



## healing the scars of sexual abuse

Shortly after VEN. ANET ENGEL'S birth, her mother began to have severe depressions. Anet promised herself that when she grew up she would find out why her mother had to undergo such terrible sufferings and that she would be the one to help her make it go away. She gave up her psychology studies when she came across the Dharma in Italy, where she learnt more about human nature in a 10-day course than in three months at university. She was later to spend many years helping clients who had endured sexual abuse; eventually she would become ordained.

[After training as a social worker] I decided to work with patients from mental hospitals who were trying to reintegrate into society. Many of them had had such difficult family stories, that five years later I changed to work with multi-problem families, who demonstrated dysfunction in a variety of ways.

I came into contact with two sisters who were being sexually abused by their father and all the other men he rented them out to. What struck me as especially destructive with sexual abuse was that it was extremely difficult for these kids to actually say what had happened to them – they felt ashamed and many professionals didn't really want to listen. Unlike physical abuse, sexual abuse does not leave any apparent traces – everything happens hidden under a cover of normality.

We [including some Swiss women who were also interested in the phenomenon] started to train ourselves, learnt from experiences in other countries and built counselling places for the survivors. We also put a lot of effort into educating a broad public, publicly naming sexual abuse for what it is, and showing strategies of how to become more sensitive.

In one such counselling place in Bern, Switzerland, I was employed for 10 years. I worked with grown women (some who were over 60 years old spoke for the first time in their lives about what had happened to them when they were children), with adolescents, youngsters and also with girls aged from three upwards. Most of my clients were between 15 and 25 years old. I offered them regular weekly sessions. They had to accept basic rules – not to deliberately hurt themselves physically, not to deliberately hurt me physically and not to deliberately destroy therapeutic material in the therapy room. Otherwise it would really be their time and up to them what they wanted to make of it. I would be there with them, accompany them, guide them when necessary, and listen.

I've learnt a lot from my clients! They would know and react strongly as soon as they sensed I was not being completely

honest. Sometimes I would tell someone that she would feel better soon because I could not bear to see her suffering. She would become angry, disappointed or blame me when 'soon' did not seem to come. So I learnt not to make any promises that I could not keep and stopped trying to take responsibility for them but instead made them take responsibility for themselves – and showed them that they were capable. The best way to do that was by being very clear and responsible myself.

The most important thing I had to offer was my being there with them as fully present as I could – accepting them, genuinely respecting them and what they had gone through, seeing and acknowledging not only their problems, but also their resources, helping them realize that every single experience in their lives, even the most horrible, was theirs to accept, or to be sad about or to change or to let go of, whatever...but theirs, and setting out clearly and honestly what I had to offer and what my limitations were as well as respecting theirs.

People who have been sexually abused very often lose every bit of their self-esteem, do not have any feeling of worthiness, have lost all trust because in trusting they have been repeatedly hurt. In all the years of being with traumatized people, I am totally convinced that psychological methods can only be of help on the basis of having cultivated a genuine honest relation between client and counsellor.

When I told my clients that I was going to stop working, I was really touched that practically all of them said something like:

"From the moment I came into this room with you, I felt welcome – even though I felt like a piece of shit. And when you were willing to shake hands with me at the end of our first session, after I had told you some of the really disgusting things I had done – I wanted to come back."

I met the Dharma when I was 18 years old. I was introduced to it by Ueli Minder, who had started and taught a drug-prevention program in my school. He had an





open house where lots of young people would come and discuss questions with him about the meaning of life, or difficulties with parents, etc. I asked him once how he could always be so open and present with us and seemingly happy and content with whatever situation. "Do you really want to know?" he asked. "Yes," I said. He showed me his meditation room, and I saw the pictures of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche on the altar – I knew immediately that I wished to meet them.

In 1978 I went to my first Dharma course with Geshe Rabten. At the end of the course he advised us to check thoroughly what we had heard, and forget whatever did not make sense – this is what hooked me and what I had never come across up to that moment. The teachers that I since met all have this genuine interest in sharing their wisdom, knowledge, kindness and compassion in order to help me find my way, and have no interest in my becoming a 'follower.' They still strike me as beings without a gap between what they say and what they are.

My work was a constant teaching on how karma works. It was hard for me not to develop hatred towards those fathers, uncles, brothers and mothers who had so terribly hurt their children. It was necessary for me, in addition to daily practice, to take time off each year for extensive teachings or retreat, to develop compassion for the "bad guys."

Why did I decide to stop? Even though I tried my best, I could see with increasing clarity that my

ability to help others is extremely limited – and that, because of this I could not really keep my balance, did get more and more burnt-out and sometimes just felt frustrated, as the number of clients continually increased, while we got less and less money to do our work.

In my first Kopan course in 1984 a Western nun awakened the strong feeling in me that one day I wanted to become a nun. For many years Lama Zopa Rinpoche thought it would be more beneficial for me to continue my work in Switzerland. When I was 39, Rinpoche said maybe I should consider becoming a nun. I became ordained in November 2000. I have now been living for a few months in Tushita Dharamsala, receiving teachings every day.

The purpose of study is to become more balanced and more stable with what I already know, in order not to get overwhelmed by every difficult situation, in order to turn my belief – in the law of cause and effect, the Four Noble Truths, the Three Principles of the Path, etc., which sometimes is like thin ice, breaking, when I meet with a real challenge and me losing ground, starting to doubt etc, into conviction, which is like strong holding ground from which I can set out to learn and some day understand and integrate the altruistic intention and the nature of reality. The further I progress on the path, the closer I get to be of real help for my fellow sentient beings – and all the way I keep being interested, kind, open and helpful as much as I can. ☸

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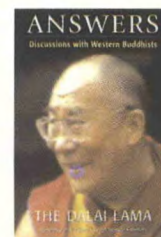
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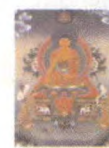
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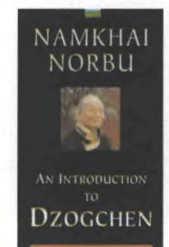
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