

ACTION FOR LIFE NEWSLETTER #3

17th - 23rd November 2003
Panchgani, India

Dear friends,

Our third week started with a video on Mahatma Gandhi's life, whose quote 'Be the Change you want to see in the world' we took on as our Motto. Although it described the events that happened half a century ago, some of the issues it touches upon are very relevant in today's world: communal differences, discrimination, struggle for power and ignorance, but also - how far a vision and a faith can lead. As one of the participants - Kedar from India - said: 'This three hour journey through Gandhi's life ignited my mind towards a dream of a better world, free of poverty, war and hatred.'

Communal fights exist in different parts of India, but we were given hope when we listened to Anees Chishti, his daughter, and Prashant Kothadiya from Pune. Coming from different traditions - Muslim and Jain - they spoke about working together in building partnerships between communities.

Mr. Chishti told us what Islam means to him. We found out that each Muslim has a commitment towards other Muslims, which means care for his economical, educational welfare and spiritual growth!

Mr. Kothadiya mentioned how diversity is sidelined in India, and religion is socialised and utilised for political purposes. The seeds of hatred in India are sown at childhood, and people are divided from each other by so many social concepts such as religion, language, cast, sub-cast, etc. This diversity needs to be embraced. Maybe the solution is finding our Spiritual Identity as all being God's children.

Our last week's conversations continued, taking us straight into 'The heart of transformation'. We've tried to voice some of the issues we're struggling through, like: finding balance between the spiritual and the material, how to live with awkward situations, how to reconcile the personal inner battles with the practice of absolutes. Here is what it meant to Keith, UK:

'The heart of transformation for me has been a process of incremental change inspired by looking at my life through the lenses of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. Although these lenses suggest unachievable perfection, they are a good tool to analyze your life and start the process of change.

Personally I was living a life where I was very angry and consumed by hate for myself and the world. I realised that playing the 'blame game' didn't serve any purpose. I needed to take responsibility for the conflicts I was involved in, especially with my family. Through personal change I have found more happiness with myself, and come to be the kind of friend I was seeking for when I was going through a difficult time.'

According to A. Solzhenitsyn 'Mankind can only be saved if all men are concerned about everything.'

2.2 million people die every year from contaminated water and poor sanitation, which is a major problem in this part of the world. Such figures were drawn to our attention during the environment session, held

by Natasha Davis from Australia. 'It made me aware what a responsibility we all have for the well-being of the planet' said Vuth from Cambodia. Part of our small contribution in caring for the environment was cleaning up the territory of Asia Plateau a week ago.

Personal reflection

Apart from all the exciting events of the AFL2 program, the last 3 weeks brought to me a whole new understanding of parenting. For the first time I felt like walking in my mother's shoes and strangely enough the 'child' was my own mother. She courageously responded to the idea of helping out at Asia Plateau, but neither she nor I could imagine what it would mean for our relationship.

Being in India for the second time, finding myself among old friends, having the advantage of communicating freely with others, it seemed natural that I'd be the one to care for my mum, who is still struggling with her English, who is discovering India and trying out many new things. But as soon as we arrived here, it almost seemed as if our family roles reversed.

The result was unexpected reactions, challenges and questions in me. I say that I love and care, but how does it show in my actions, am I aware of my mum's needs, how do I balance my responsibilities towards her and the program, where is the line between care and control, do I have the courage to say sorry if I'm wrong? This time together really challenged some of my attitudes.

It struck me one day that if I come to share my life story, it would be told differently depending on whether my mum is in the room or not. It was the first sign for me that maybe our relationship is not so great as I had thought it to be. It took some courage to acknowledge this and to discuss it with my mum. We have started sharing our quiet times, which initially seemed totally impossible and crazy. But as we move on, we find new trust building up. While most of AFL2 participants are discovering my mom's secrets of baking delicious cakes, I discover her life and character. And I feel as if some bricks of the wall separating us are crumbling down. Of course, it's a long process, but the first step is what counts.

If you think you have a good relationship with your parents, ask yourselves how much do you know about their lives, their inner struggles, pain and joy. How much do they know about you, your deepest hurts and aspirations? Indeed, often our parents need to know what we appreciate and find difficult in them, just as we need to be heard, understood and cared for.

Liliana Botnaru, Moldova

Smile with us -

It was 5 p.m. and we were all ready to go the villages with the staff from Asia Plateau, who were our host for the night. My host was Kalpana, who, along with her mother Kalabai Kharat, have served our Centre for more than 25 years. The visit made me change what I had learned in school about Maslow's Theory, that basic necessities are to be fulfilled first and then small luxuries. But my hosts had everything starting from TV, loudspeakers, CD player, cable connection, nice furniture, phone but they didn't have a 'toilet'!

We were treated to a really yummy dinner! After the second helping I heard one of my friends, Ngan from Vietnam, say 'Thoda aur dijiye.' Since we were nearly full by that time, to confirm I asked her softly, 'Are you sure that you want some more?' To my great surprise she replied, 'No! No! I can't have more than this'. Her notes from our Hindi lesson were written in a clumsy manner so in a great hurry she mistook 'Nahi Chaiye' with 'Thoda aur dijiye', i.e. 'I want some more', the opposite to what she meant!

Then it was time to sleep. With nine of us on the floor and a cricket telecast between India and New Zealand on TV, it was quite a struggle trying to sleep! A totally new atmosphere, new people around, some men whom we didn't know at all, a red light in front of us so that we didn't feel scared of darkness, somebody snoring and all sorts of peculiar noises, which happened to be chickens locked in baskets.

With all these, I must say that the trip was a really interesting and adventurous one and I am grateful to my hosts for their hospitality, for they tried their best to do everything possible to make our stay comfortable there. It reminds me our Indian culture that says 'Atithi Devo bhava' which means that guests are like our Gods. I hope that someday I could do something for my hosts to show my gratitude.

Bidisha Guha, India

Sad as it was, we had to say good-bye to Amitabha Das, whose father is not well and Will Jenkins, who did an impossible job teaching us to present a message in 30 seconds. We also welcome Naro Thiek from Nagaland, Clara Cheong from Australia as participants, and Peter and Glenys Wood from New Zealand, Howard and Maria Grace from England, Patrick Santa Maria from Malaysia as the support team. Now there are 46 of us on this venture!

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