

Family Practice

An Interview with Barry Briggs by Pamela Gang Sherman

Barry Briggs is director of Dharma Sound Zen Center in Seattle. He is married to Ellen Ziegler. Their daughter, Susannah, is eight years old.

Pamela Gang Sherman: Barry, would you come at the first question backwards? How did practice affect your parenting?

Barry Briggs: I didn't see my daughter very much during the first four years of her life. I had a job which usually took 70-80 hours a week, minimum 60; I was an executive at Microsoft. I saw the family on the weekend, sometimes, and was usually too tired or distracted to be there fully. At that time, I thought that was fine. I liked my work. My wife's concern that I wasn't spending enough time with the family seemed irrelevant to me.

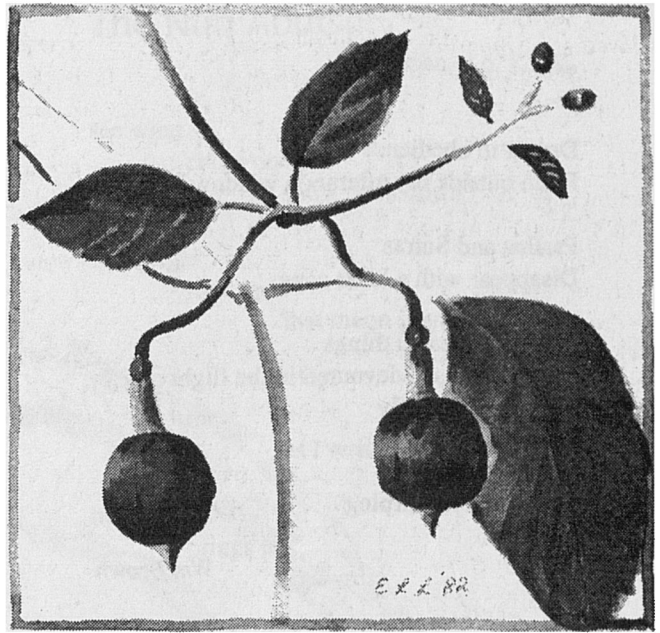
Then in 1990, my best friend said, "What would it take to get you to go to a Zen retreat?" I basically went out of friendship for him. I didn't have any big question that I needed to address. During that first retreat, nothing too dramatic happened. But I was able to spend some time with my life, and it became clear that some things needed attention. Up until that retreat it was as if my life were a nice, fancy car—comfortable, fast, stylish, smooth-driving. But in the course of the retreat, I had the chance to pop open the hood of the car and things were not so nice inside. The fan belt was coming apart, the wiring was frayed—some work had to be done. I realized that although my life looked fine from the outside, on the inside it was terribly unbalanced. One of the imbalances was that I was not involved in raising my daughter.

One year later, I quit Microsoft. I'm now a marketing consultant, and I work as much or as little as I want. I can go to retreats. Most importantly, I am involved in my daughter's life—I just dropped her off at school. My family situation is much better; though I didn't think anything was particularly wrong before I started practicing.

For me, practicing has made it possible to begin functioning more correctly in my life. It hasn't been easy: as my center began to get strong, everything in my life was called into question. After I left Microsoft, my wife and I separated for one year to make adjustments in our relationship. There was no way these could be made when we were still living together. It was like taking the car into the garage for major servicing. Now we are back together and even though that year was hard on our daughter, she has benefitted from it; I can see it in her behavior. If we hadn't separated, we probably would have ended in divorce by now. And that would have been really hard on our daughter.

PGS: How do you share practice with your daughter?

BB: My daughter is not exposed to my concrete practice because I do it before she wakes. Our family says a blessing before meals that I found in one of Robert Aitken Roshi's books. Susannah has images of Kwan Seum Bosal in her room. She also knows that chanting Kwan Seum Bosal will make the world a better place and she likes doing it with me and at ceremonies at the Zen center. But I do not think she actually does it on her own. My wife is a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and her group meets at our house once a week. My daughter likes to practice with them and she knows all the chants. Even if she doesn't practice with them, she likes to be in the same room with them playing with toys. She always comes to the various ceremonies at the Zen center; she especially likes the kido chanting and hearing the stories



during the talks. We tell and read stories specifically for the kids at our ceremonies.

PGS: How does your sangha support your needs as a parent?

BB: We have a really child-oriented sangha. It started as residential, but then people had families. Most of the long-time students have families with children and virtually all the kids come to the ceremonies. Some of the "kids" are adults and their parents have brought them to our "Introduction to Zen" workshops. Kids are particularly welcome at ceremonies; we'll usually have half a dozen from ages four to ten. So I think many of the kids feel like they're part of the sangha and this supports the families. Our ceremonies are always followed by potluck dinners, so the kids get to spend time in the community. The kids really seem to like that. There's been some talk lately about starting a Sunday School one day each month—but our center has taken on a very active schedule this year, and we may need more administrative volunteers before a Sunday School is possible.

We have sometimes called our retreats "family-style" retreats. We hold retreats on Vashon Island in Puget Sound off Seattle, so there's not much coming and going; when you're there, you're there. In the past when people have brought kids, the parents and even non-parents have shared in child-care. People's situations have changed in the last couple of years, so families aren't coming so much anymore. But our sangha is very welcoming of kids—and parents.

Not everyone in the sangha is a parent and some non-parents sometimes struggle to keep their focus with kids around. Kids are always tugging at our center—sometimes they can pull us off our center, sometimes this makes our center become stronger.

At Kyol Che this year, I asked Jane McLaughlin, who was leading it, about the traditional Buddha story. Did Buddha really have to leave home, his family? Jane's really coming into her own as a teacher. She said, "Yes! You just be homeless—have a homeless mind. That doesn't mean you have to leave home." That's really true—we must cultivate a homeless attitude, especially with children and family.

PGS: Thank you Barry.

Pamela Gang Sherman lives in Gold Hill, Colorado with her husband and two year old son. ☺