Hanuman's Devotees Teach Yoga Behind Bars
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For 15 years, Bo and Sita Lozoff have been "doing time" in some of America's toughest prisons. They are not convicts; they are one-of-a-kind spiritual teachers. Their students are prison inmates - some on death row, some serving six or seven consecutive life sentences.

When the Lozoffs began the "Prison Ashram Program" in 1973, they were warned that they might not succeed "where all else had failed." But failure was not to be. Armed with honesty, compassion, sincerity, a message and a sense of mission, they talked as friends "across the table" to prison inmates. Feeling a love and trust, the prisoners were touched. Someone cared.

The theme of the Lozoff's teaching is that on both sides of the bars everyone creates and lives in his own personal prison until he seeks God. The Lozoff's prison work, fueled anew by the success and popularity of Bo's 1985 book, "We're all Doing Time," has developed significantly over the years. Although in the beginning it was underwritten by the Hanuman Foundation and closely associated with the work and influence of Ram Dass (popular spiritual leader of the '60s) and his guru, Neemkaroli Baba, it is now an independent project of the Human Kindness Foundation. Bo and Sita recently visited Kauai Aadheenam in Hawaii and shared with Hinduism Today some thoughts about their special work.

Q: What originally inspired you to begin the "Prison Ashram Program"?

A: We never had any idea that we would end up teaching meditation and spirituality in the prisons. My idea, as a karma yogi in the lineage of Hanuman, was to be a prison guard. I set up an interview at a prison close to my home. The guy thought I was nuts - he kept asking me why I wanted to be a prison guard. Finally, I figured I had nothing to loose and I said: "I'm a karma yogi. My path to

enlightenment is service, and I think this job is a great form of service to humanity." The next thing I knew, this prison warden, who was about six feet-two inches tall, had a crew cut and wore cowboy boots, was leaning over his desk telling me he thought they left reincarnation out of the Bible on purpose. Well, I didn't get the job, but a little later they asked me to give these meditation classes.

Q: Did Ram Doss inspire you to perform this work in any way?

A: We told Ram Dass what we were doing, and he helped us with a proposal. Also, around that same time, Ram Dass was sending copies of his book. Be Here Now, to all of the prison libraries in the country and was receiving a lot of mail from that. Since we were starting this work, he asked us if we would like to also take over that correspondence. And that's how the whole thing started. As we continued with this correspondence over the years, we began to realize that we were saying the same things over and over again. So, we finally wrote. We're all Doing Time.

Q: Can you tell us anything about your experience in writing We're all Doing Time?

A: It was very difficult. A friend said, "You know. Bo, if you can't say it simple, either you don't understand it or it isn't true." That was my guideline. It took me seven years. It was such a sadhana to strip away all of my complicated ideas right down to what I really felt.

Q: What were your first prison classes like? Which prisoners were attracted to the study?

A: When we first began, we were in for quite a surprise. We wore all white, we lived in an ashram and did japa all of the time. But within a year we were completely normal looking Americans. As it turned out, that was what was appropriate. Initially, we thought we would attract people that were in for just a short time. But the people who were doing 3, 4 or 5 years didn't have that much inner incentive. The people who were doing 99 years or seven consecutive life terms were the ones that wrote to us. We were not really prepared for that at all.

Q: Now, after 15 years of experience, has the teaching program settled into a routine?

A: Every time we think we have the right form, it turns out to be a little limited. Lord Hanuman constantly reminds as we get older that we have to keep surrendering our expectations. We have come to see that our job is to simply be an example. Now, when I go to give a talk in prison, I have no idea what I am going to say. I just try to let the divine forces guide where the thing goes. Yet, still I feel that it is very important to work with the sadhaka, and there are sadhaka in each prison.

Q: With regard to the prison classes, how do you establish rapport with the prisoners?

A: Our hook-up with the prisoners is despair. We wind up dealing with people who are not in prison for the first time - usually it's not even their second. They are really tired of themselves. It's been shoved down their throats that they are the bottom of the barrel. By the time they meet us they have lost all hope. Some even try to hook up with us to prove that our program is useless, too - just like everything else. But to their surprise, often it's not.

Q: If you had to identify one common, basic dilemma experienced by a majority of the prisoners, what would that be?

A: With a lot of these guys the only problem is that they are unconventional. They're mavericks. They just don't fit. And rehabilitation is usually inferred as something forcing these guys to fit. We show them that you can be a maverick without being an outlaw, that you can be law-abiding and still never fit really - except in the larger sense where we are all one.

Q: What is it like for an inmate to attempt the consistent practice of sadhana in prison?

A: We call it the "Prison Ashram Project" because we are trying to get the prisoners to use their time in prison like they would in an ashram. But as anyone can appreciate these are extremely hostile places. It's not easy to practice sadhana in prison. It takes a tremendous amount of desire and self-discipline. Out of the 50,000 prisoners that we have dealt with personally through the years, one got out and went into a Buddhist monastery. But they all gain the spiritual perspective that whether you are in or out of jail, you are not going to be happy unless you are seeking God in some way.

Q: You have mentioned Hanuman several times. How do you relate to him and how does he effect your work?

A: We found ourselves in an interesting position as far as Hanuman was concerned. When we had come in contact with Ram Dass, and even just saw that first picture of Hanuman, we felt some connection there. I think probably our devotional practices and the form of our relationship to Hanuman would probably make a traditional Hindu wretch, but we consider ourselves extremely devoted to Hanuman. If God were ice cream, Hanuman would be one unique flavor. That flavor has taken seed in our heart. In that flavor of God there is a particular combination of devotion, service, rascality and humor. While many of the other deities are pictured on a throne, the most popular image of Hanuman shows him kneeling at the Lord's feet in the prayer pose. All of this is why we do so well with prisoners. We are among the monkeys and bears of society.

Q: What are your plans for the future? Do you have any new projects that you are working on currently?

A: I just wrote a story called Lineage. It's the first fiction I have tried to write and the first serious writing I have done since we are all Doing Time. It's a prison Siddhartha about an old inmate who has a deep inner experience and passes it along to others very quietly. This kind of thing really happens in prison and people don't realize it. As for the future beyond this, Hanuman is our guide. This work is going forward on its own now. We no longer spawn - we respond.