Greetings from Bal Ashram
January 28, 2008

Dear Friends, Namasté,

By now you may already know that Babaji will be spending the winter in Varanasi, India, at Bal Ashram, and will return back to Sonoma on March 10 th . I, too, will be here during this time, and will continue to keep you up to date with what is happening via email.

Caring for the Land

It has been very cold, so much so that the schools were closed for a few days. During this unexpected free time, all the children joined together and cared for the plants and trees on the Ashram grounds. Here are **Vijay** (Left) and **Santosh** (Right).

The freshly made soil from our compost pile was bagged and set aside ready for use. From left to right, **Samyak** , **Suraj** and **Vishwanath** are filling a pail to take to the plants.

Vishwanath (left) and **Suraj** (right), adding our homemade soil to the plants and trees.

Planting More Trees

More than 30 good sized banana trees were dug up from different parts of the Ashram grounds, carried out to the banks of the river just outside the Ashram boundary wall, and planted by the children and staff.

Suraj (the little one in tan) was so excited to be a part of this project; he worked all day long with his big brothers. It was a productive and fun day, and seeing how beautiful the banks of the river now look is

inspiring for all. The children work together very well as a team, and whatever project they are working on, there is always sure to be lots of smiles and laughter.

Exchange Program with Children from Sikkim

In early January a group of 16 young children from Sikkim (Northern India) came to stay at Bal Ashram as part of a new exchange program we have started. These children have similar backgrounds as ours, and live together in a hostel which is part of a larger school facility. Richard and Marcie Sclove had arranged the exchange program after visiting their facility last year. In the summer months, the Bal Ashram children will go to Sikkim for a week to visit. Here are some photos from the children's time together.

Every night after prayers (Arati), we all gather for a ½ hour meeting. Here are all the Ashram boys and staff with the Sikkim boys. They became friends instantly.

Sikkim boys with **Sohum** (left in blue & yellow jacket), **Santosh** (jacket with white stripes), and **Ravi** (held in the middle).

On their last day at the Ashram, the Bal Ashram children presented their new friends with cards they had made. Left to right: **Bhanu** , **Vijay** , and Sikkim friend. In such a short time, a special bond was created among all of them, many were sad to say goodbye.

All together with Babaji on the last day.

Weekend trip to Alice Project in Saranath

You may remember in the last email I wrote about Babaji's visit to Alice Project. Kamla and Loknath took the thirteen younger children to Alice Project for a weekend, both to learn more about the school and to give the children a taste of how others live.

Here are all the children with their bags packed and ready to get into the car to go to Saranath for the weekend.

In the car and ready to go … from left to right: **Amit** , **Samyak** (Golu), **Vijay** , **Renzo** (volunteer from Italy).

For a day, the children joined the Alice Project students in the appropriate class: **Ravi** on the left in a brown shirt, and **Deepak** on the right in royal blue.

For the first time, the children got a taste of sleeping in bunk beds – they all loved it.

Bal Ashram's "Vidyalaya – Alice Project"

After learning more about Alice Project in Saranath, we decided to start a small pilot school here at Bal Ashram. We'll begin with Kindergarten and 1 st grades, and the small children who have been attending the Ashram's Vidyalaya day school will be the first students along with a few of the younger Bal Ashram residents. Kamla and Loknath are working with Valentino (the founder of Alice Project), who will be coming for a visit soon to discuss the details and help plan for the classrooms.

Not wasting any time, we identified the location the new classrooms – the structure which used to house the cows was ideal (and some of you may remember that this structure used to be our make-shift kitchen and dinning hall for the first few years!)

Sunil (staff member and primary driver), with the older children, watching the wall crumble.

Here is **Rana** in action.

A view from above.

Soccer with Hemant: left to Right **: Amit, Ravi, Samyak, Hemant, Shiva**

Deepak was so happy to check his email and find that 6 friends from the US had written to him! Many of the other children shared his sentiments after sitting with Kamla and reading the notes they received from their friends. Thank you to all of you who have been keeping in touch with the children – please know how happy this makes them.

Bal Ashram Temple – Under Construction

Construction of the Ashram's new temple continues to progress well. Here is a front view looking east toward the land across the river for the proposed eco-village.

And here is a side view, looking north where you can see the ghats of Assi in the background.

This wonderful project in Varanasi is solely dependent on donations we receive. If you feel so inclined to be a part of this loving family, you can make your tax-deductible contribution in the US and in India both.

In the US (SonoMa Ashram is a 501(c)3 Non-Profit)

For electronic contributions, please click here: http://sonomaashram.org/seva_gifts_to_bal.php or send a check made out to SonoMa Ashram to: **SonoMa Ashram, PO Box 950, Sonoma, CA 95476** . Please write "Bal Ashram" in the memo field.

In India (Aghor Guru Seva Peeth is an 80G approved Non-Profit)

Please make checks out to **Aghor Guru Seva Peeth** , Mahesh Nagar Colony, Samne Ghat, Lanka, Varanasi,

UP 221005.

With gratitude and appreciation,

shivani

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