

# PRISON-ASHRAM PROJECT

March 1982

Newsletter

Namaste,

Howdy once again from Sita and me, and from this ever-growing family of prison-ashram folks inside and outside of prison. We have no tours or newsy stuff or progress on **INSIDE-OUT #3** to report, because we've been working like crazy trying to finish building our new house. After fifteen years of being mostly on the move, it feels good to experience the trip of laying down roots, like an acorn finally blown to its destined place by the wind. At least, it feels that way; God only knows.

For the first time in several years, I've begun a regular weekly class, at maximum-security Central Prison about 30 miles from here in Raleigh. It's been a wonderful addition to my life, and I think will be of great help in working on **INSIDE-OUT #3** when we settle into our new place. By the way, our address won't be changing when we move; the current address is our home-to-be.

The activities of the Prison Book Project and the Pen-pal Project are up in the air right now, so it would be helpful to hold off writing to either one until our next newsletter. If you've already written and never received a reply, please don't take it personally; we're having some problems and making some changes as quickly as we can.

Hope you enjoy this latest offering, and that it contributes to the strength of your journey. May we all become more simple, truthful and loving.

— Bo

## "KARMA-RAP"



## LOVE ON THE BLOCKS

Dear Sita & Bo,

Greetings in the Light, dear ones. I welcome you with love. Thanks so much for the warm Christmas greetings this year. If I had sat down to meditate, it couldn't have been more beautiful. Just the reading of the words, and the assortment of family smiles took me to that place where one in the Light knows so well. I smile too, as the cosmic joke keeps us light and happy. Surely "everything is everything, and ain't nuthin' nuthin'."

How beautiful it is for us to share on a level more subtle and much deeper than the spoken word. As the holiday season approached and I knew I could not afford to send cards to all my "dear ones," there were fleeting moments of sadness, but ultimately, it didn't matter anyway; as we are never more than a thought away.

Green Haven Prison has an inmate population of about 1850 men. But for 200 of them in particular, New Year's day was much more than just another day in prison. My block (J-block) houses close to 200 men. About 20% of these men are on the SNU (Special Needs Unit). Some are crippled, elderly, or just too sick physically to move about the prison. About 50 of us got together a week before and donated \$2 or

\$3 each so that we could purchase some food from the commissary. Would you believe, we had enough stuff to feed the entire block, and even serve seconds to those that wanted it?

The tears that day—including mine—were genuine tears of love and sharing. As I was spreading the mayo (600 pieces of bread!) and some of the men rolled up in their wheel chairs, each had a look in their eyes which was unmistakable. For that moment (to them especially), nothing else did matter, as God spoke clearly in the hearts of all. It was truly a beautiful day, and I just wanted to share that with you. Perhaps you will remember, but it all began for me right there at Auburn Prison in 1978 (yoga class and Bo's workshop). And now, with just three more years to my release, it's amazing to see how fast the time has gone by. I can never forget the meaning of prison in my life. The judge must have known (smile)!

God's gift to us is love, and that we shall always have in abundance. Merry Christmas and a happy new year to you both and to all of God's creation.

Your very own, Al



## MISSING THE MARK

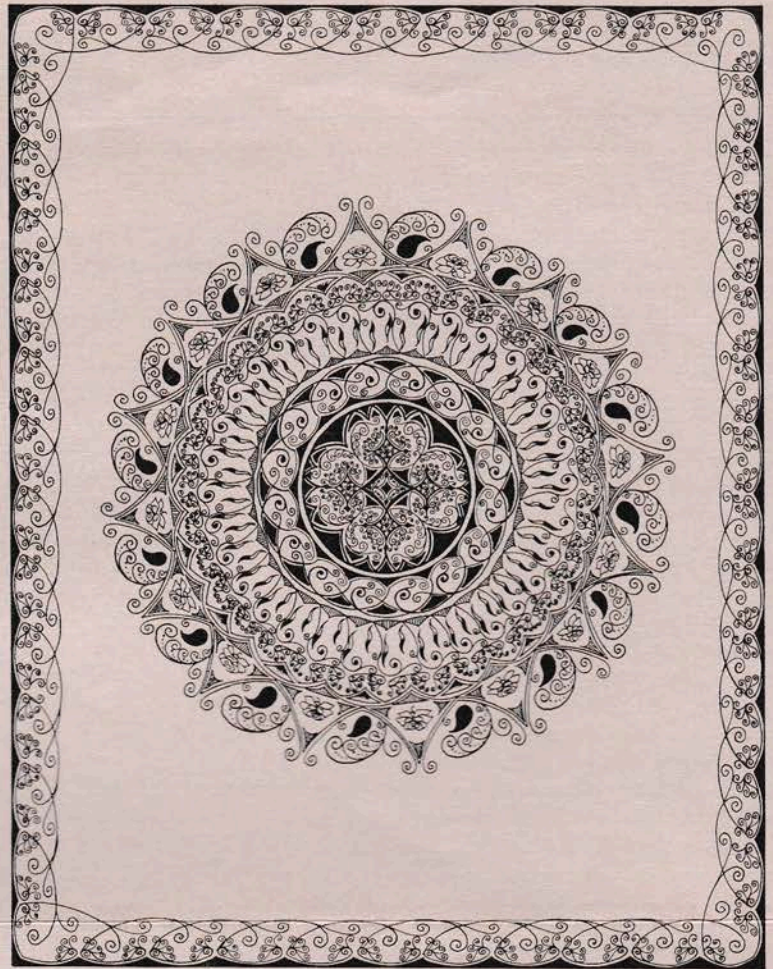
*Kausika the priest, who is now  
roasting in Hell, set his heart on  
Virtue, and in all his life he never  
told a lie, even in jest.  
Once having seen their helpless victim  
run past him and hide,  
Kausika sitting where the rivers  
meet answered the thieves: "That way!"*

This journey that we're all trying so hard to awaken to, this journey that we already know goes nowhere but *here*, is so simple it keeps eluding us. Our busy minds crave something more complicated to wrestle with, to figure out, to solve like some giant philosophical jigsaw puzzle. But as Aldous Huxley said toward the end of his life, the bottom line is just "to be a little kinder."

Of course, being kinder in every moment requires a balance of mind, some sort of mastery over one's desires and fears, and the ability to see things as they truly are; otherwise, how do we even know which of two actions is the kinder? So we look around for methods, reminders, diets, teachers; whatever resources we feel a connection with to begin the work of quieting the mind and giving up attachments. In the process, though, time after time we also lose sight of the original simple intention, which is to be kinder.

Ram Dass' first book, contrary to popular opinion, was not called *BE HERE NOW*. It was actually called **RE-MEMBER: BE HERE NOW**. The first word may often be the most crucial part of the teaching: we need to look fresh as often as we can and *remember* the simple core of loving kindness which is the foundation of all religions and all spiritual quests. Ultimately, this fresh look, this remembering, is done in each and every moment of our lives; it's what Suzuki Roshi called *beginner's mind*. We live each experience of awareness from a center of fear-less love, not from a center of Christianity or Islam or macrobiotics or yoga, but from a center of lovingkindness toward all creation. *Within that context*, we learn and practice and study through the particular methods we've found valuable, but the religions and methods are always secondary to their *essence*, which is lovingkindness. The paths are many, the essence one.

I once heard someone ask Patricia Sun how she would define *sin*. Her answer was, "sin is nothing more than missing the mark." That phrase has stayed with me for years, "missing the mark," because it's clean; it's free of blame or judgement or morality. And whether it's "sinning" in traditional terms or simply getting too heavy about our particular trip, getting holier-than-thou over other trips, getting overzealous about vegetarianism or the need to meditate daily or using drugs or abstaining from drugs and so forth; the heavi-



*original mandala art by Stephen Land  
Texas State Prison, Rosharon, Texas*

ness which produces conflict is simply "missing the mark" from our real aim. The aim is to be a simple, loving person; a person free enough of fears and desires so that he or she can speak honestly to anyone; a person who is at peace enough with his or her own life so that he or she can allow others to make their own mistakes and choose their own directions; a person whose mind is quiet enough to sense when to speak and when to back off, who has no quarrel with anyone yet is not afraid of conflicts when they seem to be unavoidable.

These qualities, as living expressions of true spirituality, require a light and easy mind, a peaceful acceptance of the world as it is, a sort of effortless wisdom which sees *through* the veils of ignorance which falsely distinguish life from death, and joy from sorrow. To quiet the mind and gain this wisdom, we climb back into all our varying paths now, but we try to remember not to miss the mark.

Dear Bo & Sita,

We offer free prisoner subscriptions and personals in classifieds. Personal ads can be sent c/o "classifieds," EWJ — a good way to get pen-pals, etc., to communicate.

Our best wishes and support in your efforts.

EAST WEST JOURNAL  
17 Station St.  
Brookline, Ma. 02146

Dear Bo & Sita,

Peace be with you. The East West Foundation (different from the East West Journal) has a new address, and wishes this information reaches our brothers and sisters "inside." The Foundation offers free literature on macrobiotics to prisoners. Information is available on the macrobiotic way of natural healing, diet, and self-transformation.

East West Foundation  
240 Washington St.  
Brookline, Ma. 02146





## LETTERS . . .

Dear Bo & Sita,

*I hope this letter finds you safe and in good health. I am great. I have been reading as much as I can on karma yoga. I find it very hard to relax, so karma yoga fits my style.*

*I have had some problems here for the past month. You see, I can't raise a hand against someone. I have made a vow that for the rest of my life I will live as a humble man. I won't hit or cuss anyone out. Now for the past month I have had some really bad problems here. First I was set up by some people who for some reason just don't like me. Then my life was at stake again. I don't know how serious these people are but I don't really care. I love everyone. I can hurt no one.*

*So now I am in the sick bay locked up for my own protection as I won't fight back. I won't argue with anyone. I am not going to break my word to God and fight. So am I wrong? Why do people have to try me and put me on the spot? I don't hurt people.*

*As much as I want to blow my top, I won't. I pray and pray. I force myself to stand there and let these people talk about me and if they want to hit me, fine. I shall pray for them. I won't go and break my word with God.*

*This seems to get me in more trouble. Everywhere I go people want to put me down and kill me. I wonder what I have done to really deserve it?*

*For a long time now I have been wanting to tell you this. But it has got really bad in the past month. So now I need to talk about it.*

*Thank you for the picture of you all on the Christmas card. I want you to know that there is not one person I could trust with what I feel and what I fear until I started to write to you. I look forward to your advice and help. I trust God for my health and protection. I am sure that as long as I remain humble and kind I will be safe.*

*So I will close for now and ask that you take care and may joy shine in your life. God be with you.*

Much Love, Dennis

Dear Dennis,

I've also spent a lot of time in my life wondering about this issue of violence/nonviolence, and especially because it's such a hard problem in prison life. It's interesting that you mentioned your readings in karma yoga, because the main holy book concerning karma yoga is the *BHAGAVAD GITA*, in which Krishna (God) convinces the warrior Arjuna to fight and kill rather than to practice nonviolence. The whole book is a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, and what Krishna is trying to get across is: 1) people have different natures and different missions in life, and there is no one policy that is right for everyone. Arjuna was born to be a warrior, and he must follow his *Dharma*, or nature. 2) everything we see or think we see is God's illusion, God's play-acting (*maya*). In truth there is no one at all, including whoever you think you are; there is *only* God. Therefore, all the violence or nonviolence is only a dream anyway, and it is God's own dream, in which we must play our parts without judging so much. No part is better or worse than another. And 3) the key to spiritual integrity, or enlightenment, is learning how to act without attachment to the results of our actions. This is Krishna's explanation of karma yoga. If God is directing this play, then we simply take our cues and act out our scenes as clearly as we can hear the directions, without

constantly questioning the director's wisdom or intentions. As Neem Karoli Baba (Maharaj-ji) once said, "It is better to love God than to try to figure it all out."

The tricky part that comes up, then, is this: was your vow of humility and nonviolence part of God's script, or part of your more limited vision? I certainly can't tell you; no one can but your own quietest mind. But what I can do in a letter is to throw out some clues in both directions to help give you some starting points to reflect on.

If your vow was pure, or in harmony with what you needed to do, then you've got to stop thinking in terms of "what did I do to deserve this?" Injury and death are not "bad" things, and health and life are not "good" things. You asked God for humility; what better way could He grant you humility than to subject you to ridicule and violence? Isn't that how all the Christian martyrs died? And didn't Jesus say that whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake, surely gains his life eternal? To make such a heavy-duty vow, Dennis, you've got to realize that you just enrolled in post-graduate school for sainthood; that spiritual life reaches far beyond physical life; and that spiritual fulfillment has absolutely nothing to do with worldly safety or happiness.

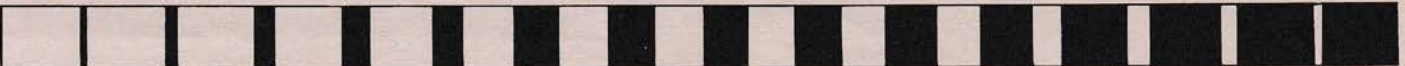
God indeed is answering your prayers, every time somebody comes up to hassle you. Because if you truly wish to be a humbled man, you must allow yourself to be humbled without fear of harm to the physical body.

On the other hand, it may be that your vow — as 99% of all vows seem to be — came not from God's plans, but your own. For example, how humble is it to proclaim "for the rest of my life I will live as a humble man"? It seems to me that the more humility we learn, the less we use phrases like "the rest of my life" about anything; because part of the humility is seeing how little we know about anything further away than this moment we find ourselves in. How strong a position are we in to make lifelong vows while our awareness is clouded by fear and fantasy? Jesus said that if we take care of today, He'll take care of tomorrow. Perhaps humility is not knowing whether we may be violent or nonviolent, but having the faith that God is with us and guiding us in each moment of our lives.

And what is nonviolence? Isn't it really in the heart, rather than in our physical actions? The Sanskrit word for nonviolence is *ahimsa*, which literally means "harmlessness." If you judge or blame the people who attack you, that's violence, even if you lift not a finger against them. Our greatest acts of violence are how we constantly judge others. If we clear our hearts of judgement and ill will, then perhaps we can meet any particular situation in whatever way it must be met.

I truly don't know what God wants you to do. I have a hard enough time hearing His cues for my own life each moment. But these tricky struggles between ego and dharma are common to us all, so don't feel like the lone ranger. My only brotherly advice is to lighten up on yourself, and to narrow your sights to this moment rather than the long haul. You can't stop judging others until you cease to judge yourself so sternly. And whether you like it or not, these other folks are your brothers, and that's no accident or mistake on God's part. So, die a wonderful death and be met by Jesus on the other side, or else accept yourself differently than you have and figure out how to live with these folks in better harmony. Either way, you know we love you,

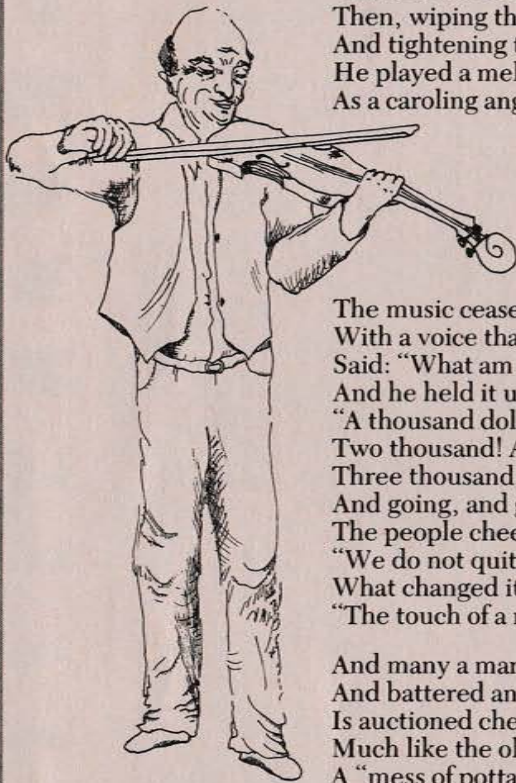
Bo





## THE TOUCH OF THE MASTER'S HAND

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer  
Thought it scarcely worth his while  
To waste much time on the old violin,  
But held it up with a smile:  
"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,  
"Who'll start the bidding for me?"  
"A dollar, a dollar"; then, "Two!" "Only two?"  
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?  
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;  
Going for three —" But no,  
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man  
Came forward and picked up the bow;  
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,  
And tightening the loose strings,  
He played a melody pure and sweet  
As a caroling angel sings.



The music ceased, and the auctioneer,  
With a voice that was quiet and low,  
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"  
And he held it up with the bow.  
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?"  
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?  
Three thousand, once, three thousand, twice,  
And going, and gone," said he.  
The people cheered, but some of them cried,  
"We do not quite understand  
What changed its worth." Swift came the reply:  
"The touch of a master's hand."

And many a man with life out of tune,  
And battered and scarred with sin,  
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,  
Much like the old violin.  
A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine;  
A game — and he travels on.  
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,  
He's "going" and almost "gone."  
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd  
Never can quite understand  
The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought  
By the touch of the Master's hand.

— Myra Brooks Welch

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