



## 50 YEARS OF KINDNESS

Fall  
2023

In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God is found in the smallest of seeds that grow and multiply, providing support and shelter for new life. The love, kindness, and generosity we show to strangers and friends alike are the small seeds that make up God's Beloved Community, in whatever form we understand the Holy Spirit to take.

The parable of the mustard seed is about both potential and promise fulfilled. In the mustard seed lies the promise of the world we want to live in—one which offers love, support, shelter, grace and understanding. Yet the mustard seed does not bloom on its own. Instead, it needs the communion of water, soil, and sun to thrive.

Our work is a collective labor of love. Whether in a prison workshop, a letter, a phone call, a poem, or a work of art, we have received so many mustard seeds of wisdom from you. This summer, we worked with students from Duke University and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill to collect and share some of our favorite words and works of wisdom from people experiencing incarceration. These students have poured through 126 newsletters from 1979 to the present and have delighted in the beauty and depth they found.

The result is the eight reflections in this newsletter. Each feature the words and artwork of people experiencing incarceration. These reflections are just the beginning of a larger project called 50 Days of Kindness, which will consist of 50 reflections highlighting the deep wisdom and creativity born from hard life experiences. We can think of no better way to honor our 50 years than to celebrate and share this work.

For those on the outside, for the 50 days prior to our 50th anniversary, we will share a daily reflection on social media and in a weekly email digest, starting on October 13 and ending on December 1. Please follow us on Facebook or Instagram or sign up to receive a weekly email digest of reflections by emailing [hkf@humankindness.org](mailto:hkf@humankindness.org) and asking for 50 Days of Kindness. For those on the inside, please join us in these 50 days of collective reflection by using one of the reflections featured in this newsletter each week. We will make all 50 reflections available on Edovo next year and will work towards making these reflections available as a book soon.

These reflections came from looking within. We looked within the newsletters and found such beauty. You can look within and around you and see the same. We were all born good. No matter what we've done or what's been done to us, that inner goodness remains. We have the power to nurture this good within ourselves and others. Doing so is how we build the loving communities we all deserve—by planting one small seed of kindness at a time and delighting when it blooms.



# SITA'S NEWS, NOTES AND OFFERINGS

## WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

### Write a Poem With Us:

For our 50th anniversary, HKF board member and North Carolina poet laureate Jaki Shelton Green will create a poem drawing from the past 50 years of writing we've received from incarcerated authors. Your words can be part of this poem! In 50 words or less, please send us a poem about what kindness means to you.

### Ask Sita About HKF:

Our next newsletter will feature my reflections on the past 50 years, and I want to answer your questions about our work! If you could ask me one question about the past 50 years at HKF, what would that be? Please keep it short and sweet friends!

**BUDDHIST PRISON MINISTRY: BODHICITTA BEHIND BARS**

## An Introduction to Buddhism

A Twelve

Lesson

Course

With

Integration

Questions

Tools, skills and practices from the Buddhist tradition written specifically for the incarcerated population.

Rev. Susan Shannon, M.Div., BCC,  
Buddhist Prison Ministry/P.O. Box 426/Orcas, WA/ 98280 all rights reserved



## NEW FREE COURSE ON BUDDHISM

Buddhist Prison Ministry offers their coursebook "Bodhicitta Behind Bars; An Introduction to Buddhism" free of charge to inmates thanks to grants from the Khyentse Foundation. It is written specifically for the incarcerated. This coursebook aims to teach Buddhism's tools and skills in a way that can cultivate inner transformation. You will learn what unifies the various schools and traditions of Buddhism-recognizing our interconnectedness, fostering inner and outer peace, and cultivating a warm heart.

To enroll in this free course, send a request to:  
Buddhist Prison Ministry  
PO Box 426  
Orcas, WA 98280

Soon to be available on Edovo.

## TOGETHER-APART

My dear friends, please continue to sit with us on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 8pm (or any time on Wednesdays that might be more convenient for you) as we send love, prayers, and blessings to the many suffering beings in the world. Use whatever practice is meaningful to you, beloveds. "See" you all on Wednesdays! Love, Sita

Many thanks to our artists: pg1: "Tree of Life" is an original stained glass by Janaki and Sita; pg2: Joe Swainston, Gatesville TX; pg3: (top) Shane Price, Front Royal VA, (bottom) unknown; pg4: (top) Carl Marshall, Huntsville TX, (bottom) Sean Fenwick, Beaumont TX; pg5: (top) unknown, (bottom) Howard Ault, Raiford FL; pg6: (top) Banegas Santine, Decatur GA, (bottom) Gregory Rodriguez, San Antonio TX; pg7: Stephen Stoeltje, Beaumont TX.



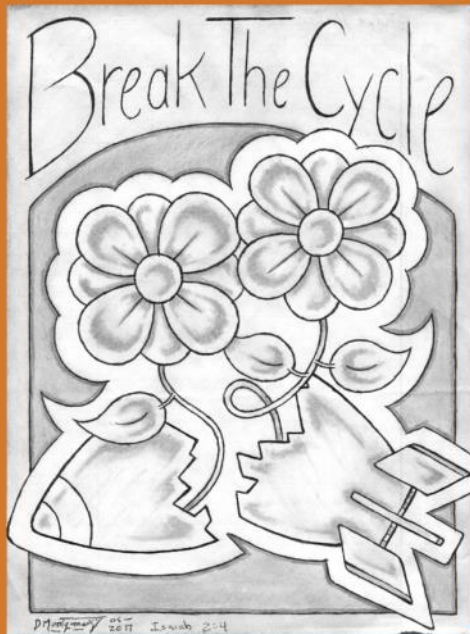


“Each person can find **enlightenment within himself** - but like the fortune cookie, you can't get the message until you are willing to **break the shell.**”

JM, 1981

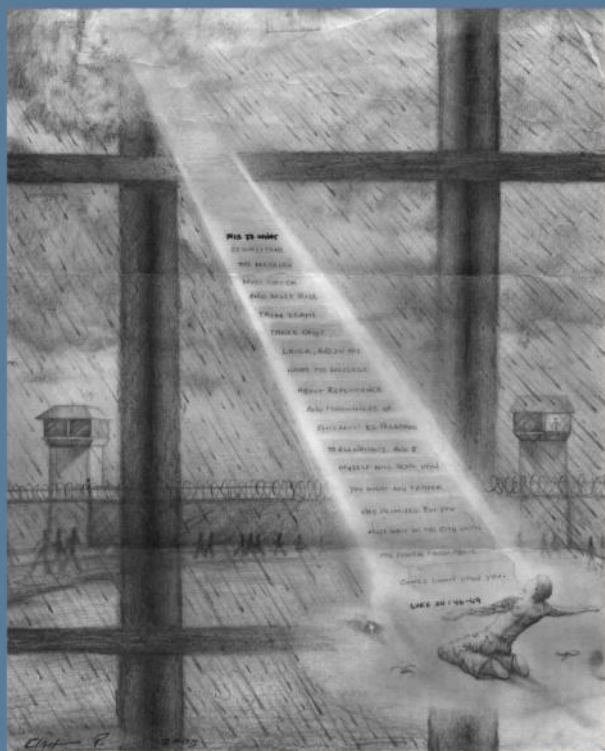
### A Reflection on a Seed

Picture yourself planting a small seed in a harsh environment, such as a desert or a crack in the sidewalk. Think about the inner strength this seed must draw upon for it to bloom into a beautiful flower, plant, or tree. As you continue to grow this week, remember the same potential that lies within each seed lies within you.



### Questions to Consider

How have you grown despite harsh conditions?  
What wisdom have you gained from difficult experiences?  
How can you share that wisdom with others? How have you already?



### Reflection

Close your eyes and imagine your body washed in warm light. As you feel the warmth on your back, picture your shadow at your feet. Welcome the shadow as part of you. Don't let it cloud your vision. Shadows only exist because of light. This light also exists within you and will always be part of you.

### Questions

What is your favorite memory of being outside in the sunshine?  
What helps you move forward in hard times?  
Reflect on a hard time in your life when you unexpectedly found moments of light. What did you learn?

“Get mad and cry and all that, and then **pick yourself up** and keep **stumbling toward the light.**”

Gabe, 2016



**“You always have a choice. Even when it doesn’t seem like there is a choice.”**

Sunny, 2020

### Reflection

Take a moment to check in with your body. Try to locate your seat of power - the part of you where goodness, light, and dignity are stored. Place your hand on top of it.

Remember, your seat of power belongs to you and only you. It will always be yours, and no one can ever take it away. It’s up to you to use it.

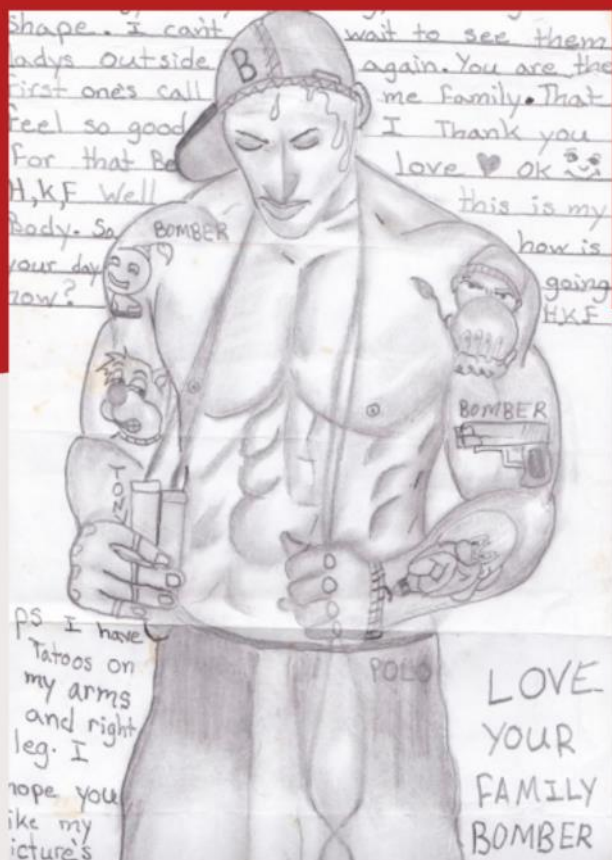


### Questions

What is a choice you made that you are proud of?

What can make it difficult to make the right choice? Why?

Reflect on your seat of power. Where does it come from and how can you use it to help yourself and others?



**“The best thing is to show them and prove it, instead of trying to tell them, and that takes time... maybe years. You do that by how you live your life from here.”**

Gabe, 2017

### Reflection

Take a moment to stretch. Extend your arms or legs, however this looks for you. Picture yourself preparing for a marathon. The hard work you put in doesn't show results overnight. It takes time. Trust in what you've already accomplished. As you move forward this week, think about how you want to run the marathon of your life. Don't be discouraged. Keep stretching...

### Questions

What have you worked the hardest in your life to achieve? How did you get there?

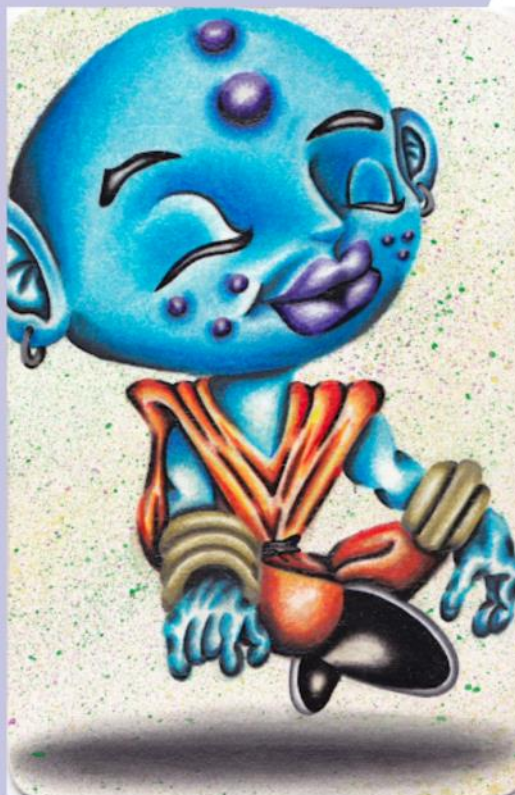
What changed in your life once you reached this goal?

Reflect on a future goal and how you can make it happen.



**“The lunatic committee  
(those internal voices  
of criticism of myself  
and others) is alive  
and well, yet it doesn’t  
need to get a vote  
in my choices.”**

Tall Tom, 2019



### Reflection

Close your eyes and imagine you are walking down a spiral staircase. At the bottom, you find a box filled with negative labels about yourself. Look through these labels and discard them one by one. Then, turn around and walk up the stairs. Look around. You are now surrounded by positive labels about yourself.

Jimmy, 2023

### Questions

What makes it easy to be kind to yourself?  
What makes it hard to be kind to yourself?  
Reflect on a time when you were brave enough to choose kindness despite being hurt or afraid.

**“As my understanding of the self grows, my love for others,  
as well as myself has also blossomed.”** E, 2018

### Reflection

Take a moment to look at yourself in the mirror. Remember no one is born with deep self-love—it must be nurtured. Say “I love you” as if you were saying it to the person you love most. Now say it again, addressing it to you, and only you. Know that nourishing your relationship with yourself also strengthens your bonds with others. You deserve to love yourself and to share that love with others.



### Questions

What is a strength of yours that you were surprised to discover?  
  
What is something you’ve learned about yourself that you want to share with others? Why?  
  
Reflect on a time when you showed yourself love. How did you feel?



**Practice**

Imagine your body as a strong oak tree. Your feet are its roots, your torso is its trunk, and your thoughts are branches touching the sky. Think of the strength and stability a tree must have to weather even the worst storms. Remember that you, like a mighty oak, are powerful. As a tree's power comes from its roots, your power comes from within.



**“They claim that they have taken your power, but it’s not true. No one can take that power away unless you give it away.”**

Sunny, 2022

**Questions**

Have you ever been surprised by your inner power? Why?

How have you used your power for good?

Reflect on the meaning of inner power. How is it different from other forms of power?



**“Just when you need it most, something you had all along makes itself known and reinstates that flicker of hope.”**

Z, 2019

**Reflection**

Imagine yourself walking in a cave. You begin to worry because it is dark and you cannot see. You stand still because you are scared, but something within you pushes you forward. As you walk in the dark, you see a flicker of light. Aha! Feeling a mix of fear and hope, you keep walking. As you walk out of the cave, you see a waterfall. You notice different colors reflecting on the waterfall. Suddenly, you are calm. You are not afraid anymore.

**Questions**

What role has fear played in your life?

What fears do you hope to overcome?

Reflect on a time when listening to yourself helped you overcome a fear or challenge.





# LETTERS

Dear Sita & HKF,

Congratulations on the 50th anniversary of the Prison Ashram Project. As you asked, I thought I'd write you about a couple of letters which I remember and have stuck with me through 24 years of incarceration. I can't recall which book or newsletter I read them in, as it was so many years ago.

The first one I remember is a line from a brother inmate who said something like: "Really, we're all monks here in prison. The question is, how gracefully can we wear our monastic robes?" I don't remember the exact words yet that's how I took the challenge and inspiration to live my life in prison in a monastic manner of prayer, meditation, work and study, mostly in my hermitage cell, my holy grotto.

The other thing that inspired me so much was about Tall Tom's soup kitchen. His testimony set me on the course of deep compassionate living in giving generously to my fellow inmates as brothers who are experiencing hunger, loneliness, and need--my fellow sufferers here in prison. I recall Tom's testimony affirmed that it is really possible to live by the words of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. "Give to one who asks you and...do not turn them away." I was really called to always give to others unconditionally, expecting nothing in return, to the best of my ability. So much so, that I have found myself moved by compassion, that when I might at first turn a brother away, I have called him back later to give him whatever I could—soups, chips, cookies, stamps, etc.—whatever I might have in my locker. I have truly experienced the Truth that the more I can be a blessing to others, the more I am blessed myself!

Indeed, I have truly been blessed by so many letters and writings in your books and newsletters. I am so very grateful for all of your love, prayers, and encouragement. You are such a blessing. God bless you all for all of your great work! -S



My Dearest Friends, I have been an HKF volunteer for over 7 years, and I am writing this letter to all of those dear friends whom I have had the great honor of connecting with through HKF to let you know that it's time for me to step down. I have done many volunteer jobs over my lifetime, but none have been as deeply moving as the connections I have made through HKF. Giving and receiving are One, and I have received as much or more from my time at HKF as I have given. I want each of you to know just how much our karmic paths were meant to cross, and how great the wave of Spirit is when we join in peace and kindness. None of us will ever be the same, and none of us will ever

walk alone again after having shared such sacred time together. Thank you all for what you, and my Mighty Companions at HKF, have done to brighten that Light in me. I too will never walk alone again. Love, Donna

Please note HKF may anonymously publish letters you write to us in our newsletters or other publications. We may also publish artwork sent to us with attribution whenever possible. Please let us know if you do NOT want your work published. Thanks for filling our publications with your spirit and wisdom!



humankindness.org

PO Box 61619  
Durham, NC 27715

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Durham, NC  
Permit No. 205

## PRISON-ASHRAM PROJECT

