

# PRISON-ASHRAM PROJECT

September 1981

Newsletter

## SPRING TOUR '81

I'm never sure just how to write about our prison tours in these newsletters. I think I usually wind up with a brief synopsis of facts and dates, but what never seems to come across is the *experience* of these tours, of the prison workshops and other meetings which touch our hearts so deeply. Last night a friend from Germany asked me what the workshops are like, and I started getting stoned just *telling* him about them. I think his former impression was that the Prison-Ashram Project basically promotes yoga and meditation as a way for prisoners to improve their lives; it certainly looks like that on the surface. But the project doesn't really revolve around "instruction"; it seems to be a vehicle for *being* in love—literally be-ing, together with prisoners and other people who want to *be* with us in that consciousness. Even while explaining the experiences to my friend, that feeling of love began washing over us just from talking about it. We could both experience the feeling of these workshops and it became easy to understand how deeply enjoyable they are. When I walk into a prison room and see ten or thirty or a hundred prisoners expressing their desire for this love (just by coming to the workshop), the purity in the room starts blowing me away before the thing even begins. It's just an amazing feeling to be in that group, coming together for *no other purpose* than to play in the spirit; there's no college credits, no brownie points toward parole, no naked women or movies or music; just to sit in the spirit, just to play with words about truth, to examine our own souls and maybe to touch hearts. By the time I've sat down and cleared my mind and open my eyes, it's like looking at so many heavenly angels sitting in front of me, beyond space and time. When we sit in this love together, there's no prison and no inmates and no me and no . . . nothing other than love. Look at some of these faces in pictures taken during a workshop, and maybe that love will still share itself with you. These happy faces, that look like they're stoned at a rock concert, are *all*

doing ten years to life in a maximum security prison in Ontario.

The workshops give us all an opportunity to meet "backstage" in the play of our lives. This can only happen if there's absolutely nothing that I want from anyone there; if I want *anything*, even something "good" like rehabilitation or self-improvement or happiness for the people in the room, then



I'm still buying into the play on stage; I'm not able to be in the dressing room behind it all. Because backstage, there's just no difference between me and the other people in the room; I'm no freer, no more fortunate, or whatever; all those roles are parts of the stage characters. Backstage, there's just nothing to do except to *be*.

So the talk goes on, and the questions and answers go back and forth and I do teach a few meditation techniques and breathing practices in case someone ever wants to use them, but it's all just going on as the play, as the *excuse*, really, for simply being together. When we look at each other at the end of the night, when these rough, tough, scarred "criminals" look at each other affectionately or come up to hug me or grasp hands for a moment, the look in our eyes is not "wow, were those great techniques!", or "wow, can you teach yoga!"; the look on both parts is simply "wow, does it feel good to be in love." Truly, Sita and I have had many of the most blessed moments of our lives in prisons. It's those meetings in prisons that have opened our way to being in love everywhere, all the time. Over the years, the prison



workshops seem to be schooling us in the experience of not wanting anything from other people; of how to just *be* with a person with no hooks, no ulterior ego stuff; no conditions.

I remember walking into a beautiful fishing lodge in the mountains of Pennsylvania to lead a weekend training seminar last spring for parole officers and administrators. Looking at the "straight, middle-class" participants with their cigars and briefcases, the women with high heels and dresses, I was overwhelmed with my greater difficulty in being in love with these people as I so easily can when I'm in prisons. I had to admit that for some reason, I couldn't just sit "backstage" with these people. The first day of the seminar, I

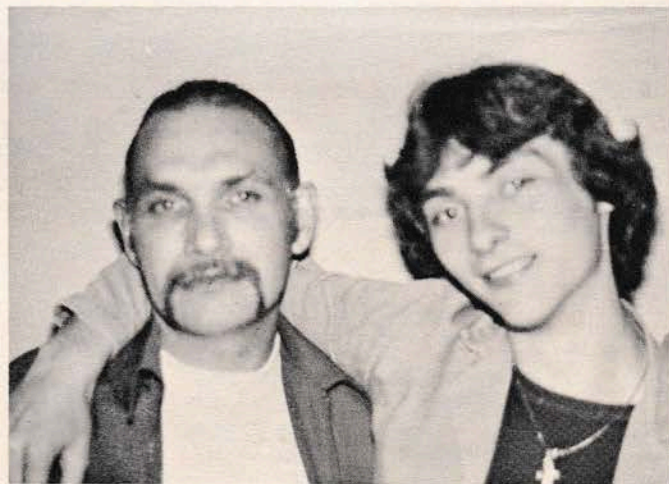


tried as best I could, but I felt stiff, and I felt that they were stiff, the seminar was stiff. . . . I even debated whether to go back the next day. I did mantras, prayed for guidance, touched inner checkpoints, the whole bit; and I still felt stiff, although I did decide to go through with the second day. Somehow the next morning as the session wore on, I started seeing an added quality in the faces I looked at. Something behind their eyes, something which felt that good old familiarity to my heart, seemed to be winking at me from beyond. As I loosened up from that, they seemed to be loosening up from *my* loosening up, and then of course I'd loosen up more, etc. By the end of the day, we were all just home together, the players all relaxing backstage, always just the same players, just us. We had finally met in the spirit, and all the rest — the "training," the rational understandings about stress reduction through meditation and so forth — were just the flimsy excuses once again.

In the Salem County Prison in Massachusetts, this love got very far out. Salem is the oldest jail in the country, and is as ugly and horrible a place as it is old. The inmates still use shit pots, which are emptied a few times a day; no plumbing, no daily showers, the inmates look about like they feel.

One's self-image in such a place is pretty low. My workshop at Salem was held in the library during the middle of the day, and the library stayed open and busy the whole time. Other groups meeting, people walking in and out, lots of noise, and here we are over in a corner trying to figure out the best way to use this hectic and distracting environment. Nothing much happened that seemed especially deep or touching; except that underneath the discomfort caused by this lack of privacy, there was still some subtle relaxed flavor, something gentle, between us. Later that day (I was told this a few days afterward by Joel Grossman, a remarkable social worker), Joel was conducting his regular discussion group and during a brief lull, one of the inmates who had attended the workshop stood up and said, "I just want you to know that I really love you all." As Joel added when he told me, "You just don't say that sort of thing in Salem Jail; yet every one of the guys in that group allowed themselves to feel what he was saying without laughing it off or getting embarrassed."

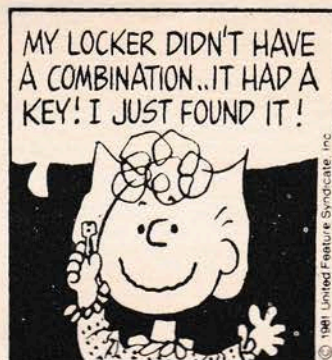
At the Lewisburg Federal Prison in Pennsylvania, a guy walked over to me before I left and said that he just wanted me to know that even if somebody walks out on me (in a workshop), not to feel that anything failed. He said that he



walked out during my workshop several years earlier in Indiana, and that he got out of prison, got into trouble all over again, sent back to prison, etc., and now finds that he understands the whole rap. Who ever really knows what should happen from these meetings? All we can do is to be with each other and then let go of any notion of "results."

Well, these are just a few of the thousands of moments we enjoyed during this past tour. I hope we've found the words to give you a taste of what it was like. It's like going all over the place and feeling no distances at all; like meeting thousands of people and finding no one there, no one unfamiliar, nothing new; just love.

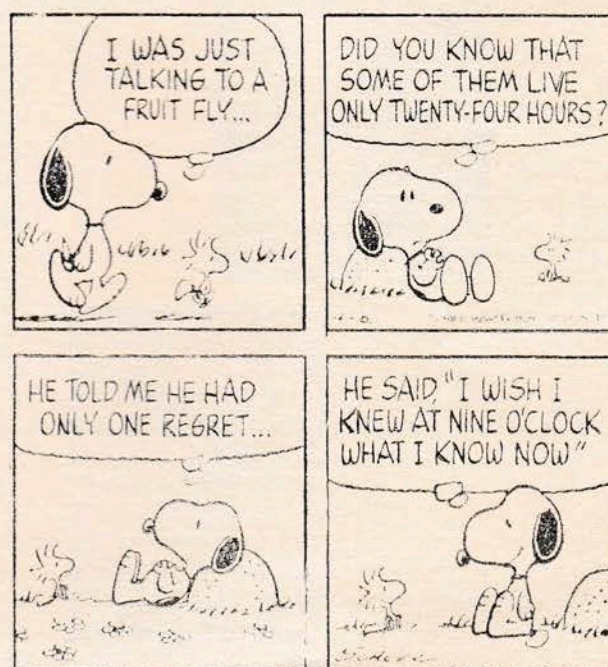
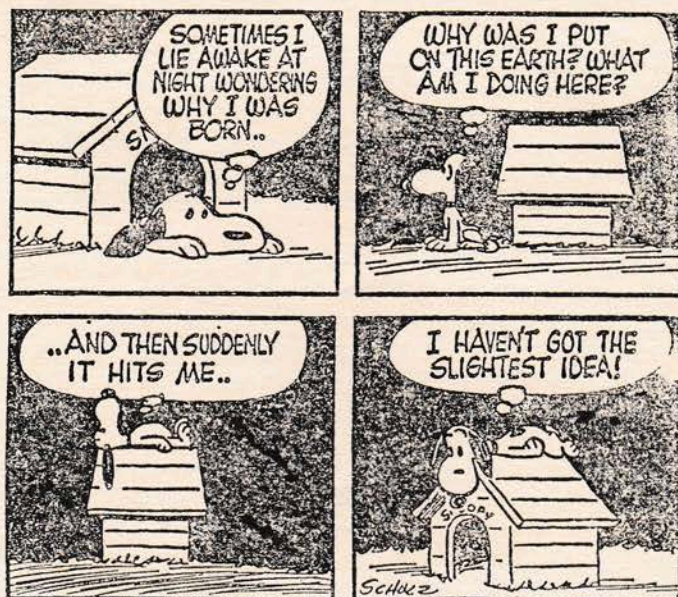




## PEANUTS AND GOD

For years, Charles Schulz has been one of our favorite spiritual teachers. People think we're joking when we tell them that PEANUTS books, to us, rank right up there among the world's holy books. But if the function of a holy book is to lift one's spirits, to offer light and clear guidance, to reflect ourselves in its pages and to help us accept our sweetness and our flaws, then PEANUTS books fit right in. Who knows? Perhaps saints don't always come in robes and talking about God; perhaps sometimes they take birth to lighten our burdens in other ways, like uniting our spirits through profoundly simple humor. Maybe Schulz is such a saint and doesn't even know it; maybe he's not. Whatever the case, his unique brand of gentle loving humor warms millions of hearts across the globe every day, and I can honestly say that I have never once seen a PEANUTS cartoon that seemed out of step with true Love.

We offer a few of those chuckles on this page for you to reflect on, and heartily recommend further doses. One last note — you might wish to join us in beaming Charles Schulz some light and blessings, as he recently underwent major heart surgery. We love him dearly.







## SILVER THREAD ART CENTER

*As mentioned in our last Christmas newsletter, these folks (then the Silver Thread School of Art) are spiritual artists who are trying to develop a self-sustaining center for their work. Zai Netto, their director, spent many years in Florida State Prison, and his own artistic skills evolved in that time. The Silver Thread people have now moved to Gainesville, Fla., and would appreciate any help or advice in pursuing their aims. Their letter follows:*

Dear Bo & Sita,

Greetings . . . We love you. Thank you for including the picture of Jesus in your December issue of the Prison-Ashram Project newsletter. As a result we received uplifting letters from all over the world.

We have spent the past 2½ years (since Zai Netto was released from Raiford prison) building the foundation for our center. Times have not all been easy and sometimes it would seem as if the bricks we were laying for the foundation would crack irreparably. However, we are still standing . . . and I believe straighter and stronger than before.

We feel it is time to expose our work and put the center up front for all the world to see. Perhaps the human interest story of our happening (as well as the art work itself) may bring hope to others, especially artists and prisoners. We believe in art as a way of natural healing or therapy. Zai is completely self-taught through meditation. He has developed techniques which can be applied to all areas of the arts . . . techniques which can guide one to one's inner self. Several of his students will soon be off parole and come to be with us. We have been supporting between seven and twelve people; we have a daily schedule involving

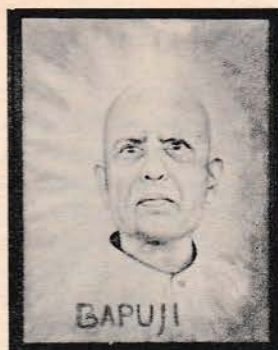
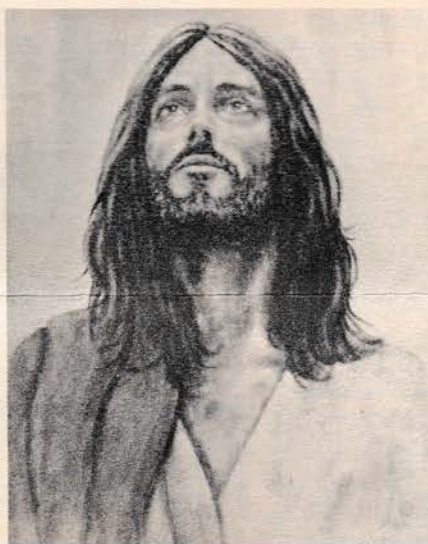
yoga, jogging, meditation, chanting, creative time, and work for the center.

We have not yet directed much energy into the distribution or exposure of our work. Now that it seems to be time to "come out," we have many questions about looking for outlets to place our prints (especially Jesus) on consignment . . . also for books, magazines, etc., that might be interested in using our work. Any hints or suggestions would be most welcome and appreciated.

We are a non-profit, tax-exempt organization; however, as our work is just now beginning to be seen we cannot depend on donations. What about grants? Would you know if we qualify and/or whom to contact and how to approach it?

We hope you and your family are well.

On Peace, Light, and Love,  
Crystal Star  
Silver Thread Art Center, Inc.  
1801 N.E. 23rd Ave.  
Gainesville, Fla. 32601





## BREAKING THROUGH

by Gregory Jackmauh

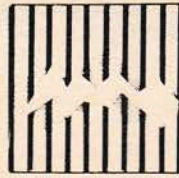
*The following article is reprinted with permission from the Prison Project Newsletter of the Rudi Foundation. These are the folks who have taken over responsibility for our pen-pal and book projects. To ask for a pen-pal or to donate or request spiritual books (other than INSIDE-OUT), write to them at Box 468, Cambridge, Ma. 02138.*

This is about "breaking through" — about my own breaking through. The steps that led to what was, for me, a transformation are not easily described. But I have decided that trying to share what I saw at that moment of breaking through is worth the effort. It is worth it if it is useful to someone else, if it helps someone recognize that they can experience their own life in a very new and positive way.

I have been studying yoga meditation for more than four years and have been teaching yoga practices in prison for over two years. It was in a prison yoga class that I experienced this "breaking through." And I want to add that I believe this experience was possible *because* of the inmates who were present. They were direct, sincere individuals who had developed an inner strength, long before I had ever met them.

Four years ago I began to explore yoga practice because I felt that something was missing in my life — although I didn't know what it was. After two years of practicing yoga meditation twice daily, I began to teach classes in prisons and some other institutions. During those two years I have had a growing awareness that I was not getting across to my students the power and reality of a meditation practice — the power for growth, fulfillment, and improvement and the reality that it can and does happen for anyone who practices. Faced with increasing frustration I became very motivated to find my way out of this problem. My regular teaching in yoga meditation classes and this sense of frustration became the first stage for my breaking through.

Then there came a day when I was beginning a new class and was faced with introducing myself and what the class was about. The sense of having nothing I could say went through me. I felt at the very bottom of the ladder that led to making



sense out of my life. I became very quiet as the class sat there waiting for me to start. I looked at each member of the class and saw in them too a similar distress at their life situation. I had to begin so I just began to speak what was on my mind.

I told them that this class was a special one for me and that perhaps it would be unlike any class they had taken before because there was no subject to learn, no product to make no goal to achieve. We were all that mattered. By this time I felt I was looking into five pairs of familiar eyes. In the inmates I saw that same person who was in me. That person was reaching out, trying to find a way out of that personal uncertainty we often refer to as *I*. I tried to express my feeling to them that when we meet here we are not different. They are not inmates to me and I don't want to be thought of as an "outsider." We are the same because of our need to make our life better. When we let ourselves drop our roles like inmate or teacher, and drop our prejudices about other people's roles, we have a meeting, a meeting that takes place in the heart. Then there is no need to protect our image or ego.

I stopped talking. Right away the men began to relate how they came to be in the class. Each spoke in turn; I said almost nothing. I had said enough. This "meeting" last another hour.

During the one and a half hours we spent together in that first class, our attention stayed on this meeting in the heart. We had done no meditation, the word had barely come up. But the experience we each had in the class was a spiritual one. The classes which followed had a great deal of ease and clarity to them. Everything we explored, yoga, meditation, the inner spirit, the inner self, a creative force, or God, each of these "concepts" could be related back to that first *experience* together. We had broken through our roles, expectations, ego defenses and had had a direct experience of spirit.

From that experience with my class in prison I have far greater conviction that anyone, anywhere can have this experience of spirit. I might qualify that and say that it is possible for anyone who is earnest enough to take the chance of letting go of their self-image and the prejudices they have toward others. This letting go and experiencing of the spirit is not an easy task by ourselves. Different spiritual and religious practices serve the purpose of helping a person find this spirit.

One thing I have experienced strongly is that regardless of the path, when people begin to feel this spirit and know that it is *inside* of them, their problems look simpler, the other people in their life will begin to appear friendlier, and dealing with their life on a day to day basis will get easier. Once you find this spirit, the experience is so great, such a feeling of freedom and inner strength that you just naturally begin to practice your spiritual path more and more.

If I have communicated only one thing through my writing here, I want it to be that the spirit in each of us is a wonderful and comforting thing, with both power and peace, and it is readily accessible as soon as we decide we want to find it.

*The philosophy behind the Prison-Ashram project is simple: We don't pretend to know what prisoners (or anyone else, for that matter) need. We offer and share a lot of teachings, methods, viewpoints and ideas, so that you can taste many things and decide for yourself what feels right and what doesn't. We're critical of groups, teachers, or organizations which seem to be reeling you in rather than setting you free. What we're trying to get across is the idea that **you** have all the answers you need somewhere within the quietness of your own mind and heart; there are many differing techniques that can help you to tap that place in yourself. There is no "one way" that is better for all people.*



## SAYINGS OF NEEM KAROLI BABA (MAHARAJ-JI)

*On the full moon in September, we celebrated the eighth anniversary of our Guru's death; his mahasamadhi. Inasmuch as the Prison-Ashram Project is really his idea and his energy, we thought it would be nice to share with you some of the things he said to his devotees. Of course, nothing he said was very significant in comparison to his presence itself; but perhaps these few casual remarks can serve as a focal point for trying to feel the quality of a being who lives these words.*

See God in everyone. It is deception to teach by individual differences and karma.

You get wisdom from suffering. You are alone with God when you are sick, in the cremation ground, or hospital. You call on God when you suffer.

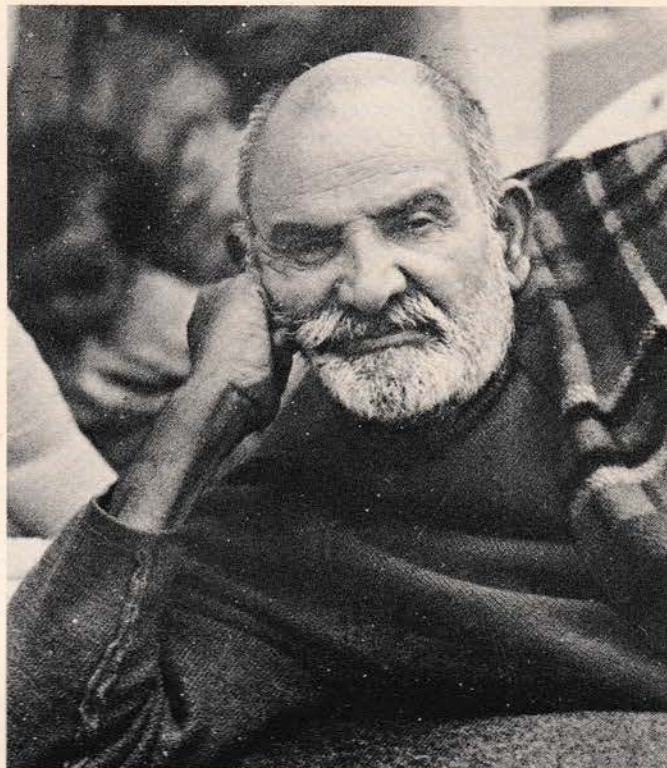
It doesn't matter if you are married or not; it only matters how much you love God.

It's better to see God in everything than to try to figure it out.

If you are free from attachment, you will lead a simple life in a simple environment.

God will give you everything you need for your spiritual development. Hold onto nothing.

Total truth is necessary. You must live by what you say.



Truth is the most difficult tapasya (*discipline*). Men will hate you for telling the truth. They will call you names. They may even kill you, but you must tell the truth. If you live in truth, God will always stand with you.

Clear the mind of all worldly things. If you can't control your mind, how will you realize God?

To see God, you have to have special eyes. Otherwise, you cannot bear the shock.

Serve the poor and remember God. You become one with Christ.

Forgiveness is the greatest weapon, because a saint so armed is unperturbable. He can give up anger immediately.

Cleanse the mirror of your heart and you will see God.

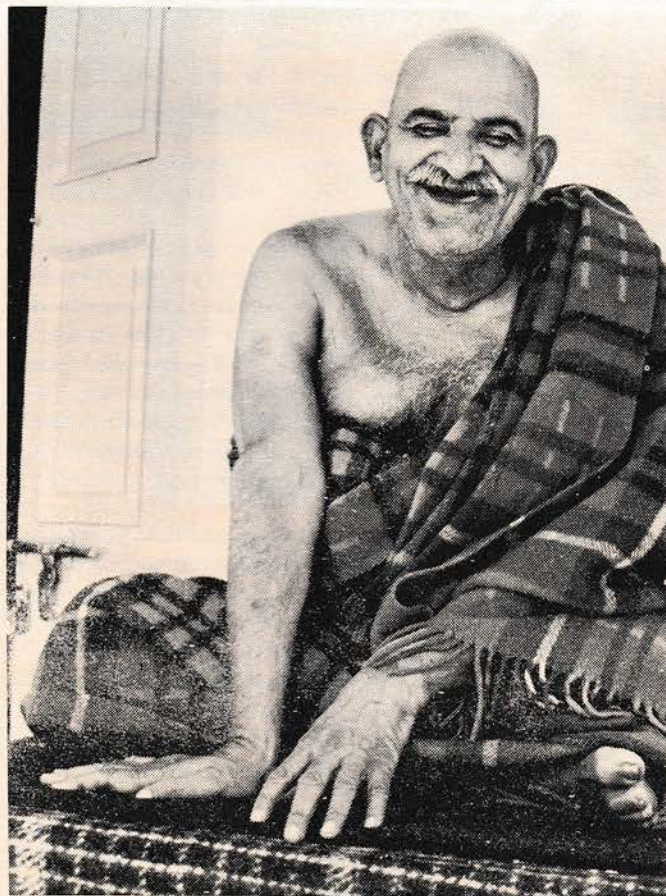
Even if a person hurts you, give him love. The worst punishment is to throw someone out of your heart . . . You should love everyone as God, and love each other. If you cannot love each other, you cannot achieve your goal.

Love all men as God, even if they hurt you or shame you. Be like Gandhi and Christ.

It is not necessary to meet your Guru on the physical plane. The Guru is not external.

All religions are the same. They all lead to God . . . See no difference, see all the same.

The body passes away. Everything is impermanent except the love of God.







## LETTERS . . .

Dear Bo & Sita,

*It's been the best and worst of times yet nothing to really place a value on; things happen as they happen.*

*Parole was denied again, predicated on the same grounds, and I felt a touch of anger seasoned with disgust. As the hearing drew to a conclusion I couldn't help but laugh. The board members asked why. . . . I asked them if they understood how unnecessary their fantasy was. Kaboom! I won an all-expenses covered trip to see the shrink. We drank a little coffee, discussed the baseball strike, and that was it. All in all, it wasn't a bad way to spend an afternoon in this place. Picture this dude as a senior version of the "Fridays" drug-gist . . . bowtie and smock . . . he can handle it. Actually, his wife owns a travel agency and he spends most of his time skiing here and there and working on his retirement plans. What can I say?*

*We had an all-prison picnic on the 4th, that was significant for its lack of heavy drama. A little food and music, some game-games, and a cloud of smile-smoke hanging over the compound. It was nice to see that much harmony and sad to think it only lasted for a day . . . business as usual since then and a lot of senseless changes.*

*Ummm . . . have to share this: A dude had an epileptic seizure . . . we helped him through the changes and after he calmed himself down we asked him how life was treating him. He said, "The script is okay but I keep losing my place." Woo-wee!*

*Yeah, love is the answer . . . I coach a softball team and the players are mostly in their late teens or early 20's. They call*

*me "old man" or "pop" and at first I was a little irritated. lately it's become an advantage. We talk a lot, get inside each other's trips and manage to cool one another out when necessary. It's like having 18 children but sometimes they are the father. I sometimes enter the dugout and feel a bunch of pride . . . and usually laugh at my foolishness; yet there are still days when I need those feelings and I don't feel ashamed of them anymore.*

*There are mornings I awake and think: "Who do I want to be today?" All of us are simply variations of the same design. I think when we get the diversions out of the way and accept that we're all interchangeable characters in the life-play, we get back on the homeward path. It's a way of giving yourself a hug, in the morning, and feeling good about the day. It doesn't always work, but it helps to keep the grrrr's away.*

*Love twice,*

*Phill*

*Joliet, Ill.*

Dear Bo,

*Each person can find enlightenment within himself—but, like the fortune cookie, you can't get the message unless you are willing to break the shell.*

*Love & Peace,*

*J.M.*

*FCI-Englewood, Co.*

## ON THE ROAD AGAIN . . .

*On the road again,  
going places that I've never been,  
seeing faces I might never see again;  
It's great to be back on the road again."*

*— Willie Nelson*

*I'll be doing another tour during late November/early December. As usual, the funds I receive from public workshops will enable me to do the prison ones free of charge. The tour will cover ground between here and southern Florida, and will include four kinds of gatherings: Prison workshops; Training seminars for people who work or wish to work in prisons; Public or college talks about the prison work and the prison system in general; and finally, public workshops which will be unrelated to the prison work (these are "general" gatherings called *Living Lightly* . . . , and will include discussion, meditations, chanting, etc.).*

*If you're interested in arranging any of these meetings, please contact us as soon as possible and let us know what you have in mind and what the best and worst dates would*

*be. Scheduling a tour is always tricky, so please let us hear from you soon. If you're in prison and want to arrange a workshop, check with the psychologist or chaplain or some other staff member — whomever seems to be the friendliest — to see what the possibilities might be. You can tell him or her that we can easily send references from wardens and other administrators throughout the country who have felt the workshops to be valuable.*

*We'll send out a tour schedule in the next newsletter, around the middle of November. At present, the only confirmed date we can share is Sunday, December 6, in Miami, Fla. Sita and I will both be leading an all-day public workshop called "*Living Lightly* . . ." Contact *Mandalama Journal* for details (305-251-8740).*

*Well, that about wraps up one of our longer newsletters. As always, you know we love and appreciate you all. As King Janaka said, "May Loving Kindness wash over the worlds!"*

*Bo + Sita Logo*

The Prison-Ashram Project is supported solely by unsolicited private donations.

All contributions, grants, or trusts are always needed and welcomed.



Viswamitra smiled. . . . "Where do your lands end? What are the limits of your realm, and where is the dominion of another king?"

Janaka looked around, this way and that. "Well, my kingdom is not these fields, it might be the city."

"Where?"

"No, I see nothing of mine there. Surely, then, my own body must be my kingdom, and I will look . . ."

"What do you find?" asked Viswamitra.

"You may go or stay anywhere as long as you like," smiled Janaka. "Even this body is not mine, this I am not. It is no part of me. Or else — I rule all space, for I do not hold onto the sounds that enter these ears; I rule all land, for I desire no scents but let them come and go; I rule the waters for I do not grasp at any taste; my eye does not cling to lights and colors and so I rule all fire; I care not for any touch, nor do I avoid it, and so I rule the air and winds. . . ."

Viswamitra said, "Janaka, no craving nor thirst have you. You have found the everlasting Dharma wheel and truly set it turning, set it rolling out of the hills and past the reach of Death and beyond the rule of time; beyond rebirth; beyond old age, beyond sickness, beyond death again — the glorious Wheel of the Good Law, the Dharma Law a man may win for himself as he wins a battle, with a lion-roar of victory and a shout of great joy!"

Janaka reached down and held the rich dark Earth in his hands. "Dissolution is the end of all things compounded out of the elements and each man fares according to his own deeds." He crumbled the soil and let it fall through his fingers. . . . "May all beings everywhere be happy and safe! May all creatures born or seeking to be born have happy minds, may none wish another ill! May loving kindness wash over the worlds!"

— from the RAMAYANA,  
retold by William Buck

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