

Heart to Heart

IN 1995, Annie Coats had a stroke. Determined to spend her remaining years in service, she gave up her possessions and her life in the US to return to India, where she had been regularly visiting a Sufi teacher since 1987, and where she had completed a three-month fellowship in 1993.

Shortly after her arrival in India in January 1996, she began working in Mother Teresa's orphanages in Bangalore. It was this experience that changed her life. Meeting children with appalling disabilities and extraordinarily open hearts put her on the path to where she is today – a Buddhist nun (now Ani Tenzin Desal) and spiritual program coordinator at Mahamudra Centre in New Zealand. This is the story of her awakening ...

Children in the orphanages in India are the greatest healers in the world. They perform the most complex psychological feats of healing without ever earning any degrees or attending any seminars. They heal with a power far greater than any drug, operation or therapy. Their power is the unconditional love of a child, channelled through a clear mind and the purity of a brilliant heart.

On the way to the orphanage on that bright spring morning, I was told to prepare myself to see the “rejects of society”. Well, I saw the twisted arms and legs, the enlarged deformed heads, and the too-thin, dysfunctional bodies. But no one could have prepared me for the experience of the incredible light emanating from the eyes and hearts of these children. I felt humbled before these brave beings who had reincarnated in these pathetic bodies, and in these tougher-than-you-can-imagine circumstances.

These children ask for nothing but your love. As their arms reached out to me, I became oblivious to bodies, nationalities, ages, or sexes. I was only aware of the incredible ache in my heart. By evoking the love within me, the children magically opened and healed my heart. They taught me this basic truth: There is only one way to receive unconditional love – first, we must give it away, so our hearts can become open to receive it!

My first heart-to-heart encounter was with a small boy, newly arrived at the orphanage. The extensive scarring on his right side told the silent story that he had suffered more already than many people know in a lifetime. He looked expectantly up at me when I gently patted his back. I hesitated to pick him up. Consequently, he threw himself face

down on the mattress, curled his legs up underneath his tummy, and wrapped his arms around his head. My heart broke at such an obvious act of dejection by such a tiny being. I bent over, scooped up the tiny boy, lifting him to shoulder height. Together we went to the Magic Garden and Magic Tree.

The Magic Garden and Magic Tree are located next to the orphanage. In the garden is a lovely statue of Mary, the Mother of Christ, several small rows of plants, and a few footpaths. A large tree with a small stone bench beneath it overshadows the entrance to the garden. I named this place the Magic Garden and Magic Tree because the children we brought to visit here were awed by the sights, smells and sounds, and found peace and joy by just being there.

Quietly rocking and singing to the sweet bundle in my arms, I prayed with all my heart: “Please pour love through me to this child, and cradle him in a cocoon of love so he won’t ever feel dejected or unhappy again.” As I prayed and sang, the squirms stopped, and I realized how many children just like him had never been held, or rocked, or had songs sung to them. When we returned to his crib, he sat up, stuck his legs through the bars, and rocked his body to and fro as joy radiated from him.

The next visit was more adventurous. Although the little boy did not talk, he could walk easily. But when I placed him gently on the ground in the Magic Garden, he became timid and shy. He stood like a statue, quietly interacting with lights and energies that I did not perceive. His hands would grasp, manipulate, and bring the energies to his mouth to taste them, but his feet always remained planted in one spot.

After a short while, I took his tiny hand and softly pulled him forward to a row of plants, and he obediently followed. Watching me intently as I patted the leaves, he mimicked my actions. Then, sensing the discovery, he took to the experience like a duck to water. Holding one finger of mine, he moved through the rows, fondling the plants like old friends. Finally, a bit weary, he bent over, smoothed the soft dirt at his feet, and laid his cheek down on its warmth.

Whenever we revisited the Magic Garden in subsequent weeks, he would pull me through it, letting go of my finger for short periods of time. His unseen friends and energies remained with him, but he felt safer, freer, lighter, and with a new sense of inner courage and joy.

I later had a heart-to-heart encounter with a teenage boy. I'd talked to him several times in passing, and had noticed how remarkable it was that he always placed his crippled, spastic body in a perfect lotus position to sit up in bed. But I had never spent much time with him. One day he kept reaching out to me, grabbing my shirt, while I was feeding a girl next to him. So, to pacify him, in my mind I telepathically promised him I'd take him for a walk when I finished taking the other teen to the Garden.

Upon my return, I stood in front of his bed, hesitating to lift him up as he was quite large. I was flabbergasted to see him stick out his lower lip in an obvious pout, afraid I would not keep my "telepathic promise"! Softly praying, I hefted the body that was as tall as I was (but far lighter, thank goodness), and scrambled out to the wheelchairs. Once strapped in, he uttered a squeal of glee, totally aware of the forthcoming adventure. We rolled out to the Magic Garden, down the pathways, under the trees, bumpity-bump, squealing in ecstasy. Oh! Why, oh why, didn't I bring him out before? How many weeks had I not given him such joy? Forgive me, friend.

This lean lad was very bright, mimicking me with ease. It appeared he was totally aware, but trapped in a crippled body. He had spastic movements in the limbs, eyes unable to focus synchronously, and without the power of speech, although his broad smile and squeals of joy lightened my heart beyond words. I fell in love with this child too, so much so that I knew I would always see him before me in my memories.

The time came to leave, and the pain of separation was so great I could not stop the tears. I prayed for strength. As I knelt before him, I looked tenderly into his face and



Annie Coats in her first year at the orphanage.



Ani Tenzin Desal after ordination.

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whispered "I love you, I love you." The boy looked up with widened eyes of wonder. He, who had never spoken, spasmodically grasped my shirt with his hands and pulled me close to him. Then, to soften my misery, this heavenly child placed his open mouth on my cheek in a farewell kiss! Great is the love of the children – for it was the Kiss of the Divine I had received. ☸

Ani Tenzin Desal's career of service includes karma yoga in an ashram; collecting donations for Mother Theresa's orphanages; and teaching science, math and English to children at a Tibetan settlement near Debra Dunn. On the advice of Lama Kamtrul Rinpoche, teacher of His Holiness, she became a volunteer clinical biochemist at a charity hospital in south India. She has also cared for a lady with Alzheimer's disease, and did sewing projects for school children and the poor.

She completed a Vajrasattva Retreat at Kopan and on the advice of Lama Zopa Rinpoche she served as general assistant and accountant at Tushita Meditation Centre. In February 2005 she received ordination as a novice nun from His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.