

Written by Steven Rosen

Sunday, 24 July 2011 13:31 - Last Updated Saturday, 31 March 2012 01:10



I had traveled to Braj for pilgrimage and to do research for an upcoming book. But while I was there I decided to visit my old friend Aindraji, to see if he would like to be interviewed for Yoga of Kirtan, Part Two, a volume that as it turns out may or may not actually be published. To my delight, he was enthusiastic about the project and invited me up to his room for an intimate conversation, which I taped. What follows is a transcription of that tape.

Steven Rosen (SR): Western name, date of birth, etc.

Aindra Dasa (AD): Well, I renounced my Western name. ...It doesn't exist anymore. I threw it in the Yamuna.

SR: [laughter]

AD: So my legal name is now actually Aindra Dasa. All legal or formal things are done in the name of Aindra Dasa. But if you must know my previous ungodly name -- well, it's a Christian name, actually. Still, I consider it to be relatively ungodly. [laughter] My name was Edward Franklin Striker.

SR: Sounds like a dignified name...

AD: I was born in Arlington, Virginia in 1953 ... March 12 ... and that was in the Arlington Hospital. But I spent most of my life growing up in the, as we call it, "sticks of Ole Virginny" -- at the foot of the Bull Run mountain range. There was a battle of Bull Run during the Civil War. It was one of the deciding battles, evidently.

SR: So you were a backwoods boy ...

AD: Yes, I was more or less backwoods, out in the countryside, rural area... the nearest neighbor was maybe three-quarters of a mile away.

SR: Brothers and sisters?

AD: I had brothers and sisters ... one older brother, a younger sister, and two younger brothers. We were the first in our school to be expelled for wearing long hair during the hippie days.

SR: Would that be the late sixties or early seventies?

AD: Late sixties. My father was rather, kind of, well, he was a musician. My mother was an artist. So because my father was a musician he put a five-string banjo in my hand when I was five years old, and he taught me how to play claw hammer style. And then I graduated to the git-fiddle as we called it, or the guitar, and started learning how to play bluegrass, and that sort of thing, when I was seven. My father and mother moved in hipper types of circles; they were doing marijuana and LSD and stuff like that before I was. [laughter] I kind of grew up in an atmosphere that was relatively liberal, even though we were out in the countryside.

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SR: Did they have some semblance of religion? Were they Christian?

AD: My father was a Lutheran ... he did take us to church. For the first few years of my life we would go to church. My mother was a Roman Catholic ... but she didn't appreciate very much at all that it was hard to get answers to her questions -- like when she would try to ask the nuns

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questions, and they would say things like, "Don't ask these kinds of questions, or you'll go to hell." So she more or less defected from the Catholic [church].

SR: They sound like they were thoughtful people, your parents ...

AD: Yes, they were philosophically inclined. Anyway, so then we went through the sex, drugs and rock-and-roll metamorphosis, so to speak. This was in my youth, in my father's house. We used to have huge grass parties and what not, out in the country. So many people would come every weekend ... it was like a big scene. And so I ended up with an electric guitar, and I was playing lead guitar in a group.

SR: You got into rock music...

AD: I got into rock music. I was kind of like a hellish, not hellish, but hellacious, guitar player. I was into people like Hendrix...

SR: My hero. [laughter] He had something special.

AD: Yeah, I liked to play that kind of stuff ... it was fun. But then we started going to the Vietnam War moratoriums, and more or less doing free gigs at colleges, and what not. And we played at the Washington Monument during those moratorium days.

SR: Did the bluegrass thing fade away when you got into rock?

AD: Yeah, but those were my roots. Early influences.

SR: And then you met the devotees around the time you got into rock music?

AD: Well, sort of. At the war moratoriums I would see the devotees doing kirtan, chanting and dancing, distributing prasad, distributing Back to Godhead magazines, and distributing tons of incense. Strawberry incense was filling the air in those moratorium events. So naturally I bought incense from them and they gave me a Back to Godhead magazine ... which I didn't read, I just looked at the pictures. I was too dumbed down, so to speak, to get into reading much.

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SR: Were you a reader at all during that period.

AD: Well, I started reading books like "Be Here Now," and other types of spiritually oriented books. I was searching for truth. But that came a little later.... So after a few encounters with the devotees I got a book called, "Beyond Birth and Death." I was taken aback when I read the first paragraph, where it says that we are not these bodies ... and Prabhupada further says that it's

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“easier said than done,” that it’s harder to realize than it sounds. Something like that. Easy to say, difficult to realize. So after reading the first paragraph, I guess that was the beginning of my good fortune. I shelved it and didn’t read any more in that book, because it was just too heavy for me to deal with at the time. And I’d moved from my father’s farm because I was looking for work.

SR: You say your “father’s farm” ... did your mom and dad split up?

AD: Yeah, after a while they did. Before I joined the movement they did. I stayed in kind of like a crash pad in Washington, D.C., and I was out of work at that particular time.

SR: This would be the early 70s?

AD: Yeah, it was 1973 ... it was when I joined the movement. Actually joined it was late '72, '73...

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SR: Same with me. I joined around the same time.

AD: So, my so-called wife came home ...

SR: You were married?

AD: I was, married for about four years

SR: You mean, it was just like a relationship ...

AD: We considered ourselves married ... and we were together for about four years until she came home one fine afternoon from work, and said, "Hey, you're into spiritual things, right? Get a load of this," and she threw an Isopanisad in my lap. Well, I picked up the Isopanisad and started reading it, and little did she know that that was the beginning of the end of our ongoing relationship.

So then at a certain point – well, my wife and I and my friends, we would pile into our vehicle -- we went down near the Dupont Circle area. There was a music workshop that was very near the Q Street temple (in Washington, D.C). I was just above Georgetown, near where Georgetown University is. Georgetown and Dupont Circle were the hip areas of town. I was looking for work, so I went to check out the bulletin board to see if there were any musicians required. Of course, there wasn't anything at that point, but as I was coming back from the music workshop I popped into an Indian spice store, and I saw they had a rack of Spiritual Sky incense there, the kind the devotees made back then, which I noticed because I needed some incense for home. As I was looking through the rack I remembered that, at the war moratoriums, I would buy their lotus flower incense. That sparked thought of going to the Hare Krishna temple -- I had never been to a Hare Krishna temple and I had already read Isopanisad – because I was kind of looking for the Bhagavad-gita. I had heard of it and wanted to read it, because in reading Prabhupada's Isopanisad, in his commentaries, he would refer to Bhagavad-gita again and again. Some friends had given me the popular Penguin Bhagavad-gita, but it wasn't clear. I wanted the Bhagavad-gita that Prabhupada was referring to, his own edition -- As It Is.

SR: Nothing quite like it. Prabhupada's Gita captures the essence . . .

AD: I knew that, or I sensed it. So I went over to the temple, everyone else was too afraid to come in with me, because they were afraid they would have to surrender to something. Nobody wanted that. [laughter] But I went in and asked for some incense ... I was greeted at the door by Varutapa Prabhu (I think he's no longer with us).

SR: Accha. So that's the first devotee you remember ...

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AD: Yeah. And I asked him if they had any incense ... so he goes away to get some and comes back telling me that they didn't have any incense, but that he had something that maybe I'd be interested in ... and he hands me Bhagavad gita As It Is. I was really happy to get it, but I needed some money for gas to get back up to where I was staying, and I only had \$2.00. I had \$1.00 left in my pocket after giving him \$2.00 for the Gita. What to do?

Also, he gave me some japa mala and he showed me how to chant japa while I was there. He didn't demonstrate how it was to be done, but only verbally explained it, so I had a completely different conception when I started. He said we had to very carefully absorb ourselves in the transcendental sound of the mantra. I was used to chanting "Om" in relationship to other spiritual groups. So I was thinking that this mantra was also similarly chanted. Imagine: I would chant Hhhhhaaaarreeeee Kkkkkrrrrriishshshshshnnnaaa ... long and drawn out, like they chant OM in some circles. Of course, I was stoned also, so it was a pretty outrageous experience chanting like that. But I would fall asleep after about 16 mantras, what to speak of 16 rounds.



SR: [laughs]

AD: They were telling me that I should finish 1 round and try to go for 16. I was thinking, "How do they do it?"

SR: Tell me more about this first visit ... the surroundings, your demeanor, the devotees.

AD: Well, I had hair down to my knees. I could sit on my hair, because it was so long. I had real old jeans, and what not, the hippie look. Anyway, I invited myself into the kitchen where a female devotee was cooking. There was a little window well there, because it was like a semi-basement, and little chipmunks and squirrels and birds were all assembled there waiting for her to give them something to eat. So she would open the window, and they weren't disturbed ... they would stay there, trusting her ... and she said, "Haribol, spirit souls... you want some prasadam?" And she would toss out some little crumbs of this and that prasada. Leftovers or whatever. And I was amazed. I was thinking, "Wow, she's actually seeing them as spirit souls." It really moved me when she said, "Haribol, spirit souls." It sounded so cool, so realized.

Then I asked her if it was "possible," if "perchance, maybe, I could stay with you guys, for a few days just to see whether you're actually living this philosophy. And if I could learn how to, too." So then she said, "Sure, why not! Why don't you make a definite plan? Why not tomorrow?"

When she suggested I do it the very next day, I was tsunamied with the realization of how attached I was, of how much of my attachments I'd have to give up in order to actually accomplish her suggestion of coming and staying in the temple the next day. So then I went out to the car, drove my car back, and started like a madman giving away my amplifiers to anyone and everyone ... my guitars, my amplifiers. Whatever I had, I started just giving away – everything. And then my wife saw this. We had discussed this philosophy many times. But now she saw I was serious. So she was just hanging onto my ankles, crying and crying, saying, “Eddie, please don't go back home, back to Godhead -- not yet! I'm not ready to go back to Godhead! Please!! I haven't finished enjoying you yet!”

It was actually quite enlightening for me. When she said, “I haven't finished enjoying you yet,” I felt like a slab of meat on a tigress's dinner table, and I started realizing that the statements in Srila Prabhupada's purports – because I had read Isopanisad -- about the influence of maya, illusion, it's all true. I saw the personification of Krishna's illusory energy trying to keep me in the material world. So I folded my hands, pranams style, and told her that, “Look, if you're not ready to go with me, then I'm going to have to go without you.” And I left.

So then I just packed my bags, grabbed my pregnant cat and took her out to my father's farm. Because I had asked the girl at the temple, “Well, what do I do with my pregnant cat?” and she said, “You don't have to worry about her ... just chant the Hare Krishna mantra over some milk and offer that to her ... because she'll get Krishna prasada she'll get a human birth in her next life, so you don't have to worry about her.” So I did that. I took her out to my father's farm, but, while I was there, I decided that I would stay at his farm for a while, and I started reading Bhagavad-gita . . .

SR: Wait, wait, wait. She invited you to move into the temple, but you're staying ...

AD: I was trying to figure out how I would get there in one day's time, and I couldn't do it. But I wanted to move in that direction.

SR: Right, right. Okay.

AD: I didn't want to just dump my cat and leave her in the material world. Besides, at that time, I was for months habituated to eating only three figs a day because I was afraid of getting bad karma. You see, I had some strange ideas. I understood that eating could be sinful. I didn't know about prasad. I didn't understand how by offering food to Krishna it becomes akarmic – free from karma -- and all these things. So I was trying to minimize my eating to avoid karma -- and I'd become extremely thin and very gaunt. Eating only three figs a day for months, you can't expect to be robust. [laughter]

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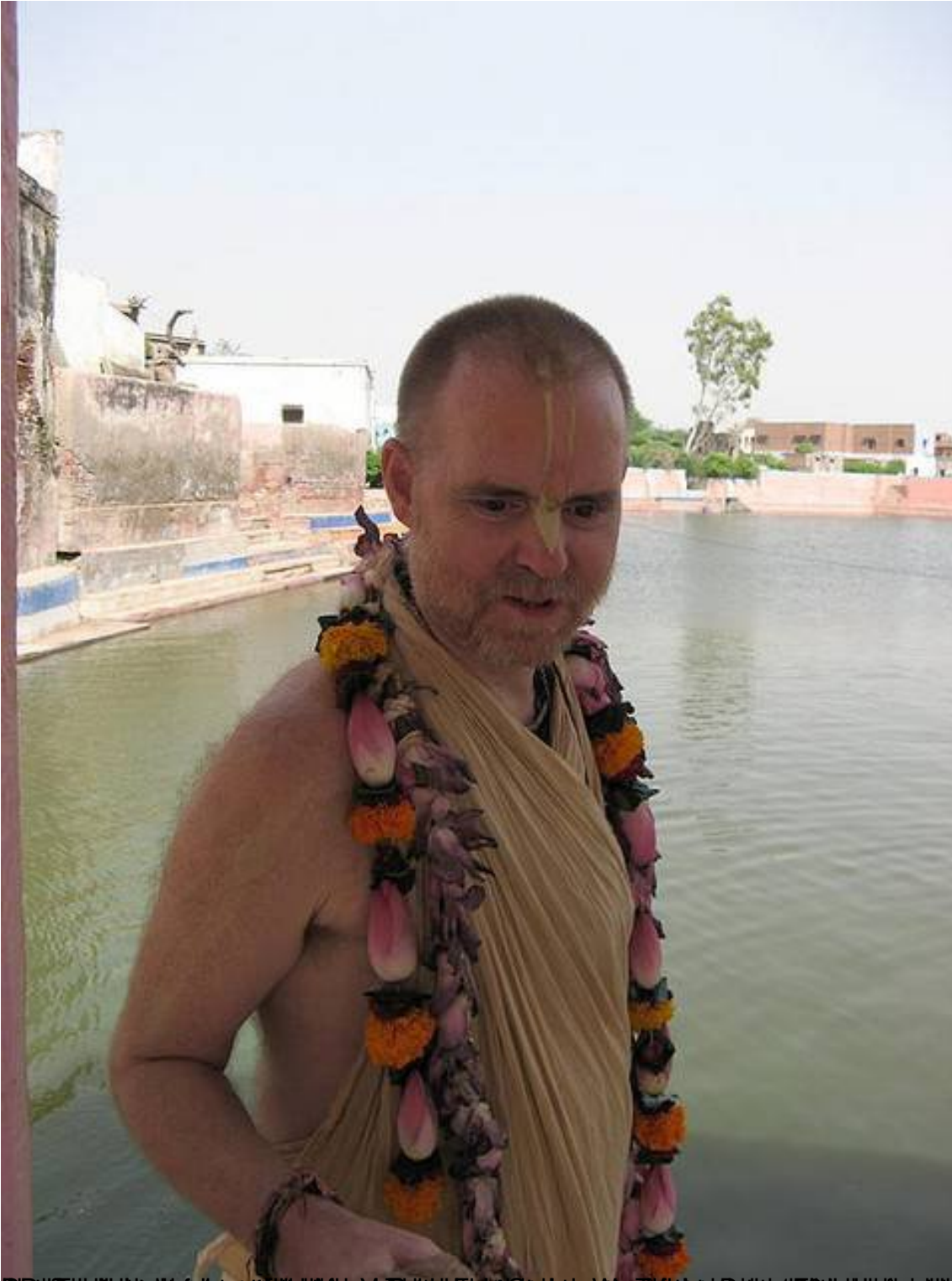
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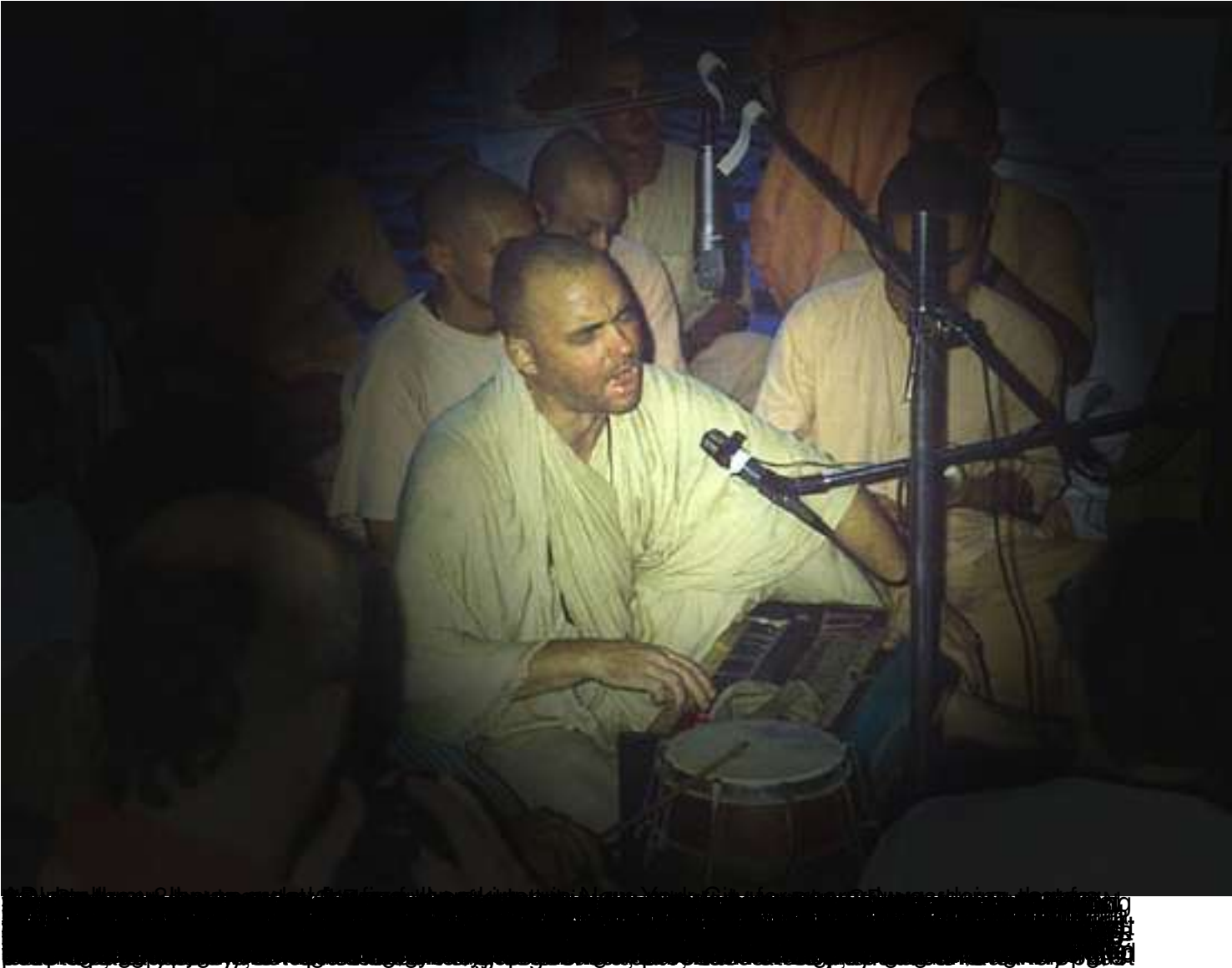


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