

## Meditation and Parenting: Reflections on the Vidyadhara's Teachings

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The topic of this talk, the connection between meditation practice and raising children, is a vast one. In order to focus our discussion, I went back to some of the teachings of the Vidyadhara, the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, particularly the talks he gave at the opening of Alaya Preschool in the late 1970's and here at the Karma Dzong building.

In a seminar here called "How to Cultivate Buds and Flowers" in 1982, Rinpoche discussed children as buds and parents as flowers. This metaphor of buds and flowers is powerful because it conveys the image of a garden with flowers at various stages of unfolding. Parents and children share this lovely environment of growth in a sacred world. This metaphor suggests a family culture that extends out beyond the household confines of the nuclear family. Of course the basis for this unfolding is meditation. However, to busy parents the idea of maintaining meditation practice while raising children may sound very idealistic. Rinpoche, however, realized the huge challenges of Shambhalian domestic life.

"...there is a demand on all of you to practice ..., as well as having social obligation like volunteering and sharing each other's responsibilities within the community. On top of that you have a wife or a husband who might be quite a handful... and on top of that you have children who may be absolute handfuls ... So you begin to feel that you are completely exploding yourself. You try to use every finger, let alone every hand, to try to maintain everything at once. Keeping your daily schedule of practice and everything becomes impossible. And on top of that you also have your economy -- there's not enough time to press your shirts or dress-up properly or clean your jewelry. All sorts of demands are made on you. Partly because of your personal commitment to practice and partly because of sangha organization all sorts of demands bounce back on you so that you find

your life completely full, absolutely full.” (Opening Talk: Alaya Preschool, Ven. Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, March 1978.)

So the garden of Shambhala Buddhist family life can become pretty overgrown and chaotic. In many ways our homes are like preschools, which Rinpoche called “organized chaos”. “But that’s fine,” he said. “We have that anyway all the time. What’s the difference?” Raising a family magnifies the natural chaotic nature of life. However, as Rinpoche famously said, “Chaos is very good news.” Of course this doesn’t mean that we should throw up our hands and that anything goes.

The presence of chaos causes us to wake up to how things actually are. So often we consciously or unconsciously shape our experience based on ideas or images of how things *should* be. We might have a particular dream of how we would like our family life to be. Or we might desire our domestic lives to be ordered in a particular way. Naturally, there’s nothing wrong with domestic order. Children thrive within consistent schedules and environments. But if we become too attached to order, to how life should be, then when chaos ensues our reaction may cause a great deal of harm. We can become afraid or resentful of the perceived source of that disorder. Then we tend to shut out the world or go to war with it. That’s not a very sane and open atmosphere in which to raise children.

One of the main themes that I see in Rinpoche’s early talks about schooling and parenting relates to our confused perceptions of the sources of our suffering as parents.

“The main point I’m concerned with is that we should not transmit any sense of rejection to our children. Whenever we begin to feel that they are nuisances it’s because we are being nuisances rather than our children are being nuisances... I should warn you about regarding your children only as sources of disturbances in your life, disorder in your life. When you want to hear a certain talk, go to a public function, for or for that matter have an affair with your lover or spend a long time with your wife or husband, there is always a tendency to want to park your children or child somewhere else. You might love them, but nevertheless that kind of temporary nuisance mentality comes up. You would like to become a

free person once more -- for twenty-four hours or a few hours or even ten minutes -- and so you provide your children with bottles and pacifiers (in England they call them dummies). I find that kind of attitude very insulting to your immediate body and flesh who become your children... I'm not particularly trying to say that you should be on duty twenty-four hours a day and heroic and warrior like in dealing with your children. .. So what I'm saying at this point is that Alaya Preschool is not a place where you can get rid of your children so you can have some free time. But on the other hand, practically speaking, if you want to sit or to do ngondro practices or if you want to do all sorts of things, Alaya Preschool may be very convenient. But there is a very thin hairline's difference between the convenience mentality and one's dedication to one's child.” (Opening Talk)

He seemed to be suggesting that we need to be clear about separating caring for children from caring for ourselves. Rinpoche said about this, “it is a 50-50 situation. For example, in bringing up our children, we can't abandon them on the pretense that we have other things to do. But at the same time, we cannot just close the door and refuse to work with the world outside either. So there is an important balance between the two.” (“How to Cultivate Buds and Flowers”, Ven. Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche & Lady Diana Mukpo, Vajradhatu Sun , Dec. 10-12, 1982)

Rinpoche seemed to be saying that we need to practice living our lives as one piece. Everything that occurs is part of the sacred world, an opportunity for attention and practice and celebration.

“The hassles of this life come from not regarding everything as sacred. We are particularly talking here about relating to our children and to our husbands or wives. Once we have a sense of awareness and constant practice, then life becomes workable. We begin to learn how to handle our various jobs and duties, those connected with the sangha, as well as those connected with earning a living and taking care of our family.” (Buds and Flowers)

This inseparability of the development of the adult and the child is a very important

principle in a Buddhist view of human development. We also find this theme in the “Education of the Warrior” in the Letter of the Black Ashe, which we have been studying at Naropa University in the Contemplative Education Department in our attempts to develop Rinpoche’s vision of “developing our own style of education.” (A Talk to the Alaya Staff, CTR, Jan. 15 1979.)

In our tradition the practice of meditation is the basis for caring for ourselves, our children, and each other in a sacred world. Mindfulness/ awareness practice is our method for cultivating openness and sanity in our entire domestic situation. Again, quoting the Vidyadhara, “Sitting practice itself could be regarded as training ourselves to be aware so that we could be aware always. Sometimes we find that while we are on the meditation cushion we are fine, but when we get up and go to the office and get talking on the telephone, we change our personality entirely...” (Buds and Flowers) Without meditation practice as the basis for our family lives it is very easy to believe that our thoughts are real, that how we perceive our life situations is solid, that we need to constantly protect ourselves, or our families from the problems of life, and that the claustrophobia we experience can only be dissolved through aggression or ignorance. As Rinpoche said, “All of our depressions can be overcome by the notion of basic mindfulness-awareness... Once we have a sense of awareness, life becomes a new revelation.” (Buds and Flowers)

Rinpoche said, “One of the main points is that [meditation] practice should come first, whatever we do... Practice may sometimes be regarded as a difficulty, when we try to schedule time to practice as well as to conduct our family affairs properly... So we wonder how to fit all of this together” (Buds and Flowers) When I heard him say this I thought, “How can we possibly put practice first?” Finding any time for formal practice might seem impossible for many of us.

The first step is see formal meditation as a priority. We can only believe this to be true based our personal experience of the benefits of meditation. Unfortunately, for most of us it takes a lot of practice before the effects of meditation show up in our lives. So, if you

are a new practitioner, be patient.

One effective way to find time to practice is by relying upon each other. Family Counsel here in Boulder has done a great deal to allow parents opportunities to practice. Friends, partners, and spouses can give each other meditation time. This takes discipline and planning. But it's worth it.

Another important aspect is our attitude toward our meditation. Sometimes our ideas about the form of practice becomes rigid. Ato Rinpoche in a talk here in 1993 advised parents to be flexible. "When you are free anytime, even 15 minutes, then you can practice. If you schedule it, it may not happen. Leave your door [to the meditation room] open. You can stop in the middle of your practice if your child needs you. Then you can return and continue practicing." One of my MA students at Naropa meditates with his infant son in his lap. Of course, that depends on the child.

Another part of meditation that Judith and I have found to be indispensable for parenting is regular meditation retreats. Short daily practice is wonderful, but it often serves only as what Ponlop, Rinpoche called "speed bumps" – just slowing us down a little. After each of our children were two or three years old we would each do an annual 1-2 week solitary retreat. Only through retreats were we able to reach the depth of meditation that is so essential for personal transformation. Solitary retreats also have the added effect of allowing us to contemplate our unacknowledged attachments or aggression toward our families. These feelings are natural and should be included in our practice. It is also valuable for the children to be away from a parent for a longer time. And it is important for the other parent, if there is one, to experience life as a single parent. Keeping retreat practice alive ventilates the dynamics of the family as a whole.

As important as formal meditation is, our greatest opportunity for practice as parents is meditation in action.

"(I don't) necessarily mean to say that sitting on your gomden or your zafu is the only form of practice. The general sense of practice is having constant

mindfulness and awareness. That is the foundation of our life, which helps to free us from speed, chaos, neurosis, resentment and all the rest of our negativity.

Therefore, awareness practice is the key point: awareness while you're cooking, awareness while you're driving, awareness while you're changing nappies and even awareness while you're arguing! ... So the genuine sense of awareness is extremely important. Without it, we cannot do anything at all. We are completely crippled. Awareness allows our vision to expand, so that our vision becomes powerful. And this allows us to *be* and to be responsible. The responsibilities of being in a family unit may include taking care of our children, cleaning our home, cooking our meals and relating with each other.” (Buds and Flowers)

So how does the practice of meditation help specifically in daily life? We could look at one way that Rinpoche mentions in a talk to the Alaya staff in 1979. Even though he is referring to the children we could also apply this to ourselves as parents. After all, this journey applies to everyone.

“I think one point is that you could introduce a notion to be still before they embark on their next game or whatever. So there's some notion of introducing stillness, how to be still.

I think they have to be taught how to hold it. You could tell them (us) "Hold it!" You know, just do it right away. That's some sort of learning how to be... So, sort of learning to hold it and not embarking on it right away. Because a lot of energies come from impatience and wanting to entertain themselves. And because they can't relate with that gap. So some kind of relation to gap of some kind would be extremely helpful...” (A Talk to the Alaya Staff, CTR, Jan. 15 1979.)

That “gap” is the meditation experience of refraining from mindlessly reacting to our thoughts and feelings by noticing the space that allows us to actually see what is there.

Another aspect is relating to the details of life in a sacred fashion, beyond romanticism.

“We can evolve our children as much as ourselves, so that we can actually build them up. Our children can learn how to eat, how to pick up food, how to roll around on the ground, and how to relate with other children. Basically we are learning how to bring up all of our children as statesmen, royalty. In our vajrayana world we don't have a prescribed royalty as such, but everybody who is actually able to handle and relate with reality fully and properly and with dignity comes through with confidence. In exactly that same way as Shambhala Training programs, we are developing some kind of mutual confidence so that our children are no longer regarded as under-developed apes but as fully-developed embryonic beings. That basic attitude is very important in buddhism as well. As buddhists we say that people inherit their own buddha-nature. In dealing with their children sometimes people forget that. Because our children can't eat, get dressed, shit, piss and walk properly we regard them as sub-human beings. That could be called setting sun vision. Such setting sun people who do not believe the buddhist vision, think that human beings are basically apes and they try to survive out of fear of death. Really being alive and actually performing properly in our real world is what we call Shambhala vision. It is very important for us to take that kind of attitude” (Opening Talk)

In conclusion, we are growing up together as buds and flowers, parents and children-inseparable. We care for our children and also care for ourselves in an atmosphere of sacredness.

“So on the whole we should regard our home as sacred. We should spend as much time as we can working with our domestic situation - with awareness and with delight, rather than feeling that we're subjugating ourselves to chaos. If we can't build a good home situation, we cannot build enlightened society. Enlightened society must have a good foundation, a good garden and good soil where buds and flowers can develop and blossom.” (Buds and Flowers)