

THE PRISON-ASHRAM PROJECT

A LITTLE NEWS

FALL 1987

NO SECOND THING...

There is Spirit alone in this Universe. There is no second thing in existence. -- Krishna

I did some workshops --both in and out of prison -- in Alberta, Canada, recently (and I'd like to quickly thank all those fine folks for a wonderful time). I make it a practice not to think ahead about what I'm going to say. That way, the talks express whatever it is that's most alive for me at the time. In Alberta, what came to life was Krishna's statement above -- that everything, every part of our lives, everything beautiful and ugly, every nuisance and fear and joy and struggle, is Spirit. There is no second thing in existence. There are no other items on the menu.

In a dream, what is everything made of? Just dream-stuff, mind-stuff. The people, the props, the places, how could any part of our dream be made from anything other than our own essence? It's all just our minds creating and expressing themselves in those many forms. That's exactly what Krishna is talking about, but from the view of God as the dreamer.

A mother in Edmonton asked me how she could devote herself to her spiritual life amid all the demands her kids made on her time. But her kids and their demands *are* Spirit; that *is* her spiritual life. A musician in Calgary wondered how to better balance her worldly life and spiritual life. Balance what? Who separated them in the first place? A yoga teacher was concerned about his beer-guzzling couch-potato friends who aren't living spiritually. But their lives are just as spiritual as ours; what else could they be? Popcorn and beer are made of spirit too!

Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that it doesn't matter what we do because everything is the same. Not at all. Though everything is spirit, there are natural laws to this spirit, and we can do easy time or hard time depending on our own actions.

Both the seeker and the couch-potato are pure Spirit, and their lives are both spiritual, but the seeker is *aware* of this (or tries to be, anyway) and therefore is trying to live more in harmony with how the whole thing works. The couch-potato is pretty much on automatic pilot, which is not very satisfying in the long run. Living a lazy life, avoiding challenges and inspiration, satisfying only our crudest whims and hungers, is like owning a priceless work of art and using it as a dartboard. Still, each person must be given the dignity to make such decisions for himself. The couch-potato isn't any further away from God than you or I. How far away can God be when everything is spirit?

There's so much power to this teaching! It can lighten us up tremendously. We can stop judging ourselves and others so harshly. We can stop struggling as if we're always coming from behind. We can give up all those suffocating fears which make us think we'd become lost souls if we were to allow ourselves to laugh or relax for a few minutes. Best of all, we can let go of the false notion that our spiritual work is some sort of obligation on our parts, and instead see more clearly that it's a joy of the highest order. In other words, WE DON'T DO ALL THIS WORK TO GET CLOSER TO GOD; THERE'S NO DISTANCE IN THE FIRST PLACE. We do spiritual work to become more aware, so we can enjoy the depths of this closeness.

With the kind of awareness and quiet mind we can develop through practices like meditation, the truth of this can sink all the way in and become our most basic attitude. *Everything is spirit.* What a difference it makes! Not so much to the details of things that happen to us, but rather the entire "us" to whom those things happen. For example, a few minutes ago Sita read me a letter from a new 19-year-old prison friend who wrote, *My whole life just seemed to fall apart in one week...I lost my mother, stepfather, an ear, a very pretty girlfriend, and my freedom.*

Our hearts tear open for him, not so much for the circumstances themselves, but for the pain he's feeling. If his deepest attitude could know that *this is all Spirit*, that there is no other thing going on, then the pain softens even in the middle of all the crises. It doesn't wipe it all away like a fairy tale, but it does mean that these aren't accidents, or random curses from an unloving universe, nor cruel punishments from a judgemental God. A timeless spiritual journey is taking place, taking him through terrible pain and frightening challenges, through confusion and hope and despair, often teaching

him the painful results of his own poor decisions -- but a perfect journey nonetheless, one which is slowly leading him to total enlightenment.

This is the coming together of God the Father and the Divine Mother. The Father throws spears at us, and the Mother reminds us, *Don't duck, don't run, don't hide, stand straight and they'll pass right through you, my love*. It's all a dream, a cosmic adventure, which has something to do with developing fearlessness, compassion, and respect for every experience.

This all-embracing receptivity of the Divine Mother is so hard for us to deal with. The Mother opens Her arms in an infinite embrace. We think She won't embrace our bad thoughts, our sick deeds, our guilt and laziness and selfishness and fantasies and cruelties; but the Mother's hug just gets larger and larger. It embraces it all. All the love, and all the killing and senselessness; every rotten thing we've ever done; the hug just keeps widening. We throw something at Her like "Aha, what about Hitler?"; what about Ethiopia?", and the hug just widens a little more to consume Hitler, to consume all the starvation and misery, all our shame and fear, in Her Love. It shuts out nothing. There is Spirit alone; Nothing lies outside the Mother's embrace. And that embrace is within each of our hearts. That's the power which frightens us so much.

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This idea of taking courage and embracing life shouldn't be confused with the pop-spirituality being marketed today. There seems to be a tremendous attachment to positiveness -- affirmations, prosperity, good health, world peace -- which is very sweet and well-motivated, but very attached. It's like standing on one leg; we're too easily knocked over by a strong wind.

It has never been true that external behavior or achievements are what the game is all about. I get all these spiritual promo's in the mail that say things like "Ten Ways a Spiritual Person Should Act," or "Affirmations for Perfect Health and Prosperity," "Visualize World Peace." But be honest with yourself: Deep in your bones, doesn't it always feel artificial, even a little creepy, to be around a group of people who are so immersed in one of those positive-thinking, affirmation-projecting, big-brother-is-loving-you trips? Honestly, now. You look around and see a group of wonderful human beings who were created with unique passions, personalities, likes and dislikes, and yet they're all smiling alike, talking alike, trying to think alike. That's such a waste! Maybe it's not as destructive as throwing darts at the priceless painting, but it's sort of like hanging it on the wall at ankle-height. It hurts my heart to see so many thousands of people falling into a yuppie-ish "spiritual growth industry" which is like a giant sausage factory that turns our spiritual spark into conformity. That's just not what the profound spiritual mysteries are really about.

Some people who read this are going to want my head on a platter for including "world peace" in my examples. After all, what idiot could be against world peace? But it's not that I'm against it. I just see it differently. First of all, it seems to me that the only lasting world peace would be a by-product, not a goal. It's what occurs when every individual in the world has found personal peace. Political peace couldn't last otherwise, because new, unpeaceful people would sooner or later come to power and screw things up. Secondly, I don't feel a sense of drama or urgency about the possible destruction of our planet, because it's been clear for a long time that the planet, beautiful as it is, can only be temporary. Whether the sun destroys us in three billion years or nuclear weapons do the job in three days, either way we have to understand that even the planet is just a circumstance, subject to change. It doesn't take priority over the inner work, the work of tapping into that which is beyond all change and form.

I don't mean to sound like the Grinch who stole Christmas, as if I'm suggesting that people shouldn't work for peace or that all affirmations or positive-thinking are foolish. I work for peace. I do self-healing. I enjoy feeling positive. It's the most natural thing in the world to try to stay in good health and try to keep the planet alive, the environment clean, and all the other good things we believe in.

But we can do these things with or without attachment. And attachment, no matter how noble, will ultimately add to our suffering rather than relieve it. Attachment prevents us from seeing the truth. Attachment makes us forget that our true nature is beyond all change and that every outcome of our efforts, win lose or draw, is equally spiritual. That's the wonderful punch line of the joke. That's the whole Bhagavad Gita, Koran, Old Testament and New Testament right there: *Do your best, work as hard as you can for the good of all, but remember that the results are My department. Don't get too lost in the dream.*

A very dear friend who died of cancer a few years ago was a devotee of a yogi who teaches that all disease is "disease", which means if she could only figure out what she was doing wrong, the cancer would have to go away. She was so pure, yet for years she felt a sense of shame for having cancer. I hate that teaching. It makes people blame themselves for being sick and even for dying. It also ignores the fact that many great saints have died from diseases like cancer or diabetes, including Ramakrishna, Suzuki Roshi, Ramana Maharshi, and Neem Karoli Baba. Any one of them could have healed themselves. But Ramana Maharshi, when he was implored by a disciple, "Master, please heal yourself; please don't leave us!," replied with a startled look, *Leave you?! Where could I go?*

Part of the problem is that we tend to confuse the wrapping with the goods. Let's say Susie Jones walks out in the woods one day and sits under a tree eating artichokes. Let's say, for whatever cosmic reasons going back millions of years, she gets totally enlightened that day, and when she comes back home everybody can see that she's got a light around her the size of Chicago. What we tend to do is, within a week there would be thousands of us sitting under trees eating artichokes. And once a year on that day there would be artichoke celebrations and all sorts of rituals. Little kids would be wearing t-shirts saying "My parents sat under Susie Jones' tree and all I got was this lousy t-shirt." That particular species of tree would become holy. We'd wind up killing people on the other side of the world who aren't interested in hearing about Susie Jones. Teachers would spring up all over the place charging \$300 per weekend to help us look and act more like Susie.

But Susie's enlightenment didn't have anything to do with the tree or the artichokes or what she was wearing or her unique personality. The best way we can come to the same point is not by imitating or worshipping her, but by continuing to find ourselves. Like the Buddha said, *Don't follow in my footsteps; instead, seek what I sought.*

And what the enlightened ones have sought is a state of truth, not a smile-face personality or a formula for behavior. In Calgary recently, I said something negative about the Harmonic Convergence hysteria, and a guy raised his hand and said "I don't mean to be confrontive, but...", and proceeded to argue with what I had said. The difference of opinion was fine, but what tickled me was "I don't mean to be confrontive." The truth was, he *did* mean to be confrontive. He didn't like what I said, and he wanted me to know that. And that's perfectly okay! How much can we learn about ourselves if we avoid all conflict? We don't have to pull out knives or beat each other up, but neither do we need to pretend that we're not arguing when we are. Who ever said that's the spiritual way? We can keep our minds clear enough to argue, even passionately, without forgetting to respect each other; without forgetting that we are all spirit, and our honest differences are spirit too.

Trying to live a positive life is one thing, but lying to ourselves is another. We've become so afraid of negativity that we twist ourselves up in mental/verbal knots rather than face it openly with a sense of adventure. During a workshop some years ago, a lady interrupted me and said, "Excuse me, Bo, but you just used the word 'problem'. In our ashram we don't use that word; we say 'growth opportunity' instead."

Yecchh! How would you like to live in that ashram? The thing is, when we really know that every problem is an opportunity, then we don't need to switch words. This journey is not about being afraid of words, it's about *opening* so wide that our definitions take on a deeper understanding. Like when Jesus said, *See, I shall make all things new!* So with our new understandings, we can still say things simply, like "Bobby died" instead of "Bobby shed his earthly body but his eternal soul is still with us." Isn't that a relief?

Every person's path is unique; we are all pioneers. Our freedom comes from turning inward honestly enough to see the truth, and then taking the courage to live our lives in line with that inner truth.

The point is simply that life is a mysterious and wondrous spiritual journey in *all* its forms from the hideous to the sublime. And I freely admit, that includes all the popular teachings about affirmations and prosperity and positive-thinking that I've just slandered. But the journey *also* includes my criticisms and humor toward those teachings, and your reactions one way or another. It includes whether we get paroled, whether we drive a Yugo or a Rolls, whether Johnny gets better or dies of cancer, whether we make a million bucks or die in the streets. It's a big journey, and it doesn't run out of room.

And in all honesty, life is a much greater adventure this way, because we leave ourselves wide open on both feet rather than standing on one and spending all our effort just trying to stay up. It's a much richer experience when we don't all have the same personality and we see that no matter what we may learn from others, we have to make most of our decisions on our own. Let's not settle for a whitewashed plastic copy of our enlightenment when we can go for broke toward the real thing. What is there to be afraid of? Win, lose or draw, *There is Spirit alone in this universe; there is no second thing in existence.*

LETTERS

Dear Bo,

Thank you all so much for We're All Doing Time. The book was cheerful, a real delight, although "lightly" presented.

The approach of happiness, self-fulfilment, humor and determination are true inspiration for prisoners, for sure; however it seems one thing to explain more is this: Although seekers do progress in prison, PLEASE remind them Bo, that once they get out to remain in good company. Negativity is rampant in the world, and unless we are morally straight and spiritually strong, don't try to "save the world" alone.

That's my experience anyway, since I got out in '84, in in '85, out in '85, and in in '86. But the above is now learned.

*Best wishes & love,
GB, Texas*

Dear Bo,

My sentence is 3-9 years, of which I've served one. My friends and I have discussed our interest in a program to help youths in trouble.

Being at one point in our lives in a similar situation, we feel we can help because we understand and care. We come together in unity to ask your help to make this project possible. Please help us.

*Thanking you in advance,
KJ, New York*

Dear Karen,

I think your idea is great. I'd be happy to give you some general pointers.

First of all let me say that the "Scared Straight" kind of program, in my opinion, is not the way to go. It's gotten a lot of media attention, but I don't think it's necessary to use such negative methods. Youths who are in trouble have usually had plenty of scare-tactics and verbal abuse all their lives. What they need is caring, not scaring.

Here are some step-by-step suggestions:

- 1) Get a caseworker or psychologist or education specialist (whoever is the friendliest) to be the sponsor of your group and help you to write out a brief, one-page statement of purpose so everybody has a clear idea about what you're doing.
- 2) Keep your statement of purpose simple. The plain truth is, you're prisoners who realize that you wasted part of your lives because of bad decisions, mistaken values, and not knowing how to think for yourself or feel good about yourself. Now you'd like to share your experiences with young people to maybe save them from some of that same pain. What else do you really need to say?
- 3) Come up with some sort of rules or guidelines for who's in the group, how new members are accepted, and how your sessions with the juveniles will be run. One thing in this regard: Don't let any members or staff make

things too narrow (you know, like "Have you girls accepted Jesus as your personal savior?"). That sort of thing could blow the group's whole purpose of simply sharing a little concern for these young people.

4) Now it's time to see about getting some juveniles in there. Because there have been so many successful programs, it shouldn't be too hard for your sponsor to contact a judge or the local juvie authorities for their cooperation.

5) When the juvies come in, don't worry about a whole planned, tight presentation, or you're going to lose their interest. You just need to be yourselves, and be straight with these folks. That's all anyone is ever looking for. The more honest you're able to be, in terms of your own life and feelings, the more deeply the young people will be affected by meeting you. For example, what if you're nervous in that first meeting? You look straight into their eyes and say the simple truth: *"Hi, my name's Karen and right now I'm a little nervous because I don't know what to say to you. But I know it has something to do with helping you to avoid some of the pain and wasted years I've gone through, starting at your age."*

Everything else will just roll into place. By starting your group with that kind of in-the-moment honesty, you're not only trying to help the kids, but you're doing the very thing you need to be doing as well - just looking inside and being straight about what's going on. Try it; it's great.

You should be receiving our book and tape soon. Please let me know how all this goes. Sita and I offer you our very best wishes for this great project.

Love, Bo

Dear Sita,

Hope my letter finds you all in the best of health.

We do not have chairs at this maximum security unit, but I manage to set at the edge of my bed with my legs and back straight to meditate.

The first week I was ready to give up, but something led me to keep trying... although I was scared, or thought I was... finally, after not giving up, I started to welcome everything -- noise, flies, etc. Then there was peace.

Thanks for everything. Please give my love to Bo. I'm still learning... I guess we all are.

*Take care,
KDJ, Arkansas*

Dear Mr. Lozoff,

Thanks so very much for sending your book so promptly. After reading it so many times I feel as though many of the letters in it could have been written by me.

I'm serving 2-15 years for armed robbery. This was very out-of-character for me, as I've always been a pretty passive person. Being only 18 at the time, and the fact that it was my first and only offense, the judge was pretty lenient.

So now I find myself here with ten months in and eight to go before I'm released. Bo, I've got to tell you, I'm scared as hell. That sounds strange, a 20-year-old being afraid of going home after being away for a year and a half.

Before I was sentenced my girlfriend and I got engaged. Her parents have been super; I'm like a son to them. So what the hell am I afraid of?

I think for the first time in my life I'm worried about what the future holds for me. I know that if I stay away from drugs and continue to think for myself (instead of saying "what the heck" when my so-called friends suggest things that create problems), I'll be able to keep from screwing up enough to come back.

Bo, I was wondering if you had any suggestions that could help me. An organization like yours gives us all a chance to say "I'm okay." It also gives us a reason to thank God He reveals His love for us, even in the joint, through folks like you.

God bless you,
CE, Michigan

Dear Chuck,

Fear is fear, and we all need to learn how to deal with fear no matter what the object of it may be.

Start working from the outside in; from what's happening right now. Your letter expresses not only the fact that you're afraid, but it expresses a great deal of alarm about it. You might call it your fear of the fear. Try to cut back on that part of it. When you feel fear, don't close your mind around it or run and hide. Try to sit still and let the fear come up, front & center. Study it. What does it really feel like? What thoughts are going on? Are there any little surprise clues that pop up to let you see what's behind it?

When we're afraid, the breath becomes uneven, shallow, and makes everything worse. If you're sitting still and studying the whole thing, you can take control by keeping a good, deep breath going. That small step alone will begin to conquer fear, because you're already not allowing it to take over your whole body.

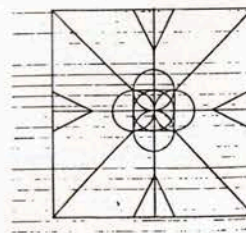
You can learn a lot about yourself while you're locked up, so don't just be waiting to get out. Use the time wisely. Things like this fear come up for a reason. They're not hassles or accidents. Courage, for example, doesn't mean to have no fear; it just means to be able to do what you need to do whether there's fear or not. That's what my book is about, so I hope it helps you.

Love, Bo

THANKS FOR THE LOGOS

In our last newsletter we invited your ideas and sketches for a logo for the Human Kindness Foundation. We're in the process now of working on one, and we wanted to show you some of the artwork we received to help us out.

Our thanks to the following friends who sent these in: Alison Weiner, Parris Dorsey, Eugene Perry, Basil Langton, Clyde Courtney, Doc Stearns, Fred & Christine Adler, N.J. Ferguson, Duane Sosbee, and three others whose names unfortunately got separated from their artwork.



RESOURCES

"Any news from Native American prisoners would be greatly appreciated since we currently have a growing Prison News section in our newsletter, The Phoenix. Contact with prisoners, support groups, brotherhoods, sisterhoods and prisoner alliance networks is a growing focus for our organization.

CANADIAN ALLIANCE IN SOLIDARITY WITH NATIVE
PEOPLES
16 SPADINA ROAD,
TORONTO, ONTARIO M5R 2S7
CANADA

"The Local Endeavor has a distribution of 6,000 and is a 16-page tabloid. We extend an open invitation to planetary citizens (in and out of prison) to submit writings, including poetry and heart-songs. If you have an issue, thought, or just an opinion that needs expression, please write us."

THE LOCAL ENDEAVOR
BOX 2002
NEVADA CITY CA 95959
OR:
BOX 595
MI-WUK, CA 95346

"Images literary magazine is now accepting materials for this year's issue. Images is produced by students of Wilmington College's Project Talents program at Lebanon Correctional Institute In Ohio. The magazine strives to publish the best available poetry, essays, short stories, and artwork (b/w, no larger than 8 1/2 x 11).

Send subscriptions or questions to:

IMAGES OF PROJECT TALENTS
C/O SHARON THOMPSON
PYLE CENTER, BOX 1285
WILMINGTON COLLEGE,
WILMINGTON, OHIO 45177

"This beautiful world we live in moves to the rhythm of song. In 1985 for The First Farm Aid Tour, we inmates in Missouri donated \$1,269.63, and we were on national tv news. Miracles happen in numbers, brothers and sisters who are doing time! If you want to be part of this with me, and help the American farmers through the great entertainers like Willie Nelson, John Cougar Mellencamp, Charlie Daniels, etc., please write to me. If you send a donation, make it payable to Farm Aid and we'll show them what we can do.

DALLAS MOORE
BOX 846
PLAINVIEW, TX 79073

And finally, please take note: the Prison Library Project has moved. If you want books other than We're All Doing Time, their address is now:

PRISON LIBRARY PROJECT
976 WEST FOOTHILL BLVD. #128
CLAREMONT, CA 91711



self-portrait by Cliff Schultheis, USP-Leavenworth

Cow Philosophy



A WORD TO OUR NON-PRISON FRIENDS

The Prison-Ashram Project of the Human Kindness Foundation is supported solely by your donations. You are among 2500 donors who enable us to provide free workshops and materials for many thousands of prisoners and other shut-ins. We don't believe in high-pressure fundraising, so this reminder is the only way we have of inviting you to continue your support.

Other than the rare donor who can afford a large contribution or a bequest (very rare, but we're still hoping), the best way you can help us is to send a monthly gift, no matter how small. We'll even provide you with a reminder envelope each month (a new level of sophistication for us!). Or, if that's not your style, just send us what you can when you can; it's always appreciated and used as efficiently as possible.

And of course, copies of my book, *We're All Doing Time*, or album, *Stumbling Toward the Light*, are still available for donations of \$10 & \$8 respectively, plus \$2 postage.

The Human Kindness Foundation is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code. All donations, bequests, and gifts of stocks or properties are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. To make donations or request more information, write us at Rt. 1, Box 201-N, Durham NC 27705.

address correction requested

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Durham, N.C.
Permit No. 205

Life is so generous a giver, but we, judging its gifts by their covering, cast them away as ugly, or heavy or hard. Remove the covering and you will find beneath it a living splendor, woven of love, by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it, and you touch the angel's hand that brings it to you. Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty, believe me, that angel's hand is there; the gift is there, and the wonder of an overshadowing presence.

-- Fra Giovanni, 1513 A.D.

