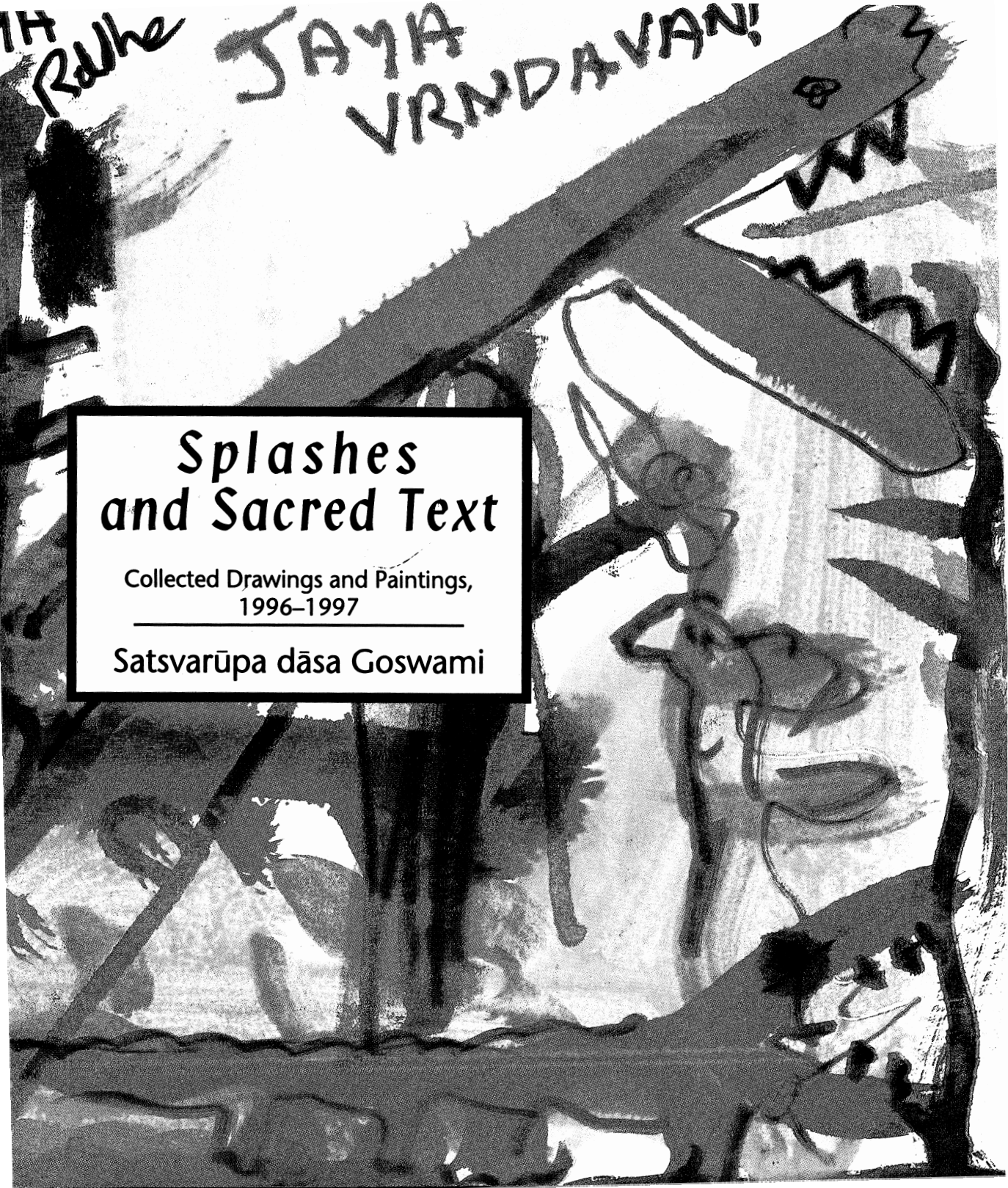


Splashes and Sacred Text

Collected Drawings and Paintings, 1996–1997

Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami

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Series Title: Books Among Friends

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Splashes And Sacred Text



One of my favorite stories about artists is the story of how Kandinsky discovered abstract art. Kandinsky was painting at the beginning of the twentieth century in France, and he has been credited as the first person to deliberately paint in a non-

representational way. One day, Kandinsky was out painting landscapes. When he returned to his studio, which was crowded with his paintings, he noticed a canvas lying on its side on the floor. He was suddenly struck and then overwhelmed with the beauty and energy emanating from the painting. He didn't even recognize that it was one of his own paintings because the painting was lying on its side and the sense of realism was lost.

Kandinsky couldn't deny his experience of the beauty he had witnessed, and he tried to duplicate it somehow, looking for energy and beauty rather than realism in the imagery. He found it difficult to recapture the beauty at first because he was so consciously attempting to create it. Then he decided to paint what he saw with his eyes, but to paint it from within. This was the beginning of abstract art.

I have maintained a Philistine attitude toward abstract art, especially after watching it become commercialized and so much removed from its original artistic roots. I realize now that I haven't understood what the abstract artist is trying to achieve. Doing my own artwork has helped me to see that abstraction allows you to try to capture something inexpressible, to reach inside and to pray through the painting. I have to admit the truth that Kandinsky discovered: there is beauty in an apparently random splash or a dot or a color combination.

Śrīla Prabhupāda once told a story of how Govinda dāsī took him to a church in Montreal. It was the Universalist Unitarian Church, and on the wall hung a modern painting of bamboo. Śrīla Prabhupāda said, "There was nothing in it to impel my Kṛṣṇa consciousness." It is important for a devotional artist to impel the Kṛṣṇa consciousness of others. I do believe, however, that there are different ways to do that. I don't think illustration is the only way. Representational art can certainly inspire *smaraṇam* because it acts as an aid in our attempt to visualize the details of Kṛṣṇa's form and pastimes. It is impossible, however, to capture the true beauty of Kṛṣṇa on canvas; all our attempts will fall short. An abstract representation may tend more toward impersonalism, so that doesn't suffice either. I guess I want to say, though, that abstract art can contain the power of emotion just as much as representational art, and sometimes even more so. That too can impel our Kṛṣṇa consciousness. As devotees we are looking for an evocation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

I am not an abstract artist, nor am I skilled at representational art. I take my courage from the naive artists, those who have had little or no formal training, but who feel inspired to draw and paint and who are able to release their inhibitions and draw in a childlike way. Since the naive artist doesn't have much craft, he remains free of artistic demand and can simply paint according to his own sincerity. That is what makes the artwork appealing.

I like to tag on śāstric words, and often take words or phrases in English or Sanskrit from Prabhupāda's *bhajanas.* The whole process then begins to turn into meditation or prayer. Matisse said, "He who really has something to say is driven to it by the emotion which makes him carry out his work." To speak about *bhakti* as Prabhupāda spoke about it, and to draw out the emotions by splashing paint on the page makes me feel alive. Therefore, "Splashes And Sacred Text."

Kṛṣṇa—Own Words

I like to draw people walking. Or, it's not that I *like* to draw them; they just seem to come. We read of artists going through phases. Picasso had a pink phase, a blue phase, and a cubist phase. An artist might draw the same image for years until he got through with it—maybe a door until he opened it—some image from life that has meaning.

A devotee likes to keep Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in his mind, but sometimes he doesn't feel worthy to paint Their forms. I have that problem. What seems to come more readily to pen is the image of a man walking.

Maybe it gives me the sense that at least I'm alive, I'm walking, moving forward on the path of *bhakti.* I once wrote a book called *Pada-yātrā* describing a mental journey I took over a period of two weeks. Interspersed with the writing, I repeatedly drew people walking, usually toward the east, but sometimes west too—vigorous fellows with swinging arms.

This man particularly reminds me of me. He's out early in the morning, it's spring, and the sun is up early rising over the forest. I swing my arms and feel alone with nature. I often walk with my sweatshirt hood up and in my *dhoti* and boots. This green man is green, but not with envy. He's a forest man. On his face he wears the ubiquitous *tilaka.* A devotee draws *tilaka* on all faces and even on trees and air—the stamp of the Vaiṣṇava. Is preaching that easy—you just plaster on *tilaka* and it's all Kṛṣṇa conscious?


KRSNA

Art. Jean Dubuffet said that "true art crops up wherever you don't expect it . . . whenever no one has been thinking about it or uttering its name." I don't know if this is art. I don't really judge it. It has already been redeemed by the holy name I wrote across the page, by the fact that the man wears *tilaka,* and I hope by the life I live that somehow seeps onto the page—the life of the moving hand, the nervousness, the preserving again of a little bit of life. Is it a vain attempt? It doesn't matter to me. I am not trying to maintain ego but to preserve experience, a moment spent in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

My drawings look unfinished. I accept that. It reminds me of the word "serendipity," which means the coming together of apparently random elements to form something pleasing. For a devotee, that means that finished or not, the elements of color and imagery form to present an image filled with the fortune of having come to Prabhupāda and the attempt to practice *bhakti.* Serendipity expresses our auspiciousness.

As for the phrase, "own words," well, I was painting while Prabhupāda's *bhajana* tape played in the background. I heard "Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa" over and over again and I suddenly wanted to express Kṛṣṇa consciousness in my own words. "Own words"—an act of impetuosity. But I share it with you.

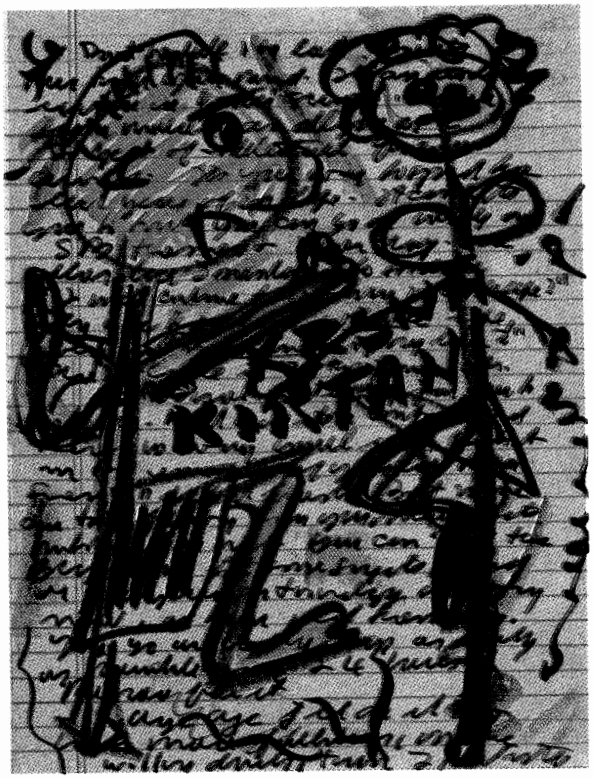
Kirtana And Kṛṣṇa-kīrtana

Before I say anything specific about these next two drawings, I would like to tell you how much I like to draw on top of handwriting. I am a writer who writes by hand. It's really not possible for me to save all the pages I write, and often they are thrown away after they have been typed into manuscript form. Still, those handwritten pages represent my life to me, my life written in my own script. There is an *akāśa* record, a record in the air, and Kṛṣṇa keeps records from the impressions in our hearts. These are subtle records and mine, written by hand, is something tangible and physical. Somehow that inspires me sometimes to draw on top of these pages to show the writerly nature of my life. I don't have a clean slate; it has already been written upon by the time I go to draw from my experience. Doing this also helps me express lightheartedness. I don't take my writings as so immortal they can't be doodled upon.

Now, the images. The first one shows a small-headed person. In Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura's "Śrī Nāmāṣṭaka," Song 8, he expresses his ecstasy at seeing the entire universe dancing in *kīrtana.* He mentions Nārada Muni, the thousand-faced Ananta Śeṣa, and Lord Brahmā singing "*Haribol*! Taste the nectar!" Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura writes, "By the influence of the transcendental vibration of the holy name, the whole universe becomes ecstatically maddened and everyone tastes the mellows of the holy name."

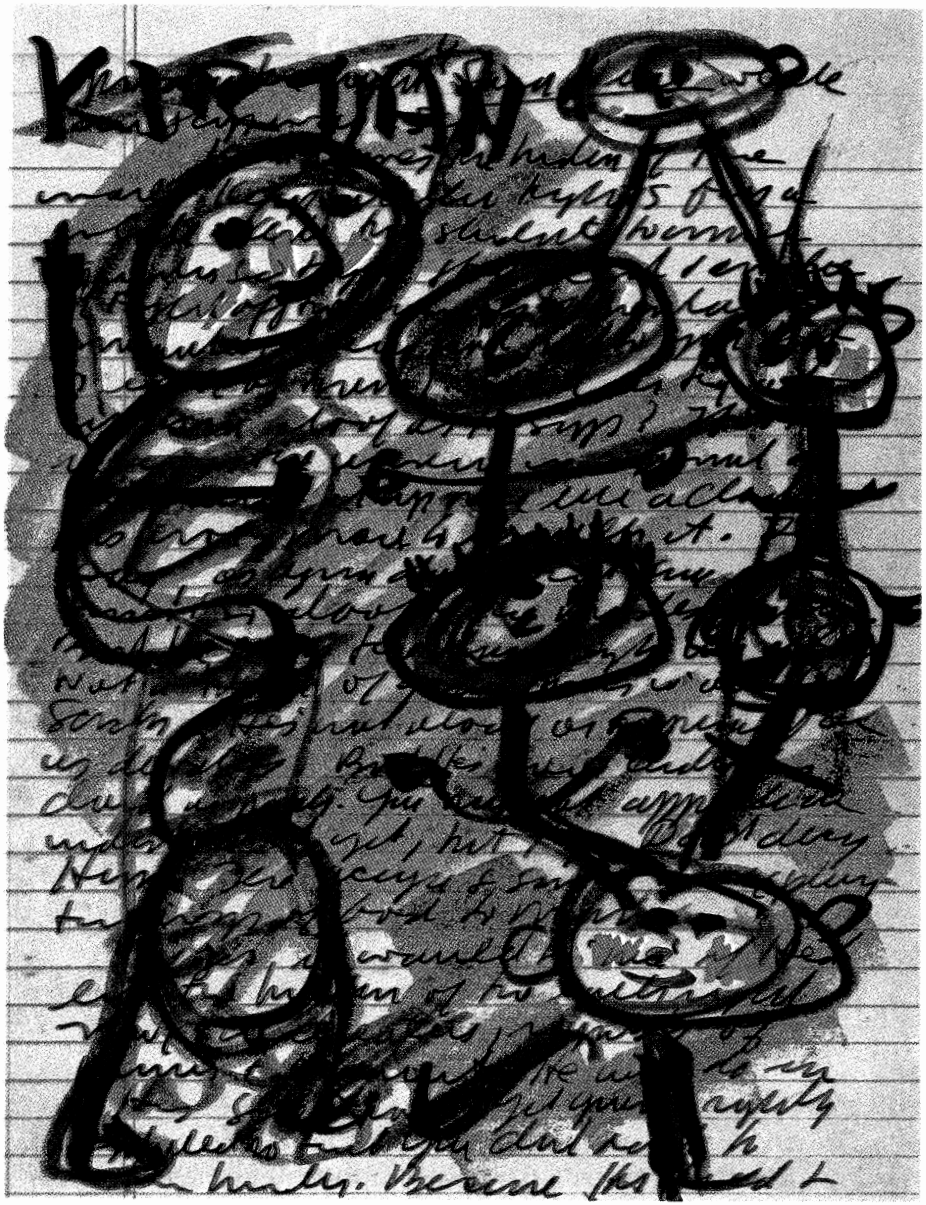
This is my version of the kinds of wonderful creatures who take part in *kīrtana.* We can only imagine such people dancing, the spiritual master and his disciples, the demigods and their servants, the universe of diverse forms dancing in the gold and blue atmosphere of the holy name. *Kirtana* means to praise God. We feel wonder

when we surrender to it. Our bodies change with the inner ecstasies. Perhaps that man on the left is experiencing such ecstasy. Lord Caitanya experienced bodily changes. They weren't grotesque; they were His beautiful expression of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī's mood.



To be honest, I like this man with six heads and an inadequate body. The other man appears to have an insect's thorax and a bent spine. He's not even smiling. Still, his cheeks are pink and he is doing the dance. This is *kirtana* and it is a wonderful theme to celebrate again and again.

I told you how I always seem to draw pictures of people walking, but even more I turn to figures with their hands in the air dancing. I'm surprised at how graceful they seem to come out, or how athletically they're leaping because I'm quite sedate myself. Where does such joy come from? Is that six-headed man one or many? He's both. After all, we lose our false egos when we dance. We forget if we're men or women or children stomping our feet. We're suddenly in Navadvīpa doing the dance.



Fear Not, Read Bhagavad-gītā Sincerely



Someone looked at this painting and asked me how it came about. I can't remember. When you're drawing, certain mental and spiritual states arise, leave their impressions, and are gone. It's hard to recapture them even when you have the finished drawing before you.

I like to paint spontaneously. I apply a background color, then follow my instincts. Picasso said he would reach for a blue but pick up a yellow and then go with it. I do something similar. I pick up a blue, then wait until I hear, "Go to green," or, "Go to gold." I follow what comes. That seems important for what I am trying to achieve—concentration on process as much as product.

One color comes from another until something that pleases the eye is generated. And of course, I am always reaching for that serious underlying purpose as befits an aspiring devotee. I am always trying to contact Kṛṣṇa.

I said that the verbal messages often come from Śrīla Prabhupāda's *bhajanas,* but in this case, the words came from the same place as the colors—as nonverbal suggestions coming from within. I want to get past the academic or dogmatic presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness to find words from the heart.

There's a delicate balance between letting something actually come from the unconscious and imitating that act. One is sincere and the other pretentious. I visualize the process as like driving down a heavily trafficked highway. There is danger at every step. In this case, the danger is in falling into imitation, pretension, or even a complete lack of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. While I want to speak coherent Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I'm willing to speak an implicit message. This man is wearing saffron (identifies him as a devotee), he's ornamented with *tilaka,* and he's got the courage to preach. All of that makes his Vaiṣṇava identity implicit.

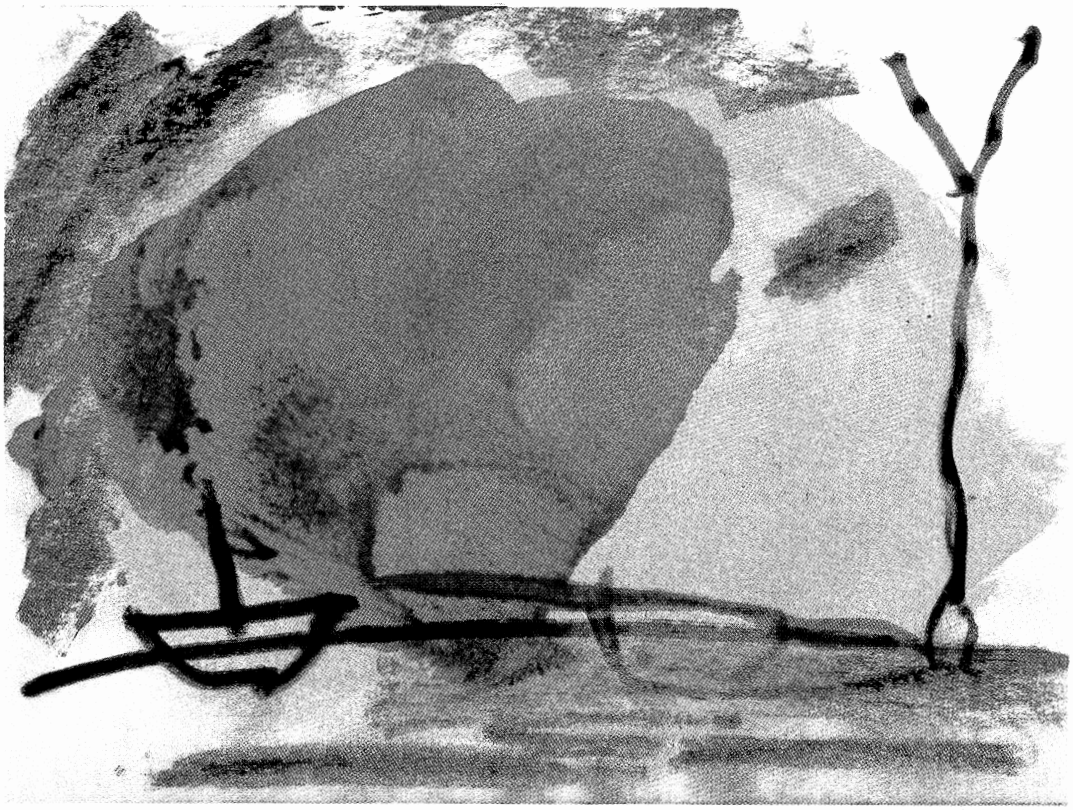
I don't know about that animal—what it represents—but one thing I'm attracted to drawing is beings interacting. Sometimes I have them dancing and sometimes they are quarreling, but generally I like to depict peaceable exchanges. There appears to be no connection between the human and animal and the words, "Fear not, Read Bhagavad-gītā sincerely," but *vidyā-vinaya-sampanne, brāhmaṇe gavi ḥastini:* a wise person sees all souls equally regardless of the body they inhabit. This is the platform of Kṛṣṇa consciousness and it is the platform from which such peaceable exchanges can take place.

Landscape

This has a Zen-like simplicity to it. I like Chinese and Japanese paintings that convey in just a few simple lines an entire mood. In my painting, the green "cloud" appeared first, then everything else formed itself around it. Reminds me of the ink blots on the Rorschach test. A psychiatrist shows a patient an ink blot and then analyzes the patient's personality by what he sees in it. We played that game as kids, didn't we—looking at clouds and finding different shapes in them? I didn't superimpose any images here other than what you see, but feel free to find what you like.

I called the green thing a "cloud," but it's also shaped like a willow on a summer riverbank. Or it's something I didn't define, something between cloud and sky and mist and water, hovering peacefully in the atmosphere.

Sometimes drawing can be intensely focused on scribbled lines, splashes of color, and written words. This one took less effort, but it was difficult in another way. It took a kind of courage and inspiration not to tag on a Kṛṣṇa conscious verse or to suddenly draw a face with *tilaka* peering out to prove it was Kṛṣṇa conscious. Can't a boat floating on a lazy river on a green misty summer morning be Kṛṣṇa conscious? The *Bhagavad-gītā* says a true *yogī* sees Kṛṣṇa everywhere and sees everything in Kṛṣṇa. Prabhupāda says that he sees the separate manifestations of material nature, but he always sees them as Kṛṣṇa's energy. This is a landscape. Perhaps it's in Vṛndāvana—a peaceful boat docked and ready for His pastimes.



I say this at the risk of people wondering what I have against explicit Kṛṣṇa consciousness. It's more a personal point. Sometimes we have to learn to get through life and art without pasting Kṛṣṇa consciousness across the front of it as if our lives are meant to be filled with billboard slogans. We want the message of Kṛṣṇa consciousness to get through, but at the same time, sometimes we want to feel it rather than intellectualize it. That means sometimes leaving it at a landscape and assuming that Kṛṣṇa is there—of course He's there—because we are not Chinese voidists.



Man With Upraised Arms

This rusty man with his arms upraised makes me think of Orphan Annie. I don't know why exactly, but he's a little person, vulnerable, red-faced, pointy-nosed, but somehow stamped with golden *tilaka* and graced with layers of auras. What else makes a person fortunate except that he chants Hare Kṛṣṇa and has the stamp of the Vaiṣṇava on him?

This drawing is not just a drawing *about* something or *of* something; it is a child. There is a child in this drawing. A child does not have to be judged as an art object. I read a statement by one art therapist who advised persons who draw their dreams or anything for themselves not to judge or critique the work. "[Judgment] has no place in this work any more than a mother telling her child that he would look better with different colored eyes."

Sometimes when we look at a drawing like this we wonder whether it was done *by* a child. I know a ten-year-old who is a better draftsman than I am. Still, I am looking to evoke something that I don't think a child could have evoked. In any case, my real virtue is that I have not stopped drawing even though I still draw like a child. Sometimes schoolchildren sign their paintings and add their ages: Kṛṣṇa dāsa (age 10). This seems to say, "Please do not judge this drawing by adult standards. After all, it was drawn by a child." Should I sign my drawings, "Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami (age 58)" for those who would judge me by the same standards as Michelangelo?

Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Is Free

Kṛṣṇa consciousness is free. Prabhupāda writes in a *Bhāgavatam* purport that complete freedom is achieved when we meet the complete spirit, the Personality of Godhead. Therefore, the main pivot which upon freedom turns is *bhakti.* We can celebrate such freedom.

What I like best about my drawings is that there are plenty of them. If I don't like one I can accept that it came from the flow of creativity and I can move on to the next one. Why do I like that feeling? Because life is like that. We live in a flow or process of spiritual and material growth with only the assurance that we will not continue forever in this body. We are also assured that we are eternal spirit souls, although we don't always have much direct realization of that. Therefore, we live always with the choice whether of not to be Kṛṣṇa conscious before us, day after day after day, drawing after drawing after drawing.

In this drawing the colors remind me of dancing rainbows. Do you see the faint green animal enjoying the *kirtana* in the back? And the pale purple one behind him? They're not pretentious creatures, but they live a bare truth.


HOLD
IS
FREE

Lord Varāha And The Demon

Thank God, finally a picture of something we can recognize. It's no great shakes, I admit, but at least Lord Varāha is smashing clubs with that demon. The demon looks as if he's aware he's being photographed. He's posing for the camera, flexing his biceps. Reminds me of my father. The *Bhāgavatam* says Hiraṇyakṣa had golden hair. Lord Varāha seems slightly amused. He's not posing, but looking intently at the demon and at what He has to do. Somehow His club came out smaller than Hiraṇyakṣa's, but I won't worry about that: the *Bhāgavatam* says He cannot be defeated. He will triumph.

Hiraṇyakṣa was a big talker. I drew him like that here, mouth open in boast, disheveled hair and forward charge. Lord Varāha is calm. He doesn't have to display His biceps. He doesn't even seem to have a good grip on His club.

I often don't draw pictures of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes. Prabhupāda said depicting Kṛṣṇa is not play. He shouldn't look cartoony, but beautiful enough to attract the mind. I'm not so expert at draftsmanship, but I really ought to draw Kṛṣṇa more often, and do it earnestly. To be earnest I have to put myself into it and express my individual glorification. Picasso said that artists shouldn't *try* to be original. They shouldn't think, as they go to draw a circle, that everyone is drawing circles in the same way, "so let me do something different." Similarly, so many people may draw Kṛṣṇa, but just by the nature of individuality, each drawing will have a different flavor to it. It will be an "original."

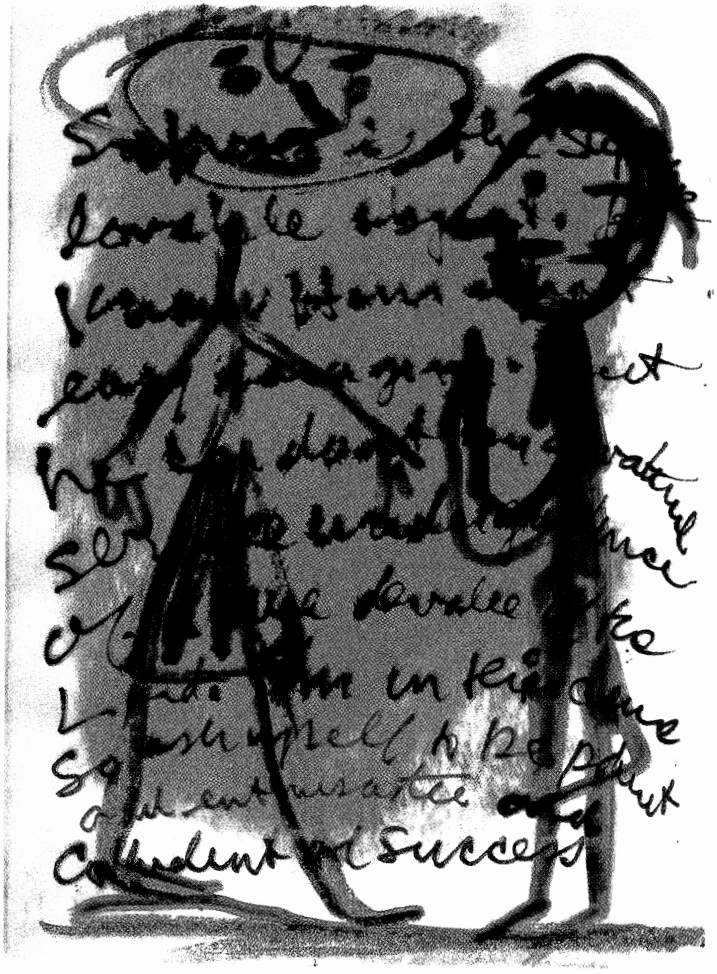


For a devotee, being "original" means finding our original love for the Lord, touching the *Bhāgavatam,* being true to the yellow of His *dhoti.* Our earnestness may be tiny, and we may have little technical skill or discipline. Still, we are trying to express something. We don't want to appear blank before Kṛṣṇa but to offer something heartfelt. We draw what comes, make allowances for it, and feel what it generates in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Kṛṣṇa Is The Supreme Lovable Object

When I was drawing for awhile under the concept of the naive artist, I thought I should try to make forms as realistically as I could, and the freedom of the naivete—and the daring of it—was that although I wasn't a good draftsman, I could still go on drawing happily. Then I found myself actually going backwards in my presentation of human and animal forms, landscapes, or drawings of the Lord and His pastimes. I seemed to want to immediately go to the essence of expression, and that allowed or even demanded crudity, passion, bright colors, and quickly sketched forms. I found myself resorting more to stick figures and leaving out details. This made it even more outrageous to attempt to draw Kṛṣṇa. It would seem that to draw Kṛṣṇa's form should be done painstakingly. Kṛṣṇa is beyond the beauty of even the most meticulous painter's rendition, so what hope did *I* have? At the same time, I thought by sketching quickly I could still capture something sweet and innocent.

I particularly like to combine words and images in a way that renders the words only half-legible. It feels true to the movement of consciousness to unconsciousness and back again, the way it happens just before we fall asleep. Painting is a sensual delight as is any service we do for Kṛṣṇa. Sensual doesn't have to mean sense gratification. I like to soften the blue for the clouds, then before the paint is completely dry take a pen and start writing in the words. I write quickly just as I do when I free-write. I write so fast the ink stains right before my eyes. Then I draw on top of that.



Kṛṣṇa: He wears golden *tilaka* and a golden crown under a golden aura. He is taller than His worshiper, standing in an orange *dhoti,* His form blue, dark yet brilliant, and He's barefoot because He's in Vṛndāvana in summer. Did I succeed at revealing His omnipotence, peace, and enlightenment? He's my worshipable object. And the worshiper—he's a stick figure, I know, and that's because all I have of Kṛṣṇa consciousness is a stick figure understanding. At least he's there with me in my heart when I draw freely, the worshiper approaching his worshipable Lord.

The words—half-legible: "Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the supreme lovable object." Something about Him not being easy to attain. "Pure devotee of the Lord . . . " "Ask yourself to be patient and enthusiastic" (a reference to Rūpa Gosvāmi's verse, *utsāhān niscayād dhairyāt).* "Confident of success." The *śāstras* act as one layer and the drawing another and they begin to vibrate back and forth, one medium to another.

Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Is The Best Treatment For Headaches

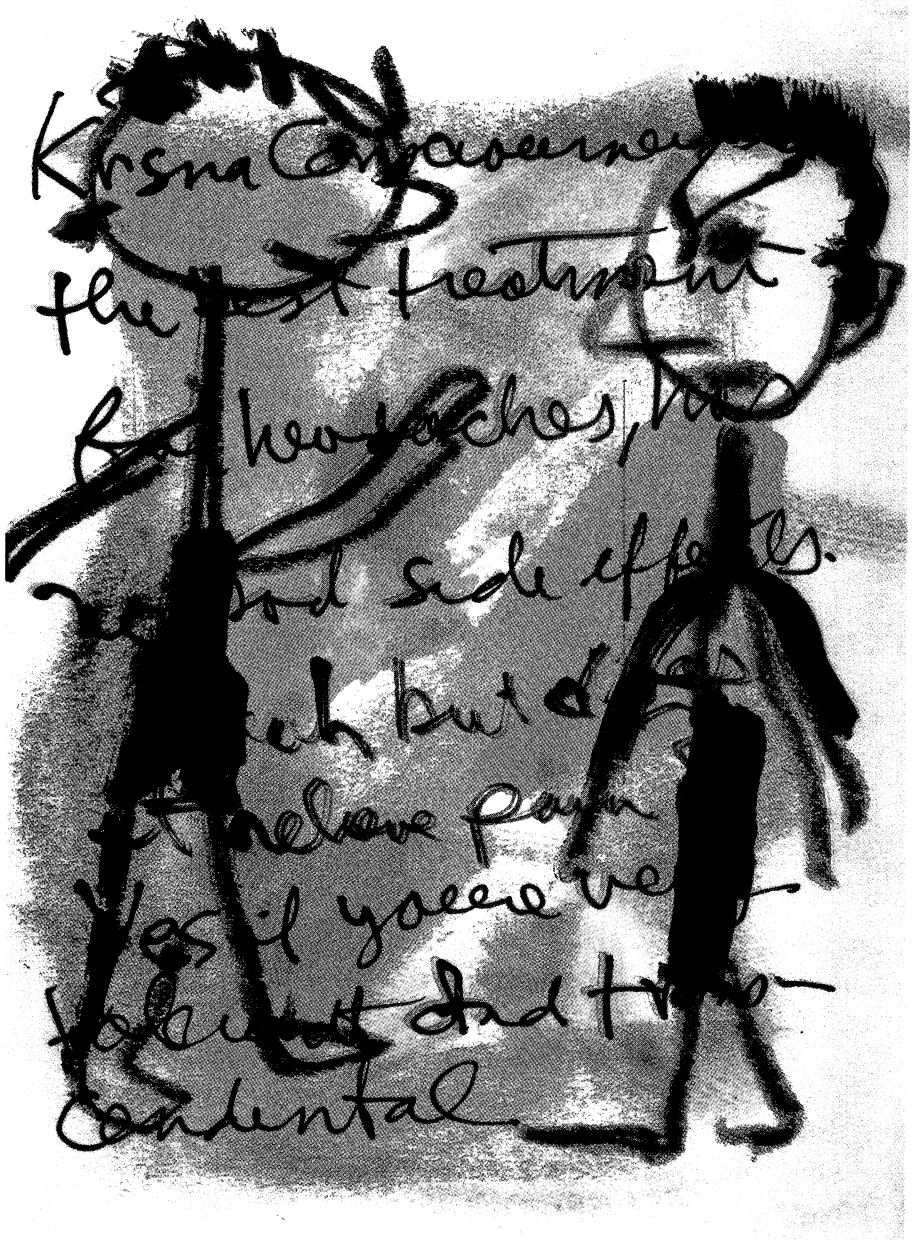
"Kṛṣṇa consciousness is the best treatment for headaches, has no bad side effects," says one man in red ink. The other replies, "Yeah, but does it relieve pain?"

Red Ink: "Yes, if you are very tolerant and transcendental."

Free-writing about my condition. It seems simpler to relieve pain with medication, but Red Ink holds his hand in *jñāna-mudrā* and assures the sufferer that Kṛṣṇa consciousness is the only solution. The sufferer has a crew cut and his hair is standing on end. His *tilaka* reminds me of the "red" pain that goes on behind the right eye, and even the last "t" in "treatment" seems to stick behind that eye like a knife. He wants relief. Will Kṛṣṇa consciousness actually relieve pain? Now? Red Ink says it does, because it develops the spiritual quality of tolerance.

One other point: these two men are probably not so important. Their clothes are just splotches and the sufferer doesn't even have hands. Obviously he doesn't need them, because everything is there in essence—his life, the exchange with a devotee, the exchange of knowledge and friendship.

I often draw someone offering instructions with the *jñāna-mudrā*. So much of our life in ISKCON means either giving instructions or receiving them. I sometimes make fun of this exchange, that someone is always the teacher and someone always the submissive student. It's natural to make fun of things we do all the time because we want to isolate any hypocrisy or superfice from the depth of a real exchange. The real exchange is our life; it's the means by which we attain enlightenment, and I surrounded this one with warm greens and golds, the colors of nature.


Krsna
the
headmen
headaches, no
and side effects.
but
relieve pain
yoga
Yes, if you're
body and mind
Oriental

Self-Portrait

This is my little life, which goes on faithfully day after day. I rise at midnight and turn on the desk lamp. By God's grace my right hand grips the pen and I write. Sometimes I look at the window and see my reflection there. My face doesn't carry so much cheerful news as I grow older; it's more serious and ready to function for as long as it can. Basic elements of life, of my life—a writing hand, a light to see by, and this self-portrait, the attempt to look into the self behind the mask.

And I would like to welcome the figure on the left. I'm not sure *who* he is, but he might be a preliminary attempt at the self-portrait, or perhaps he's a sub-person, more of an expressionistic view of myself than the one that lives in reality. Anyway, I'm glad he's wearing *tilaka*. Welcome to the family; welcome to the club.

Are self-portraits, even ones done in this homey, kind of warm way, self-centered? I don't think so. We all want to feel the warmth of a good desk lamp and the privacy of the midnight hour, and to see the self without the selfishness. It is simply an act of sharing.

There's a lot of talk about self-expression both for and against. Those who are against it say it's obsessive, solipsistic, narcissistic, and they have other words for it too. The advocates say that it's everything. I don't think in Kṛṣṇa consciousness we have to stand at either extreme. Self-expression for a practicing devotee means self-examination and the attempt to maintain a hope that he can improve. We improve by finding our own voice and then speaking to Kṛṣṇa with it. After all, we are Kṛṣṇa's eternal parts and parcels, and He is the original Supreme Self. The Supreme Self and the little self are meant to engage in dialogue and to express their love for one another.



Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa

Ah, at last, the forms of the Yugala-Kiśora, the Divine Couple.

How audacious! How *dare* he draw Kṛṣṇa! Who does he think he is, a pure devotee? What art school did he attend? Where is Rādhārāṇi's long black braid? Where are the jewels? Where are the *garlands*? The *rasa* is not perfect. Throw him out. Rip up his paintings.

To hell with you all, you gremlins. I drew this with devotion.

Kṛṣṇa is millions of times more beautiful than my little drawing reveals, but you know what? Śrimati Rādhārāṇi is so kind to Her devotees that if we sincerely want to draw Her Kṛṣṇa and to serve Her by placing Her in a loving mood beside Him, she won't take offense.

Therefore, I make this point again: even an artist who tries to portray Kṛṣṇa realistically and who has tremendous technical talent cannot approach Kṛṣṇa's actual beauty. All he or she can express is whatever devotion prompted the act.

What satisfies me with this portrait of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is that it looks like a child could have drawn it. I have never been offended by a picture of the Divine Couple drawn by small children. They never fail, as far as I'm concerned, and they're never wrong because they are always innocent. Even if they depict Rādhārāṇi as old or overweight or underweight it doesn't matter. They intended no offense. Their drawing is offenseless. Their awkward hand movements are not held against them.



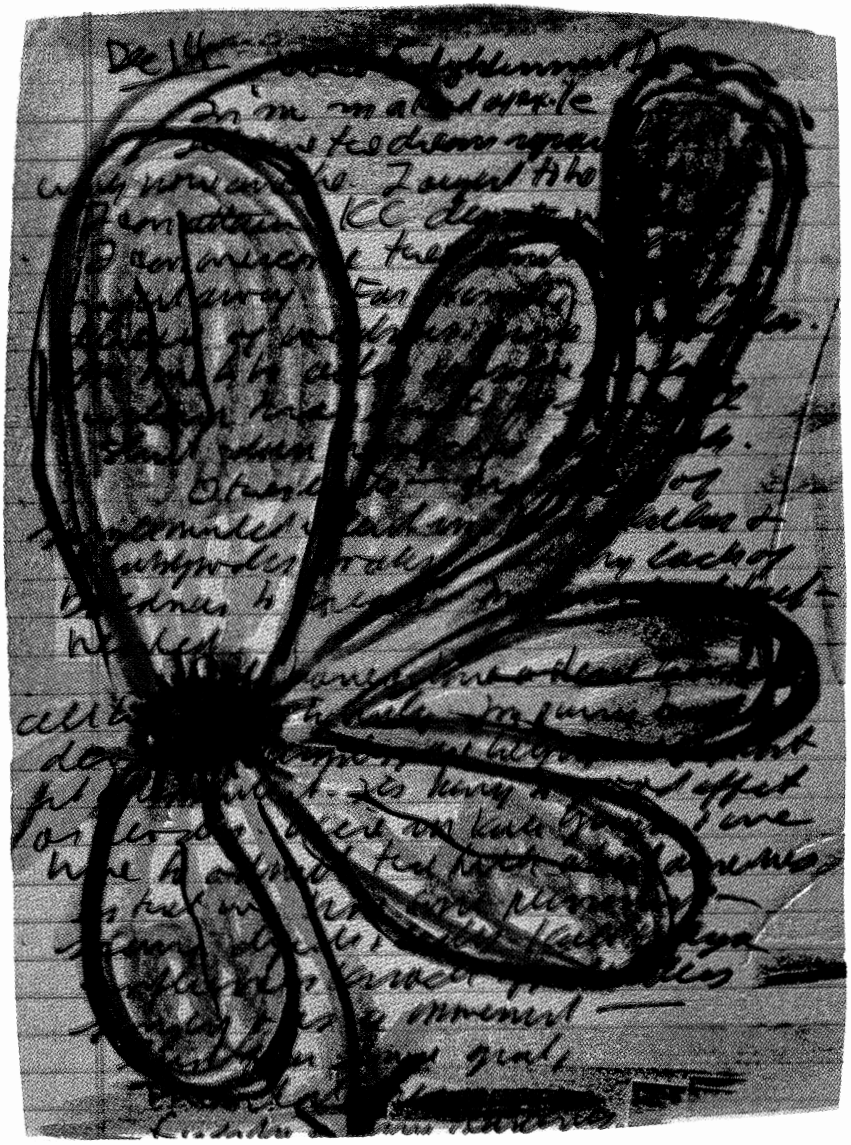
Haribol

I can't actually remember the story behind this drawing, so I'll make one up now. On the right, a man is beating a bass drum. He's an agent of King Veṇa, and his message is that all sacrifice must stop. There should be no more *kīrtana,* no more religion, no more talk of God. Anyone who disobeys this injunction will be punished. But the sun is blazing, and the sun is independent of this evil king and his town criers. Therefore, the monkey is laughing at the foolishness of the man beating the drum (although the deer is afraid).

O town crier, don't you know that the king should not create anxiety in his citizens? The sun shines forever, each day rising again, and it reminds us that these petty kings will be destroyed one after another. The devotees will triumph and sing *kīrtana* once again, generation after generation.

Or, an alternative to that story is that the man is actually performing *saṅkīrtana,* beating the drum of *harināma* and singing, "Haribol." The monkey is in ecstasy and the deer is doe-eyed at the sound. Yes, I like that story better.


HARIBO



World Enlightenment Day

When I drew this flower it seemed like a stroke of good luck. I thought it was beautiful. It reminds me what a great achievement it is for a person to develop the technical ability to paint flowers realistically—those people who illustrate flower and bird books or who paint nature scenes. They certainly have to be proficient. We shouldn't shrug talent off as unimportant. When I see a painting of an iris or a dandelion, even if it's not exactly to my taste, I have to acknowledge the *vibhūti* that comes from God.

The *Bhāgavatam* says that flowers and birds are a manifestation of God's artistry. Prabhupāda also spoke about painting flowers. He said that an artist has to work hard and apply all his talents to make a flower in oil or watercolor. No matter how beautiful he makes it, however it is never as beautiful as the original flower in nature, and it can never have the sweet fragrance or share its delicacy and freshness. Prabhupāda used this as an argument to prove that life comes from life. He said if the painted flower takes so much talent and work, then how can we say that nature's flowers are born from a mechanical universe?

The first words on the manuscript page upon which this was drawn are "World Enlightenment Day." So this is the flower of enlightenment that grows in the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement with its sun-like effulgence and spreading generosity.

Nṛsiṁhadeva

Few nondevotees can immediately understand Nṛsiṁhadeva's fierce form, so the devotees are sometimes embarrassed to have a picture of the lion-man hanging on the temple wall, fearing that it will horrify the guests. Perhaps it will prove to them what a devilish and dangerous cult the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement really is.

For devotees who understand or at least appreciate God's appearing in this fierce form to kill the very fierce demon, Hiraṇyakaśipu, however, Lord Nṛsiṁhadeva is a personal friend and protector. We don't fear Him but call Him close when we are afraid. He protects our inner and outer worlds from desecration.

This Nṛsiṁhadeva seems to have come out of the colors themselves, just as He originally appeared out of a pillar. Nṛsiṁhadeva always comes of His own accord, and He always appears to rescue His devotees. Therefore, it is not only the trained artists who can call for Him to appear; anyone can appreciate the Lord enough that He will manifest in a swirl of color on the page, that Lord, full of anger, a demon on His lap, who rescues all the worlds.

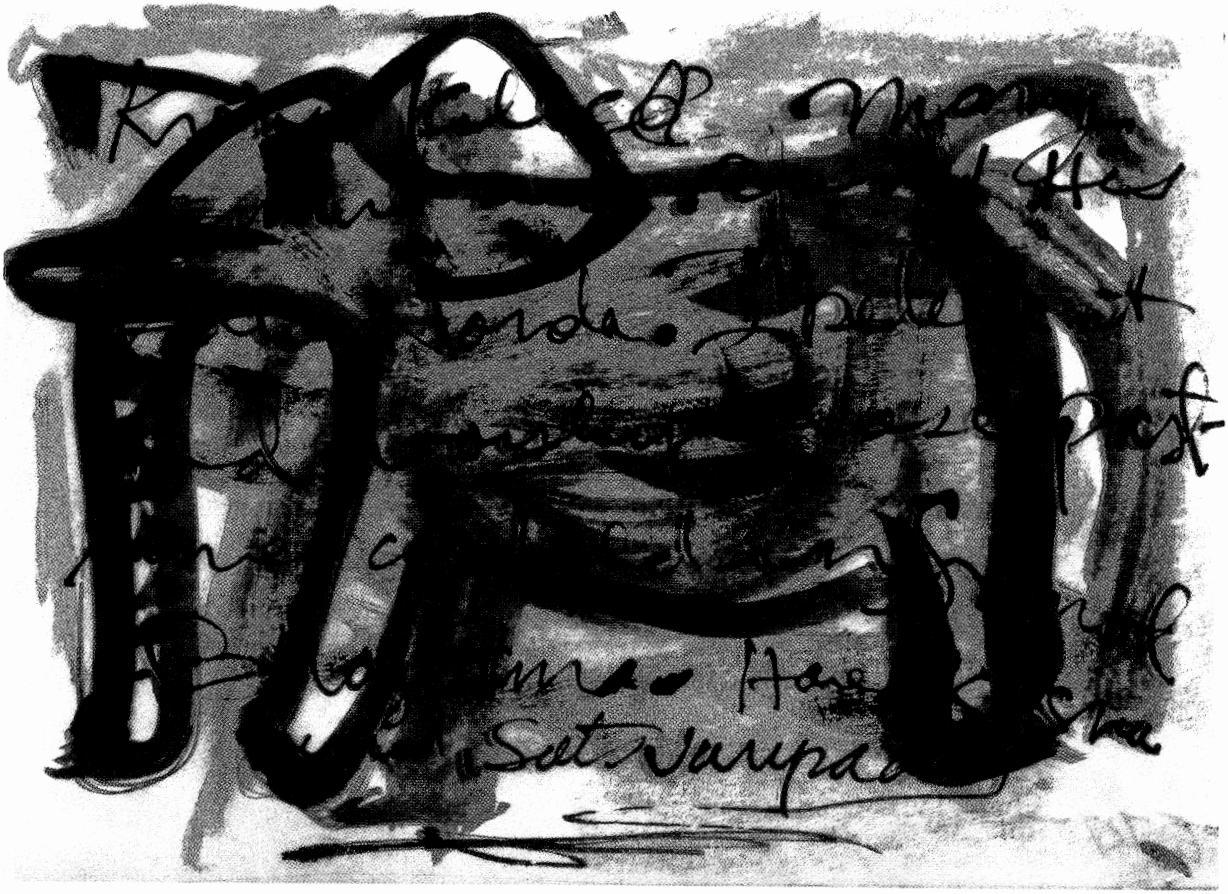


Kṛṣṇa Killed Many Demons

"Kṛṣṇa killed many demons and saved His father Nanda. I believe it and worship those pastimes as told in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. Hare Kṛṣṇa. Signed, Satsvarūpa dāsa."

It's odd that as I grow older I draw more childishly. We sometimes hear of oldsters entering their "second childhood." I don't know how that's defined and I don't care, but perhaps it means we turn more to child-like expressions to give us relief from the stuffiness and the closing in of disease and mental diminishment that are inevitable in old age. We feel shortcomings in our relationships sometimes, and wonder where the joy went. Of course, practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness makes joy always accessible regardless of our age—the chanting and hearing, associating with devotees in an unpretentious way—and it is capable of helping us overcome the pressures of institutional or societal life, dealing with nondevotees, and the general wearing down that comes from the accumulation of material attachments. Anyway, age helps you drop inhibitions; there's nothing left to prove. Out comes an elephant, drawn with child-like glee, and words, simple as can be, "Kṛṣṇa killed many demons . . . "

Elephants aren't worshipable like Vaiṣṇavas or the form of the Supreme Lord, but still they are as auspicious as peacocks. There were plenty of them in Hastināpura when Kṛṣṇa was there with Yudhiṣṭhira, and I feel good about this elephant making its appearance to help bring my mind ever closer to Kṛṣṇa consciousness.



Haribol (Two Paintings)

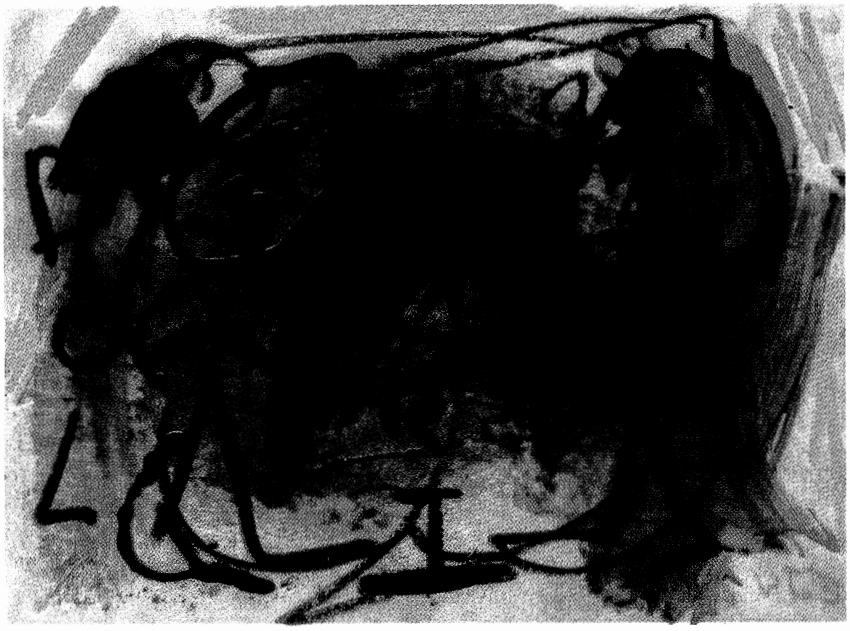
Once devotees showed Prabhupāda a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, whose paintings were full of fantastic figures of demons and other creatures. Prabhupāda said, "Yes, we have creatures like that in the *Bhāgavatam*." We were amazed when we heard it (1966) that these kinds of creatures actually existed. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura said that we can't imagine anything that does not already exist. Maybe this little blue creature also exists somewhere and my drawing simply illustrates its life.

Often when I draw, such creatures appear, but at some point I take control. It usually happens when I go to draw the mouth. Then I have to decide whether to make the mouth happy or sad. The mouth seems extremely expressive to me, and I find myself usually opting for happiness. Or for a mysterious mix, a "Mona Lisa" smile that is closer to life. After all, we're not just happy hares who are always smiling.

These creatures are smiling, celebrating Kṛṣṇa consciousness in a vigorous, chesty way. *Haribol*!

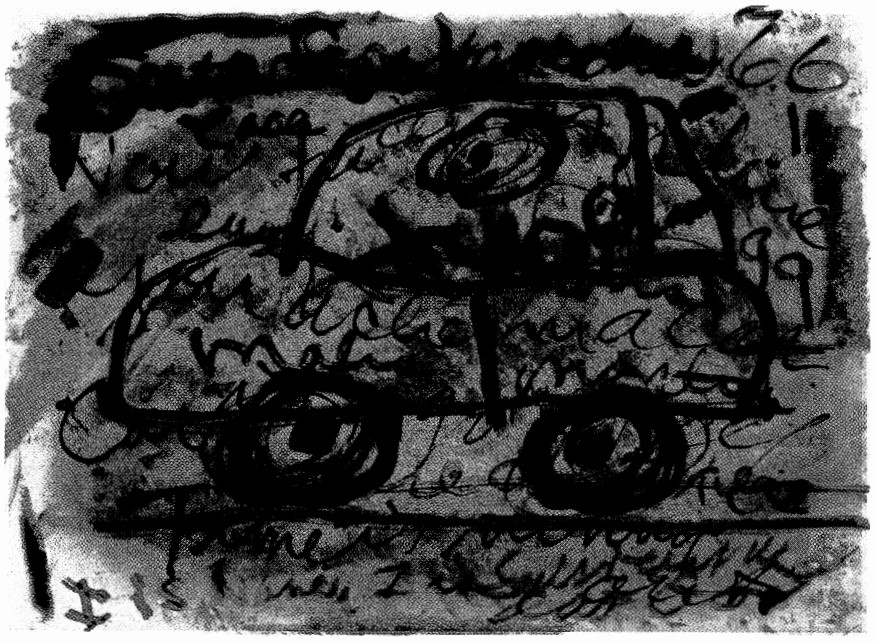


Second Haribol



Splashing paint. I used liquid bees–wax to set the basic background, then crayons, then finally drew in the stick figures. The red splotches look a little bloody, but perhaps it's not really blood but anger, pain, things that happen beyond our control that slap us in the face. See the stiff neck of the figure on the left? O Lord Hari, Your material nature is strange and also dangerous. Please allow us to remember you whenever we are caught in the headlights or the line of fire. Let us remember to call on Your holy names and be happy in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Car Ride



This one reminds me of a father driving his child somewhere. Do you see the secret line at the bottom of the picture? It says, "I is Nancy," then, "I is Satsvarūpa dāsa." The phrase "I is Nancy" was one of those private family jokes. My mother used

to say it. My mother had an older sister named Madeline and a younger sister named Nancy. Of the three children, Madeline was pretty and caught guests' attention and Nancy was plain, even unattractive. One time, when Nancy was very little, and when the guests were giving their attention to Madeline, Nancy stepped forward and announced herself: "I is Nancy!"

Well, I is Satsvarūpa dāsa and I can draw a car and a man behind the wheel.

We're fortunate in that whatever we paint or draw is done from within a Kṛṣṇa conscious world. Although our illustrations tend to tally with the material world, at least we don't see that world as a materialist sees it but as Prabhupāda says, knowing both spiritual and material truth. We draw a car, we draw people, we draw odd creatures, and it may resemble something anyone else could have drawn. Our car carries the *mahā-mantra* on its doors and is going somewhere on Kṛṣṇa's mission.

Ha Ha Prabhu



I like to paint while listening to Śrīla Prabhupāda singing *bhajanas.* Then in a natural way, words from his *bhajanas* drift onto the page. It seems arbitrary which ones arrive, but they feel urgent whichever they are, and I write them down. Those words take on new meaning for me, and I realize that each one of them has the power to transform the mundane into the spiritual. It's true because it happens graphically right before my eyes. Drawing while intently listening to Prabhupāda allows his words to bypass the intellect and hit me in the heart. It makes me hungry for more.



Headache

I drew this remembering the old commercials for Bengay ointment, which featured "Peter Pain" with his stubble-bearded jaw line hammering on people's muscles. Just a little Bengay rubbed into the shoulder sent Peter Pain packing. My red man runs away too, but he also always returns.

My pain arrives in the blood, so I made my man red. I portrayed the sensation of it traveling and then being stuck in a contracted vein through the rays coming from his eye into my head. He hangs on like a leech. He does his job.

While some people try to exorcise their pain by drawing it, I was more in the mood of not wanting to neglect what for me is such a prominent part of my life. I don't think that my depicting it on the page gives it more power over me. Rather, it objectifies it and somehow makes it easier to accept.

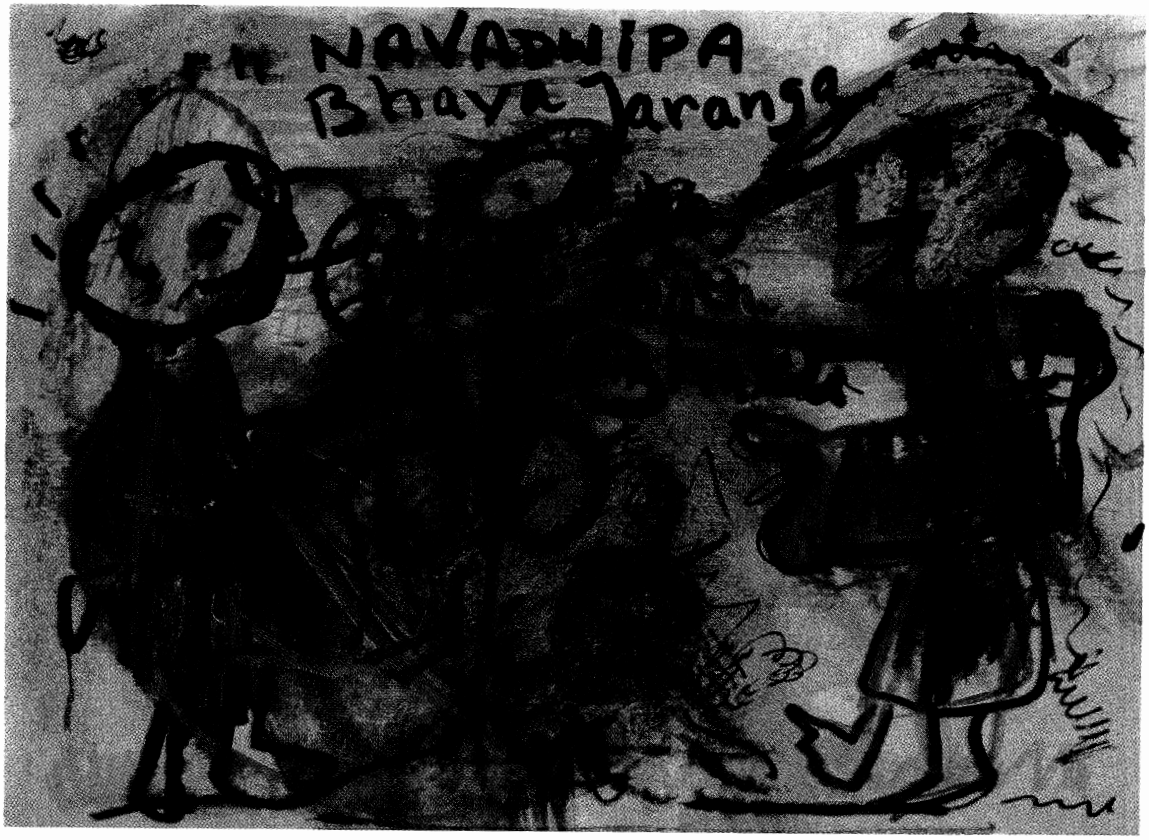
Pain knocking on the outer wall, on the covering, the body. It doesn't touch the soul. The soul simply observes just as an artist maintains an objective view of color and its mixtures. Pain is not true reality. Therefore, we are tolerant.

Navadvipa-Bhava-Taranga

This is the title of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura's book in which he describes Lord Caitanya's pastimes and the pastimes of various Viṣṇu incarnations connected with Navadvīpa. The word somehow came to mind not exactly related to that book but more to the meaning of the words: *Navadvīpa-bhāva-taraṅga* means the waves of bliss associated with the mood of Navadvīpa. The two devotees are dancing around a small tree. It is obviously not a *tulasī* tree because it has fat, sunflower-like blossoms. I see it as the flowering plant of *bhakti.*

We usually hear that *bhakti* doesn't flower on earth but only when the tree (which is actually a creeper) reaches Goloka far beyond the material planets. This painting is therefore not exactly theologically correct.

Still, these devotees are celebrating the flowering of the tree of *bhakti.* Purples and blues, yellows and greens, all coming together with humans, revealing Kṛṣṇa's artistry and giving us a glimpse of His beauty.


NAVADWIPA
Bhave Jarange

Jagannātha Svāmi (Two Paintings)

Images mean more when you're in the holy *dhāma.* When you write, "I saw a tree" in Vṛndāvana, it somehow has more significance than stating that you saw a tree in America. The *dhāma* has that power. Even if you say, "I sprained my ankle," it seems to mean that Kṛṣṇa was somehow directly involved. He was trying to increase your *bhakti.*

I was in Jagannātha Puri in January 1997, and the bazaars had lots of these stick-on decals depicting Lord Jagannātha in His various poses, incarnations, and pastimes. They were also full of decals showing images from the West—whatever merchants thought tourists would buy. I bought quite a few of them and used them in my drawings and collages.

This one I turned into a picture of Lord Jagannātha being carried by the strong servants who carry Him at Ratha-yātrā and place him on the cart. I did a series of these using various Jagannātha stickers to symbolize the Jagannātha *mūrti.* In some of them I drew around Him the cart and parade scenes. I don't have to explain it. It was a prayer: *jagannāthaḥ svāmi nayana-patha-gāmi bhavatu me,* "O Lord of the Universe, kindly be visible unto me."




KESNA
CHARLIE CHAPLIN

Painting 2 Of Jagannātha

I was so surprised to see Charlie Chaplin in a bazaar in Purī that I put him here in my collage. This little fellow is world famous. People think of him as a humble person who was pushed down by big business and a cruel world, but who had an indomitable spirit. I added *tilaka* to him because after all, I found him in Purī.

I like Charlie Chaplin. He reminds me of myself in a way—the "little fellow," the laughable hobo who has no money, no talent, but who has his own place in the sun. And there he was in Purī, on display in the market! And I was too!

Bhaja Bhakata

"Bhaja Bhakata" is a *bhajana* written by Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura about offering food to Kṛṣṇa and then honoring the *prasādam.* We used to sing it in the Boston temple in the old days. I suppose the redness in the background will remind people of cartoons. When we were kids, that was our idea of beauty, a way to revel in color and form and characters like Woody Woodpecker and Bugs Bunny. Those Looney Tunes cartoons had such vivid colors, and the characters would live on top of that background.

Doing these drawings also reminds me of the time when I was a child and the stores in Great Kills ran painting contests for the kids. At Halloween or Christmas all the store windows are plastered with paintings and drawings, all judged and posted as "the most original," "the most sincere," "the funniest," etc. I still have that feeling sometimes—that I draw with my utmost and then anticipate the prize. Someone will tell me I expressed something and I will feel joy.

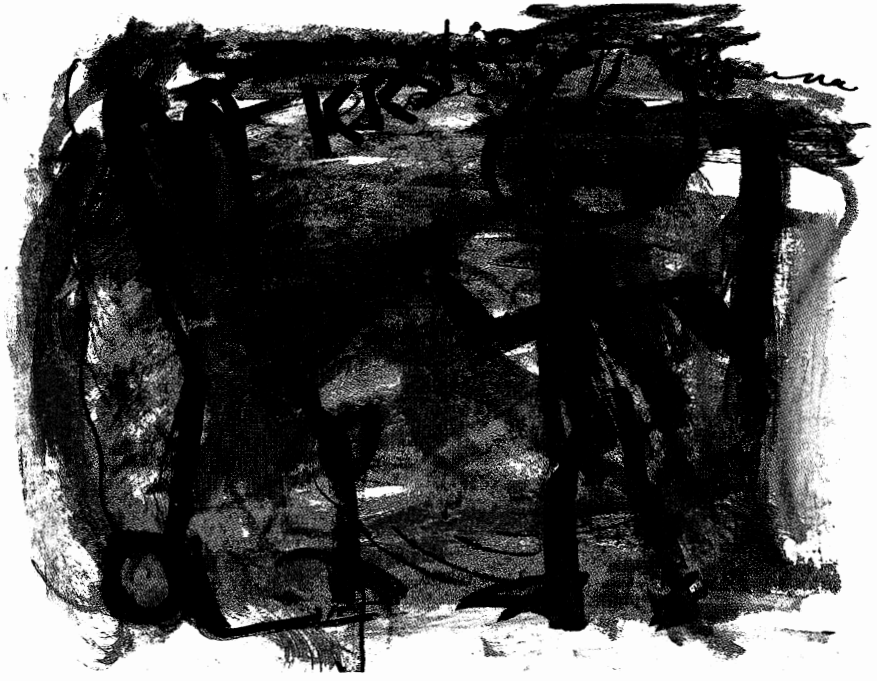

Sri
Jaya
Hari
Chitta
Hara
So
hu
Bo
Ba
hu


Bhaja
Bhakta vat
Sala Sri

Gaunt-Faced Man

I like this gaunt-faced man, his eyelids heavy. He looks like he has been performing austerities and perhaps has been touched by *bhakti.* He has a bird or a bug on his shoulder, which reminds me of St. Francis. His facial features are elongated, and he's definitely not beautiful—his ears are drawn in at different levels—but he has the faint hint of a smile despite the scratches that are his cheeks. Obviously he has been through the obstacles on his path, but he wears his Vaiṣṇava *tilaka* proudly, and the "bird of pray" is still chirping to him to "Go on, go on." That black line zipping past his left ear is the thunderbolt that just missed him and lost its energy on the way past, and there are hints of music on the far right, strains of the *bhajana, "Bhaja bhakata-batsala śri-gaurahari."*

Krsna, Rabbit, And Devotee



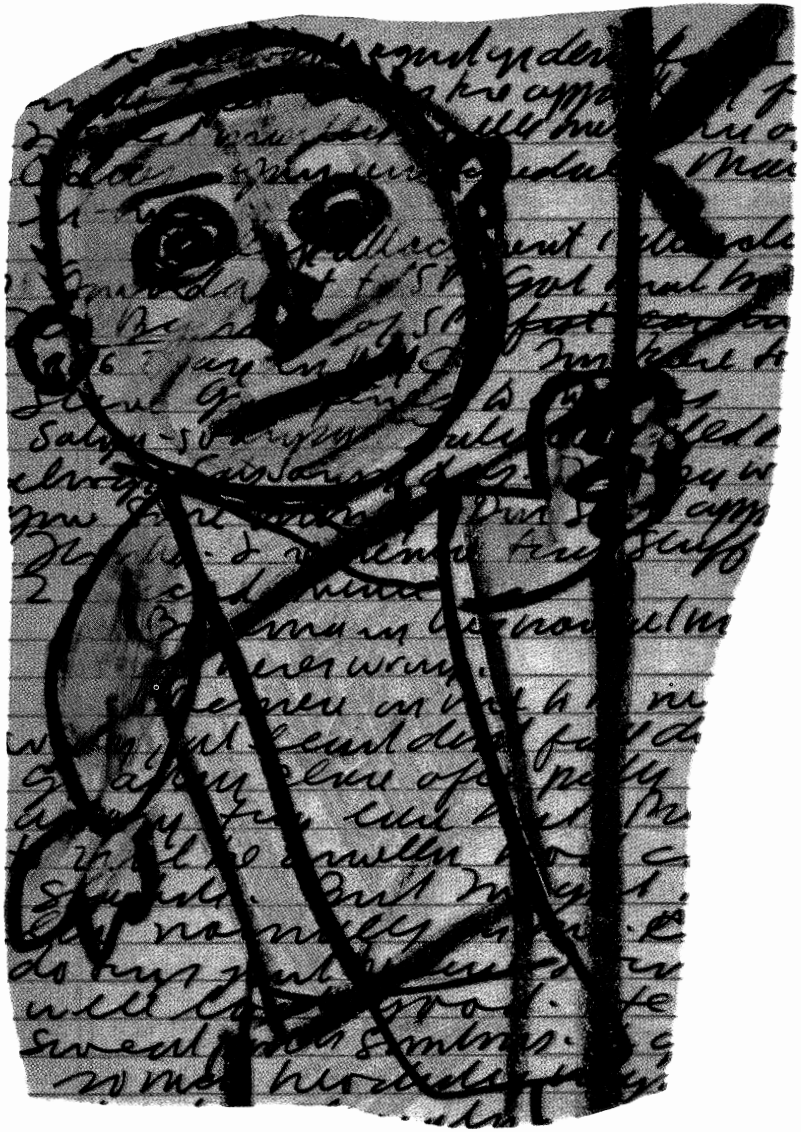
I don't plan my paintings beforehand, and I don't create a story. I just begin them. Does that sound irresponsible? No, I know there's a safety net under everything I do, the assumption (which is a true one) that Kṛṣṇa is everything and I can't escape Him.

In that sense, you can't fall away from Kṛṣṇa. As practicing devotees who chant sixteen rounds, follow the four rules, and read *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam,* when we take a break and open our paint set and splash onto paper whatever comes, even if we don't paint the four Kumāras or Arjuna talking with Kṛṣṇa—even if a rabbit appears with a stick-figure man, still, it's within Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Am I inviting the mind's chaos into my spiritual life? I don't think so. I'm not talking about rubber-stamping. There is a thin line between Kṛṣṇa conscious permissiveness, which is based on the acceptance that everything is a spark of Kṛṣṇa's splendor, and the chaos or nihilism of thinking everything is random. We play in Kṛṣṇa's creation, feel His grace, serve Him, and love Him because of what we see, but the nihilist who invites chaos is reveling in impersonalism.

If we understand that basis, we can allow images to impel our Kṛṣṇa consciousness even if they are only implicitly connected to Kṛṣṇa. Here the man wears *tilaka* and "Kṛṣṇa" appears in His holy name. The rabbit seems to have become a disciple since its hands are folded in reverence, and the devotee has his hand held high in *jñāna-mudrā.* I just read Prahlāda Mahārāja saying, when he was instructing the boys, that even the birds and beasts could become recipients of *bhakti.* Who can understand how that's true? But here we see it. This rabbit is not just being taught to sit up and beg for a sweet ball. He's receiving *brahma-jñāna,* and the holy name approves.

Just to avoid the always
serious and official we
may do this.
And just to make an
act (drawing), etc., which
has no audience like
the flower that
blossoms unseen but
is therefore seen only by
God. The flutist in the pit.
You delight in it and offer it to Him.
No one else has to know it.



Acknowledgments

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Splashes and Sacred Text

Collected Drawings and Paintings, 1996–1997

Matisse said, "He who really has something to say is driven to it by the emotion which makes him carry out his work." To speak about *bhakti* as Prabhupāda spoke about it, and to draw out the emotions by splashing paint on the page makes me feel alive. I tag on śāstric words, and often take words or phrases in English or Sanskrit from Prabhupāda's *bhajanas.* The whole process then begins to turn into meditation or prayer. Therefore, *Splashes and Sacred Text.*

