960s we became desperate to find a path that could explain everything about God and how to love Him. Having no one to guide us, we did the only thing possible at the time: we searched for knowledge in the public libraries. The Communist Party was proud of its large libraries educating people in all sorts of mundane knowledge, but because of the volume of literature, spiritual books also found their way onto the shelves.

“One day we stumbled across a copy of the Bhagavad-gita printed in the late 1800s. The library did not lend out books, so each day we would return and eagerly read the copy in the library. It seemed to answer all the questions we had about life, death, creation, God, and the spiritual world. We read with a passion.

“With further searching we came across an old copy of the Mahabharata. We spent all our spare time in the library reading it together. Finally, we decided we must have the books for ourselves, so for months we painstakingly copied them by hand. It took time because, as you know, the Mahabharata has thousands of verses. By copying them we also mastered them.

“But as a result, we encountered a new type of frustration. We learned that to realize the knowledge we had to serve a spiritual master. But where in Russia, deep behind the Iron Curtain at the height of Communism, would we find a guru? We became hopeless, but continued praying.

“Years went by. We found other scriptures from India in the libraries. They all reinforced our understanding that we needed personal guidance from a spiritual master. And we were getting older. By 1989 I was 74 and Thakurani was 51. There wasn’t much time left, but one day the Lord took compassion on us.

“It was in the spring of 1990, on the eve of the fall of Communism, when we were walking down a street in Odessa and a young man quietly approached us with a book under his arm, all the while looking around to be sure the police weren’t watching. We were startled when he put the Bhagavad-gita As It Is into our hands. We wanted so much to purchase it, but we didn’t have enough money.

“We took his address, worked hard at extra jobs for a few weeks, and after contacting him again, bought the Bhagavad-gita. We were thrilled when he told us there were a number of people meeting secretly to read and chant Hare Krsna together, for Communism was still in force and religious meetings were forbidden.

“We were happy to finally find people like us, interested in the culture and philosophy of India. But one thing was still missing: we didn’t have a spiritual master. Our prayers for mercy reached a feverish state.

“Finally the Lord heard us. Six months later the regime fell and you came to Odessa to give lectures on Bhagavad-gita. That’s when you accepted us as your aspiring disciples. The next year we were initiated.

“The Lord waited a long time to answer our fervent prayers. From my childhood I was always praying to him. I’d almost lost hope, and finally he rescued us.”

Kishori chuckled. “Guru Maharaja,” she said, “may I stop speaking about myself now and say some words in glorification of you?”

I laughed. “Let’s not spoil the story,” I said. “It may well go into my diary.”

Kishori nodded and smiled.

dinadau murare nisadau murare
dinardhe murare nisardhe murare
dinante murare nisante murare
tvam eko gatih nas tvam eko gatih nah

“O Lord Murari, during the beginning, middle, and end of all our days and nights, You always remain the only goal of our lives.”

[Sri Daksinatya, Srila Rupa Goswami’s Padyavali, Text 73]



BEARING THE BURDEN

| SEPTEMBER 9 - 12, 2006 |

During the festival in Odessa, one of my aspiring disciples asked to see me. Fifteen-year-old Radha Sakhi dasi was born into the Krsna consciousness movement. When she was a child, I gave her a lot of attention and care, as I do for many children, and while we talked, I could tell that such love had borne fruit. She told me that her mother had recently passed away, a few weeks after suddenly coming down with a lung infection. Radha Sakhi was alone in taking care of her and was with her when she died. Though shaken by her mother's impending death she bravely collected herself, and put a Tulasi leaf into her mother's mouth, poured Ganges water on her head, and loudly chanted the Hare Krsna mantra into her ear.

"You did the right thing," I told Radha Sakhi. "Just as your mother brought you into the world and helped you become Krsna conscious, so you helped your mother to leave in the most auspicious circumstances. Mother and daughter have proved themselves to be the best of family members by serving each other's deepest interest: to return back to Godhead."



Indradyumna Swami and Russian gurukulis

The day before I left, I initiated 10 people, bringing the number of my disciples close to 2,000. The next morning as I was packing to leave, I had a small seizure. My body stiffened, my neck and arms were full of intense pain, and I couldn't speak. It lasted only a minute or two but left me exhausted. As I went to lie on my bed I tried to understand why it had happened.

"I am in good health," I thought.

Then I remembered that the same thing had happened two years ago, just after another initiation. Although Tamala Krsna Maharaja once told me not to attribute bad health solely to the karma of my disciples, I couldn't ignore Srila Prabhupada's statement in *Perfect Questions, Perfect Answers*, that a spiritual master takes on the burden of the sinful activities of his disciples.

"Krsna is so powerful that He can immediately take up all the sins of others and immediately make them right. But when a living entity plays the part on behalf of Krsna, he also takes the responsibility for the sinful activities of his devotees. Therefore to become a guru is not an easy task. You see? He has to take all the

poisons and absorb them. So sometimes – because he is not Krsna – sometimes there is some trouble”

[*Perfect Questions, Perfect Answers*, Chapter 6]

I had thought about stopping initiations last year but decided to continue. Now, as I lay on the bed, it became obvious that something had to change. I decided that from now on I would accept disciples only if I knew them well and had long-standing relationships with them. I would be more selective.

Then I got up to take a shower. While lathering I slipped and fell, hitting my head hard on the floor. I was knocked out for a few moments. Then I woke up and stumbled back to the bed.

“That makes my decision even more firm,” I thought.

That afternoon a young man approached me with a letter of recommendation from his temple president asking me to accept the boy as an aspiring disciple. I politely refused. Word spread quickly.

After the festival, I left with my Russian disciple and translator, Uttama-sloka das. Dressed in dhotis, we flew from Odessa to Kiev, where we would catch a plane to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, Uttama-sloka’s native country. It is a small Muslim country on the Caspian Sea bordered by Russia, Iran, Georgia, and Armenia.

At the airport in Kiev I ran into Prabhavisnu Swami, who was on his way to another region in the CIS. “Are you going into a Muslim country dressed like that?” he asked.

I had been in a hurry when I left Odessa, and it hadn’t occurred to me that it might be wiser to travel in conventional clothes.

The trip had been organized months in advance, but because of the outdated communications in Azerbaijan we had not been able to contact the temple or local devotees for weeks.

“It’s like flying into the unknown,” I said to Uttama-sloka.

“We don’t even know who’s picking us up,” he said with a half-hearted laugh, “or where we’ll be staying or even if they’ll have prasadam ready.”

“I love it,” I said. “This is sannyasa: completely dependent upon the Lord.”

But the love wasn't without apprehension. I felt nervous as I mulled over Prabhavisnu Swami's comment about my clothes. I recalled the last time I visited Azerbaijan two years ago, when an official had demanded a hundred-dollar bribe as I departed.

I turned to Uttama-sloka “Do any tourists ever go to Azerbaijan?” I asked.

He laughed.

I looked around the cabin. I saw only Azerbaijanis, silently staring back at me.

I turned to Uttama-sloka. “There's a heavy mood in here,” I said.

Toward the end of the flight, as I was nervously arranging my documents for entry, I noticed a large man sitting across the aisle, wearing a black coat and sporting a big mustache. He suddenly turned to me. “Hare Krsna!” he said loudly.

I don't know who was more startled, I or the other passengers.

“Are they going to wash your feet when you arrive at the temple?” he asked in a booming voice. He was speaking Azerbaijani, and Uttama-sloka translated.

Everyone looked at me, and I wasn't sure how to reply. Either way would confirm that washing the feet of distinguished guests was part of the tradition I followed. I doubted any of the passengers had ever heard of such a thing. Then the same man came to my rescue.

“It's not our Islamic custom,” he said, “but nevertheless it is your tradition's way of honoring guests. And respecting guests is very much part of Islamic culture.”

I took a quick look around and saw a number of people nodding their heads in agreement.

“How do you know about this?” I said.

He laughed. “I used to live next to your temple in Baku,” he said. “Every time a guru would come I would watch the recep-

tion from my window. You are good people. You love Allah with a passion.”

I looked around the cabin again. Everyone was smiling at me. All my misgivings vanished.

When we landed, the other passengers stepped back to let me take my baggage out of the overhead compartment. Some motioned that I should go forward and be the first to leave the plane.

The woman at the immigration desk smiled and asked if I was going to stay at the Hare Krsna temple. When customs officials asked if I had any goods to declare, I replied that I didn't. One of them smiled. “But do you have any Hare Krsna baklava?” he said, referring to a traditional Middle-Eastern sweet.

“No,” I said. “I'm sorry, I don't.”

“Make sure you have some on the way out,” he said. “We work both directions, coming and going.”

As I walked toward the exit I looked up and saw a sign: “Welcome to the country where it is a tradition to serve and respect guests.”

I chuckled. “Things have certainly improved since my last visit,” I thought.

When Uttama-sloka and I left the terminal we were greeted by about 50 devotees. As I walked along, the devotees gave me flowers and garlands, which I immediately distributed to the many curious Azerbaijanis watching. Each time I offered someone a flower I would greet him. “Salaam aleikum,” I would say. “Peace be unto you.”

“Wa aleikum salaam,” they would reply, wishing me the same.

I marveled at being so openly received in a devout Muslim country.

As we drove to the temple, I spoke to my disciple Sahadeva dasa. “Things have changed,” I said.

“Yes and no,” he said. “The government wants to join the European Union, so it is welcoming foreigners and making it easy

to come and go. It wants foreign investment and US dollars for its large oil reserves.”

Then he lowered his voice, as if out of habit, “But the government is very corrupt,” he said. “The officials keep most of the money and the people remain poor. I won’t say more.”

I looked out at the city. It appeared much as it did when I first came, in 1992.

“What is the population?” I asked.

“Eight million,” said Sahadeva, “but 20 million Azerbaijanis live next door in Iran.”

“How is that?” I asked.

“Gasoline costs one US cent a liter in Iran and bread is practically free,” he said.

I was happy to be back. Baku is one of my favorite places for preaching. I can never get over the fact that I can preach freely there, in the midst of the Muslim world. All of my 25 disciples in Azerbaijan were born in Muslim families, but no one opposed them when they joined the Hare Krsna movement.

The next morning, Sahadeva told me a bit of recent history. “Some years ago the government cracked down on the 200 non-Muslim religious movements in the country,” he said. “We thought we were finished. But then it officially registered 20 of them, including us.”

“Why did it do that?” I said.

“The government was primarily concerned about the opposing political parties using religion as a front,” he said. “Many of the groups were merely facades for political opposition. Because we’re a purely spiritual movement with no political intentions, the government had no complaints. But it did place some stiff restrictions on us. After all, it is a Muslim country. It forbade us to preach outside Baku, and we are not allowed to hold public programs. People can only visit our temple. But we got permission to distribute Srila Prabhupada’s books anywhere we want in Baku.”

I smiled. “Lord Caitanya’s secret weapon,” I said.

“People like us and know who we are,” he said.

I got first-hand experience of that as we drove through the city. When we stopped at a red light, two men walked by in front of our car. One man turned to the other. “You see in that car?” he said. “It’s a Hare Kṛṣṇa guru.”

The next morning I was thinking of visiting the local hospital to follow up on the seizure. But just as I was about to bring up the idea, I overheard two devotees joking about the doctors in Azerbaijan. “When a patient goes to the hospital,” said one, “the doctors have to decide whether to treat the patient or let him live.”

I just kept quiet.

My heart goes out to the devotees in Azerbaijan. They preach in an isolated part of the world and are rarely visited by senior devotees, so I decided to go ahead with the initiations they had planned, although I knew little about some of the candidates. I have always relied on temple presidents to recommend disciples, just as Śrīla Prabhupada did.

Before the ceremony I asked to meet the candidates. One man in particular caught my attention, as I had stayed at his house when I was in Azerbaijan two years ago. He was originally from Iran, but he took up communism and fled to Azerbaijan when it was a republic in the former Soviet Union. He started a business in Baku and soon became wealthy.

Later he fell away from communism because he saw it failing. He turned again to Islam and became a devout Muslim.

Then several years ago he met the devotees and was fascinated by the philosophy of Bhagavad-gītā. He was impressed by the temple programs but hesitated to fully surrender because of his attachment to wealth. He then went to India, on a pilgrimage to learn more about Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Overwhelmed by the beauty and transcendental atmosphere of Vrindavan, he decided to become a devotee. I was in Vrindavan at the same time, and one day he approached me and asked to become an aspiring disciple.

That night he prayed to Sri Sri Radha-Syamasundara at our temple and asked Them to take away any impediments to his Krsna consciousness. After he returned to Azerbaijan, his business failed, and he started a smaller one that brought in less money but gave him more free time.

“How do you use that free time?” I asked. I wanted to see how serious he was.

“I use it to chant between 32 and 64 rounds a day,” he said.

At the initiation ceremony, I mentioned that his life was simpler than when I first met him. “Allah always gave me what I wanted,” he said, “but Krsna took everything away and left me only the shelter of His lotus feet.”

Everyone smiled.

“I can easily bear the burden of a few more disciples like this,” I thought. I handed him his beads and gave him the name Nilacala-candra das. “Caitanya Mahaprabhu has forbidden, ‘Don’t make many siksas, many disciples.’ But for preaching work we have to



I can easily bear the burden of a few more disciples like this

accept many disciples – for expanding preaching – even if we suffer. That’s a fact. The spiritual master has to take the responsibility for all the sinful activities of his disciples. Therefore to make many disciples is a risky job unless one is able to assimilate all the sins.”

[*Perfect Questions Perfect Answers*, Chapter 6]



A LION AMONG MEN

| SEPTEMBER 13 - 18, 2006 |

I boarded a flight from Moscow to Krasnoyarsk with my secretary, Uttama-sloka das. We tried to get comfortable, but it wasn't easy. The seats were small and close together. Although the plane had been renovated, it was still a vintage model, dating back at least 20 years. But it was midnight and we were exhausted, so we eventually fell asleep on the five-hour flight to Siberia.

Half an hour before landing the cabin lights came on. I woke up and noticed a man across the aisle staring at me. Finally he stood up and came over.

"I'm just curious," he said. "Why you are going Krasnoyarsk? Not many foreign tourists go there."

Before I could answer, he started speaking again. "I'm sure you're aware of Siberia's dismal history," he said. "Stalin built many forced-labor camps there in the 1930s and sent tens of thousands of political dissidents to their death. And the future isn't much brighter."

He looked around nervously, and his eyebrows went up. "Siberia is fast becoming the nuclear wasteland of the world," he said. "Foreign countries have paid the Russian government billions of dollars to dump their high-level radioactive waste around Krasnoyarsk. But the people of Siberia never see the money. It all ends up in Moscow. There's only one thing the people get."

"What's that?" I said.

"Cancer!" he said loudly. The person in the seat in front of me turned around. "They dump the nuclear waste into gigantic holes near two towns on either side of Krasnoyarsk. It's no coincidence that the region has one of the highest incidences of cancer in the world."

"Why do people live there?" I said.

"They pay big salaries to keep people in Krasnoyarsk," he said. "People will do anything for money."

He paused. "Even die for it," he said.

"Gosh!" I exclaimed. "And why are you going there?"

"I'm a doctor," he said. "My organization is helping to finance a cancer clinic in Krasnoyarsk. I'm going to oversee the project." He went back to his seat.

"One of the highest incidences of cancer in the world," I said to myself. "Anyway, that's all the more reason to go there and preach. Life is such that even though people are suffering they still have to be reminded that this material world is a temporary place full of misery and the only alternative is spiritual life."

It certainly had been an uncomfortable flight, and what's more, after we landed we ended up waiting in our seats 45 minutes for buses, but no one said anything. People in Russia are tough. They are used to austerities, and I rarely hear them complain. The captain shut off the power, and we sat waiting in the dark, stuffy cabin.

"If this were Europe or America," I thought, "you'd hear people shouting, but here they just tolerate it all."

And who would listen anyway? There are no complaint boxes in the airports, no forms to fill out and send to the authorities.

We finally left the plane and walked out into the chilly autumn air. “Russians are indeed tough,” I thought, “but Siberian Russians are the toughest because they live in Siberia, where the bitter-cold winters are infamous.”

I shook my head. “Can you imagine?” I thought. “Living in one of the coldest places of the inhabited world.”

Outside the terminal we were met by a large group of husky men in leather coats asking if we needed a taxi. “It’s like a scene from the 1930s,” I said to Uttama-sloka. “Look at those old wooden buildings. The bright lights of Moscow seem far away.”

On the way to our apartment, I again saw Russian resilience. As we were coming to an intersection, a streetcar plowed into a small car. The driver stepped out of her vehicle, blood gushing from a cut on her head. She reached into her purse and calmly pulled out a scarf, which she put to the wound. Her passenger, a man in his 50s, stood next to the car in shock. What amazed me most was that people drove by without slowing down.

“It’s unbelievable,” I thought. “In most other places people would offer to help or see what happened. Here they just drive on.”

“Can’t we stop?” I asked my driver.

“The police will arrive soon,” he replied calmly as we sped on.

I turned to my disciple Guru Vrata dasa. “What do you have planned for my four-day visit?” I asked.

“Morning and evening classes,” he said. “During the day you can rest. But your Gypsy friends have asked if you could visit their village tomorrow afternoon. It’s been two years since you were last there.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Definitely. Let’s go. I’d like to see how they’re progressing.”

I paused for a moment. “They really have made progress in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, haven’t they?” I said.

“Ummi,” said Guru Vrata, “Well, you’ll have to be the judge.”

The next afternoon we started out for the Gypsy village.

"You know," I said to Uttama-sloka as we drove, "I've written several diary chapters about the Gypsies. Maybe I can get enough material from this visit for another one."

"I suppose I should tell you now," Guru Vrata interrupted. "Practically all the Gypsies you met last time are dead or in jail. As you may remember, most of them deal drugs."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I remember there were a few who seemed genuinely interested in Krsna consciousness."

"They're the ones coming today," Guru Vrata said.

A half hour later we entered the Gypsy village. As we drove through, I was reminded of my previous visits. Children stopped playing to stare at us. Women hanging laundry glanced at us and quickly looked away. In contrast, a group of men playing cards on a porch looked up and studied us intently as we drove by.

I noticed several wooden stands on street corners. "What are they selling?" I asked Uttama-sloka.

"Drugs," he said.

"Don't the police stop them?" I said.

"This is a country within a country," he said. "The police have no authority here."

"That makes the Gypsies the toughest of the tough Siberian Russians," I said.

"Excuse me?" Uttama-sloka said.

"Oh, nothing," I said.

Our car pulled up to the house where we would have our program.

"Whose house is this?" I asked Guru Vrata as we got out of the car.

"Alexander's," he said, "your aspiring disciple and one of the leaders in the Gypsy community."

"Huh?" I said. "My aspiring disciple?"

"Yes," he said. "After you visited two years ago, several Gypsy men asked me if they could become your aspiring disciples. I saw they were serious about Krsna consciousness, so I agreed."

As we entered the house we were greeted by some of the temple devotees from Krasnoyarsk who had come to help set up the program. Then Alexander entered and paid full obeisances.

"Welcome to my home, Guru Maharaja," he said, his wife at his side.

The house was just as I remembered it, neat and tidy with Krsna-conscious pictures everywhere. Alexander took me to a room upstairs to meet his friends. As I sat down a tall man approached and fell down flat in front of me, tears in his eyes. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "please forgive me. I'm a wicked man, but I want to change."

"His name is Victor," said Alexander. "He was just released from prison."

"How long were you in prison?" I asked.

"Three and a half years," said Victor. "I was sentenced to five years, but I was released early for good behavior. Because I was injured when the police arrested me, I wasn't able to work in prison, so I just chanted 16 rounds a day. I was also reading Srila Prabhupada's books and preaching to the other prisoners.

"It was so hellish in there, Guru Maharaja. Sometimes we were 40 men in a 30-square-meter cell. There were often fights between the prisoners. But one prisoner was a leader in the Siberian mafia. I made him into a devotee, and he always protected me.

"The prison authorities appreciated my behavior and my positive influence on the other prisoners so much that they had me preach Krsna consciousness regularly on the closed-circuit prison television. In some ways I think they were sad to see me go."

The others laughed.

"But the problem is," he continued, "that I was more Krsna conscious in jail than out. I'm not chanting 16 rounds a day any more. What should I do?"

"Just see the entire material world as a jail," I said, "with four great walls: birth, disease, old age, and death. It's the same as an ordinary prison: everyone suffers here, and it's hard to get out."

Victor listened intently.



Just see the entire material world as a jail

“Chanting the holy names is the only way to get freedom from material existence,” I continued. “If you’re serious about getting out, you’ll chant.”

“Thank you, Guru Maharaja,” he said. “I promise to chant 16 rounds a day.”

“Are you married?” I asked him.

A hush came over the room. Guru Vrata leaned over. “His wife is still in prison,” he said. “There’s a code among Gypsy women that they take part of the blame for their husband’s crimes even if they are innocent. In this way, their husband’s time in prison is reduced.”

“I see,” I said.

I quickly changed the subject. “And where is that handsome Gypsy man who was here last time? The one with the light-colored eyes?”

Again the room became silent.

Guru Vrata leaned over a second time. "He was severely wounded in a knife fight last month," he said. "They took him to the hospital, but when the doctors saw he was a Gypsy, they ignored him and left him to die. But then one of the doctors saw his neck beads and asked if he was a devotee of Krsna. Apparently the doctor likes devotees, so he operated on him and saved his life."

"Is he out of the hospital?" I said.

"As soon as the operation was over the police arrested him for previous offenses," Guru Vrata said. "He's now in a prison hospital."

"Whew!" I said. "There's no happy ending this time."

"This Gypsy over here is chanting 10 rounds a day," said Guru Vrata.

"Oh really?" I said.

"But he's illiterate," Guru Vrata said, "and the other Gypsy men tell him he's wasting his time because he can't read our books. They say he'll never understand Krsna consciousness."

"Not true!" I said, almost shouting. "He can hear about Krsna and learn everything that way. And the Lord will also enlighten him from within the heart."

"And," Guru Vrata said, "you'll be pleased to know that Alexander has been chanting 16 rounds a day for several years."

"That's really wonderful," I said.

"Before coming to Krsna consciousness he was also a powerful drug dealer," Guru Vrata said. "He committed many crimes we won't mention. But now, as a result of chanting Hare Krsna, he's become very soft and gentle. He maintains an honest living by selling cars. He's also strictly following the regulative principles. And what's more, he preaches Krsna consciousness in the Gypsy community. As you can imagine, it's not an easy thing. But many Gypsies are now coming to him for spiritual guidance."

A silence fell over the room. I looked around and turned to Guru Vrata. "So?" I said.

“So, he would like to become your initiated disciple,” Guru Vrata said.

I was taken by surprise. I thought about my decision to cut back on initiations, but at the same time I realized it would be a great step forward for Alexander – and the Gypsy community.

“Yes,” I said firmly, “I will initiate him.”

The devotees burst into applause.

“But” I said, “I have one request: that the Gypsy men in the village give their approval.”

During prasadam Uttama-sloka turned to me. “Why do you have to get the approval of the local men?” he said. “You’re Alexander’s spiritual master. You don’t have to ask anyone for permission to initiate him.”

“True,” I said, “but if the men in the village approve, it will make his initiation more bona fide in the eyes of the community. In that way other Gypsies may become serious about Krsna consciousness.”

For the next few days I gave lectures at the temple. Hundreds of devotees from all over Siberia attended. I noted in particular how serious they were about Krsna consciousness. They asked many questions, but the main question on my own mind was whether the Gypsy men would authorize Alexander’s initiation.

Meanwhile, nine other candidates came forward with recommendations for initiation from their temple presidents. As they were all wonderful devotees, I could hardly decline. The days passed, but on the morning of the initiation we still had no answer from the Gypsy village.

Then, as we were preparing to leave the apartment for the initiation ceremony at the temple, Uttama-sloka’s phone rang. A big smile came over his face. “Guru Maharaja,” he said, “Alexander said no one in the Gypsy community objects. Permission is granted.”

My eyes welled up with tears, maybe because I was grateful to the Gypsy men or just plain happy for Alexander. Or perhaps because I was appreciating the unfathomable grace of Lord Caitanya

Mahaprabhu in distributing His mercy equally to everyone in this dark and dangerous age of Kali.

On the way to the temple I told Guru Vrata the name I wanted to give Alexander so I could be sure no one else in the temple had received that name. “It’s Dina Bandhu das,” I said. “It’s a name of Krsna meaning friend of the fallen.”

Guru Vrata gulped. “Guru Maharaja,” he said, “if I could make a humble suggestion, Gypsies are sensitive to the fact that people see them as fallen. They won’t appreciate that name. They’re a proud people.”

“What name would you put forward?” I said.

“You’ll have to decide,” Guru Vrata said.

I thought for a moment. “I’ll give him a noble name. This will make the Gypsies proud that one of their own is a devotee of Krsna.”

I quickly looked through a little book I keep with names for disciples.

I was looking forward to the moment Alexander would be initiated. It would be the fruit of many visits to the Gypsy village, so I purposely gave a short lecture. When the disciples started to come forward and take their vows, my heart was pounding. One by one, I gave them their new names: Kriya Sakti dasi, Dana Gati dasi, Gita Vilasi dasi, Sri Gauri, and more.

Alexander was the last. After bowing down he kneeled in front of me. It felt like a historic moment. I was thinking that possibly he was the first full-blooded Gypsy to take initiation in ISKCON.

After he recited his vows I handed him his beads with a smile and with great emotion. “From this day forward,” I said, “your name shall be Purusa Simha das. It means servant of the supreme enjoyer in the form of a transcendental lion. Lord Nrsimha always protects His devotees. So be fearless – a lion among men – and preach the glories of the holy names in your Gypsy clan.”

I looked out over the audience and saw several Gypsy men nodding their heads and smiling from ear to ear.



*Indrayumna Swami and Uttama Sloka das at the
initiation ceremony in Krasnoyarsk*

“Now that Lord Gaura has descended to this world, the waves of the holy names of Lord Kṛṣṇa are suddenly flooding this planet, and the hearts of the sinful conditioned souls, which were as hard as thunderbolts, have now become as soft as butter. Let me take shelter of that Lord Gaura.”

[Sṛīla Prabodananda Sarasvatī, Caitanya-candramṛita, verse 110]



LUCK OF THE IRISH

| SEPTEMBER 19 - OCTOBER 5, 2006 |

When I was young, my mother would often speak of her Britannic forebears. “Your grandmother was from Wales,” she told me on many occasions. But what she liked best was the Irish part. “Your grandfather was an Irishman from Cork,” she would say proudly.

When my father would talk of his German roots, she’d pretend not to hear. “Look at the faces of these children,” she would say. “Irish eyes are smiling.”

“Luck of the Irish, boy!” she yelled from the grandstands when I won a high-school swimming race against all odds. Sometimes she’d say the same when I got good grades on my exams.

No wonder, then, that I was always curious about Ireland. Whenever something would come up in the news about the country I would take special interest and read it, and when Saint Patrick’s Day came around each year I would wear something green. And I knew not to mess with the full-blooded Irish boys with names like Sean, Kerry, Neil, and Ryan in school. They were

dirty fighters. They kicked below the belt and continued punching even after you'd given up.

My curiosity about Ireland faded with time, and when I became a devotee I learned that we are all eternal spirit souls, part and parcel of Krsna. Nevertheless, when the Irish devotees contacted me early last September and asked me to take part in a traveling festival in Ireland, the curiosity of my youth was revived.

"Will there be a festival in Cork?" I asked.

"No," said Gaura Hari das. "We'd like to do Dublin and Galway. Tribhuvanatha's festival programs were always successful in those places."

My Godbrother, Tribhuvanatha das, who passed away several years ago, was Irish. He was a pioneer in introducing Krsna consciousness in Ireland, and his traveling festival programs made our movement well known there. But the programs were discontinued after his demise.

I thought for a moment. "I'll come," I said. "I have heard that Irish people are pious. And it would be an honor to revive the festival program that Tribhuvanatha prabhu began. We'll dedicate the festivals in his memory."

And so on September 17, I went to the airport in Warsaw for a flight to Dublin. As I walked through the airport, I decided to buy a few toiletries, so I went into a small shop and waited in line. The line was long, so I picked up a Time magazine and started browsing through it.

Suddenly I heard a man's voice behind me: "Old wine in new bottles."

I turned around and saw a well-dressed gentleman.

"I thought you people didn't read that stuff," he said.

I quickly put down the magazine. "Uh... Generally we don't," I said sheepishly.

Then I saw that he had a magazine in his own hand. He smiled and put it down on top of mine. "I don't want it either," he said laughing. "I just picked it up so I could get in line behind you."

"Really?" I said.



Tribhuvanatha Prabhu

“I just got married a few hours ago,” he said. “My wife and I are going to Spain for our honeymoon.”

“Oh,” I said. “Congratulations.”

“When I saw you walking through the airport, I ran after you,” he said.

“What?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “You see, we want you to bless our marriage.”

The woman behind the cash register looked up.

“I’m a businessman,” he said, “and I travel a lot. I often buy books from you people when I pass through the airports in America. I know what you’re all about.”

"Today at the wedding the priest gave a very boring speech. He must have given the same talk hundreds of times. My wife was crying. The whole thing didn't feel right. We feel if you consecrate our marriage it will be blessed."

I felt a bit embarrassed. I looked around and saw the cashier smiling. "Isn't that sweet!" she said with a sigh.

I thought for a moment and then put up my hands. "May Lord Krishna bless you and your wife with a prosperous and spiritually rewarding marriage!" I said.

"Thanks so much," he said, extending his hand to shake mine.

Then as he turned to go, he wheeled back around and put a \$100 bill in my jacket pocket. "That's for the mission," he said with a smile.

While on the three-hour flight, I took the 100 dollars out of my pocket and placed it carefully in my handbag. I made a mental note that I would use the money for the festival in Ireland.

I was apprehensive, to say the least. I knew the festivals wouldn't be anything like our festivals in Poland, which after 17 years are organized and efficient. Despite all good intentions, the Irish program would be piecemeal, thrown together with elements from various places.

Devotees who had free time would join us from England, Ukraine, Russia, and Poland. The festival paraphernalia would come from the remnants of Tribhuvanatha's old program and from a small festival program in England. Some householders would also lend us a few items. The only sure thing would be the stage show, as I had invited a number of talented devotees who perform at our programs in Poland.

I arrived in Dublin the day before the first festival. My apprehensions seemed justified when I spoke to Tribhuanesvara das, a Polish devotee who had come to Dublin early to lead Harinamas and advertise the festival on the streets.

"For a few days we had six or seven devotees going out," he said, "but yesterday there were just three of us. I played accordion



Harinama in Dublin

and sang, one devotee with a bandaged hand played karatals, and a new boy with long hair wearing Levis handed out invitations.”

“That’s definitely not the impression I like to make on Harinama,” I thought. “Everything should be first class.”

“Of course,” I continued thinking, “the holy names are transcendental and always have a purifying effect on those who chant or hear them. But if they are presented in an attractive way, there’s more chance the conditioned souls will take an interest.”

I recalled a letter Srila Prabhupada once wrote to my Godbrother Upendra:

“I shall call you and some other students to assemble there to practice Sankirtana in a systematic way. Of course, chanting Hare Krishna does not require any artificial artistic sense, but still, if the procedure is presented rhythmically, then the people may be attracted more by the transcendental music.”

[Letter, June 1, 1968]

The next day we went on Harinama with 15 devotees. Unfortunately it was raining, and we had to shift from one shop awning to another for protection. Some invitations went out, but by the end of the day I was feeling that attendance at the program would be small.

Fortunately, because of the expert management of the local GBC man, Praghosa das, our movement has an excellent reputation in Dublin. Our two vegetarian restaurants are well known, and for weeks in advance, customers had been informed about the upcoming program.

The next night, the hall was packed with over 500 people. It was an old, musty place, used mainly for rock concerts. Hundreds of posters of different bands who had played there were plastered everywhere. The place looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in years. I asked the technicians to keep the hall dark, flooding only the stage with lights.

Although we had not rehearsed our show, it went off well because the performers were experienced and skilled. The crowd loudly applauded the Bharat Natyam dances, enjoyed the bhajans, roared with approval at the martial-arts show, sat in awe at the yoga demonstration, and listened attentively to my lecture at the end. Everyone relished the prasadam, and we sold many books.

As we left the hall that evening I gave a sigh of relief. "But the next town, Galway, won't be so easy," I thought. "The last time Tribhuvanath and his festival program visited there was ten years ago."

The next morning, in pouring rain, we traveled west in a caravan of vehicles to Galway. It was an interesting journey through the lush, green Irish countryside.

"It rains more than not," said a devotee.

"More than not?" I asked.

"About 275 days a year in Galway," he said.

As we drove on I noticed row after row of stone fences.

"I don't see wooden fences," I said.

"The soil is rocky," a devotee said, "so for centuries when farmers tilled the land they took the rocks and made boundaries with them. It's unique in this part of the world."

After hearing a little Irish history, I couldn't help but ask a question I'd always had about the country.

"Are there really leprechauns?" I said.

"No Irishman will deny it," a devotee said with a smile.

Then his face became serious. "But you can never borrow money from them," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because they're always a little short," he said with a grin.

The devotees burst into laughter, and I lost all hope for the existence of Ireland's fabled creatures.

After five hours we reached Galway, a town of 100,000 people. I was surprised that my tourist book listed it as one of Ireland's major cities. As we drove along, the sun appeared briefly from behind the clouds, and I marveled at the beauty and quaintness of the town.

The next day the rain lightened into a drizzle, and after a morning program at our base, we drove with our caravan of cars into town and parked near the main street.

As we assembled for the kirtan, I picked up a drum and tried it out. It sounded dead. Then I noticed we only had two pairs of kartalas, and they were small. But the worst came when I saw devotees putting signboards around their necks advertising the festival program.

"Take them off," I said to the devotees. "We're not the Salvation Army."

Soon our little ragtag group began chanting down a pedestrian street about 300 meters long. Despite the fact that a nice devotee couple lived in Galway and sometimes did kirtan on the same street, it soon became obvious that most people had never seen devotees before.

School had just finished and suddenly the street was full of high-school kids. As we passed a group of older boys, one took a bottle of beer, shook it, and sprayed us all over.

Suddenly I saw another group of young men walking quickly toward us, apparently with the intention of crashing through our ranks. As I stepped forward, a brahmacari caught my arm.

“They can be mean,” he said.

I flashed back to my youth. “Don’t mess with the Irish boys,” came to my mind, and I stepped aside. As they reached us we opened our lines and the boys walked through without incident.

“I wonder what kind of program we’ll have in this town,” I thought.

Some people stopped and stared, but most just walked by as we chanted down the street. We were an unfamiliar sight, and it would take time for people to get used to us. By the end of the Harinama four hours later, people were beginning to smile. We had only just broken the ice.

“Tomorrow will be better,” I said to the devotees as we drove back to our base that afternoon.

The next day I took the devotees out early, before 10:30 AM. Dark, ominous clouds hung in the sky. In the chilly morning air, people walked quickly down the street, somber looks on their faces. But this time, no one took notice as we started our kirtan.

I turned to Tribhuvanesvara, our kirtan leader, and asked him to give it his best. He thought for a moment and changed to an upbeat melody on his accordion. The devotees began chanting and dancing down the street in great pleasure.

The kirtan got stronger by the hour. Around noon, when bright sunshine suddenly appeared from behind the clouds, many people looked up and then smiled at us, as if to attribute the flood of warmth and light to the kirtan of the holy names.

We passed close by a group of shoppers. “What in the world are these people doing?” A woman asked her friend.

“They’re worshipping Krsna, stupid!” her friend replied.

A devotee who was distributing invitations came up to me. "Guess what," he said. "I overheard a man speaking to his friend over his cell phone. The man said, 'The Hare Krishna's are everywhere and they look so happy. I'm thinking to join them. No, seriously, I am.'"

By the time we left at 3:00 PM, exhausted but happy, auspiciousness prevailed. At the end of the day, I had some hope that our program would be successful.

"O King, when the devotees of Lord Krishna dance, their steps crush the inauspiciousness of the earth, their glances destroy the inauspiciousness of the ten directions, and their upraised voices push away the inauspiciousness in the demigods planets."

[Hari Bhakti Suddhodaya 20.68]

The next day we performed Harinama at a local university. Again we tried our best, but although the students looked at us curiously, they didn't appear interested. I noticed a lot of invitations in the trash cans. Afterward, the Harinama devotees put up posters, but they were quickly covered by other advertisements. As we drove home that evening, I was again apprehensive about attendance at our upcoming event.

"We need another Harinama like yesterday," I thought as I drifted off to sleep that night. "One's not enough."

But any hopes of another were dashed when I woke up the next morning and looked out the window. It was pouring rain.

We arrived early at the festival hall that afternoon. I was pleased to see that it was modern, well equipped, and clean. I counted 600 seats.

"It's a nice hall, but it will look empty if only a few people come," I thought.

As the afternoon wore on we waited impatiently for a crew of technicians to arrive and set up the stage, lights, and sound, but no one came. Finally, just three hours before show time, one technician showed up.

"Where is the rest of the crew?" I asked.

“A show?” said the young man. “We thought you were just going to pray.”

Immediately he began preparing the lights on the stage. But he seemed new on the job and unfamiliar with the equipment. From time to time he would run back to the sound desk, fiddle with it and then run back to the lights. Time passed and soon there was only 90 minutes to opening. He became frantic.

“Even I set it all up in time,” he said, “I won’t be able run the lights and the sound simultaneously.”

“Well,” I said, “I’ve got several qualified men here who can easily set this all up and run it all as well. Can you use them?”

“I don’t know what the boss will say,” he replied.

“We have no choice,” I said strongly.

“OK,” he said relieved. “Let’s get to work.”

Immediately several of our men, seasoned by years of experience on the Polish tour, jumped into action. In an hour everything was up and running.

Meanwhile the rest of us set up the book table, shops, and prasadam.

Then with 15 minutes until opening, we sat back and waited for the guests.

A trickle of people began arriving at 6:00 PM. As they took their seats, I went behind the stage and told Tribhuvanesvara to start the bhajan. Then I went back to the main entrance and waited. Minutes later a few more people arrived. At 6:30 there were only 30 people in the hall.

“This is what I was afraid would happen,” I said as I turned and walked to the stage.

“Guests or no guests, let’s start the show,” I said to the devotee stage manager.

I went back to the dressing rooms and sat down. An hour passed. The performers went on one after another.

“All of this for so few people,” I said out loud.

“What do you mean?” said Dina Dayal das, just back from his second martial arts performance. “The crowd is getting bigger by the minute.”

I jumped up and rushed out to the front of the stage. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The hall was more than half full, and people were still flowing in.

“There are over 400 people out there,” said a devotee. “They all came a little late, probably because of the bad weather.”

I stood and watched the crowd. They seemed mesmerized by the show.

Toward the end, I came on stage and gave a lecture. Through the bright lights I could see everyone listening attentively, so I took advantage of the opportunity and spoke for over an hour. No one moved.

Then we had a rousing kirtan. Many in the audience jumped up from their seats and danced with us in front of the stage. Afterwards we distributed prasadam. Soon the guests left, many with Srila Prabhupada books under their arms. Fully satisfied, I walked back to the dressing room to gather my things.

“I never imagined so many people would come,” I said shaking my head.

A devotee passed by. “Great show, Maharaja,” he said. “And against all odds. It was such bad weather, and we had so little time for advertising. How’d we do it?”

I smiled. “Luck of the Irish,” I said, “and no doubt, the mercy of the holy names.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

“I have tested it definitely that melodious vibration of Sankirtana, if performed by serious devotees, can attract people from the very spiritual platform, and it at once makes the spiritual background very smooth, where a spiritual instruction from the Bhagavad-gita can be implemented very nicely. So my first concrete program is to organize such a Sankirtana party.”

[letter to Harikrishnadas Aggarwal, March 3, 1968]



MYSTERIOUS ANTIQUES

| OCTOBER 6 - 10, 2006 |

As autumn descended on Europe, I started thinking of my yearly pilgrimage to India. Going to India is more of a necessity than a luxury for one in the renounced order of life. To do his service well, a sannyasi must remain always pure in heart, and there is no better means of purifying the heart and building one's spiritual strength than spending the auspicious month of Kartika in the holy land of Vrindavan.

I had been busy preaching throughout the summer, so I had forgotten to make a reservation to India. When I finally called my travel agent, he said the only seat left was on October 6, a few days before Kartika began. I immediately reserved it.

Later in the day, I telephoned my disciple Dhruva das to ask about the possibility of visiting another holy place in India before our scheduled Vrindavan parikramas in Kartika. We talked about Haridwar, Tirupati, and Udupi. Then suddenly I had an inspiration.

“Let’s go to Bangladesh,” I said, “and visit the great saint Narottam das Thakur’s birthplace in Keturi. I can’t forget the wonderful spiritual experience I had when I visited there two years ago with Radhanath Swami.”

Dhruva agreed. Several days later I took my flight to Delhi and met Dhruva there. The next day, we went to the Bangladesh Embassy to get our visas. We arrived early to avoid long lines, but we could have arrived hours later, as there wasn’t a single other person applying for a visa. In fact, when we walked into the visa sector of the embassy, the man behind the counter was fast asleep.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said. “We’d like to apply for visas.”

He woke up with a start. “What?” he said. “Visas?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “This is the place to get them, isn’t it?”

He stood up slowly, stretched his arms, and yawned. “Yes, yes,” he said. “This is the place.”

He rummaged through a few drawers and found some application forms. He handed them to us.

“How long do you plan to stay?” he asked.

“Just three days,” I said. “It’s a quick trip.”

We filled in the forms and took our seats to wait for the visas. I noticed a poster on the wall: “Visit Bangladesh before the tourists come.”

I mentioned it to the clerk, and he laughed. “That poster is over 30 years old,” he said. “It came out after the war, in 1971. Few tourists visited Bangladesh before that time, and even fewer now.”

The next day we caught a flight to Kolkata and waited for a connecting flight to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. At one point I glanced up at the board announcing flights and saw that ours was delayed. I jumped up and went to the Biman Bangladesh flight counter.

“How long is the delay?” I asked the man behind the counter.

“At least four hours,” he said without looking up from his work.

“What?” I said. “Four hours!”

I looked around to see if any other passengers were upset, but I didn’t see anyone.

“Where are all the other passengers?” I said.

“There aren’t many these days,” he said.

Five hours later, our flight finally took off, with only 20 passengers.

We arrived in Dhaka late at night and quickly cleared customs and immigration because there were so few passengers. We had missed our connecting flight to Rajshahi and would have to re-book it the next day. As we hailed a taxi, Dhruva asked me where we were going to stay.

“We’ll stay at the local ISKCON temple,” I said. “I’ve got the address in my bag.”

We jumped into the taxi, and I gave the address to the driver.

“Sir,” he said, “I can’t drive to that part of town tonight. It’s too dangerous.”

I leaned forward. “Dangerous? It’s not in a bad part of town. I’ve been there before.”

“Sir,” he said. “There were violent demonstrations today. Some groups are still roaming around. It’s too risky to go there now.”

I sat back. “I see,” I said. “Then take us to the nearest hotel. Something reasonably priced.”

As we drove out of the airport and into town I noticed the streets were empty and littered with rocks, bricks, and broken bottles.

“What’s all that?” I asked the driver.

“From the demonstrations, sir” he said. “During the afternoon no one could go to or from the airport.”

“That explains why the flight was delayed,” I said to Dhruva.

We checked in at the hotel and fell fast asleep. Several hours later I woke up from a nightmare about being chased by rioters.

The next morning, I saw a newspaper under our door, courtesy of the hotel. I picked it up. "Rioting at Key Points throughout City" screamed the headlines.

"Several dead, many injured," said the subhead. "More demonstrations planned today."

Many groups had engaged in the demonstrations. The articles spoke of factory workers dissatisfied with their wages and other groups dissatisfied with the government's rationing of electricity. I already knew from searching the internet that strikes and violent demonstrations are very much part of the social fabric of Bangladesh. The history of Bangladesh has been one of constant social upheaval and violent politics.

"Best if we leave Dhaka quickly," I said to Dhruva. "Call the airlines and tell them we missed our connection to Rajshahi, and ask them to rebook us for this morning."

Dhruva came back 10 minutes later. "All flights to Rajshahi are full for the next 10 days," he said.

I thought for a moment. "Then, book us to Jessore," I said. "It's an hour and a half bus ride from Benapol, where Haridas Thakur did his bhajan. There's a nice guest house there where we can stay."

Dhruva came back a few minutes later. "The flights to Jessore are booked up for seven days," he said.

"Try Sylhet," I said. "That's where Advaita Acarya appeared."

Dhruva was gone a little longer. Then he came back. "No seats for a week," he said. "It seems you have to reserve well in advance here."

He paused. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "what are we going to do in this place for three days? We can't get to the temple. We can't even go outside the hotel."

"For now let's just chant our rounds," I said.

We read and chanted throughout the day.

That night I again dreamed that I was being chased by a group of demonstrators. The next morning when I woke up, I immediately grabbed the morning newspaper from under the door.

"Four Dead in Clashes with Police," said the headlines. "Local Activists Vow Revenge."

"Call the airlines," I told Dhruva, "and see if we can fly back to India today, instead of tomorrow."

Again, the reply was negative. "The flight back to Kolkata is also booked," he said.

Again we read and chanted all day.

The next morning I looked through the newspaper again. "It's a big city," I said to Dhruva. "The demonstrations and rioting seem to be in selected places. Let's get out of this hotel. I can't sit here any longer."

In the afternoon we reconfirmed our flight for that evening and stepped outside the hotel for the first time since we arrived.

There was a lot of traffic and we waited a long time for a taxi. "Let's go to the temple," I said to Dhruva as we finally stepped into a taxi. But the driver refused.

"Is it dangerous to drive there?" I said.

"Not today," he replied. "But it's too far and I'm stopping work soon."

But neither Dhruva nor I wanted to wait on the street any longer. "Then take us to a beautiful part of the city," I said.

The driver laughed. "There's not much beautiful about this city," he said.

"Well then," I said, "take us where the tourists go."

"What tourists?" he said.

"Can you suggest somewhere for us to go then?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I'll take you to the old town," he said. "It's peaceful there."

We drove an hour through heavy traffic and finally arrived at a market.

"I'll leave you here," the driver said. "I'm going home."

"Where are we?" I asked.

“In an old bazaar,” he replied.

As we stepped out of the taxi, I saw artisans making bangles, drums, and brass articles. It was obviously a Hindu neighborhood.

“Feels a little like India,” I said to Dhruva.

As we walked through the market, people stared at us. Obviously, whatever tourists came to Bangladesh didn’t frequent the area. We wandered around for some time and were about to go back to the hotel when I noticed a little side alley.

“Let’s walk down there,” I said to Dhruva.

The alley was hemmed in by buildings on both sides, so it was almost dark. We walked for 50 meters and were about to turn around when I saw a small shop with a torn awning that read, “Antiques.”

We had to bow our heads to enter through the door. As my eyes got used to the dim light, I noticed piles of old brass pots and utensils. On the walls were dusty paintings of kings and queens from bygone ages. A few old swords lay here and there, as well as some ancient puja articles like achman spoons and cups. Old watches, unpolished jewelry, and an odd assortment of things were piled up in three dirty glass showcases. Antique lamps hung here and there, making it difficult to walk around.

We had been browsing through the shop for 15 minutes when suddenly we heard a man’s voice. “Haven’t had customers in here for a long time,” the voice said.

I turned around and saw an old man sitting behind a counter. I wondered why I hadn’t seen him when we walked in and concluded it must be because he hadn’t moved.

I had to squint to see him in the dim light. “Good afternoon, sir” I said. “We were wandering around this part of town and came upon your store.”

“Something in particular you’re looking for?” he said, still not moving.

“Anything interesting,” Dhruva said.

The man studied us carefully for a few moments.

"I can show you some unusual items," he said, "but I have to go home to get them. I don't keep them here."

"Like what kind of interesting things?" Dhruva asked.

"I have a centuries-old coin," he said. "If you put grains on it, they'll immediately disappear."

"Is that true?" Dhruva said.

"I also have a peacock feather that casts no shadow."

"Wow!" said Dhruva.

"I have a deity of Ganesh that doesn't appear in any photo you take of him."

"Really?" said Dhruva.

"And I have a pot that neutralizes poison."

"Neutralizes poison?" said Dhruva.

"It was used by royalty," the man said. "In ancient times kings were sometimes poisoned, so their food was put in this pot before their meals. But I'll only show you these things if I'm convinced you're serious about buying them."

"What?" said Dhruva.

"That's the condition," the man said.

"How much does the pot cost?" Dhruva asked.

"Two thousand dollars," he replied.

"OK, Dhruva," I said with a chuckle. "Let's move on. That's way beyond our price range."

I turned to the old man. "Thank you, sir," I said. "It was interesting meeting you."

As we turned to go I noticed a peculiar item on his desk.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's not for sale," he replied.

"I just want to know what it is," I said.

"It's an old tiger's tooth," he said.

"In a silver casing with a chain," I said.

"Yes," he said. "It belonged to a king hundreds of years ago."

"Is it special?" I said.

"Very special," he replied.

"How so?" I asked.

"The person who wears it will never be troubled by bad dreams," he said. "He'll be blessed, and his dreams will be good."

"Wow!" said Dhruva. "That's incredible!"

"Dhruva," I said, "you don't have to believe everything he says."

I thought about my bad dreams the previous two nights. I couldn't resist looking closer at the mysterious tooth.

"Can I hold it?" I asked.

The man picked up the tooth and put it in my hand.

It was large and dark yellow, and the silver casing had ornate carving all over it. It spoke of antiquity.

"Thanks," I said and handed it back. We turned and started to walk to the door.

"Are you interested in buying the tooth?" the man said.

"No thanks," I said as we started to open the door. "I'm sure it's too expensive."

"Just wait," the man said. "I'm willing to let this piece go for cheaper."

Dhruva and I stopped and turned around.

"I think he needs the money," Dhruva whispered. "Looks like no one ever comes here."

"How much?" I said.

"Two hundred dollars," the man said.

"That's pretty cheap," Dhruva said.

"Not in Bangladesh," I said. "It's one of the poorest countries in the world."

"I'll buy it for you," Dhruva said, and he walked back in the store. After paying for the tooth, he came back and handed it to me.

"One more thing before you go," the man said. "I have something else you may be interested in."

"What's that?" Dhruva said.

"Several pairs of old Radha Krsna Deities," the man said.

"Oh?" I said. "Old Radha Krishna Deities?"

“Yes,” the man said. “Two to three hundred years old. And very beautiful, but they’re in my home.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

The man locked up the store, and we walked through a maze of streets to his home. Once inside, we sat in the living room while his son brought several boxes out from under a large sofa. Then he put three sets of old, tarnished, brass Radha Krsna Deities on a table.

Dhruva and I couldn’t believe our eyes.

“They just don’t make Deities like this anymore,” Dhruva said.

“They’re so beautiful!” I said.

“Before partition,” the old man said, “the worship of Radha and Krsna was very popular here. They were worshiped in Hindu temples and homes. When the war broke out in 1971, many Hindus fled to India, taking only the possessions they could carry.”

“It’s amazing these Deities didn’t end up in a museum,” I said. “Their features are so extraordinary.”

“This is primarily a Muslim country,” he said. “People here are not interested in such things.”

“How much are they?” I asked.

“One hundred dollars a set,” he said.

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Oh, really,” I said calmly, not wanting to appear excited.

Suddenly Dhruva looked at his watch. “Guru Maharaja,” he said, “it’s 4 PM. It’s getting late. Our flight is at 7 PM. If we don’t leave now we’ll miss it.”

I continued looking at the Deities.

“For hundreds of years these Deities must have been worshiped with love and devotion,” I thought. “Now they’re just lying under a sofa.”

“Will you take a credit card?” Dhruva asked the man.

“Absolutely not,” he said.

“Let me see how much money I have,” I said.

Because we had come to Bangladesh for only three days, I hadn't brought much cash. I reached into my pocket and pulled out what I had. It was just over 100 dollars. I put it on the table.

"I'll take one set," I said.

Again I studied the beautiful forms of the Deities, gazing at one set and then another. I just couldn't decide which set to take.

"Guru Maharaj," said Dhruva anxiously, "it's getting really late now."

Finally I decided on a pair of Deities about 15 inches high. The artistic detail on them was something that could not be duplicated.

When the man put the other sets back in the boxes and under the sofa, both Dhruva and I felt sad.



The Radha Krsna deities from Bangladesh

Then we rushed back to the hotel, threw our belongings into our bags, hailed a taxi, and rushed to the airport.

When we put our bags through the x-ray machine a customs officer saw the metal forms of the Deities inside one bag and asked us to open it.

“What are these statues?” he said.

“Just something we picked up in the market,” I said casually.

Another officer came over and the two of them looked at the Deities together.

“Something Hindu,” said the second officer. Then he nodded his head, indicating we could leave.

On the plane, as I put my coat in the overhead rack, the tiger’s tooth and chain fell out of one of the pockets. In the excitement of getting the Radha Krishna Deities I had forgotten about the tooth. I quickly put it around my neck.

Exhausted, Dhruva and I fell fast asleep in our seats. We slept for over an hour and woke up at the same time.

“Dhruva!” I said excitedly. “I just had an amazing dream. I dreamt we were on Harinama in a Muslim village. As we chanted through the village all the people came out of their houses to sing with us. They were singing ‘Allah Akbar!’ and we were singing ‘Hare Krishna.’ We all joined hands and danced together in bliss. It was so vivid!”

Dhruva looked at the tiger’s tooth around my neck. “Guru Maharaja,” he said, “that’s exactly what the man said would happen if you wore that tiger’s tooth. Just imagine if we’d been able to get the peacock feather, the coin, the deity of Ganesh, and the special pot that neutralizes poison.”

I laughed. “It doesn’t matter Dhruva,” I said. “We’re bringing back something infinitely more precious: beautiful Deities of Radha and Krishna. We rescued them. Now we have to find a proper home for them.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

“I have got some reports that the Deities in Bombay are being much neglected. This is a most abominable affair. Radha and

Krishna should not ever be neglected or left unprotected, so I am wondering what you have done to rectify this situation. I have heard that Madhudvisa intervened to get the Deities a better place. He has done nicely.”

[letter to a disciple, May 2, 1972]



FRUIT OF VRINDAVANA

| OCTOBER 11 - 25, 2006 |

Dhruva das and I arrived in Delhi after our short trip to Bangladesh and took a taxi to Vrindavan. Though I have been to Vrindavan many times in the last 35 years, coming into that transcendental abode is always a fresh and exhilarating experience. I wanted to enter Vrindavan in the proper frame of mind, so during the three-hour drive I started to read from one of my favorite books, Vrindavan-Mahimamrita.

*grnanti suka sarikah sucaritani radhapates tad eka paritustaye tru
latah sadotphullitah saramsi kamalotpaladibhirdhusca yatra sriyam
tad utsava krte manah smara tad eva vrndavanam*

“Always meditate on the blissful abode of Vrindavan, where parrots are constantly singing the nectarean characteristics of Radha and Krishna and where trees, creepers, flowers, fruits, and twigs increase the beauty of the land. They are always joyful because they are fully engaged in the service of the Lord of Radha. May I always meditate on such an enchanting abode of ecstasy.”

[Sri Vrindavana-Mahimamrita,
by Srila Prabhodhananda Saraswati, 17 sakata, verse 97]

The next day, we began our Vrindavan parikrama along with 250 other devotees by visiting the Madan Mohan Temple near the Yamuna River. As we began walking down the dusty path, I had the feeling that this year's parikrama would be full of nectar and unlimited mercy.

It didn't take long for my expectations to come true.

After our visit to Madan Mohan Temple, I had an idea. "Let's make a quick trip to the Vraja Mohan Temple," I said to Dhruva. "I'd like to offer my respects to the Deity of Narottam das Thakur."

Over the years, my disciples and I have helped restore the Vraja Mohan Temple to its original beauty. It is one of the places in Vrindavan where I go for spiritual shelter and inspiration.

We went to the temple and paid our respects to the Deity. Then the pujari, a friend of mine, came up to me. "Maharaja," he said, "I have been waiting for you all year. I have a wonderful surprise. Come to my room."

We entered his simple quarters, and Dhruva and I sat on the floor. The pujari reached up onto a shelf and brought down a small wooden box. He opened it slowly, took out a beautiful Salagrama-sila, and put the sila in my hand.

I was speechless.

"We were digging the foundation for a new guesthouse behind the temple," he said, and we broke into the remains of an ancient temple five meters underground. We discovered this Salagrama in one of the rooms. I'm giving it to you as gratitude for all the help you and your disciples have done in restoring our temple."

Later, Dhruva and I walked back to where we were staying, carefully holding the auspicious Deity. "This is only our first day in Vrindavan," I said to Dhruva. "Just imagine what other transcendental wonders await us."

Then I quoted one of my favorite verses by Srila Rupa Goswami, *madhavya madhuranga kanana pada praptadhirajya sriya vrindranya vikasi saurabha tate tapiccha kalpa druma not-tapam jagad eva yasya bhajate kirti cchata cchayaya citra tasya*

tavanghri sannidhi jusam kim va phalaptir nrinam “O handsome, fragrant tamala desire tree blooming in Vrindavan forest and embraced by the madhavi vine of the goddess ruling this forest, O tree, the shade of whose glory protects the world from a host of burning sufferings, what wonderful fruit do people find at Your feet?”

[Srla Rupa Goswami, Utkalika Vallari, verse 66]

Two days later, I took the devotees on Govardhana parikrama. We walked slowly, having bhajan and describing each holy place as we stopped there along the path. When we arrived at the sacred Govinda Kunda, where the surabhi cow bathed Lord Krsna with her milk, I asked my Godbrother Chaturatma das to tell the pastime to the devotees, and I went to sit alone some distance away on the bank of the lake.

I was tired and hot, and the cool breeze off the lake quickly refreshed me. The whole atmosphere was enchanting, with white cows grazing nearby, green parrots flying about, and peacocks in the trees. I was reflecting on the spiritual significance of the place when suddenly a young village girl, around eight years old, came and sat beside me without saying a word. She began gazing out at the lake, just as I had been doing. We sat like that together, just meditating on Govinda Kunda for well over half an hour. Once in awhile I'd look over at her and smile. She'd acknowledge my gesture by slightly tilting her head to the side, as Indian people do.

Finally she turned to me. “Baba,” she said and reached out with her closed hand, in a gesture of offering me something. I put out my hand, and she put a beautiful Govardhana sila in my palm.

She smiled sweetly. “Giriraja,” she said and ran off to play with her friends nearby.

The small sila was brown with a white triangle in the middle. I looked at it for a long time. Then I walked the few steps to the kunda and bathed the sila in the sacred water.

As I walked back to where the devotees were, I thought about my good fortune. The best way to receive a Govardhana sila is directly from a Vrajavasi, someone who lives in Vrindavan, and I, without even asking, had been blessed with such a sila from the hands of a young girl who lived at Govardhan Hill.

When I showed the sila to the devotees, everyone was amazed.

But the desire tree of Vrindavan dhama had still more fruit to offer.

The next day we continued our Govardhana parikrama from where we had left off. When we reached Uddhava Kunda near the end of the day, I was happy to see my old Vrajavasi friend, Giriraja das. He has been the pujari at Uddhava Kunda for over 50 years.

We rushed forward to greet each other. As we hugged, I meditated on my good fortune to be holding a pure Vaisnava like him.



The Govardhana sila from Govinda Kunda

He once told me that his father did Govardhana parikrama five thousand times before conceiving him.

After we sat down, I spoke to the devotees for over an hour about the transcendental importance of Uddhava Kunda. Giriraja das sat patiently by my side. He does not know a word of English, but his face would light up every time I said a name of the Lord or one of his eternal associates, like Uddhava.

Just as I finished, he reached onto the altar, picked up a large Govardhana-sila, and put it in my hand. Once again I was surprised by mercy that had come of its own accord. I was amazed to see that the sila very much resembled the smaller one I had received earlier at Govinda Kunda.

“I have been worshipping him for thirty years,” Giriraja das said. “He was given to me by an old sadhu who lived in a small cave in Govardhana Hill, near Govinda Kunda.”

As Giriraja das spoke, I looked again at the sila in my hands. It seemed to become more and more precious.



The Govardhana sila given by Giriraja das at Uddhava kunda

All the devotees crowded around to see the sila. Giriraj das took my hands and looked at me with tears in his eyes. “I am an old man,” he said. “I may die soon. I am giving you the most cherished thing I own. I am giving you my life.”

I could not find a way to reciprocate with his kindness, so I fell down at his feet and offered obeisances for a long time.

The next morning I started my worship of the two Govardhana silas. Many devotees came throughout the day to look at their beauty. I was thinking that I had received the pinnacle of grace in the holy dhama.

But there was more to come.

Soon after our Govardhana parikrama, we visited Uchagaon, the appearance place of Lalita devi, Srimati Radharani’s closest sakhi. For days I had prepared myself by reading about Lalita devi – her personal qualities, her special mood, and her service in Radha and Krishna’s pastimes. As hundreds of us walked along the dusty road leading to the hill where Lalita’s village was, I was thinking about my spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada. Only by his grace could I even set foot in such a holy place.

As we were crossing a bridge over a small river, I noticed two of our devotees speaking to a farmer on the other side. The farmer was an older man, typical of many Vrajavasis – dressed in a simple white dhoti, old shoes, a vest, and an old chaddar. I thought it odd that the devotees were speaking with him for so long.

“They certainly don’t speak the local Vrajavasi dialect,” I thought, “and surely a poor farmer like him doesn’t speak English.”

When I reached the group, I was surprised to hear the farmer speaking English fluently. I listened for a moment and then spoke to him. “Sir,” I said, “how is it that you speak such good English?”

He smiled. “When I was very young,” he said, “I had a desire to learn English.”

After the other devotees left, I also discovered that he was learned in the Vedic scriptures.

“Many of Radha and Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes took place in this area,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

He extended his arm and pointed. “Up on the hill is the place where Lalita devi appeared,” he said. “She’s the leader of all the sakhis.”

“And just over there” he continued, “the gopis declared Srimate Radharani to be Queen of Vrindavan. And on that side, just behind those trees, Radharani performed the marriage ceremony of Lalita and Kṛṣṇa.”

He chuckled. “Radharani became so happy that her veil fell off and landed on a rock,” he said. “You can still see the impression of that veil on the rock. It is called the citra-vicitra sila.”

“You know a lot,” I said.

He laughed. “Everyone out here knows these things,” he said. “This is all we talk about.”

His expression became serious. “But it’s quickly changing,” he said. “With material progress and Western influence, our culture here in Vrindavan is being negatively affected. Now people are more interested in watching television and Bollywood videos. Even out here.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

I asked the farmer to go with us up the hill to Uchagaon. Along the way we continued our discussion.

“I’m happy being a farmer,” he said. “With my knowledge of English, I could have had a good job in a city, but that would have meant leaving Vrindavan. And this, I would never do.”

When our party reached the temple on top of the hill, I gave a talk about Srimati Lalita devi, recounting a number of her transcendental pastimes. My respected guest sat next to me and seemed to enjoy the talk.

But as I spoke I felt increasingly embarrassed. “This gentleman was born in Vrindavan,” I thought, “and he has been living here his whole life. He knows these things better than I do. Who am I to speak in front of him?”

After my talk, the farmer and I sat down to take prasadam together, and I noticed he was carrying a small bag.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked.

He smiled, opened the bag, and took out an English edition of Krsna Book.

“What?” I said. “Where did you ever get that? This book was written by my spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada.”

“I found it on a bus two years ago,” he said. “I’ve read it seventeen times.”

“Seventeen times?” I said.

“Oh yes” he said. “It’s my favorite book. It’s all about Vrindavan.”

He paused for a moment. “I’ve heard about how your spiritual master went to the Western countries and delivered so many people. I want to read more of his books, but I can’t afford them.”

Here was more mercy for me: an opportunity to serve a genuine Vrajavasi.

“If you give me your address,” I said, “I’ll send you the entire collection of Srimad Bhagavatams.”

“Please do,” he said, “and in English.”

“Of course,” I said.

“But don’t wait too long,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I’m over fifty now,” he said. “I want to start traveling.”

“To all the holy places in India?” I said.

“No,no,” he said. “I plan to travel throughout Vrindavan and share with everyone what I’ve learned from your spiritual master.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “If people in these villages were to know his message, Vrindavan could be saved from the onslaught of Western culture.”

His bushy eyebrows went up. “Just as your spiritual master went to the West and delivered so many people,” he said, “so his teachings can restore Vrindavan’s culture to its original glory.”

As we parted, we hugged. “Thank you,” I said. “Thank you for increasing my faith in the holy land of Vrindavan and my spiritual master, and in his transcendental books, as well.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

“Better you yourselves do as much as possible to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness there by distribution of literature, kirtana and prasadam. That will be as effective as my personally coming. I am very keen on the distribution of my books and I am very indebted to all of you for your untiring efforts to see that every man and woman in America gets one of my books. If they simply read one page, even if they do nothing else, they can become perfect.”

[Letter to Hari Basara , April 20, 1974]



Along the way we continued our discussion



DISAPPEARANCE DAY OFFERING TO SRILA PRABHUPADA

| OCTOBER 26, 2006 |

Dear Srila Prabhupada,

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

I am writing my offering to you today at Sankari Cor, a most sacred place at the foot of Varsana hill, in Sri Vrindavan Dhama. Though I have visited this holy tirtha a number of times, I still cannot fathom my good fortune in being here. Nevertheless, I am fully aware that the source of such auspiciousness is your Divine Grace.

As I sit reflecting, I realize the greater portion of my life has been filled with auspiciousness by your mercy alone. It was only the period before we met that was full of misfortune, anguish, suffering, and pain. I shudder when I think of those times, extending hundreds and millions of births into the past. I think of them only to appreciate the good fortune I have now.

Srila Prabhupada, your causeless mercy can be matched only by the mercy of the Supreme Lord. Were I to list the many priceless gifts I have received from you, they would fill volumes of books. The list began the day I met you, through the medium of your disciples. Though my memory often fails me now, remembrances of you are still

clear, being of a transcendental nature, unaffected by the ravages of old age and time. In my mind's eye, I can still see the tall and noble figure of Visnujana Maharaja when, 36 years ago, he motioned me to step forward as I stood transfixed by his enlightened lecture to a group of students who only jeered.

"Come here, young man," he said in a soothing voice, "and I will tell you of my spiritual master who can deliver you from this abode of birth and death and take you to the transcendental realm."

After an hour I turned to the friend who had come with me. "I want to be just like him," I said.

"What is it that attracts you to him?" my friend said.

"His love for his teacher," I said softly. "He seems to love him more than anyone's ever been loved before."

Months later, when I finally met you, I understood why. Love is reciprocal, but your generous blessings upon us seemed much greater than our insignificant efforts to please you. When I brought you your suitcase, lost in flight from New York to London, you slapped me on the back. "So much endeavor in this material world," you said, "but when I take you back to Godhead, everything will be easy and sublime."

Srila Prabhupada, I hanker for the day when your words will come true and I will be in your association in the spiritual world, where everything will be as you said: easy and sublime. But for now, the great endeavor you referred to – living in this world – is still at hand. Life goes on as always, a combination of so-called happiness and real distress.

I can tolerate it, of course. You have given me the holy names, your books, your service, and the association of devotees. But still, all this cannot relieve me of the real pain in my heart: being bereft of your transcendental association. For what reason did the Supreme Lord take you away on that fateful day in November 1977?

It must be in accordance with the Lord's own words spoken to a young Narada Muni in a forest, countless millions of years ago:

"O Narada, I regret that during this lifetime you will not be able to see me anymore. Those who are incomplete in service and who are not completely free from all material taints can hardly see me."



Srila Prabhupada and Indradyumna Swami (right)

"O virtuous one, you have only once seen my person, and this is just to increase your desire for Me, because the more you hanker for Me, the more you will be freed from all material desires."

[Srimad Bhagavatam 1.6.22 – 23]

Srila Prabhupada, in the beginning you gave us your association freely. But it is obvious from the above verses that to serve you again personally, we must purify our hearts through a lifetime of service, not resting until your mission is established in every town and village. Nothing less will do, for a servant cannot ask for a special favor until he completes the work entrusted to him.

And so it is that I will try to please you until my final breath. Though my aging body does not allow me to serve you with the same vitality and vigor as before, I am praying that whatever experience and realizations I have gained through the years will inspire my disciples. Together with all your followers, we hope to fulfill your dreams in those places where we serve your mission, united in love and appreciation for your Divine Grace. Such cooperative service pleases you and cleanses the hearts of all anarthas.

But in all honesty, Srila Prabhupada, at times the process seems painstakingly slow. Thus I truly wonder when I will see you again. Until that time, I maintain hope by seeing you present in the personalities and service of my Godbrothers and Godsisters. As the Supreme Lord is manifested in His creation, as an artist's nature can be perceived in his painting, as a father's personality is there in his children, so your mercy may be witnessed in your disciples. By appreciating them, we are in effect appreciating and associating with you.

Today, many of my Godbrothers are present.

In Jayadvaita Swami I see your straightforward, no-nonsense preaching, able to stand up to and easily defeat the most formidable opponent.

In Kesava Bharati Maharaja I see your ability to manage a temple project from inception to completion, providing the devotees with a sanctuary from the material energy and a place to become purified so they can return to their preaching.

In Lokanath Maharaja I see your passion for preaching to your countrymen, with a desire to revive Vedic culture throughout this land. His sweet voice and charming discourses captivate even my hardened heart.

In Visrambha Madhava Maharaja, I see your love for mastering and quoting innumerable slokas, strengthening and giving authority

to the timeless wisdom we all present. I remember you once said with a smile that if we memorize a verse and quote it several times, it's ours.

In Radha Govinda Maharaja, I witness your ability to present with authority, clarity, and vision the glories of Srimad Bhagavatam. His expertise is matched by none, except by you, of course, who bless his words to sound like yours. He's truly a chosen son.

In Deena Bandhu prabhu I marvel at how one of us, by your mercy alone, has developed a genuine love for this holy dharma to which you so kindly invited us. You wanted Western devotees to come here and preach, but the irony is that he's no longer Western. He's transcended all that. From the dust of Vraja Bhumi, in which he constantly walks, has been born a true Vrajavasi, a lover of Radhe Syama.

In Dravida prabhu I see your love and meticulous care for your Bhaktivedanta purports. And how proud you must be of his steadfastness in the brahmacari asrama, a true example for many a man!

In Svavasa prabhu I see your love and dedication to your beloved world headquarters in Los Angeles, a temple which you yourself gave so much time and energy to.

In Vaisesika prabhu I clearly see your deep compassion upon the fallen conditioned souls, manifested by a desire to distribute your books to each and every fallen conditioned soul in this world.

In Āindra prabhu I see your love for the constant chanting of the holy names. There's more that can be said, but what is the need? For one who has a taste for the holy names, perfection is guaranteed.

In Dhananjaya prabhu I see your dedication to following the personal instructions of the spiritual master. You once told Dhananjaya, "Stay here in Vrindavan for the rest of your life." By following that instruction he has pleased you and will become an eternal resident of this transcendental abode in due course of time.

In Kurma-rupa prabhu I see your love for the cows. Once you spoke out against the entire Western civilization saying, "My challenge is that you are making friends with the dogs but killing your mother, the cow." Kurma rupa must be giving you unlimited pleasure by caring for and loving these earthly cousins of the surabhi cow.

In Bimal Prasad das and Chaturatma prabhu I see the love you exchanged with all those who saw you as a friend. To this day I remember you laughing with Bhagaji inside your quarters here, as he told you stories of Krishna's pranks with his friends. I wish to also laugh with my friends in that way.

O Srila Prabhupada! The list of such disciples is endless, both here and beyond, for your glories are known throughout the three worlds. All glories to all your followers, their service to you, and their compassion upon the fallen conditioned souls!

In your absence their association is a soothing balm, giving relief from the pangs of material life. Their presence is a constant reminder that in this world you live forever by your divine instructions and your followers live with you. Without a doubt, such loyal disciples will soon serve you in your ISKCON in the spiritual sky. My prayer on this auspicious day is that I may also be fortunate enough to be counted among them in that transcendental abode.

Forever your servant,
Indradyumna Swami



VYASA PUJA ADDRESS TO PARTHA SARATHI DAS GOSWAMI

| NOVEMBER 11, 2006 |

Dear Maharaja,

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

This evening you have asked me to speak at your auspicious Vyasa Puja celebration, but with your permission I would prefer to read an offering. Please don't feel that this is inappropriate. The great Narada Muni has stated:

*brahmanyah sila sampannah satya sandho jitendriyah
atmavat sarva bhutanam eka priya subrt-tamah*

“To respectable persons, Prahlad Maharaja, acted like a menial servant. To the poor he was like a father and to his equals he was attached like a sympathetic brother. He considered his teachers, spiritual masters and older Godbrothers to be as good as the Supreme Personality of Godhead.”

[Srimad Bhagavatam 7.4.31]

My dear Goswami, it is indeed easy to glorify you, for in your character and deeds I see the mercy of our spiritual master, Srila



Partha Sarathi das Goswami

Prabhupada. I have no doubt that because of your service to the ISKCON movement you have received the full mercy of Srila Prabhupada. Your pioneer preaching in South Africa, particularly through the Tent Campaign, is legendary.

Time moves on and you have aged, and the campaign's old bus now lies rusting in a field. But the many devotees you made and the fine reputation our society gained are evidence of a historic time when grass-roots preaching established ISKCON as one of the major spiritual movements in the country.

As prosperity and success blossom throughout the yatra, let

us not forget the initial efforts of devotees like you, who worked tirelessly in austere and often dangerous situations to establish Kṛṣṇa consciousness in South Africa. Such selfless preaching has no doubt endeared you to the Lord and earned you the right to return back to Godhead.

And what is the secret of your success? It is no secret at all. Everyone can see it: you are a faithful follower of our Guru Maharaja. It is for this very reason that you sit on the Vyāsasana tonight, for Śrīla Prabhupada has said that a loyal student in turn becomes a qualified teacher.

But to the devotees in this yatra you are much more than their noble teacher. Because of your personal dealings with your disciples, you are also their father, friend, and counselor as well as their spiritual guide. As their teacher, you know slokas and sutras, tithis and mudras, but you also know the joys and sorrows, the happiness and woes of all your disciples.

Because you are so personal with them, you are acutely and painfully aware of their struggles with family, business, sickness, and death. You are the first to congratulate the parents of a newborn child and the last one to leave a beloved disciple's funeral pyre. You counsel and advise, chastise and criticize as their eternal guide.

They are blessed – those disciples who have your fatherly love and care. I sense they feel secure and protected under your guidance. They are confident that you will one day take them home to the transcendental abode. Such faith is rare in this world, and I feel privileged to be here tonight seeing the loving exchanges of a genuine spiritual master and his faithful followers.

Why do so many devotees seek your shelter? Because you have passed the test of time. Firm and steady in your service, you are like a steadfast rock in the South African yatra.

As a Godbrother I am impressed with your strong sadhana. While a number of devotees still struggle to chant a minimum of 16 rounds a day even after years of devotional service, you always endeavor to chant the maximum number of rounds. For years you chanted 64 rounds or more a day. Only recently have you reduced it to a “mere” 40 rounds a day, because of your ill health.

And you like to study. That is evident in your learned discourses and the books you write, which are always fresh and interesting and filled with transcendental realizations.

And the most amazing thing is that you do all this despite your bad health. You do more reading, chanting, and preaching while ill, than most of us do when we feel fine. If the Lord were to suddenly bless you with good health, it would prove troublesome for the atheists, agnostics, scientists, and sense enjoyers of this land, because they would be challenged by your preaching. On this auspicious occasion, we ask Lord Nrsimhadeva to watch over and protect you so that you may live a long and exemplary life, showing us and many others the path to perfection.

*hari smrti ahlada stimita manaso yasya krtinau sa romancah
kayah nayanam api sa nanda salilam tam evacandrarkam
vaha purusa dhaureyam avane kim anyais tair bharair yama
sadana gaty agata paraih*

“By remembering Lord Hari, the devotees’ 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 as 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, text 55]

My dear Goswami, our beloved Srila Prabhupada said he wanted at least a few disciples to catch a hint of what he was revealing to us, and I know that you have caught a glimpse of that deeper understanding.

How do I know? Because your taste for bhajan and your desire to distribute the holy names have given you away. You know that after diving into the ocean of Lord Caitanya’s sankirtan movement, one day a devotee will find himself in the pastimes of Radha and Krsna.

By Srila Prabhupada’s mercy that you have understood this.

*param gopyam api snigdhe sisye vacyam iti srutih tac
chruyatam maha bhaga goloka mahimadhuna*

“The Vedas say that to a loyal disciple one may speak the confidential secret. Therefore, O most fortunate one, now please hear the glories of Goloka.”

[Sri Brhat-Bhagavatamrta, Part Two, Chapter 1, Text 6]

Dear Maharaja, please be kind upon a poor, unintelligent, and unenlightened Godbrother who has yet to taste the nectar of the holy name, whose impure heart keeps him from doing anything significant for our spiritual master. Please keep me in your prayers, as you are in mine, so that I too will have a chance to return back home, back to Godhead in this lifetime.

Before closing, I want to share with your disciples something I wrote for them today. It's the one thing that your extreme humility keeps you from giving them. It's a pranam mantra, a short meditation on your unique qualities and service.

Srila Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakur has written that the disciple should remember his spiritual master at least three times a day. I hope your disciples will use this pranam mantra as part of their daily meditation upon you. Our Godbrother Gopiparanadana Prabhu has kindly rendered it into Sanskrit.

*dasa gosvaminam vande
nama bhajana samsrayam
yamya dese guruddesya
sthapakam srita vatsalam*

“I offer my respectful obeisances to Das Goswami, who helped pioneer the mission of Srila Prabhupada in the southernmost tip of the world. He is devoted to bhajan and is caring and affectionate to all those who take shelter of his lotus feet.”

Your servant,

Indradyumna Swami



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 16 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.

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