



FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing,
and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

Minding Our Business

T and I are scheduled to offer a retreat, along with other senior lay students/parents, on the practice of parenting at Fire Lotus Temple in Brooklyn, the city center of Zen Mountain Monastery. And I agreed to lead a discussion about parenting after being approached by a lovely new mom in Woodstock, and owner of Illuminated Baby, which will happen soon after. Oy.

As readers of this column can attest, I am not in much of a position to be doling out advice on how to be calm, cool, or collected. But even more than that, can talking (and/or reading) about Buddhism really help us be better parents, or might it just add to the list of things we should be doing?

The web is full of sites, articles, and blogs about how to “Use Buddhist Teachings for Better Parenting,” with subtitles such as, “Learning to be a Calm, Compassionate Parent with Buddhist Teachings.”

Here are some tips from one I found:

Buddhism Teaches Compassionate Parenting If one just takes a minute to breathe, calm down, and react [sic], life with children will be happier and easier.

Learn How to Parent Mindfully from Buddhist Practices By being mindful, it is possible to pay more attention to what a child is really trying to say and to enjoy the small pleasures and details of a child’s life and convey the message that one’s children are truly valued and loved.

Being an Accepting and Understanding Parent Each individual is a Buddha and one must respect and accept that uniqueness.

Being a Responsible, Loving Buddhist Parent By setting good examples of responsibility and being loving towards others, parents can help children imbibe these important values.

Who could argue with such sound advice? Of course each individual is a Buddha who deserves to be respected. But what does that mean when the Buddha in front of you is flopping around in the bed, covers transformed into a cave, whining about being tired, and you have exactly 20 minutes to get said Buddha out of said bed, clothed, fed, teeth brushed, and out the door for her ride to kindergarten? And the reason for the rush is that you let her sleep in because she was on the brink of getting sick and as much as you love and respect her, you also know that *her* illness during this week filled with *your* deadlines would be treacherous, to say the least.

Responsible, maybe, but not very loving. You try to be patient, respecting her position, even paying attention to the small details of the wind rustling in the trees outside, try to hear what your little Buddha is truly saying; is there a message beneath that plea to *just sleep one more minute, mama, please?* You try to breathe. In fact, you do, breathe. But the sound of your own inner voice, screeching with irritation, reciting your list of things to do (in order to be respectable person in the world) wins out. And you growl at the little Buddha.

Buddhism teaches many things, but as far as I can tell it is all geared toward finding in ourselves what the Buddha called, “an awakened heart,” which is also called “bodhichitta.” As Pema Chodron says, “this is a place as vulnerable and tender as an open wound.” And unfortunately, this is what we have to move into in order to become mindful. Learning to calm down, even breathe and notice is of course part of it all, but the only way to get there is to do the first, hardest thing: don’t try

to change anything. *Be*, totally. Every aspect. Don’t add to my experience of the moment, regardless of how painful it is or how lame I think it is/I am.

As my teacher Daido Roshi used to say, “really trust yourself.” Not to do the right thing, or have the correct answer, but to simply “do what you’re doing while you’re doing it,” another of his favorite teachings. Does this then mean that when I am growling, just growl? Maybe so. Chances are I will “make a better choice” as we encourage our kids to do, when I am not adding so many layers to my own experience, getting caught up in what psychotherapist Karen Horney calls “the tyranny of the shoulds,” and just giving all my mean-animal sounds their moment of truth, even when they stay, as they hopefully do more and more, on the inside, and not shared with others. When I am truly apprehending the moment, whines, irritation and all, *that’s* mindfulness, and over time, mindfulness definitely leads to less irritation. But there are no shortcuts.

I recently came across a lovely piece written by a Buddhist professor and practitioner from Sri Lanka named Lily de Silva called “Interpersonal Relations and Vipassana Meditation.” In it she writes, “Though essentially a social animal, the human being practically lives alone in a private world of his own, constructed by his sense experience.” Isn’t that the truth!? And it is that sense experience that we need to fully, totally contact in each and every moment. Our senses, our bodies contracting, smelling, tasting, thinking—regardless of the content or our beliefs about that content—that is mindfulness. Without minding ourselves, meticulously, we can only be an “accepting and understanding parent” when we feel accepting and understanding.

She continues, referring to a teaching of the Buddha called The Sakkapanhna Sutta, “Though people wish and make pious resolutions to live in harmony with one another without enmity and aggression, without recourse to weapons against one another, they in fact live in disharmony, harbouring anger and ill-will against one another, sometimes resorting to weapons to terrorize and kill one another. What is the reason for this paradoxical situation that in spite of wanting to live in harmony, they cannot do so?” This is one of my favorite questions. It is too easy to say how we want to behave toward our kids, our loved ones, even those we don’t like. But unless we actually see what the Buddha calls “unwholesome emotions” we will never be able to take the next step, which is to refrain from expressing them.

Buddhism is an incredible tradition that offers insanely detailed tools for seeing through our strong feelings, the various places in the mind we store them, the six realms of existence in which we meet and manifest them, the unfathomably myriad ways we can express our negative views, and concrete paths that lead to living a wholesome life in service to others. The Buddha saw for himself the cosmic nature of *all things*, the way *everything* arises, dissipates, and, unless unflinchingly clarified, arises again, in accord with karma and circumstance. This is heavy duty stuff which takes years and years to grok, to put into practice and to integrate. I am so grateful that I have a teacher and a sangha to help me along the way because it’s really hard!

Pema Chodron writes, “Many of us prefer practices that will not cause discomfort, and at the same time we want to be healed. But bodhichitta training doesn’t work that way.” There is no way to heal what ails us without meeting it first, really taking care of our most personal business, face to face, heart to heart. ●