

13/12/10 – Anandwan, India

Dear friends,

This letter is not easy to write. I'm finding it difficult to put words to the experience, I'm afraid that words would only limit what there is to express and then somehow not convey what I would so wish to share with you. Perhaps it's best that I stop trying so hard and just give you a few moments from the past week.

The other day we visited the hospital here that treats leprosy patients. In the men's ward (one large room with about 30 beds) there was one little boy sitting on his bed. The first thing you notice about him is his sparkling eyes full of life and excitement. Then you see one of his legs up to his knee has been amputated and the ends of his fingers have been lost leaving the classic leprosy-afflicted hands that are curled and look like stumps. Leprosy causes the nerves to be destroyed (particularly in the hands & feet), leaving complete loss of sensation and muscle wasting – and this is irreparable even when the disease is cured. It is this loss of sensation that causes continuous difficulties – injuries & accidents that lead to infection that is hard to treat. It is also this deformity that has been the cause of the stigma associated with leprosy. “This is our naughty boy” said the Doctor with a smile, “his left leg had to be amputated because he got an abscess in his foot which wasn't treated in time & was therefore impossible to cure, he should have been sent to us earlier”. Early treatment can prevent most deformity. But the boy wasn't in hospital because of his left leg. “This naughty boy,” the Doctor continued, “climbed a tree (with one leg!) and then fell out of it and fractured his right leg”. On cue, the boy with a glint in his eye, rolls up his trouser leg to show us his large, jagged scar that covers the length of his thigh. Which young boy doesn't like to climb trees? He looked like he would be out climbing others given half a chance. You could tell that life, the disability, the vulnerability was not going to limit this little monkey. No way!

Yesterday, a little girl about six years old pulls at my shirt to get my attention. She points her fingers to her eyes and then to me. She is deaf and this was a sign that said, “Look”. Then she started a series of hand signs and of course I was completely lost. She saw my confusion and stopped, and then began again more slowly. This time I realized she was going through the alphabet and was intent on teaching it to me right away so that we could exchange names. As I fumbled to get the hand positions right and kept forgetting letters she took my hands and showed me how they should be. This teacher has patience and gentleness in abundance.

These are not isolated moments at Anandwan, these touching encounters fill the days. The place is a hive of activity, everyone is doing something, working, participating in community life. There is action without effort, working to share & create harmony. It begins to seem quite normal until you remember, hang on a minute, that woman weaving the most beautiful, intricate carpet cannot see the colours she is so skillfully using for she is blind. That man making special sandals that protect these vulnerable leprosy feet has no sensation in his feet himself. That couple in the tree nursery caring for the delicate saplings have hands that no longer can completely feel the tender leaves. Everything is made here by the people who live here – the mattress on my bed, the bed frame too, the amazing

food I eat, the milk for the tea, the special tricycles designed to help leprosy patients get around. Some of the gas used for cooking comes from the treatment of sewage, all plastic is recycled, shredded and used in building, the water is treated & recycled, rainwater is harvested. And it goes on and on. The people here are treading lightly on this earth with their wounded feet.

Leprosy as a disease still remains a bit of a mystery, it is a bacteria that you can catch like TB, it is only found in humans and is one of the oldest known diseases to man. It is completely curable. Nathan said if you look around Anandwan and try to see what could be the common factor amongst leprosy patients, the thing you find is "loveliness". There is loveliness here. Maybe being lovely is what is needed to overcome leprosy, to handle being rejected by society, to gain a sense of dignity and self-respect.

There are no victims here and no place for pity. One man said that they don't spend their time thinking about what they don't have or what they have lost but rather focus on all they do have and on everything they are able to give. This just about sums it up. People here have taken their pain and suffering and transformed it. It reminds me of the words of those that have survived imprisonment like Victor Frankl and Nelson Mandela. They speak about one freedom nobody can take away from us - to choose the way we perceive life, to choose our attitude to each moment that is before us. When faced with challenge and difficulty do we choose to let it get us down, to feel victimized, to feel life has somehow treated us unfairly? Or do we choose to see the opportunity that lies within it, the lessons that are there for us to learn, the way that suffering can lead us to touch our beautiful humanity and feel the healing power of love? To feel like rather than questioning life, we see how life questions us in each moment. The people of Anandwan have made their choice and I feel extremely blessed to be here to feel, see, hear & sign language it!

I have been asking myself these last few days if maybe I have died and arrived in heaven - if this place really does exist on earth then paradise is within our reach.

This place is full of love so it's easy for me to send it all the way to you,

Susie

20/12/10

Dear friends,

Another week has passed and each day brings new experiences and insights. Things begin to feel familiar and then you discover something new.

There are not many cars here and no real roads as such but there are signs around the place for vehicles that say "Go Slow". This seems to be the message for this week. It is remarkable to see so much activity, so much work & action going on but so little stress, or tension, or pressure. I haven't seen anybody rushing about. Everything seems to be done with ease - an effortlessness. There seem to be no goals to reach, no striving for something out there in the future. It's just simply living in order to live simply.

In the mornings I work in one of the kitchens. There are about 10 kitchens here, each feeding over 200 people twice a day. Everyone working in these kitchens is

a member of the community and therefore has some kind of disability. The work in the kitchen never ends, it's a continuous daylong process of washing, chopping, sorting, cooking & flipping chapattis. The magic comes in the relationships and interaction of those working in the kitchen team – there is much laughter, joking and teasing. There's a sense of genuine appreciation for each other and deep affection that I have never seen before in a "work place". It's quite beautiful to see. It's as if people are just enjoying each others company and some cooking gets done – a great model for work. And as would be expected given these conditions the food is divinely delicious. It's a daily reminder for me of the importance of spending time preparing nourishing food, of eating consciously and mindfully, of looking after ourselves in this most fundamental way.

In the afternoon I work at the school for the deaf. We've been doing arts and craft activities and the last couple of days we have been making bracelets with beads and thread. Both the boys and the girls love doing this and it's lovely to see the pleasure it gives. Again, the "Go slow", no worries attitude is alive here too. Often the thread would accidently drop and beads would fall to the floor – twenty minutes patient work scattered. But the kids don't bat an eyelid and just start over again. It's clear that the act of making the bracelet is what is important not the rush to the end. Of course they are pleased and proud to see their finished work of art.

Every other day I have been visiting the boy that loves to climb trees, Sandip, in hospital. The first day I visited him, I came unannounced and found him in a little room off the main ward, sitting at a desk with his schoolbooks. He told me how he has been missing school since he has been in hospital. He clearly wants to learn. So when I visit I take my laptop and we do some maths together and check our answers on Excel and he's so excited to learn how to use a computer. And although it is not so easy to manipulate the mouse-pad with his missing fingers he is very determined to practice and master it and I think soon I'll be able to leave him the computer and have a rest on the bed next to the desk! We've also had some fun taking photos in Mac's photo-booth and laughing at our silly faces. These are precious moments and I often find myself walking out of the hospital eyes glazed with tears.

When Anandwan was created and for about 20 years or so the surrounding community didn't want anything to do with the place – the fear & stigma of leprosy was strong. Anandwan was growing a surplus of vegetables but nobody in the local community wanted to buy them to eat. But the people of Anandwan wouldn't be discouraged by this rejection and continued to live the way they felt was right, creating a model of sustainable living, of abundance, of growth. They decided to offer something to the outside, local community in the form of education and built a school for the local children. This was a huge success and marked a turning point. Roles were being reversed, the "disabled" community began to help the "healthy" community and now there are not only schools for the local community but an agricultural institute, training for local farmers and for the unemployed. I keep finding out about different out-reach projects that they have and it seems like there is no end to what they are giving.

One such project is happening this week. With the support of one charity Anandwan will host an eye camp – offering cataract operations to people from the region. It is expected that thousands of people will come here to get an eye

examination and then some 2000 will get an operation to remove cataracts. All in the space of one week. Anandwan is busy getting ready, everyone is mobilised, the kitchens will be preparing food for all these people and they will be given shelter. How fortunate to be here to witness such an undertaking.

I am here with 12 others who have come from different countries to serve and meditate together. We have time to share our experiences with each other and practice deep listening. It's a very supportive and caring circle of people and I feel lucky to have them by my side. Yesterday, Ian, told us how after meditation one morning he saw a butterfly and as he looked closer he noticed that it was missing one wing. Not quite believing that a butterfly could fly without one wing he looked again, indeed it was. The one-winged flying butterfly – so symbolic of Anandwan. One clear lesson we are privileged to be learning here is that there is a lot more possible than we would ever dare to believe or imagine.

I have the Bhagavad Gita here with me and I pick it up to read a few verses, put it down, and step outside to see the living version of its message before my eyes. One for this week: "The awakened sages call a person wise when all his undertakings are free from anxiety about results; all his selfish desires have been consumed in the fire of knowledge. The wise, ever satisfied, have abandoned all external supports. Their security is unaffected by the results of their action; even while acting, they really do nothing at all".

Wishing you all a peaceful Christmas and the space to Go Slow and maybe do nothing at all.

Love,
Susie

30/12/10

Dear friends,

I'm leaving India tomorrow. In one way it feels like I only just arrived and in another there's a timeless quality to being here. I've never not felt sadness in leaving this country so I'm paying special attention to all the sounds, sights and smells – absorbing it all like a sponge.

The last week at Anandwan was particularly moving, not least as it meant saying goodbye or farewell to many wonderful souls.

We spent Christmas day in silence taking rest from our work duties and alternating sitting and walking meditation. These silent days have been necessary to allow all the experiences to settle, all the emotions, thoughts and feelings to be acknowledged and held in quiet attentive space. A time and place to connect with all that has been happening in the inner life. As I sat by the lake watching the sun descend, an old man came and sat down beside me. He began to talk and tell me he had been in Anandwan for over 30 years and that three years ago his wife had died, defeated by cancer. As I sat and listened he told me that a simple life was a good life, free from unnecessary worries, and that happiness is to be found inside and not outside. He repeated, "Happiness is inside". We shared some silence and watched the birds. The homes for the elderly in Anandwan are called "Wisdom Banks" – very appropriate!

The inter-being between generations was so lovely to see in the community. In the kitchen I was "working" with people of all ages from 7 to 70! Kids are cared

for by all adults around and sometimes these roles are reversed as when I saw one of the blind children pushing the tricycle of the leprosy-afflicted man. Time during the day is given to being with each other and with family – relationships are clearly what is important, the rest can wait.

My last visit to Sandip in hospital was difficult for me. When I walked through the gates, I looked up to see him waiting for me on the balcony. We didn't turn the computer on that day but instead drew pictures. He drew a picture for me of my house as he imagined it would be, with flowers and a bicycle outside, and an aeroplane in the sky taking me back. As he was drawing I noticed a wound on one of his leprosy-afflicted fingers. I took his hand to have a closer look and saw that it really needed a bandage. A few days earlier I had accompanied three of my friends from the group to the bandaging unit where they were working. Every morning hundreds of people have the wounds on their feet and hands cleaned and re-banded. Because of the loss of nerves, blood supply and sensation, many wounds never heal and require daily care to avoid infection. Even though the leprosy is cured, this is the tragic lasting legacy of the disease.

When I saw Sandip's wound I felt a sudden pain inside me as the reality of this disease hit me again and this was something he would carry for the rest of his life. With no or little sensation in most of his finger-stumps he will continue to injure himself, everyday life is full of risks for him. He didn't know how he hurt himself this time. And then, I realised the extent of his courage and amazingness – how he uses his hands so well that I had forgotten the lack of sensation.

I was holding back the tears but he seemed to notice the emotions running through me and began to draw a picture of a man with funny hands that had misshaped fingers, missing fingers. He pointed to it and said, "This is a leprosy patient" and then started to laugh. There's nothing like humour to create lightness when things feel heavy and dense. God bless him!

Part of the way Anandwan runs is that each person who works earns a "salary". So for example Chandrabhan who is the chef of the kitchen earns 2000 rupees (approx. 35 Euros) per month. So as you can imagine to bring a donation of over 2000 Euros is quite something and can go very far. As a group and in collaboration with the community we discussed ways in which the money could be spent wisely and appropriately. There seemed to be for me a kind of paradox in that in one way the people of Anandwan have all they need and yet at the same time noticing that there could be things that would enrich their lives further. So from our experience of participating in community life we decided the money should benefit the children & the elderly and we drew up a list of things we wanted to support, including:

For the Children: a school trip for the deaf children, sports/games equipment, art supplies, musical instruments and CD player for the blind children; funds for Sandip to enable him to make the most of school while protecting his health and safety.

For the Elderly: jumpers, socks, hats (this Winter has been unusually cold), radios, a new coat of paint in their homes.

Any funds remaining would go towards daily costs.

Anandwan has an amazing gentle power of opening us up, of revealing vulnerability and tenderness, of coming face to face with those parts of ourselves we'd rather not see, and then teaching us how to approach these parts softly with kindness, to befriend and embrace them and listen. Ultimately, the hard

edges of protection & pain around the heart are slowly dissolved and healed. As Zohar said, the love of Anandwan fills our lives.

I am blessed to have received such a gift as at the end of a special year, and I know that my self, my heart and my life will never be the same again.

As I sadly leave India, I happily return to Europe and look forward to seeing you soon!

May 2011 bring peace, love and understanding,

Susie

“Better indeed is knowledge than mechanical practice.

Better than knowledge is meditation.

But better still is surrender in love,

Because there follows immediate peace.”

Krishna advising Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita