

PRISON- ASHRAM PROJECT

Newsletter

Spring/Summer '84

special issue: MEDITATION: Back to Basics



(left to right: Soledad Smith, Buddha, Attica Jones)

PRISON-ASHRAM PROJECT
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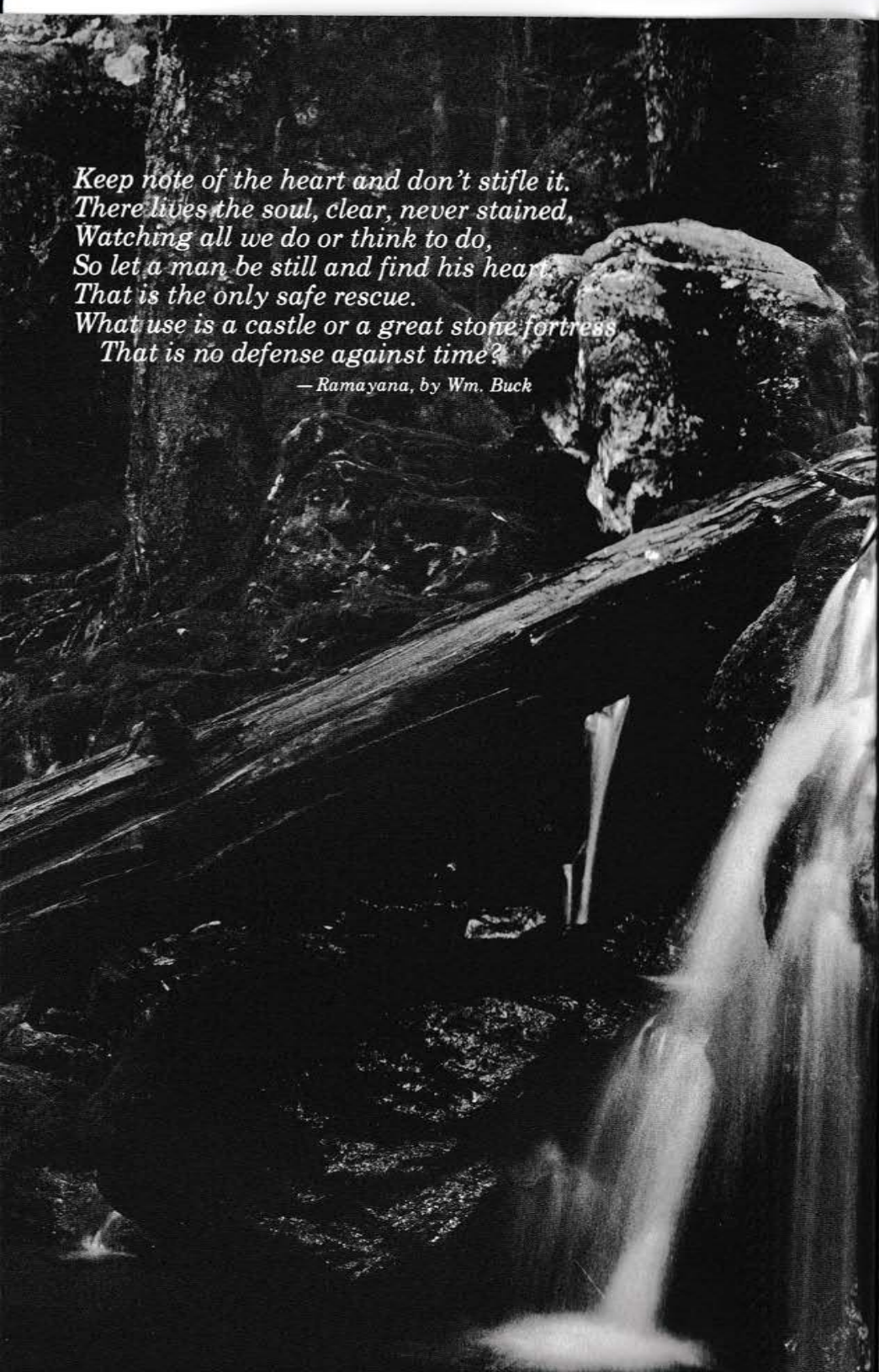
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*Keep note of the heart and don't stifle it.
There lives the soul, clear, never stained,
Watching all we do or think to do,
So let a man be still and find his heart.
That is the only safe rescue.
What use is a castle or a great stone fortress
That is no defense against time?*

—*Ramayana*, by Wm. Buck

Sitting Still

It's easy to get so wrapped up in the spiritual "search" that we lose sight of the fact that our greatest spirit-power can be gained simply by learning how to sit still. That's all that meditation is, when you get right down to it: Sitting perfectly still; silence of body, silence of speech, and silence of mind. The Buddha called this "The Noble Silence."

For most of us, it's easier to slice bread with a sledgehammer than to sit quietly and do "nothing" at all. When we first try any sort of meditation technique, we think "Maybe other people can do this, but not me; I'm just not cut out for this sort of thing; it's not my nature." But truthfully, that's a crock. Meditation is hard for everybody, because we've all allowed our minds to run non-stop all over the place for many years. It just takes some time and discipline to gain our rightful control. And an uncontrolled mind, no matter how much it knows, no matter how smart it becomes, is never going to find peace or satisfaction. The moment we fulfill one part of it, it hits us with something else. No wonder most people sleep one-third of their lives! The mind is a wonderful servant, but a cruel and exhausting master.

Because meditation is so hard to settle into at first, many different methods have been taught through the ages to help us learn how to do it. It's important to understand that meditation itself is a state of mind; it's not a method or exercise. Meditation is not describable. All we can do is to learn various techniques of meditation *practice*, and then we practice it every day until our minds calm down enough to allow the experience of genuine meditation. It's also important to understand that any meditation method is as good as any other; we just have to pick and choose according to our gut feelings, and then stick to the daily practice with patience and self-discipline.

A lot of people spend tremendous amounts of energy looking for a guru or a master who can reveal to them the deepest secrets of the universe. But really, the very best that such a person can do is to inspire us to look within ourselves for those "secrets". Wisdom can't be put into words; it has to be experienced. And a noisy, uncontrolled mind isn't even *able* to feel the peace or freedom that a guru can bestow. Neem Karoli Baba once put it this way: "When a pickpocket meets a saint, all he can see are his pockets." Until we empty our minds of all the noise and busy-ness, how can *anyone* fill our minds with higher truth? We have to make the room.

So, meditation practice is simply about making enough room inside to allow all the wisdom of all the ages, all the "peace that surpasses understanding", to flow through us naturally, freely — as is our true birthright. Meditation practice is not to *get* or to *conquer*, but rather to open, to empty, to relax in faith that all we need to do is

make ourselves ready, and everything we seek is already here waiting for us.

Of course, it's not quite as easy as it may sound. Besides all the noise of our conscious minds, we also have some pretty heavy subconscious baggage we've been holding on to. Meditation practice is like turning on a light with a dimmer switch in a big room filled with furniture. At first we can only see the stuff right around where we're sitting, but as the light slowly brightens, we start seeing the shadows of things that we don't like, or that scare us, or that depress us as we realize how far we are from being really empty. But in order to let go, we first have to acknowledge anything we might see. We have to learn how to sit still through thoughts of terror, perversion, grief, pain, loneliness, ambition, fantasy — whatever is there. We have to learn the delicate art of allowing a thought or feeling to be whatever it is, yet not clinging to it or adding to it in any way, and not allowing it to control us. It's like watching a movie and remembering not to get sucked in by what's happening on the screen.

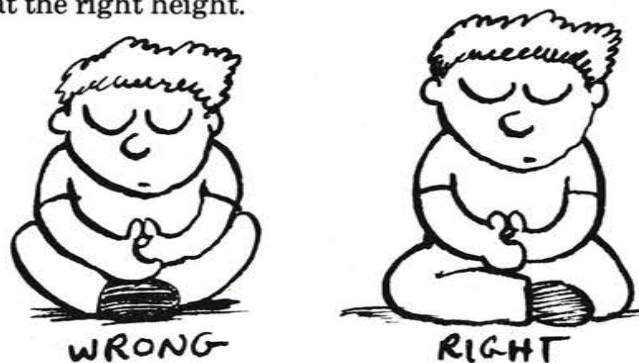
Again, that's the purpose of the various methods for meditation practice. By having one point of attention, no matter what comes up in our minds we can see it openly, and then get back to the one-point of the method. Then something else comes up, we notice it fully, and get back to the one-point. And then something else, and something else....

There's a story about Milarepa, one of the great ancient Tibetan masters. Once Milarepa moved into a certain cave to do intensive meditation practice. But no sooner did he set himself up and start meditating, than he became aware of a bunch of little demons, little creatures, that also occupied the cave, and who tried purposely to disturb his concentration. So the first thing Milarepa did was to try to get rid of them by preaching the Dharma (the Gospel). He preached and he did all the traditional exorcism rituals, and then sat back down to meditate; but they were still there. After a few more unsuccessful attempts, Milarepa decided to change his strategy: He would completely ignore them. Maybe this would get rid of them. He tried this for a few days, and no matter how loud or obnoxious they got, he firmly sat still, resisting them in his silence. But that didn't work either; they were still there. Finally, in complete frustration and defeat, he screamed "Alright, I give up! I can't force you out of here! I'll just have to share the cave with you." Then he sat down once again, all his resistance gone. And so were the demons.



How to Sit

It's well worth the time to pay attention to the actual physical part of sitting to meditate. Nobody gets spiritual brownie points for looking like a great yogi or for enduring painful knees or back; and at the other end, we don't gain much control over our minds by slumping into a half-sleep everytime we try to meditate. What we're shooting for is a sitting posture which keeps the back, neck, and head in a straight line, and yet is so balanced that there's no tension required to hold ourselves in place. For most of us, this takes a lot of practice. Try sitting on pillows or folded blankets of various thicknesses, and see what the best height is for you to be able to sit straight with no effort. The knees should be down, not up, when the butt is at the right height.



Another sitting position is called *seiza* in Japanese, and in *seiza* we sit slightly higher, but like on a saddle, with our feet behind us. This is comfortable for many people who can't seem to get the hang of folding their legs in front of them. The "right" height in the *seiza* position is when the knees don't ache and the feet don't fall asleep. Just bunch up the pillow or blanket slightly more than before.

Sitting in a chair is also alright, although the tendency is to lean against the back of the chair, and this isn't usually straight enough. If you do sit in a chair, both legs should be doing the same thing, whether the feet are crossed at the ankles, or both feet flat on the floor a few inches apart.



In all of these sitting postures, the hands should be placed either on each leg, or in the lap, in such a way that you don't feel your shoulders being pulled down by the weight of the hands. The hands can be loosely clasped, or separate. Traditionally, they're kept sort of closed, since an open hand is a gesture of going outward, and meditation is a time to go inward.

Just Sitting Still

It's not a bad idea to use the posture itself as a meditation method for a few days or even a few weeks. Get as straight and balanced as possible, and then for 20-30 minutes at the same time each day, simply stay aware of the body being still. After the first minute or two of minor adjustments and scratching, etc., allow the body to remain still without responding to itching, restlessness, twitching, changing positions and so forth. Pay careful attention to any feelings of muscle tension or cramping so you can learn how to sit better next time, but for the most part sit through these experiences without responding to them. This is the first step in learning how to sit through the harder mental/emotional stuff down the line.

If you use the body as a meditation method, don't be too concerned about what's going on in the mind. Even if the mind feels like it's running around like crazy, you're doing okay as long as you stay perfectly still. Remind yourself that for the moment, you're working on "silence of body" and "silence of speech". "Silence of mind" will come later.

Meditation on the Breath

One of the most universal methods of meditation practice is to use your own breath as the one-point of concentration. After getting the body silent, bring all your attention to one of these two points: Either the tip of your nose, or the lower abdomen, where the diaphragm rises with each in-breath, and falls with each out-breath. Whether you choose the nose or the diaphragm, keep the mind right there, feeling the whole duration of each breath as it comes in, and each breath as it goes out. You don't follow it in or out, but just keep the attention in one spot, observing it go by.

The breath is a very good focus to concentrate on, because it's fresh every second, so it brings the mind right into the present moment. The present moment is the only place that true meditation ever happens. (It's the only place *anything* really happens).

Time and time again — maybe a thousand times in a half-hour — the mind will wander and you'll forget all about watching your breath. But the instant you remember, you simply drop the chain of thoughts in mid-stream, and get right back to the nose or the diaphragm. Like Milarepa, there's no sense in being frustrated over this, because the frustration is just a greater distraction. Remember, this isn't meditation anyway; it's meditation *practice*. And if we were already good at it, we wouldn't need to practice.

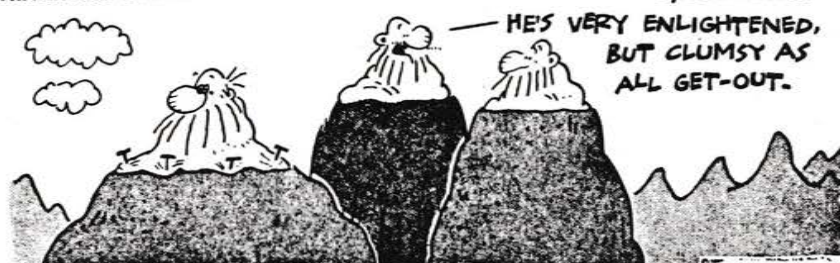
When using the breath as a meditation method, it's not necessary to breathe in any special way, or to try to control the breathing at all. The method is just to *observe* the breath however it is. Sometimes it may be long and slow, other times short and fast; no matter. Sometimes you'll notice with interest that the breath may change as the thoughts change. This is part of our self-education; no need to do anything but watch and learn.

Sometimes it may be helpful to channel the mind into the meditation practice by thinking "breathing in...." as you feel the breath come in, and "breathing out...." as you feel the breath go out. But try to make sure you *feel* the breath at the same time; don't get stuck in the thought.

If the mind seems particularly wild sometimes, it may help to do this focusing exercise until it comes back under control: As you feel the breath come in, think "breathing in....", and then *count* the breath as you feel it go out. "Breathing in...., one; breathing in...., two; breathing in...., three;" and so forth up to ten, and then start again. If you lose track of which number you're on, start at one again. It's really amazing how our minds can get so busy sometimes that we can lose count between one and two! It's happened to me many times. This exercise is a very handy indicator of how focused or how wild our minds may be.

FRANK AND ERNEST

By BOB THAVES



Mantra Meditations

"Mantra" is a Sanskrit word that means "mind-sound," or "mind-protector". Using a mantra meditation simply means that instead of the breath or the posture, your mind tries to stay focused on a particular sound or word (silently). For example, "OM", "AUM" is one of the most universal mantras. After getting the body straight and still, you just think "OM" over and over, perhaps along with each breath, or independent of the breath. Every time you get distracted or forget, you come back to "OM" as soon as you remember.

A mantra works on various levels. The obvious one is, like the breath, it provides a single point of attention so we can develop more powerful concentration and non-attachment to our thoughts. The

mantra is like an anchor as our minds toss about in stormy seas. At another level, different mantras are said to have different subtle effects on us. "OM", for example, helps to put us into harmony with the universe, while another mantra — for example, "OM AH HUMMNN" — may bring more of a feeling of personal power and courage. The mantra "SHREE RAM JAY RAM JAY JAY RAM" ("Ram" is pronounced "romm"), may bring a more devotional feeling (it means Dear God, hail God, Hail hail God).

The practice of using mantras goes back thousands of years, and many complicated books have been written about the power of these Sanskrit sounds — their shape, their mystical secrets, precise ways to use them. To really get into it on that level would probably require full-time practice with an experienced teacher and very rigid rules of diet, sleep, breathing, and lifestyle. For our present purposes, the best idea seems to be a general appreciation of what it's all about. I have used a couple of mantra meditations for many years at a time, and they certainly brought many benefits although I never had the rigid training described above.

If any of these mantras appeals to you, simply try it for a month or so and see how it feels as a meditation practice. As a focus for concentration, they're all equally good. As for any subtler effects, let your experience be your guide.

Other Meditation Practices

Since the main purpose of meditation practice is to bring the mind to one point, we can all feel comfortable trying out various methods which feel right for us. There are devotional methods, like using the word "ALLAH" or "CHRIST", or an image of the Christ or of Mother Mary for the mind to try to hold steady. There are non-devotional methods of imagery too, like holding the vision of a clear sky or of a single cloud through which all your thoughts keep passing without stopping. Many Zen meditators practice an eyes-open meditation, with the focus being a spot on the floor about a foot in front of them, or perhaps a candle flame.

But whatever method you choose, it's a good idea to stick to it for at least a month or more, at the same time every day (once or twice a day), before deciding to try a different method. Meditation practice is not like smoking a joint or dropping acid; it's slow and subtle, and it takes awhile to begin feeling whether a method seems to be doing its job. The busy mind will try to present all sorts of logical reasons to drop one method and try another, but that's just more noise. Every method really accomplishes much the same thing. First we have to develop concentration and control, and those are difficult qualities to achieve no matter what methods we use. What's really important is not *which* method, but rather our persistence and patience and good humor.

Ending Meditation Practice

The end of each meditation practice — regardless of the method — is a good time to deepen our peace and wisdom in several ways. What deepens our peace is to spend just a few moments in offering and receiving blessings of good will, of lovingkindness. By offering, I mean that we picture the faces of people whom we love most, hate most, and fear most, and one by one offer them good wishes for their journey in life. To the ones we hate and fear, we try to understand clearly that they're just fumbling through life like we are, and that our anger or bitterness toward them only hurts us all. So we forgive them for however they may have hurt us or feel toward us, and bless them for their difficult work in learning whatever they need to learn. This can all be done in a matter of seconds — just picturing whomever pops up in our minds, and surrounding them with light, with peace from our meditation. While doing this, the mind is centered in the heart — in the middle of the chest, directing the breath in and out right there.

By *receiving* blessings, I mean sitting in the same heart-space, and first feeling the love of those who love you, anywhere in the world — those who wish you well. And then offering *yourself* the same understanding and kindness that you would offer to others. Picture yourself sitting there in silence, a sincere spiritual seeker like millions before you since the beginning of time, and appreciate how beautiful you truly are, and how much you've already changed just to be doing this. In the Bhagavad Gita, one of the two main Holy Books of India, God says:

*Though a man be soiled with the sins of a lifetime,
Let him but love me, rightly resolved, in utter devotion;
I see no sinner. That man is holy.*

These simple practices can be the cornerstone of that sort of real transformation. What we're doing is to finally take personal responsibility for controlling our minds and opening up our true compassion — for others, for ourselves, and ultimately for the All, or God.

The end of each meditation is also a good time to deepen our wisdom by reading a line or two that seems to speak to us, and letting it sink into the openness and depth we've just created by meditating. For example, after the sitting practice and the period of blessings, you might just open the Bible or the Koran or the Ramayana or the Bhagavad Gita or Inside-Out or Jonathan Livingston Seagull, or any other book written for the Spirit. Open it wherever the fingers seem to choose, and let the eyes glance wherever they like. Sit for a minute or two trying to really comprehend whatever you have just read, and then take that thought out into the day with you.

One of my favorite lines, which I have worked with for years in this way, is from the Ramayana:

We look at man's life and we cannot untangle this song:

Rings and knots of joy and grief, all interlaced and locking.

You just walk around the prison looking at all the people, all the situations, all the fantasies and dashed hopes and courage and fear, and it runs through the filter of "rings and knots of joy and grief, all interlaced and locking." And we begin to see our own lives as well in this way — and the wisdom deepens.

You may choose to work with one passage for a long time, or to choose a new one each day. Whatever the case, the meditation practice helps to make the mind most open and receptive, and this is a good way to try to continue that state of mind into the day.

Keeping It Simple

Meditation practice is so simple that time and time again our minds will try to complicate matters just to distract us. But it actually is just a process of sitting down for awhile to focus the mind. The traditions of offering blessings and contemplating a holy thought are strictly optional; the mind just happens to be "ripe" at that time. But don't let all these words lead you into confusion. Each one of us has the ability to simply sit still and start getting straight with ourselves.

*A saint is a very simple man:
when he walks, he walks
when he talks, he talks
and that's all.*

*He doesn't think while listening,
day dream while walking,
see while touching.*

That is very hard.

That is why he is a saint.

— Sujata, "Beginning to See"



*The truth upholds the fragrant earth
And makes the living water wet.*

*Truth makes fire burn and the air move,
Makes the sun shine and all life grow.*

A hidden truth supports everything. Find it and win.

— Ramayana, by Wm. Buck

Meditation, Control, & Repression

The following is a transcription of the question-&-answer session which followed a meditation workshop at the Colins Bay Prison, Ontario, Canada.

Question: *You talk about 'control', but it sounds to me like it's not necessarily healthy. I mean, if you're in a ghetto and a guy messes with you, how can you turn away from him? What I'm saying is, if you have anger and hostility inside you, isn't it better to let it out?*

Bo: That's one of the traps in psychology: We think that if we don't express a feeling, we have to repress it. It's not really true. For the spiritual warrior, there's a third option: You just let it be whatever it is, but you don't let it control you. Of course, this has nothing to do with whether you defend yourself or not; I'm talking about your state of mind, not your course of action. You can defend yourself without anger or hatred. That's what the martial arts are about. Martial arts are simply meditation-in-action. People learn to focus their minds and let go of fear, anger, and all hostility, and then they can do whatever they need to do without intentionally wishing harm to another human being. In Aikido, for example, it's considered really clumsy to injure your opponent — even if that person tried to kill you. The aim is to simply stop him from hurting you, and you do that as gently as you can.

The question of control versus repression is a big one, I know. But let's face it: A lot of you are in here because of a lack of control. It might be a good idea to look at the whole issue more closely. The point is not that anger is wrong or sinful; but that it's a lie; it's a crock. So why should we express or repress something which is not what it seems to be in the first place?

Are you saying that all emotions are a lie? I don't understand what you're trying to get across. It sounds like a big head-trip to me.

Well, yes and no, to both those things. Emotions are real in a sense, that is, they happen and so they're real. But the *object* of emotions is the lie. It's natural to experience anger, lust, greed, joy, fear and so forth; they're all parts of being fully human. It's like they're all floating around like bacteria in the air, and I'm susceptible to one kind while you may be susceptible to another. They come into us according to our nature, and then we need to run them through our systems in one way or another. With an emotion like happiness, it feels great to express ourselves and it seems to bring good stuff into the world. Yet to many people living as monks or yogis, happiness is simply one more passing cloud in the sky of the mind, and rather than expressing it outward, they sit and watch it pass. How about lust? With the right person at the right time, lust also

feels great to express outward toward an "object". Yet much of the time if not most of the time, our lust would mess up our lives constantly if we were to express it whenever it came about.

Anger is usually a terribly destructive, exhausting feeling which can create a lot of new karma and bring suffering into the world. The only reason modern psychology says "find a way to express your anger constructively" is that they don't know what else to do with it. But that whole attitude assumes we are at the mercy of anger or lust or happiness or whatever else washes over us. We're not. We *allow* the emotions to control us, and so we have to someday take responsibility for the consequences.

The control which comes about through meditation is not control in order to repress our feelings. It's the sort of control which allows us the freedom, the self-dignity, to determine in each and every moment the best way to live our lives. The wisdom for how to handle an emotion is only found in the very instant in which we feel it; so if we just keep a clear and strong mind, we can express the appropriate ones, and the harmful ones we can just observe internally and let them go. We don't repress anything at all.

And yes, this is definitely a head-trip, but that's the way most real change begins. First we look for ideals that make sense, and then we try to take those ideas deeper and deeper until they work their way into our heart and guts. If it stays in the head, it's not worth much.

Yeah, but no matter how much you may want to change yourself, it all seems different when you're in the middle of your anger. I mean, I don't even know what's happening then; it's like something goes click, and somebody's laying on the floor before I even know what happened.

I know what you mean; that's why I say that we have to take it deeper, because if it stays in the head, then it gets lost as soon as the head gets lost. And we all know that the head gets lost fairly often. But through meditation, prayer, martial arts, or whatever appeals to you, you *can* gradually gain enough mindfulness so you can see what's happening before you *cole-cock* somebody. This is why so many of us do this stuff. You need to be doing something every day, while things are okay. If you want to lift up a car, you don't just go try to lift up a car. You work out; you plan a strategy. You start with small weights and gradually build up to heavier ones. You live in such a way that with each new day, you're slightly more prepared to handle anything that may happen.

I'm saying that all of us will eventually have to be able to feel the full range of human emotions without getting blinded from truth while we're feeling them. I went to a ten-day meditation course once; fifteen hours a day of sitting and walking meditation practice; no talking, no writing, no reading, no touching, no yoga, no snacking.

After a few days in such a tightly limited environment, what starts to happen is that emotions get starved; there aren't enough "objects" to stimulate your emotional experiences. So these emotion-bacteria, just floating around wanting to be felt in some way, start invading you for no reason at all, or for reasons pulled out of your memory bank, like grieving over your father's death, or being angry for how you were punished unfairly twenty years ago. And it's fascinating to watch how the emotions roll in like a tidal wave and then roll out again after awhile, even if you haven't done anything about them at all. And believe me, when you're sitting still all day long in silence, there's no way in the world to repress or hide from them! Nothing is hidden when you're spending every moment watching the way your mind works.

So what happens? Why does the emotion go away if it's not being acted on? Not only does it go away, but often it leaves so suddenly that you're mind-blown at how powerful it was just an instant earlier. It's like a giant soap-bubble that grows bigger and bigger and gets incredibly huge, yet when it pops there's nothing there; no trace of it at all. It seemed like it contained so much, yet it was all surface; there wasn't really anything inside that immense, shiny, overpowering bubble. And then you sit there awhile feeling pretty clear, and another one rolls in. And this might go on for hours.

That kind of training helps you to find out for yourself that emotions are just passing "invitations"; nothing more. Then we begin to handle our lives a lot more skillfully.

It sounds like you turn into a zombie or something; like you have to be so careful every minute. What does that have to do with things you mention like 'spiritual freedom'? It doesn't sound very free to me!

That's a sharp observation. I've gone to monasteries and zendos where everybody walks around being intensely mindful of every step, of every bite of their food, every word they say. It doesn't look free to me, either. But then I meet the head abbot, or the local holy man, and he (or she) turns out to be like a child — full of joy, very spontaneous, freely expressing all their emotions, even anger.

It's like first we have to gain the freedom to be natural. How spontaneous can we really be while our minds are clouded with habits, traumas, ambitions, fears, bitterness and so much garbage that has nothing to do with this present moment? So there's a training period. First we start watching ourselves more closely than ever before, so that we can see all the blocks which seem to keep us struggling. When we've seen and let go of all the garbage, then we're finally free to live fresh and alive every second of the day. At that point, there's no need for meditation practice; we *become* the state of meditation. There's no struggle, no doubt, no confusion; because we've given up all resistance to our lives. But we can only give up

resistance out of strength, out of complete control. So we meditate in order to gain control so we can give up control. God has a weird sense of humor.

Can you go through all your 'garbage' and blocks without a teacher or a master?

Sure. If you just meditated daily and kept opening up to yourself, kept patiently gaining control, self-discipline, self-honesty and so forth; you'd discover the same things inside yourself that other people may have spent years finding out by travelling all over the world looking for teachers and masters. I think having teachers often presents as many traps as doing it alone. Someday each of us has to open into himself; into that seat of intuition inside of us which guides us perfectly. Even if a master leads us for awhile, still, at some point either we find the guidance in ourselves or we call it quits. Because the truth is, the only "Master" is within. Like Jesus said, the kingdom of Heaven is within you. A holy man or holy woman is just a passing reflection of your own deeper nature. If you get hooked on their personalities or their bodies or their beautiful words or wondrous powers, then you've missed the boat. The whole point was to turn you inward, not outward.

A teacher or master might tell you to do a certain kind of yoga, or to meditate every day. But our lives go through a lot of different periods. Diets change; yogas come and go; sometimes, after years of daily practice, we might need to stop meditating for awhile — who knows? That's why the internal connection is essential. As your mind gets quieter, the intuition gets clearer. Your life just *moves* more smoothly; it's a very subtle thing. Good things just seem to happen around you; you seem to get "luckier" in many ways. Painful things seem a lot easier to bear, and bring wisdom instead of bitterness. You see and hear things that you were too busy to notice before. You become a lot more perceptive about the people around you.

But these changes take a lot of time. A teacher or master might keep you busy with all sorts of things, but sometimes that busy-ness just keeps you from making the bigger changes. The things that *seem* like tremendous change, "overnight" change, usually don't last, because it's all just surface activity. Since you're in prison now, it's a perfect opportunity to do it the other way, on your own, and take the time to change in a more mature way. If it's in your "Dharma", or destiny, to meet certain teachers, then you'll meet them along the way, as your intuition develops enough to guide you. I mean, right now you're in this room with me, and I'm a spiritual teacher, and this is where your life guided you. Everything is going along like clockwork; we just need to keep doing the work on ourselves.



LETTERS

Dear Sir,

I would like to know if I could ask someone questions about my experiences in meditative practices. For instance, most times I feel a sense of lost identity or fear while at the same time I feel a sense of peace. Am I doing something wrong or is it a natural reaction?

In all sincerity, I am very, very much interested in this form of religion, or belief, faith, etc. And believe with all my heart that it is the true and only way for one to become spiritually awakened. Thank you very much for what you are doing to help people like me.

Yours very truly, John/III.

Dear John,

Any feeling you have during meditation is "natural"; any feeling at all. After all, you weren't made from any "unnatural" ingredients! Right?

Fear and peace, along with a million other feelings, are just part of the process of quieting down. The main thing is to have a lot of patience so you can allow these things to all take their turns coming up in your mind. That's why you have one object to focus on, like a mantra or your breath. As the millions of things come up in your mind, you simply notice them and return your attention to the meditation object.

Sometimes your experience might get very intense, but you just do the same thing with it. I've had meditations where fear got so strong that I felt like I'd freak out any second; you have to have the discipline to keep right on sitting, no matter how bad it gets. And then what happens is that it'll pass, sooner or later, and you'll feel a little bit freer than ever before. Keep at it, and stay cheerful.

Love, Bo

PS: This is definitely one way to become spiritually awakened, but **no** way is the "true and only way". Different strokes for different folks. Stay open.

Dear Prison-Ashram Project,

My name is Melvin C. and I write this letter to your project in the concern of me wanting to find out if there would be by

any chance that your project distribute books if so like I am having lots of problems with concentration and memory it seems to be getting badder and badder I hear people say the subconscious mind can help concentration and memory thru visualization things But how can you put and keep an image in your mind with out concentration that's why I would like to request if possible every books or book that could give me tips on concentration and memory everything will be greatly appreciated thank you.

Truly, Melvin/III.

Dear Melvin,

Some materials are on the way that might help. I also wanted to write to see if I could help a little more. Don't worry too much about how well you can concentrate at the very beginning; if you already had good concentration, you wouldn't need to do meditation or any of these other things. You just start wherever you are, and try to be patient, as these things take some time before you may see a big difference. But try to have faith that every single time you make any sincere effort, that effort will have some good effect even if you can't feel it.

You didn't mention whether you do any drugs or not. If you do (even pot), it would help a lot to stop completely. I remember it took my memory about six months to begin coming back after I stopped smoking pot. So if you're serious about improving your memory and concentration, it would be good to cut out all drugs. It would also be good to clean up your diet a little. Sugar and caffeine hurt your abilities to concentrate. I know that's not good news, but I'm afraid it's true. Maybe try just cutting way back if you don't feel you can cut it all out at once. Limit yourself to one ice cream or soda pop, one cup of coffee, etc.

Try a sitting practice in which for the first month you don't worry about anything more than sitting perfectly still — no twitching around — with your back straight. Try keeping your attention on your own breathing, but don't be upset no matter what your mind does, as long as you keep your body right there without moving or getting up. After about a month, you'll have the body disciplined

enough to begin working more on the mind. Also, as you said, visualizations are good practice too. See if you can hold any image in mind for awhile; work on getting it to stay longer and longer. You've got to give yourself some time for these things to work; don't give up.

Love, Bo

PS: The sitting practice should be done for at least 20 minutes at a time, working up to forty, at least once a day. And remember, it's hard for everybody!

Dear Bo,

Whenever I meditate anymore I seem to experience a visualization of the physical world breaking up into light patterns. I can not understand this. It first happened to me when I was living outside, and at this time my little brother was in the hospital dying of a bullet wound. Anyhow, I asked my brother to try and lose his pain in meditation, which I followed him in. About two or three minutes I started to feel myself leave my body, and had a visualization of a white light that seem to be as a mirror that shined all the light of the sun but gave nothing that was of the physical world. I tried to get back in my body which I did, but I was blinded, for half of a hour.

Since then it happens to me every time I meditate. Will you please give me some advice on this?

Om Shanti, Jack/Montana

Dear Jack,

Your experience sounds wonderful; I can't really tell from your letter whether it bothers you, or you just think you should understand it. I've had many kinds of experiences in meditation, and all the teachers I've been with said basically the same thing: Let the experiences just be what they are, and don't get the mind too involved with them. Of course, there is such a thing as being hung up on experiences, but all you really need to do is to ask God to take you farther. When you see the light again, just think, "Thank you, God, and take me farther still." And leave the whole thing alone as soon as you get up from meditation. The real changes it makes in your life will be obvious as time goes by. The Light sounds wonderful, Jack, and I'm sure it helped your brother too. Keep on keeping on,

Love, Bo

Dear Bo,

I'm a black male, 26 years old, currently serving time for armed robbery (10-15 years). When you were here at the prison, one thing in particular that you said, quote: "This is not a religion or some philosophy teaching; nor am I here to convince, persuade, or force my beliefs on anyone." This touched me. And what also impressed me was my own personal experiences during and after the exercise you had us participating in (meditation).

Since being here (40 months) I have had many low points, as this is the prison design. But just for those few precious moments, I was never so relaxed, and relieved. It was indeed a mind blowing experience, and I find myself, trying to repeat the same procedure as the one you took me through. Unfortunately, I have not been able to reach the level of consciousness that you brought me aware of. None the less, this is not to say I have given up my pursuit for the truth!

Brother, we are brothers! And I'm tired of trying to fulfill my wants, rather than my needs. Let's stay in touch. For all that you can do in assisting and guiding me in this direction, is helping me, help you.

A brother indeed who's in need,
William/N.J.

Dear William,

I loved being with you, too. The feeling you're describing is simply what it's like not to be playing any games at all just for a few minutes; games of being somebody, protecting your image, feeding desires, fears, memories, plans, etc. Just for a moment, being fully alive right where you are. I can help the group to feel it once just because I catch everybody's ego-systems off-guard, but then when you go back to your cell and try to recapture it, the ego isn't going to be as easily beaten.

So, try to remember how good it felt, and that we can all feel that way **all** the time. But between here and there is a lot of patience while we work on sitting quietly. It takes patience, strength, courage, determination; which are all great qualities to develop anyway. And you're going to have to learn how to be firm and gentle all at the same time; firm about keeping it going, yet gentle with yourself when you blow it.

Just remember that everything you felt, was in you, and still is; it didn't come

from me. All I did was trick you into feeling it for a few minutes. Now the real work and digging is up to you. That's the same thing I'm doing in my own life. It's the same for all of us. Welcome aboard.

Dear Bo,

For the last seven days, as I entered into the state of silence I came in front of a Buddha-like spirit that would feed me by throwing up into my mouth, but the food was words. Upon the last day of the seven days, I was fed by lights and colors.

I remember behind him was seven white candles held by seven golden candlestick holders, to the right of this spirit was a clear pool, to his left, light, there is no words in the world that can tell you what it was like, I do remember that the silence was so beautiful.

In your words what does this mean? I have tried to tell people around here about what has happen, even the yoga teacher, I think he thinks I'm nuts.

All my love, Bill/Mo.

Dear Bill,

What can I say about an experience that only you have had? It was exactly what it was, and it meant exactly what it meant. It sounds wonderful to me! What more do you need?

If I were you, I wouldn't talk about it; it would be better just to let it go and see what kind of changes may happen in your life over a period of time. Other people can hear only what they're ready to hear, and it doesn't do you or them any good to try to force them to understand you. They have to walk their own way.

Remember that any experience which has a beginning, also has an end. What we're all shooting for is a state of consciousness with neither beginning nor end; nothing else, no matter how incredibly beautiful, will fill the bill.

Love, Bo

Dear Sirs,

I was given your booklet by a Catholic nun who conducted creative writing classes here. I want to get into meditation, but I still have a question or two, and I want to be sure I'm doing it right. As a Catholic, I fast and pray the rosary whenever I feel the need to.

What I want to know is, if the quotation used after your mind has been quieted by meditation, has to be the same one or can it be different? Also, I have a problem with lax muscles in my abdomen which causes protrusion; since nothing happened to cause this, I've been told exercise and control could help. Would this interfere with my meditation if I practiced contraction by holding the muscles in for the duration of fifteen minutes while meditating?

Yours truly, Myrtle Jo/NC

Dear Myrtle Jo,

Nice to meet you. I'll answer your questions as best I can, but I want to emphasize that this whole thing doesn't have to get too technical; all you're really trying to do is to quiet down so you can deepen your inner relationship with God.

And in that respect, you can see that it wouldn't be a good idea to do a stomach exercise at the same time you're trying to meditate. When you meditate, get as straight and balanced as you can, and then don't worry about your stomach muscles or anything else about the body. At some other time, do whatever exercises you want; like while you're watching tv, you can practice holding the stomach tight.

I'm not sure what you mean about the "quotation used" in meditation. If you mean a mantra, then yes, it should stay the same. If you mean sort of a "thought for the day" at the end of a meditation period, then it could change as often as you like. But remember that the meditation period itself is not the same as contemplation. You're not trying to think about a nice thought; you're trying to focus your mind on one thing so that thoughts slow down and finally stop completely.

None of this is tricky; in fact, it's so simple that we keep trying to come up with complications to make it seem more realistic. But don't worry about anything. Just do the practices as purely as you can, and write for advice anytime. That's what we're here for.

Love, Bo

Sir,

Hello, how are doing? Hope you're calm and peaceful. As for me, I'm well enough. I received your pamphlets on meditation and your projects, and I sure do appreciate your help. Yet my meditations ain't

going too well. The more I meditate, the more sensitive I seem to become. When whatever I'm doing I can see myself from a calm awareness yet if fear arises it's like a sudden wind over me and I find it hard to deal with so I just wait it out nervously until I calm down and then I meditate.

I find I can't meditate when emotion washes over me so I try to patiently calm myself. Yet I keep trying but it's hard in a cold, depressing place like this. Well, I'm not no quitter so as far as spiritual attainment goes, it's something I want so with your help I'll get there.

Well, if there's any guidance and advice you can give me, I'd appreciate it. Well friends, take care of yourselves and may peace be with you.

Ronald/ Ind.

Dear Ronald,

Try to see this whole thing as a **process** rather than a problem. You're actually doing great, but you don't know it. Part of the practice of meditation is to develop the ability to sit perfectly still while a lot of subconscious junk comes up. This is one of the ways that meditation helps you to clear your mind and get calmer. Your fears and sadness and pain are in you right now, but you don't usually deal with them. So when you sit down to meditate, they start coming up as soon as your mind relaxes its guard a little. This is **good**, not bad. It's absolutely necessary to experience these emotions sometime in order to begin letting go of them — or at least letting go of their power over you.

So what I'm saying is that you should sit there, and no matter what comes up, just sit perfectly still and try to keep observing it. Don't run from it, don't attack it; just experience whatever it is, without adding anything to it at all. Feel all of it, but don't let it take you away from your straight & strong center in which you're sitting. Let it make all its ugly faces and threats, let it bring a chill to your gut, let it be at its very worst, and just sit there. Gradually it'll get weaker and weaker, and then it'll go away, and you'll feel a lot freer than when you sat down. It may come back the next time, but it won't have quite the same power anymore.

One by one, many emotions that we try to avoid will come up in this way. And one by one, we can get free from their power over us by sitting right in the middle of them without taking the bait. All our lives we've mistakenly thought we needed to close off any "bad" feelings, but in truth, we need to open wider and wider and wider, until we're **big** enough to allow any feeling to pass through us without being enslaved by it. Do you see the difference? Enlightened people haven't "gotten rid" of fear, anger, lust, sadness, etc.; they've just expanded and opened their minds to such a **vastness** that what seems like a hurricane to you or me, is no more than a gentle breeze to them.

I've been through some of my scariest and most painful experiences in meditation, so I do know where you're coming from. Try it this way for awhile and see how it goes. Keep in touch,

Love, Bo



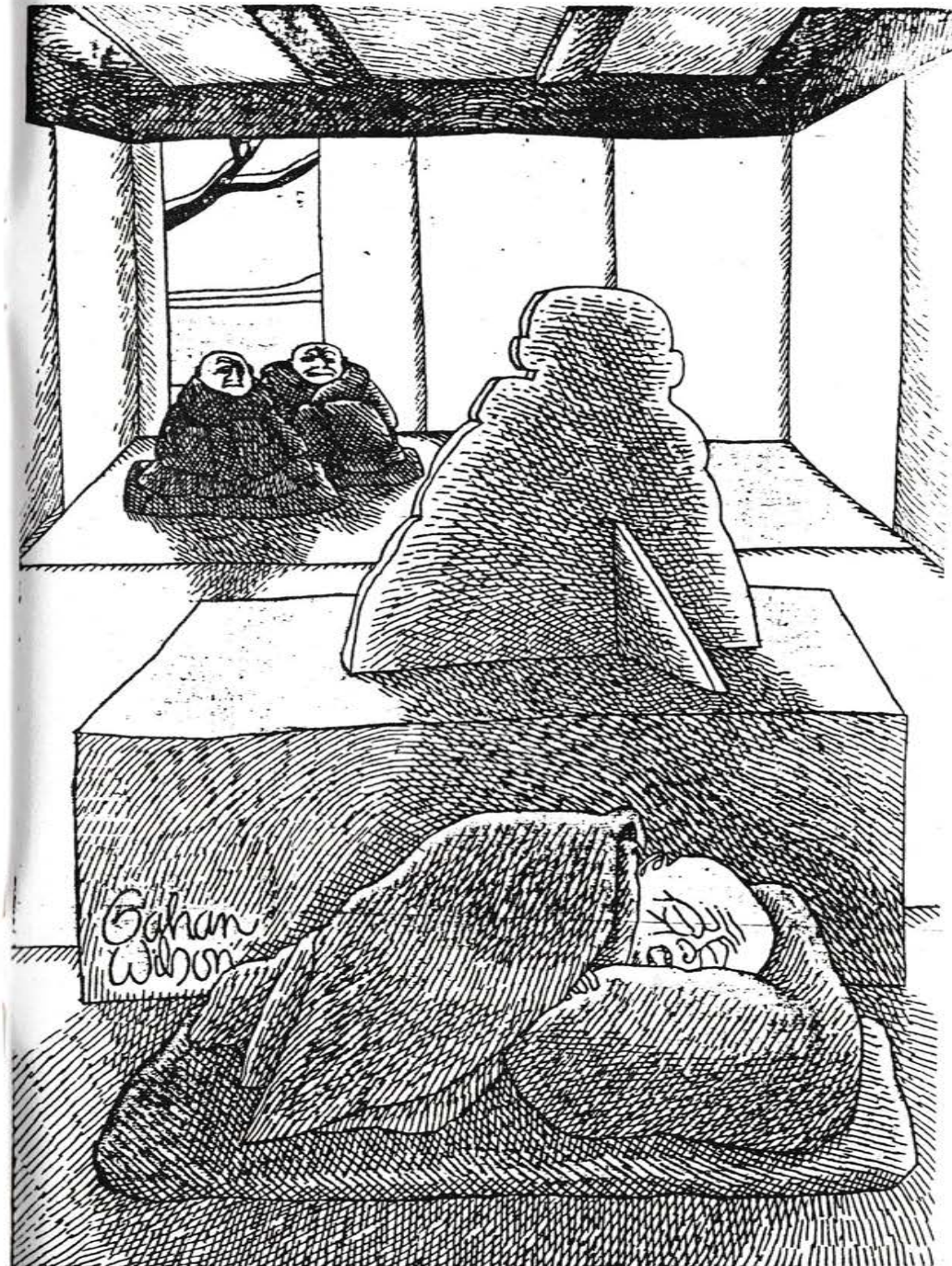
Photos, Artwork for Inside-Out #3

Work on our third book in the Inside-Out series, *We're All Doing Time*, is moving along very well. We would still like to use more photographs and artwork — must all be black and white — from the people on our mailing list. If you have a snapshot of yourself or your prison or a prison group or any artwork you'd like to share, please send it to us. We can't guarantee using everything we get, but we'll gratefully consider whatever you send.

LAME-EXCUSE-OF-THE-MONTH-CLUB:

"Of course, it's harder for *me* to meditate than for most people,
BECAUSE

I'm not the meditating type
I'M TOO OLD
I'M IN PRISON
I have weird experiences
it's too scary
I'm too smart
you hate me
I hate me
my nose hurts
my back itches
I'M IN SCHOOL
I GET DEPRESSED
I'm too stupid
peace of mind may be overrated, anyway
my knees ache
my mother hates me
my cell mate hates me
I'M IN BUSINESS
I can't sit still because I don't feel well
I'm too lazy
I DON'T KNOW THE METHOD
my nose hurts
I never experience anything
MY NOSE ITCHES
MY BACK HURTS
I KNOW TOO MANY METHODS
I GET HEADACHES
I DON'T SEE WHY I SHOULD STOP THINKING
my wife hates me
The hacks hate me
it's boring
I HAVE KIDS
I'M ON PAROLE
I'M TOO BUSY
I HAVE A JOB
I NEED A JOB
I fall asleep
Reagan hates me
I haven't read enough
I read too much
The weather's too nice to sit around meditating
Rainy days make me too sad
I don't get high enough
I CAN'T STOP THINKING
I get too high
I can't sit still



"It is not for us to question why, on certain mornings, the master is silent."

Offerings

For free books and booklets on Buddhist wisdom & practices, write:

Institute for Advanced Studies
Of World Religions
2150 Center Ave.
Fort Lee, N.J. 07024
(this zip code was wrong in a
previous newsletter)

Buddhist Publishing Group
P.O. Box 136
Leicester LE2.4TZ,
ENGLAND

For a catalog of free cassette tapes, books, pamphlets, posters, and study courses, write:

The Steel Ashram Library
P.O. Box 883
Marietta, Ga. 30061

Also, look through previous newsletters for other free offerings.



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*Now the wonderful world is born,
In an instant it dies,
In a breath it is renewed.*

*From the slowness of our eye
And the quickness of God's hand
We believe in the world.*

— Mahabharata, by Wm. Buck