

Family



Tom Campbell

The one moment that before it we were going this way and after it we were going that way. In this mystery, everything is out there from the first, but you don't realize it.

—Tom Spanbauer

In the City of Shy Hunters, 2001

As Zen students, we embrace change every moment. In family life, change is constant: cleaning up piles of toys and clothes, agreeing on meals, and making decisions. Being in family requires a huge don't know mind. The requirement to be completely flexible ranges from the simplest tasks to more momentous surprises.

In the June of 2000, it came as a complete surprise when my wife Stephanie announced she was pregnant with our third child. At age 47, I had deferred the vasectomy appointment, leaving the door cracked to a major twist in fate.

With a sinking feeling, I contemplated the losses. First, it was the loss of freedom. Second, was the all-consuming tiredness and years of diapers. Third, was old age. It didn't help when my son Corey promptly informed me that at age 65, the new child would still be living at home with us. He of course would be long gone.

Slowly, Stephanie and I began to dig into the fears of what a third child would bring. It was not just coping with the load of another child—it was our own difficulties and relationship. Our Zen practice helped us to

delve deeper into our direction, trust and vulnerabilities. After all, this child growing in her belly had cleared all kinds of hurdles to get here and there was a purpose in being nested with our family.

We began to see the true gift that was presented to us—our relationship grew more powerful and intimate as never before. The priority of working the intense jobs of the past twenty years began to recede as I opened up to the opportunity to embrace the strength and complexity of family.

When the baby's birth was past due, our family had a welcoming ceremony of chanting and encouraging words to bring him into the world. With the right signal, Nicolas was born at home the next morning on February 22, 2001—a beautiful sunny day with his whole family at his side. What was originally an unconscious “mistake,” had become a wonderful awakening of love and conscious intention.

At mid-year, juggling three jobs and three kids, I decided to cut my work to part-time and build a home office. One morning after the kids and Stephanie went off to our school, I was practicing Zen in the living room where Nicolas

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[Amy]

Something over here
Something over there
The sky helps me
The wind helps me
If it's not
In the rustling leaves
Where is it?

[John]

Vast cloudless sky
Is not sky
Deep still ocean
Is not ocean
Clouds, waves
Embrace them
Get wet! Get wet!

*[poems at a retreat]
Ken Kessel, JDPSN*

Kyol Che

was born. I asked myself: What is my biggest challenge? How do I find this big “don’t know” in every moment? How can I be the best father and husband in this family?

After sitting, I was thinking about Zen Master Ji Bong’s five principal aspects of Zen training: finding our direction; cleaning our karma; focusing our attention; expanding our “generosity of spirit”; and, wisdom training. I realized I had to take the step of deepening my practice. Having never had the inclination to go off and do a 100-day Kyol Che, I had to figure out how to do it at home, with the family.

I decided at that moment to do my own family Kyol Che. After a repentance ceremony, I designed a do-able yet flexible schedule to fit in with family life: managing the household duties with three sons, a wife who had started a school, and my own part-time work. In essence, my other half-time job for the next 100 days was to be my practice and work with my questions. I set up practice for three times a day: morning for bows and sitting until Nicolas woke up—which was frequent; mid-day for long sittings; and night for a sitting period when everyone was in bed—usually at 11:00 pm. My work period involved diapers, lunches, shopping, cleaning, and outside for building a new garden space for spring.

More important than just the amount of sitting time I got, was bringing practice energy into all of my activities whether it being putting messes away, dealing with hurt feelings and anger, or coping with multiple conflicting needs. It was the challenge of sustaining a seamless, moment-to-moment awareness of change. The family Kyol Che provided new insights into the connection of all the different parts of my life.

Just before my 100 days ended, Nicolas turned one and it felt like my life had turned 360 degrees. And I realized another 100 days began—and another 1000 years.

The family Kyol Che should be another of our practice forms. For many of our families, it is a most focused and consuming effort: how to be fully engaged with our Zen practice without leaving home? Deepening our practice through family and relationships is a powerfully rich task. The ability to sit down in the middle of your life is invigorating and challenging. I encourage others to structure your own family Kyol Che.

Tom Campbell is a senior dharma teacher at the Dharma Sound Zen Center. He has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen since 1977. He and his wife Stephanie, and sons Corey, Lucas, and Nicolas live in Seattle.



[Brad]

Dragon’s breath
Freezes in the snow
Ice lion
Melts in the sun
Passing through a
Valley of ghosts
Raindrops splatter
On Auburn Street

[Kuen]

Look with your ears
Listen with your eyes
Can the nose
Deceive the tongue?
Unhindered by the senses
Great compassionate dragon
Soars silently
Whoosh!