

SOUNDS OF THE WORLD

Our Readers Respond

Zen And Family Life

This Is Not an Austere Setting

By Carol Duermeier

The Kansas Zen Center has been a residential Zen Center for nearly six years. Now it is leaving home, getting its own apartment, and moving into a non-residential abode.

My husband Dennis, our son Ian, and I moved into KZC on May 1, 1983. We were the first residents. Ian's first birthday was five days later. We celebrated. We invited Grandmas and Grandpas up to the big old run-down house on the hill and they said, "Happy Birthday", and, "It sure needs painting", and "I'll give you five years until you burn out."

But, we were enthusiastic. We knocked down walls, sewed curtains, stayed up late at night, woke up early in the morning, had our first family fights, said, "This is good teaching", and tied the family knot tighter.

We really did not know the other people who moved in with us. But, sangha is Zen family, and just as siblings do not choose one another, yet there is something "familiar" about them, so it is with members of sangha. And the familiar thing is Zen practice. The practice gives us rules to live by. That helps us to care for one another. It's the glue.

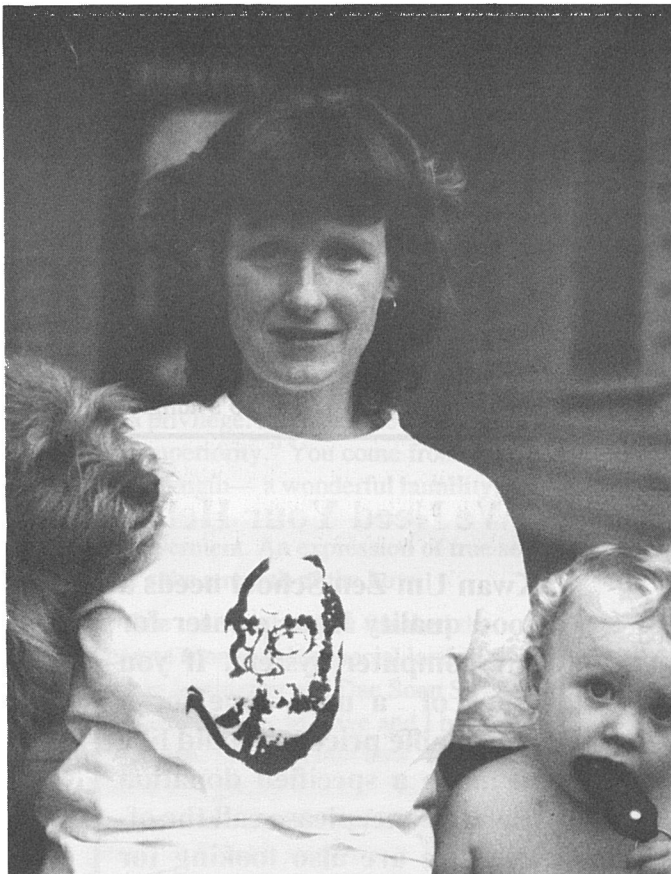
Not everyone who has lived here has ended up being friends, but there is a depth to the relationships that is different than that of an acquaintance. Perhaps, it is because one views the vulnerable side of a person as well as the public face. We see each other day in and day out, in sickness and in health, happy and sad. I remember vividly a fight that I had with another resident. We were yelling at the top of our lungs at one another, looking each other straight in the eye. Then, a surge of love rose from and warmed my very center. I have never felt anything like it before or since.

Perhaps, there are no accidents. Rarely has anyone been turned down who wished to live at KZC. Twice, people were literally walking down the street while we were in the front yard and they asked if they could live here. Yes, yes. Gifts from the Gods. The Zen Center breathes; the rooms empty, the rooms fill, and every one brings their teaching. We all mesh together in a perfect way, cleaning each other as so many potatoes in a pot, smoothing the rough edges, polishing the jewels.

Children in the Zen Center are a wonderful part of the process. They make noise, make messes, make merry, make grown-ups someday. They pick up the pace of the place. They race up and down stairs. They dance around. And, if there is a moktak (the wooden percussion instrument used for chanting) to be found, they bang on it. The world is their playground. To their parents, all of this is familiar music. But, if one is not used to the tone

of children or more accustomed to privacy, it can be jarring.

My husband and I have three children now. Two were born at the Zen Center. This has been the only living situation that they have known. They probably think that everyone lives this way. They are not shy with strangers and Ian's first grade teacher recently told me that he is unusually accepting of new people and situations. The Morning Bell Chant filters into their ears as they sleep. Perhaps it enters their dreams.



Carol and Friends

Many people in other parts of the world live a bit like this—in some sort of an extended family situation. In the United States, families are often isolated and unconnected by our restless, mobile life styles. I feel very fortunate that my children have had the opportunity to have lived with sixty different "aunts, uncles, and cousins." These people have taught them far more than Dennis and I would ever be able to teach them alone. A special way to tie their shoes, songs that I had never heard before. And the children have shared their joy, their innocence, and their genuine need.

Children are great Bodhisattvas. They teach patience. They are where we all have been. Sometimes Ian and Thomas dance around and sing, "Hap-chang-deet-dah." That is how chanting sounds to them. There used to be a little pane of glass missing from the dharma room door. It was just the right size and in the right place for Thomas to fit through. He delighted in crawling into the middle of practice. Tigris, a nineteen month old girl who lives here, sat at the top of the stairs the other night after practice. She ever so solemnly held in hand a stick and metal bowl, and chanted with her heart and

soul. Lillian, at five months old, smiles her greeting to everyone who comes here.

The kitchen is a center of the Zen Center. It is our version of gathering at the well. After practice, people drink tea there. It is the place where all the heart-felt conversations and fights seem to take place. It is the place where we see our karma: How diligent or spaced-out are we with the dishes? Do we sneak bites of other people's food? Do we clean up someone else's dirty stuff when we see it, walk by it or make a conspicuous sculpture of it? The kids are ever present there. They run about chasing balloons and sit on peoples laps to have stories read to them. They tell jokes. They leave rice on the chairs and fingerprints on the refrigerator door. Once we allowed them to draw on the refrigerator with a magic marker. Soon, everyone in the house had taken a turn and it was covered with designs until we scrubbed it for the upcoming retreat.

Last Easter we colored eggs and had an egg rolling contest where contestants, on hands and knees, pushed eggs across the porch, over the threshold, down the hall through the living room, to the finish line at the kitchen door. I doubt that it would have happened if only adults had been present.

This is not an austere setting. There are toys in the yard, dinosaurs in the bath tub, and children's voices can be heard at most times. Oftentimes, people move out, or decide not to move in because of the children. It is an adjustment for each of us to know our boundaries. People generally don't know when it is appropriate to say "no" to someone else's kids. For a long time, I couldn't correct my own kids in front of people without my "back seat driver" listening through what I supposed were the other party's ears. So, my scolding was one step removed and therefore ineffective. I would scold as I thought I should and not with an honest, unbridled response.

Our family has always left during retreats. This has been the most difficult part of living here. I would spend all day trying to put the house in order as the kids came along behind me trailing toys. I would feel this sense of pressure because all of a sudden the house was supposed to look like a "real Zen Center", devoid of toys in the house and yard. The kids would pick up on my sense of tension. They also must have had their own ideas about leaving home and a multitude of new people staying in their rooms. So maybe they would get out extra toys just to stake a claim on their space.

With each child it has become a little trickier living in the Zen Center. With the advent of my third pregnancy, we decided that it was time for a change. I used to cry when people moved out sometimes. Now, I barely bat an eye. But the Zen Center's leaving is stirring my soul. I will truly miss the adventure of living in this situation. It has been a wonderful place for the birth and cultivation of friendship. It has been a great Bodhisattva teacher.

Carol Duermeier lives with her husband, Dennis, a Bodhisattva Monk, and their children, Ian, Thomas, and Lillian in Lawrence, Kansas.

Family Dharma

By Mara Genthner

No time to write for reams and reams
Amidst the children's laughs and screams.
No time to retreat and seek satori
With shopping, planning..."Mom, read me a story."
No time to chat with friends of Dharma
Too busy burning "family" karma.
No time to chant and read the sutras
When faced with hungry Shariputras.
No time for combat with the master.
Honored guests are coming, the house—
disaster.
But Ah! When late at night and all is quiet,
Sitting with the family near.
Searching for this Profound Dharma.
Is it anywhere but here?

Mara Genthner a native Kentuckian, lives with her husband and three children, ages 3, 5, and 15, at the Lexington Zen Center where she is director. Mara works part-time as a clinical psychologist while her youngest children attend a nearby Montessori pre-school. The Genthner family devotes many weekends to enjoying and developing Furnace Mountain Zen Center, an hour's drive from Lexington.

Family Zen

by Jerry Ashmore

I have practiced Zen diligently for ten years. I do not live near a Zen Center, although I get into Chicago twice a month for practice with the Boltasa Zen Group under the guidance of Hong Son Sunim. The essence of practice for me is to "see things clearly and to allow the needs of others to form my life."

The natural environmental conditions that prevail in family life prod us towards the realization of nonself and great love for all beings. My wife and I differ in many ways. This fact naturally leads to tensions. Correct practice is to drop opinion, speculation and judgment and perceive the situation "just like this." These points of contention are the fuel for clear seeing into the nature of suffering and the interdependence of all relationships. Moment to moment awareness is necessary to maintain a healthy relationship with one's spouse or "significant other." From this understanding flows "great love" and Bodhisattva action. This is summed up in the words "allowing the needs of others to form our lives." These are just words. We must tune in and do it. Our Ego screams, "I want this, I don't want that." All this becomes quite clear with practice.

In family life there is no end to the opportunities for this type of practice, no end to the possibilities of understanding this situation right now, no end to sacrificing desire for the needs of others. If you don't believe this, try raising a 14-year-old in this modern society. This poem came in meditation several years ago:

Sitting quietly
Watching thought come and go
Allowing the needs of others to form our lives.

Jerry Ashmore lives with his family in Lake Station, Indiana.