

a heart for dying children



From left — Karen, Sandra, who died recently, Alan and Abita

Alan Joyce, founder of the Dharma Foundation in Bogotá, has been working with dying children in Colombia for 12 years. The former mechanical engineer and his Colombian fashion designer wife, Monica, have been married for 30 years. Ten years into his Buddhist life he stopped manipulating the Dharma to suit his own ego — “I can cheat on my wife but I’m going to be honest about it because we Buddhists don’t tell lies.” It was around then that his work with dying children began.

You come to a realization that everyone is suffering — the doctors, the mothers, the children — it’s very difficult to say who is suffering more. It’s easy for us to open our hearts to children with tumors and leukemia, but you realize that everybody is in the same situation.

One of the biggest errors, I think, is to compare suffering. It’s easy to say to my 17-year-old daughter, for example, who has just broken up with her boyfriend and is miserable, “Don’t complain so much, it’s natural, it always happens — there are children dying of cancer in the Foundation.” Her suffering however may be equally as great, possibly greater than the children in the Foundation, who may be more prepared for what they are going through.

The Foundation houses 14 children from five to 18 years old. The National Cancer Institute tends to send us teenagers because they are the most difficult age group. The children come from impoverished families outside Bogotá and suffer from cancer, amputations and surgeries. We ‘accompany’ them, take away a little of their suffering and somewhat prepare them for death. Dharma here in the Foundation is life, you don’t have to sit down and meditate on it, it hits you in the face every single day!

The quality of life for many children in the Foundation actually improves with sickness! Before, many did not even have enough to eat and some were even abused by their parents — mostly through violence. Here they never lack food, they share a room, have TV, and they have unconditional love. They can express themselves in any way they want without fear of reprisals.



Preparing the children for death is not classes on death at three o’clock in the afternoons! We take away its mystery by talking openly about it, and often informally. We show that we can control, to an acceptable level, the physical pain, and show them that, up to the minute they stop breathing, they do not have to face anything alone.

The other day I told a young boy who was starting treatment for cancer, “Before you got sick, you were dying, now you have cancer, you are still dying, and when you finish your treatment, you continue to die. What you’re doing now is maintenance — to prolong life as long as possible.” That’s what we all do. I chat with them about death in a natural way. Recently a girl came to sit with me at lunch. “I’ve just been with Jairo,” she said. “Looks like he’s going to die tomorrow — have you see how his skin is?” “Yes, I think maybe you’re right,” I said. And she said, “I think I’ll pass some more time with him this evening,” and carried on having lunch. You take away the mystery of death and you take away a large percentage of the fear.

And many children survive. One girl here had an osteosarcoma in her leg, which got amputated, then metastasis reached one of her lungs, part of which got removed. She came through the sickness, finishing treatment three years ago, and is now studying medicine at university, aged 21. As her family situation makes it difficult to return home, she continues with us in a new project — a house next door to the Foundation where children live who have got over their sickness but who have no families, or they live in war zones, etc., who wish to continue to study. They pay a symbolic amount to live there so they feel they are taking charge of their lives,

and they have to work. Normally we find them jobs and study grants. They get a room and food and we wash their clothes.

I also accompany a lot of adults in their homes, and children from more affluent families, outside my Foundation work.

The logic of the dharma struck me

As an engineer, I have a tendency to look for why things work. Like a TV, I take the teachings apart.

Every morning when I make water offerings, prayers and practices, I have total gratitude to the Dharma because in difficult situations, the teachings have always been there – and the situations are also the teachings!

What I like about the Buddhist teachings, perhaps because I'm a little slow-witted, is that they tell you how. In the Bible it says you have to be patient, to be generous, etc. The Buddhist teachings tell us how. The Bible says you've got to do it because it's God's word, but it doesn't tell you how, in a world where it is so difficult to be patient, so difficult to be generous. I have deep faith, yes, but also the tendency to analyze everything – I don't take anything on blind faith – how many wars and conflicts have there been in the world spurred on by blind faith?

When Sandy, a nine year old, was dying, I was in hospital with her parents. Her mother said to her, "If you have to leave, you can go now, I can't stand to see you suffering like that – I'm

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going to miss you so much." The father started shouting, "Please don't leave, don't go ..." Family started arriving and I thought it better to leave. I had done some practice with her – whispering over and over, "Your breathing is going to stop any minute now, you're going to come face-to-face with God, with Buddha, with Mary, with Jesus," and I said, "You're going to be warm and very comfortable, just stay there," and I repeated it over and over so that's what the children have in their minds when they stop breathing. When she died I did phowa (transference of consciousness at the time of death) and normally after a child dies I find a place to sit – and I try to meditate on what I've learnt from that experience. In this case with Sandy, I came to the conclusion that the closest thing to unconditional love is a mother's love – something very natural in women.

How did I get involved in hospice work?

I realized, after accompanying a team of plastic surgeons who annually perform reconstructive surgery on leprosy patients in

India, that one doesn't have to travel half way around the world to help people. On any corner here in Colombia, in our own homes, you'll find somebody that needs help.

I went to the National Cancer Institute because the



"There is a natural tendency for the children to take care of each other." – Alan Joyce

daughter of someone at my wife's company was there. I was nervous. I am a very protective father – the kind who, when my daughter or son had a cold, would sit by the bed all night with a mirror to make sure they were still breathing! When I saw all the children in pediatrics, there was an atmosphere of total sadness. I thought, "Somebody's got to bring a smile to their faces," and began making the most ridiculous jokes, which the children loved. I was hooked.

For me meditation is indispensable – it is the basis of everything. I think the best preparation for death is meditation. When we meditate, all the influences, the ego, and the attachment that normally affect how we see things, falls away. When we meditate there are moments when we recognize our nature – these are short, at least in my case – but it is an incredibly good feeling. Then I tell the children, "When the moment of death comes, not only does this body – the legs, arms, head – die, but at that moment, all the negative emotions, the egotism, dies as well. What are we left with – our nature – and we've already seen it – what better way to take a load off your backs?"

I think I am the most fortunate person I know. To find the reason why I am here on this earth, and to be able to do it as well with help from everybody, that's the most fortunate thing I can possibly think of. The teachings here are live and direct, and you understand compassion, and you feel and understand generosity. People are so kind when given the opportunity and some guidance.

I spoke to Lama Zopa Rinpoche once. "I really feel sometimes I don't give enough time to devotional practices," I said, and he laughed. "What better devotional practice is there than helping a child who is dying?" he said. ☸

Alan Joyce can be contacted at zugku@yahoo.com