

I'm Breathing—Are You?

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It began as a quiet, peaceful day, as mornings with mothers and children at home often begin. But as the day goes on, the activity and energy of the household increases. Grandmother comes to visit, friends come to play with treasured toys, tiredness comes on and hunger appears. So, he loses it. Five years old and screaming, a full-blown temper tantrum. Grandmother (my mother) begins getting uncomfortable with his behavior, saying, “If he doesn’t stop screaming, I will need to go home.” This was the beginning of her four-day visit. She lives three hours away.

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I lead my child into our little at-home meditation room. The room is bare and full of space—loving, attentive, nonjudgmental space. It has been furnished over time with breath and posture, with attention and chanting. I sit with him on a pile of bed pillows and hold the flailing, screaming mind for ten minutes, for twenty minutes, for thirty minutes. What a meditation retreat! How long will this mind go on? I hang in, mindful of my breath, posture and body sensations, mindful of us both. Staying with my breath, I keep an upright posture and quietly chant *Kwan Seum Bosal*. (This is a Korean Zen chant that invokes love and compassion. I could have chanted Coca-Cola. It is the relaxed mother in me that is chanting.) Finally, at sixty minutes, the flailing quiets and disappears; the mind of smiles and hugs and cuddles appears. We sit quietly breathing together.

Gram is still here.

A week later the screaming mind appears again in my five-year-old. This time he takes me by the hand and leads me into the safe space. On this day the screaming mind only needed ten minutes. And the next time only four. And the next time only . . . Now, at eighteen years old, when this young adult/child who knows me so well sees any tension in my face, he lovingly says, with a relaxed, strong posture, full of confidence, and with a smile, “I’m breathing—are you?”

Parenting is challenging. Our children cry. Our children throw temper tantrums—in supermarkets, in quiet spaces, in the most embarrassing of places. Our children whine, fight, say sassy things. They push our buttons.

They want dinner when we’re not ready to make dinner, and they don’t want dinner when it is ready. Our children want one more story, just when we are beat, exhausted and need to do just a few more things before hitting the sack ourselves. Our children look into our eyes and with the sweetest of faces say, “Mommy will you play with me?” while we are in the middle of something—whatever it is—and it’s hard to let go of what we’re doing, or it’s not appropriate to let go of what we’re doing. Perhaps dinner is burning and the phone is ringing and someone is at the door while at the same time our children want our attention—and they want it *right now!*

We want the best for our children, our families, ourselves; we want family life to be peaceful and happy. But family life is often uncomfortable and filled with intense feelings. The question is: What do we do with this discomfort? What do we do with our feelings? How do we relate to this strain of wanting something other than this?



Many of us have come to expect family life to look like images from *Martha Stewart Living*. Magazine pictures begin to seem like the norm. If our life doesn’t look like that, we think something is wrong. The few of us who do have the Martha Stewart house realize that something is missing. We spend much of our time and energy trying to get it all together. We put a lot of time into our makeup, but our faces have frowns; our clothing is well thought out, but our posture is bent over; our kitchens are big and glamorous, but the warmth of the hearth is missing. We have romanticized the material world, thinking that it brings happiness. We are surrounded by messages from

the media that tell us, if we have this or that, we will have it all. But what is it all? Do we take the time to ask ourselves what it is that we are *really* looking for?

The simple answer is we're looking for happiness. We have come to believe that happiness will come from stopping the crying child, the temper tantrum, the whining, the sassy talk, the loud music. We try to avoid pain, and we seek comfort—often by acquiring more and more of something, anything—instead of wanting, accepting, appreciating and receiving what we actually have.

There is another way. As a longtime student and instructor of Zen and mindfulness, and the mother of two sons, I have found certain Buddhist teachings and practices to be extremely helpful in working with the inherent challenges and discomforts of raising children. In particular, the core Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths (I call them the Four Precious Truths) and the practice of meditation—in the midst of regular, everyday life—have guided and supported me through the parenting years. These teachings have no religious boundaries; they are remarkably universal—mothers of any background can draw on them for insight and guidance. Meditation and the Four Noble Truths point us in the direction that we all long for as human beings on this planet together; they point us in the direction of freedom from suffering.



The Four Noble Truths of Parenthood

Asked to give a talk after his enlightenment, the Buddha chose for his first discourse what has come to be known as the Four Noble Truths, or as I like to say the Four Precious Truths. *Precious* because they offer a direct and well-worn path to true happiness. This talk was given on Vulture Peak in India in sixty century BCE. These ancient truths are relevant today in 2011. Following is part of an essay written for parents bringing these Four Precious Truths into everyday life with children. Even if we are not parents, as Zen students we can relate this to our

own lives if we think of “mother” as Zen practitioner and “child” as the humanness in all of us. Zen Master Uchiyama, in *Opening the Hand of Thought*, says, “To be a true adult means to treat each moment as our child.”

1. Parenthood will always include discomfort and pain.

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is that life often fails to meet our hopes and expectations. As parents, we face this essential fact when our children cry, lose a favorite toy, feel left out, get sick. When pain arises, more often than not we get tight, we turn off, we resist. We try to push it all away. Many mothers think that if they are “good mothers” their children will not be uncomfortable, will not cry, will not feel angry, will not have any real problems. But the first Noble Truth of Buddhism reminds us that difficulty and pain will always be part of life, whether we are young or old, rich or poor, whether we are the haves or the have nots.

2. Suffering is caused by wanting life to be other than the way it is.

Suffering arises when we want something other than what we are presented with. And, of course, we often want something other than what we get. Our children are crying, and we want them to be smiling. They are throwing a temper tantrum in the grocery store, and we want them to be cute and make it easy for us to do our shopping. Our child wets the bed or the house is a mess, and we yell out of frustration.

The way we usually try to find happiness—by controlling or forcing the situation to be the way we want it to be—is, in fact, the route to more suffering. Of course, we want peaceful situations, happy children, a clean house. But if this is not the reality, how do we deal with it? How do we relate to the inherent challenges, frustrations and pain of daily life with children? So often we create more unnecessary suffering by insisting that our children be different from who they are, that this moment be different than it is. We create more suffering when we try to ignore the pain, the discomfort, or when we get angry at it. In short, whenever we try to get rid of what is, we get into trouble.

3. Freedom from suffering is possible.

The third Noble Truth is fairly simple. Since we know the cause of suffering (wanting things to be other than they are), we can find a solution. There is a way out of this trap. Then we ask, “What is the way out of suffering?”

How can we create true happiness instead of being led down the old, worn path of creating more suffering?

4. The way out of suffering is learning to be with life as it is and making that our practice.

More traditionally, the fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism outlines a specific way out of suffering known as the Eightfold Path (right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation). In broad terms, the Eightfold Path consists of powerful daily practices for learning to live in harmony with life as it is, rather than constantly trying to force life into being what we want it to be. Parenthood provides countless opportunities to do just that—to drop our expectations, our hopes, our preconceptions, and to learn to be with life just as it is, in *this* moment.

The first step is to become fully aware of what *is*. For example, I am in the supermarket and my child is crying. Embarrassment arises within me, the look of the woman next to me suggests to me that I am committing a mortal sin by having a screaming child. I feel tightness in my chest. I hear the voice in my head that says my child shouldn't be screaming!

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This is my experience; this is the pain of *this* moment. I breathe and take a moment to notice my thoughts, feelings, physical sensations. I let them in. This is what is. You might ask how I can do this in the middle of such a situation, feeling harassed and under pressure. It takes practice and courage and faith. The more we do it, the more we open to the fullness of the moment, the more we know in our mind and body that it works. It doesn't take long before the situation starts to shift. We begin to feel a little space, and coolness arises. Then from a calmer, more balanced place, where we are aware of what is and accept what is, we find that we know what to do. We know how to set limits for our child or we know that we must let go of our own expectations. We act with greater compassion and wisdom for all.

Too often, when the going gets tough with our children, we try to escape our reality. We lose our courage to live in the moment. When our feelings start to intensify, we try to run away from them by blaming the situation on someone else, usually someone closest to us like our spouse or our children. As strange as it sounds, if we open to discomfort and experience 100 percent, then we experience freedom, liberation, true love.

By opening to the moment, we are able to slow down and breathe into the middle of our discomfort. We are able to be with our children, see their discomfort fully, see their pleasure fully, smell the flowers, really see the smiles on their

faces. We notice the I-want-a-perfect-child dream, the I-want-a bigger-house dream, the I-want-you-to-be-other-than-you-are dream. By noticing the dream, we acknowledge it; by acknowledging it, we sometimes don't have to act on it. The essential point is that the way out of suffering is to practice accepting what is—accepting the whole realm, accepting discomfort, ours, theirs—accepting it all.

Putting the Teachings into Practice

As mothers, how do we use the Four Noble Truths to help us to become more present with our children? How do we start to live in the real moment right here, right now, rather than in the dream, whatever dream it is? The idea of living in the moment is simple, but attaining it is not so easy. Old habits die hard—old patterned ways of being, of doing things, of living life. To change these old habits, we need to practice. We need to practice making a choice that is not based on feelings of fight-or-flight, not trying to change what is, not trying to control the situation, but rather by choosing to live with discomfort. So how do you actually do this in the real world, in daily life? How do you turn this vision of wakeful parenting into a reality? In Zen, we begin with the body.

Posture

In Zen, proper meditation posture is the basis of enlightenment—some say it's all you need. What is proper posture for the practice of parenthood? It is to stand erect in the middle of life, with dignity, grace and an open heart. The practice is to do this at the kitchen sink, behind the wheel of the car, pushing the grocery cart, changing diapers. The other choice is to stand rounded over, chest hollowed in as we sink in and try to cover or hide our pain, oftentimes subconsciously. If we stand straight, or sit upright, with shoulders back, chest and heart open, head upright, we automatically become more aware and awake.

In traditional Zen meditation, proper posture also includes how we hold our faces. Zen practitioners are sometimes instructed to do sitting meditation with a slight smile on their faces. Not a fake, wide smile, but a gentle half-smile. A simple practice for mothers is to bring this kind of smile into the daily life of parenting.

Many of us have always wanted to be a mother. We knew that this would involve making dinner for our families, changing diapers, getting up early and so on, and yet here we are making dinner and wishing that we

were somewhere else. “Oh, the sunny, warm Caribbean . . .” Yet this same exact experience, including the Caribbean dream, can change from an expression of our suffering into a moment of true happiness if we put a small smile on our faces. It is that simple. The same exact scenario of wanting to escape from our lives can bring us happiness if we are fully present to it, aware of the longing, aware of exactly what this present moment brings. Doing so, we become less attached and have more distance, seeing this scenario as manifesting on its own. The practice of the half-smile takes the ego out of the situation, adds some space, brings gentle awareness of what is. Try it. Change a messy diaper mumbbling, grumbling, complaining—then add a smile, being aware of it all. This small, relaxed smile can make a surprisingly big difference.

The Bell of Attention

Ring a bell in the home is a wonderful way to remind us to breathe, straighten our posture and come back to the present moment. Find a bell that is attractive and easy to ring. Create a special table that invites attention, presence and respect as the setting for the bell. This table could include seasonal flowers or objects that your children might collect, such as horse chestnuts or acorns. This should not be a place of forgetfulness, but a place that is alive with change. You could add a frame to display school papers for a few days at a time. Place the bell on the table so that it invites people to ring it.

Anyone in the family—child or adult—may ring the bell at any time. When the bell is rung, everyone stops what they are doing and is aware of three breaths (and perhaps the parents remember to smile). This bell can give children a wonderful sense of power. They can do something that makes everyone stop—for a positive reason. Children are sensitive, more so than we realize. When they need attention they ring this bell and sometimes their need will be satisfied by taking three breaths . . . sometimes.

Knowing that this is your direction, your children may start to notice when you are stressed and may know that if you raise your voice, it's because you've temporarily lost your openness, not because they are bad. They may also see when they are not acting compassionately and may develop a skill for coping with their own stressful situations—breathing

before an exam, straightening their posture as they get up in front of the class while giving a report, taking a quiet moment before a foul shot in front of the whole school.

As mothers, we must make a conscious choice about how we want to live. The swirl of society is rushing around us. Do we want to live in a dream, or do we want to experience reality? As we experience what it really means to be a mother, we begin to connect to all mothers, for we all want to end suffering and find true happiness for ourselves, for our children, for all beings. I call this realizing “mother’s mind.”

As we learn through our experience what it means to be a loving, compassionate mother, we encounter each situation as our child. Using the resources of the present moment, we become fulfilled and truly happy even as we face our biggest challenges, because we know that this, too, is part of being a mother in this universe. As we practice on this path of awareness, we expand our love to include more and more of the pleasures and pains of what it means to be human. This is the way things are as a parent.

Motherhood is the perfect path for spiritual practice, for enlightenment. It puts us right in the gut of this life: we love our children to death, we want the very best for them. We do so much for them, making great efforts to get them what we think they need. But what our children really need is for their mothers to be present with them. You can give them the tiniest of birthday cakes, the smallest of presents, and if it is done with real attention and wakefulness, what could be better?

And when they cry—over the loss of a toy or the loss of a friend—what is it that they really want? Yes, they want particular things, this or that, but on a basic level they want their mothers to be present with them while they cry. They want a mother who can stand in the middle of chaos and breathe, and have a slight smile on her face, because chaos is the way it is. So please be present in it, and give your children what they—and you—really want: the great open question, full of wonder, curiosity, surprise, asking, “right now, *what is this?*” ♦

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