

## Alisa Challenger's Report: Introduction to Traditional Medicine in India (April 2011)



**Children of the village, Nuniyes, about a one hour hike from Patti**

My name is Alisa Challenger and I am a pre-medical student graduating from Colorado State University. My goals for volunteering with the CFHI Introduction to Traditional Medicine Program in India were to broaden my understanding of alternative medical practices in urban and rural communities of a developing country in order to see how I could incorporate an open-minded western practice into my professional future.

Ultimately, the education I received during my month in the Introduction to Traditional Medicine Program fulfilled my professional expectations as well as my personal ones, due in part to the invaluable education I received from my host culture, in addition to my experience in a developing world. Although I *expected* to be shocked, both literally and culturally, nothing could have prepared me for the most auspiciously timed lessons of my life. From the experience, I now see my future in medicine focused on public health, as well as service to the underprivileged. I was able to *feel* the reason behind public service, and fully appreciate the nature of the best kind of job satisfaction.

I was fortunate enough to be awarded a partial scholarship from CFHI that covered some of the program cost. Not only was this financially



**Dehradun, lost on our way home from clinic. These children helped us find our way back.**

lucky, but the scholarship also gave me the incentive to take as many pictures, notes, etc. to better appreciate the experience.

Our program consisted of four weeks of rotations. The first week was spent in Dehradun, during which we visited Dr. Prem Nath, an ayurvedic/acupressure/Rekei doctor; Dr. Nanda, a homeopath; and Dr. Nisha Gera, an OB/GYN. The second rotation was in Rishikesh, in which we learned about naturopathic medicine from the doctor at the Swarg Ashram. We also took daily yoga and meditation classes. The third rotation we spent in the Patti Village with Dr. Paul, who runs the CFHI-funded free clinic there. The last week we spent in Dehradun with Dr. Gandhi doing emergency medicine, and again with Dr. Gera.



**Dr. Paul sees children in Nuniyes village**

Looking back over the many journal entries I had on the trip, I came across one that describes the inspiration behind my desire to focus on public health. It came as almost an epiphany during the 12-hour car ride from Dharamsala/McLeod on my first weekend in India:

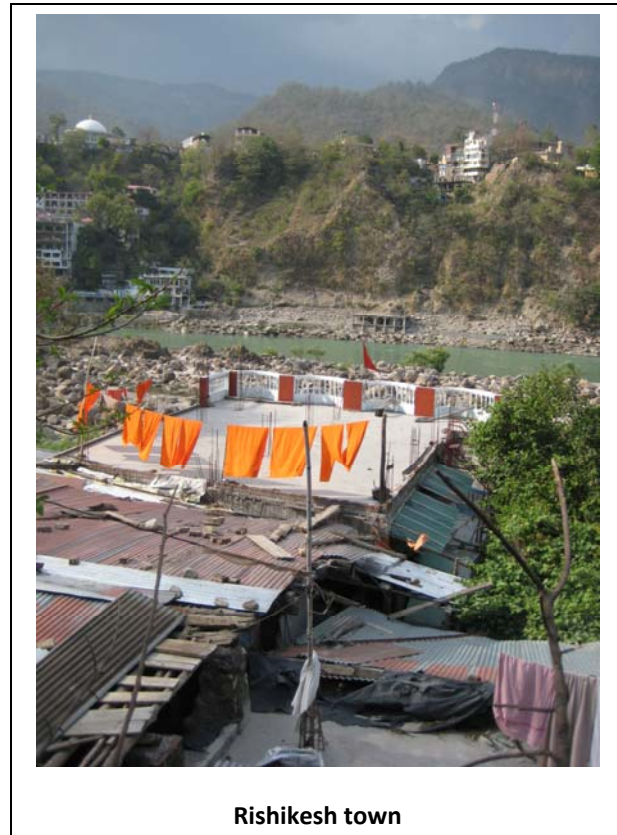
On the drive back to Dehradun from Dharamsala, the daylight illuminated the poverty and grim social conditions of India universally known. I had thought that I had read enough about India, spoke to enough people about their experiences in India, that I had prepared myself as much as I could; but everywhere I turn, everything I experience tells me I was vastly, and overwhelmingly underprepared for the experience of India. I don't think anything could

have prepared me for the emotions and thoughts I have felt coursing through my veins since the moment I arrived here. They have been some of the greatest peaks of positive and the lowest troughs of negative emotion I have felt in my life. At the point where physical exhaustion meets mental exhaustion, I break down, thinking *How can people live like this? How is this a normal, happy life?* I have not even been doing the physical labor that is required simply to survive here, and my distress over the sanitation (or lack thereof) sometimes causes me to question the science I know so well: *How are people not demanding better health code regulations? Better government infrastructure subsidies?*

The answers do nothing to calm my exhaustive concern: *They are used to it all, this has always been the status quo.* On the



**A view of the Ganga, Lakshman Jhula, Rishikesh**



**Rishikesh town**

drive back, I see a group of three children all different ages and all lacking clothes. They are squatting next to a stagnant puddle of water next to the road to drink. Maybe a half a mile upstream, a mound of trash, rotting food, and unknown filth sit in the reservoir that supplies the same puddle. Men stop on the side of the road to urinate anywhere, in water, on trash, or the actual road. Taxi drivers open a bag of chips and throw the bag out the window. Trash cans are few and far between. Cows, holy and reverent creatures in India, roam free and soil any ground lucky enough to receive its excrement. In Rishikesh, a woman selling sweets on the side of the road set up a 10x12 tarp mat on the ground three feet from a fresh cow patty to roll out her dough. A large swarm of flies hover above her kneading hands, some unfortunate ones getting caught

in the motion and dough. The unfortunate children here are ushered into a life sentence of begging or peddling, since no proper occupation, for instance school, is going to provide the

same food or money that begging will. It's hard to resist the desperate and sad, drooping eyes of a rail thin child asking for "10 rupees, madame" when you know that the support of this industry is pretty much guaranteeing them a life below the poverty line, depending on the generosity of other pitying foreigners or wealthy Indians. If the children aren't getting enough food, it's simple to make the conclusion that neither are the animals. It's also natural to come to the next conclusion that spaying and neutering isn't plausible, so packs of jumpy, flea-infested puppies are scattered down every street, every alleyway.

It took my GI system a week to adjust to the food here. There is a constant fog of pollution over Dehradun and the black smoke emanating from all vehicles here is piercing and distressingly potent, irritating my throat, sinuses, and lungs. I returned from McLeod Ganj with what my roommate thought was a tan, but what I coined an "Indian tan." Since the taxi had no AC and the windows were down, a layer of dirt had been deposited on my face and exposed skin. At a low point (after not holding down the coconut rice I had just paid for), I dwelled on all my woes and physical pain, thinking of my mother, my shower, and my bed. I burst out crying in a restaurant

during a meeting with the CFHI group. *How could I have been so wrong about this adventure? What had I gotten myself into?* With a grumbling in my stomach and my eyes throbbing with hot tears, we finished our meal and left the restaurant, soon to be crowded by begging children saying, "Hello. Please." I looked down into the deep, brown pools of pleading eyes of a young girl. I looked to the side of the restaurant where a group of more children in tattered clothing had congregated. They were behaving like normal, happy children: jesting, tagging, laughing, smiling, and hugging.

In such abysmal conditions, and with such difficult roads ahead of them, these children were not dwelling on what they lacked, or how sad it is that they live in such a way. These children were happy children. My silly American habit of selfishly wanting the comforts of an easy life suddenly seemed so frivolous. I always had that to go back to. Random chance had blessed me in the life of America, where being sick and tired were maladies which must instantly be fixed. But for these children, I may never be able to commiserate with their lives of constant and persistent misfortune, illness, and pain. I am feeling this pain, and experiencing



**My roommate, Dr. Nidhi Kansal, takes a house call in Patti village**

this sadness because I am not accustomed to this life, this place. Being in India is a spiritual, physical, emotional, and ideological whirlwind of an journey, that includes the constant low quality of life that every citizen must experience on a daily basis and who do NOT complain but still manage to BE HAPPY. In this way, I have come to fully understand the purest form of joy: joy despite the odds. Happiness is contagious in India. It's an energy that cannot be explained, but must be felt. It is one I don't believe I've ever felt before. After that moment at the restaurant, I began to see the joy everywhere amidst the misery and filth, and it made the minor pain and sadness I felt feel less acute, more obsolete. The silver lining is a cliché phrase that is overused and trite, but the filth here really began to take on a silver lining. The children I saw squatting to the filthy water without clothes or shoes, were smiling and laughing. They were emanating pure Indian joy—that of innocent children playing and stopping for some water to hydrate before running to play cricket. The woman making sweets on the ground next to cow excrement, smiled an earnest smile at me and nodded, saying, “Hello, madame”, not prodding for money or a sale, but simply sharing some of that Indian joy. The jumpy and starving puppies wag their tails with appreciation when I pour some bottled water for them on the sidewalk and they lap it up anxiously. The animals even wear some Indian joy proudly. Neighborhood children visiting my host mom shyly say hello and smile, then willingly allow me to take their picture, since I desperately want to capture some of this joy on camera. But alas, just as words are never enough to convey the feeling or experience here, I am not a good enough photographer to capture it on film. It is simply something that must be experienced. EVERYONE must experience it, and allow it to penetrate their person. If I could take any souvenir home with me, it would be an ounce of the contagious Indian joy, something which is not found in the states and which will ADD years to my life. Here's hoping I catch some of it, its only fair being as how I've caught just about everything else here!



**1 A candid photo during the Patti village health clinic**



**The most adorable children from the village  
Nuniyes**



**Rishikesh, an Indian wedding procession through the  
streets**

The medical experience and knowledge I gained through the CFHI program was priceless. The program was set up such that even my limited training and experience was accommodated to include me in on the same level of learning as the medical students in the program. I was inspired especially by the medical director of our program in Dehradun, Dr. Sanjay Gandhi, who embodied the meaning of service. His life story is an impressive epoch of determination and compassion, which continues to be written and will be written with great splendor. I am proud to have been a part of his story for just the week of our rotation with him.

More than anything, my education came from the country itself. Everything about being in a developing country was character building and humbling to a privileged American such as myself. When I return home after this experience, I will be a changed person. My life will be illuminated in a different light and every moment in it will be precious and will drive me to be a better doctor, as well as a better person. I want to strive to learn and take all I can from my country to share with a country and its people, greatly in need.