

The Treasure So Precious, There's No Word for It:
A Conversation with Amy Chua on the Intimate Practice of Tiger Parenting
(extended interview)

B: I write a column in a Hudson Valley arts magazine called Flowers Fall: Field Notes from a Buddhist Mom's Experimental Life.

A: I love it! So that's your regular column's name?

B: Yes.

A: That's fantastic, and are you Buddhist?

B: I am.

A: Wonderful, wow.

B: Yes, my husband and I are Zen Buddhists, we have a five year old daughter, and I have been writing the column pretty much since she was born. I write personal essays mostly about how I am not a natural-born mother, and this has been very difficult, and a big leap for me, and so I am writing a lot about my parenting life as a practice, and trying to understand the mind, the heart, the agony and the ecstasy, if you will.

A: Wow, a totally different perspective. How fascinating, how that dovetails with "tiger parenting" is really interesting. Kind of the opposite...

B: Well, you'd think, but this is what is so interesting for me because....well, let me ask you this: why do you say it sounds like the opposite of "tiger parenting?"

A: Well, I don't really believe it's the opposite. I mean, I don't know you at all, but what I was thinking was I actually started off incredibly over-confident, and I didn't think parenting was hard. I sort of thought, unlike you who thought you weren't born a natural parent, I sort of thought I was, and I kind of got my comeuppance, and had all my questioning, so it was like a reverse process of what you describe. I bet it is not the opposite at all, to the extent that I know anything about Zen Buddhism. The last lines of my book are, in some ways, about how to live a fulfilling life, and that's what it's about for me, too. It's just not so easy for any of us to figure out how to do that, and to have our kids live the best lives. It's much more complicated than you'd think.

B: It is. I first want to say that I read the excerpt of your book in Wall Street Journal when it came out, and followed the whole media drama with you, even wrote about you in my column, and I have heard you say that you have learned so much about the media through this whole process. And woa....now that I've actually read the book, what a racket it's been!

A: I have to tell you, I am just barely restraining myself. I am trying to be big about it, but it's really wearing on me. I thought the second time around [for the paperback] would be better, but I went on the Today Show and again! I think I'm too old for this. I am trying to be gracious, but it's so frustrating, being interviewed over and over about a book I didn't write.

B: And I think that what you are talking about is so important. Americans, myself included, love to talk about parenting; we're really in a moment of obsession about this. Parenting hasn't always even been a word. Now it's turned into this strange thing as if it's a thing one does instead of just living your life.

A: Right. Part of it of course is the luxury. One thing I noticed is that in China, now for the first time they have money, and they are starting to think about parenting. It's a luxury we have when it's not just about survival. And I love what you said (and I'll stop whining), but I have also heard from so many wonderful people, and I feel like people out there want to have

a more elevated conversation, a more thoughtful conversation where we're not just throwing rocks at each other. But every time I see something on TV, it's all back to burning stuffed animals [which she threatened to do if her daughter didn't get a piece on the piano]....it's such an important topic, and we're just stuck in the muck.

B: I'm very frustrated by it. I am doing my own little thing here in the Hudson Valley and I am so glad that you agreed, or your publicist agreed, to talk to me because what I am trying to do is make this a real conversation.

A: Thank you. I actually do look over things and I said first is there is anyone who sounds thoughtful and like they are actually going to read the book, then I want to do it. You might be surprised by how many people that cuts out. That's another statement about America, too. It's a lot of work to actually have to read something!

B: Your book is not a lot of work to read, I have to say. I read it in one sitting, and really loved it, and I am telling everyone they need to read it, and it's bringing up such important material. So, on the surface, the way my husband and I are raising our daughter is the opposite of what you're doing. We didn't want her to learn to read too early, we're into the play-based early education thing, we don't have a TV, all that stuff. I actually went to my daughter's kindergarten teacher and, I'm laughing at myself, but I told her to leave her alone, and give her more space because she is coming home from school and just wanting to practice her letters.

A: How interesting! You have a totally self-motivated child.

B: Right! And clearly, I am not at all like the you in your book, I just don't have that kind of drive or ambition, but what is so inspiring to me about your book is your devotion to your children. And being willing to say hey, this is what I feel really strongly about, even though it might seem ridiculous, I have a vision for how to do this that nobody can explain away.

A: I love that. And I know exactly what you mean. There's a lot of noise out there, peer pressure, and to have a conviction, and to never ever question that you're doing it out of the highest, deepest love for your daughter. I understand exactly what you're saying.

B: And in terms of the discipline part, neither my husband nor myself were raised with a sense of accomplishment in learning how to master anything. We met at a monastery, and when we both started practicing Zen, we both felt the great joy in learning how to do something that required huge amounts of effort. Zen is actually quite arduous.

A: Yes, I think the way you're describing it, that your first instinct was right, that there's so much that we do have in common, despite the surface. I've been trying to explain everywhere—and I'm just so lucky, you get the book, obviously—I keep saying, the first pages, the A-, the violin and the piano, it's tongue in cheek, I'm making fun, and in the end, for me, parenting has nothing to do with achievement, in that sense. It's about achieving a kind of meaning, or depth, in life. It makes sense to me, that in order to achieve, maybe these are the wrong words, but a kind of spiritual depth, that you would have to put effort into it.

B: Yes, and enormous amounts of it!

A: Right! Nothing is that easy, but that's the problem with our society. Easy money, easy solutions. It's fascinating, it really is.

B: I think it's great that because we're obsessed with parenting, we can hear that, your message, in this context.

A: Yes, exactly. It's such a different context. I love that, actually.

B: One of the things you write is, "Happiness is not a concept I tend to dwell on. Chinese parenting does not address happiness." And then you go on, and I am going to paraphrase, that Western parenting is too concerned with strengthening self-esteem, and assuming a kind of fragility of the child's, and the parents' psyches. I find that very true and so important, but I think you're wrong, in a sense, and that the kind of values you instilled in your girls is what you believe leads to happiness.

A: I think you're right that I was wrong. I think about happiness all the time! I am still trying to figure this out myself, but lately I've been thinking that it would be good if you could combine this hard work and discipline, which I do think contributes to a strong sense of self-esteem, if you could apply this to a much wider and more experimental out of the box kind of choices. You don't want a whole country of violinists and mathematicians! Now that Lulu is playing tennis, I am so much less miserable! I don't have to force her....

B: You're happy.

A: I'm happy! The thing is that I still believe you should put 110% into everything, whatever it is you choose. And also, I've really loosened up with Lulu socially, and come to respect the person that she is. And she just cannot function if she's not really social and a little bit louder than I would like and a little bit disruptive in class.....but that's who she is.

This is something I'm struggling with right now. I definitely do not think kids raised the strict way are happier than kids raised not in the strict way. There are good parents and there are bad parents. Some are strict, some are not strict. There are a million different ways. But I don't think I'm less happy than most people, in fact I think of myself as a happy person. But I worry about not being able to live in the moment, not being able to appreciate every moment. My daughter's in college now and I see life passing by and that's what I worry about. I don't want to instill in my kids always looking to the next thing. Right now I am so worried about my book tour, so I am not appreciating this very moment.

B: I hear that. You talk about looking around at Western parents and Western families and seeing that they don't look very happy. I think about this all the time, the way people justify doing things the way they were raised by saying, "and I turned out ok!" And I am looking around and people really don't look ok to me!

A: I know! Exactly....oh gosh, it's so fun to talk to you. This is making me feel better because I was dreading going out to West coast because I made the mistake of looking at some things on the internet. Who would have the time to be so nasty!

B: I feel like there is a very confused message out there, which is one of the reasons I have such a hard time with all this, trying to make myself happy and trying to fit in a way, into the parenting scene. As a new parent, you are so watched and judged so unabashedly. So I am trying to figure this all out. I have read a ton of books about parenting, but your book is the first that I felt really nailed this thing about how to be clear and determined with your kids and express your unconditional love at the same time.

A: Exactly. That part is a struggle for me. Now that I'm older, among my regrets, I wish I hadn't used such harsh words. And when my girls speak harshly and I say, don't do that, they say, but mommy you do! Because there is always teaching by example.

B: Did you ever read *Open* by Andre Agassi?

A: Is he the one with the horrible father? I was scared to read it, thinking oh my god I am going to be compared to him!

B: This is what is really interesting and should be highlighted. You have Andre Agassi on the one hand, who was a trained monkey, and he hated tennis, was doing drugs and hating himself, and your girls on the other, both happy, by all reports. When we look at parents who are pushing their child in this way, maybe it's a stupid question, but how does one know one's own motivation?

A: You're right. You've put your finger on it. I think one of the reasons I wrote the book is because I was losing sight of that with Lulu. Even though I fought with her all the time, I was so impressed with her. She had this spirit that was fighting to be happy. It wasn't just to dis me in this normal adolescent way, but she somehow knew what she needed to be happy. I am still a super tough mom, but I do feel thankful to her because she was telling me loud and clear, you may think what you are doing is all about me, but it's borderline now....

B: But the thing we hear so much about in the Western parenting world is the narcissistic extension thing.

A: That's tricky for me. For the Chinese, the child is just an extension of yourself. It's like your right arm. But that's not considered a negative thing. When you attach it to Western psychotherapy, the narcissism has negative connotations. There's this Chinese word *bao bei*, which means a treasure that is so precious, there's no word for it. I always thought of my daughters that way.

B: In Zen we would call that is intimacy with your daughters, not separate.

A: Yes, exactly. The negative side of that is when the child is separate and you're basically using the child.

B: It's very helpful to me because sometimes I worry that I do push my daughter for myself because my parents didn't push me, and I am working out my own thing on her.

A: It's useful to talk about this because it's also just part of human nature, in some ways it might protesting too much to say, *oh no, this has nothing to do with me*, it could be more complex.

B: Right! When I am forcing my kid to do something she doesn't want to do, which in my little subculture is tantamount to abuse, I have to ask myself, am I doing this for myself and in some ways I am because I know how important it is. I'm in the equation.

A: You're so right. I'm in the equation. I love that. One has to acknowledge that. And it's a very Western question, are you doing this for your daughter or for yourself.

B: We often hear about how if we push kids into things, they might do it only to please us, and not out of a genuine love of the thing itself. What do you think of that? Is that a real distinction? Does it matter?

A: Two things. First, as you know, I think a lot of people in the West today romanticize the idea of "affinity" or "talent" and are always looking for their child's "innate gift" when so often what later seems to be a "gift" is just the product of hard work and a good attitude. Lulu did not show tremendous "affinity" for violin until after 1-2 years of screeching. Then she took off. And she really showed zero affinity for math—the opposite actually—but after me bearing down and showing her what she could do, today at age 16 math is her favorite subject and her friends think she is a "whiz."

Second, I guess I do think things change as kids get older, say 12, 13, 14. At 13, Lulu was in a better position to know/feel that she had more of an "affinity" (complex idea here) for tennis than violin.

B: In Western parenting, I feel a laziness, in myself, too, that is really disheartening. We want to plug our kids in and just hope for the best. I know too well what that leads to.

A: Someone I know wrote an article about my book and said something like, I think the key to our kids' innovation and happiness, is they need to walk on the beach more. I know part of that is sort of true in the sense that they need space, but if that were the only thing parents needed to do, it would be so easy, right?

B: Exactly.

A: Boy, that would be great if that were true.

B: Right, and one of the things I am trying to meld this together with, is the idea of simplicity parenting, blocking out all the excess bullshit, all the hoopla and the software...our kids need attention, they need devotion, they need to have meaning, and know they can do stuff! It doesn't take any special anything to be able to do that.

A: Exactly! You're such an interesting combination of things. I can now see the Zen Buddhism thing as much more about hard work.

B: And the simplicity has to be part of it. There's nothing to rely on. Even though my husband and I really prioritize play, that takes a lot of work and discipline in this culture, to give them space.

A: Right, when I was young, we had a lot of free time!

B: People worry that if you are too strict you will have to deal with big rebellion, but my intuitive feeling is that I am not worried about that because we're connected to our daughter. It's not like we're just laying down the gauntlet and saying, screw you, this is the deal.

A: That's my 100% answer. And so far, Bethany, knock on wood, it totally works for me. I feel like I am so much closer to both of my daughters than so many people I know. I know what's going on in my 16 year old's life. And I have never been afraid to come down and say no. That connectedness, when you have it, you know it. But it does come from work. It comes from devotion.