

Parenting and the Dharma

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Happy Hanamatsuri! Happy Buddha Day! It is such a privilege for me to be here among many ministers and friends of the Dharma. Thank you for inviting me.

Hanamatsuri, the festival of flowers, is one of my favorite celebrations. It is a celebration of the Buddha's birth which takes place in the spring at a time when the earth is bursting forth with fresh growth and sweet flowers. It is a joyful time, a time when we can gratefully remember the Buddha's birth in Lumbini Garden, and pour sweet heavenly tea over a baby Buddha, watering the seeds of awakening in ourselves and in all beings.

Looking at the image of the baby Buddha standing in the hanamido, I think about the love and nurturance which the child Siddhartha Gautama received from his family and those around him. Although his mother, Queen Maya, died shortly after his birth, he must have received loving care from his mother's sister who raised him as her own son. We all know that the love and care which a child receives has much to do with the person he or she becomes and that parenting is, in itself, an important path.

I'd like to share with you my experiences of what parenting has taught me in the context of the Buddha-Dharma. I have found that our children come into our lives as the greatest dharma teachers we can ever have. When I was pregnant with my first child, Amy, my husband Michael and I received a congratulatory card from one of our sensei friends, the Reverend Tetsuo Unno, a Hongwanji minister who lives in California. I've saved this card, in which he wrote:

"From the standpoint of Buddhism, it can be said that there is no greater teacher than one's own child. It teaches one the depth of one's capacity to love and on the other hand, the absoluteness of one's attachments, etc. Compared to one's child (as a teacher), all the great Zen masters are as effective as a tongueless neophyte (novice) delivering his first sermon."

When I read those words 23 years ago, I did not understand what Unno Sensei meant. How can my child be such a great teacher, I wondered? Would I not have to be a great teacher to my child? However, once Amy was born, my path as a mother began and as the days and months went by, I began to understand the truth of Unno Sensei's words.

I look at the children here and see many beautiful child-Buddhas. They come into this world with eyes filled with light and love, and they bless us, not only with their love, but also with their countless demands and questions and needs, which open up our minds and hearts and stretch us in all directions, which can be painful at times, but necessary for our growth, as well as theirs. They expose our egos, keep us humble, and teach us, over and over again, how to love and let go, love and let go, love and let go.

When Amy was a baby, my husband, a graduate student at UH Manoa, was the assistant director/office manager of the Buddhist Study Center on University Avenue. Often, Michael went out in the evenings to attend classes on Buddhism and to listen to dharma talks given by visiting sensei, while I stayed at home with Amy. By the time evening came, I was so exhausted from a full day of carrying Amy, nursing her, burping her, changing diapers, doing laundry, wiping up spit-ups, nursing again, trying to keep cool in the 90-degree heat of Kaimuki, that whenever Michael drove away to attend dharma sessions, I felt somewhat resentful.

Mike's so lucky, I remember thinking. He gets to listen to wonderful Dharma talks while I'm at home, learning nothing. Exhausted and alone with a baby, there were times when I felt sorry for myself.

Then, one evening, after Michael drove off, Amy started to fuss. Her crying got louder and louder, and nothing I did seemed to pacify her. Waaaa! Her crying woke me up. "This is it!" a voice said. "Here and now, at this very moment, you are listening to the Dharma! This is it -- your opportunity to practice the Buddha Way, your opportunity to be present, right here, right now."

From that moment on, I realized that my place of Buddhist practice was right where I was standing, and that in my arms was a being who was going to show me the way. Thanks to Amy's screaming at the top of her lungs that night, I was able to wake up to the great lessons that motherhood had to offer me. I could take refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, and in the Sangha, with a baby in my arms and spit-up milk all over my shoulder. Mothering became my shugyo, my field of Buddhist training. I put heart and soul into parenting and turned to the Three Treasures for guidance. As time went on, I wrote a number of short stories on Buddhism and mothering for the Buddhist Study Center newsletter Metta. I called them "Rocking Chair Reflections." Yes, yes, I thought, a child is truly a great teacher!

Five and a half years after Amy was born, baby number two came along. We named his Ryan. By this time, Rev. Tetsuo Unno's words were alive with meaning and truth. In gratitude to Unno Sensei, Mike and I gave Ryan the middle name Tetsuo.

My work as a minister is challenging, but I can sincerely say that it is still the day-to-day demands of parenting that are the most challenging. I'm sure that those of you who have raised or are raising teenagers know exactly what I mean. I continue to struggle, thinking to myself that I still have a long way to go and a lot to learn.

A Sunday school parent who was new to Buddhism came up to me one day and asked, "How can the Dharma help me become a better parent to my children?" She was a single mother, struggling to raise her two young sons.

The words that came to my lips were, "Our Buddhist practice helps us to be still. To be still and to listen. To listen deeply, with not just our ears, but to listen with our heart and with our entire body, our entire being. To be present in the here and in the now. To be present without judging or criticizing or thinking about what we should be teaching our children or about how they should be acting and fulfilling our dreams. To be still in the midst of chaos and suffering. To drop our egos and agendas and just listen and be present. Fully present."

When my son Ryan was 14, he began listening to rap music. Hard core rap music -- the kind that made me cringe. At first I was dismayed. Why in the world was my child listening to such awful music? Since my residence was connected to the temple, I worried that the members and meditators might be affected by the boom boom of rap.

My initial reaction was to tell Ryan not to listen to rap, to tell him that it was bad music, something that I would not allow. Luckily, my meditation practice kicked in and I remembered to be still and to listen, to tune in to what was going on in my son's life. I waited until my heart felt quiet and open. Instead of asking him to "turn it off," I knocked on his door and asked him to let me listen to what he was listening. His eyes lit up and he said, "Mom, have a seat. Listen to this song. It's a good one."

Thus began my rap journey with my teenager. He shared with me new, cool rap songs and I became familiar with the names of some well-known rappers such as Exhibit, Snoop Dog,

and Fifty Cents. Together, Ryan and I read about the personal lives of some of the rappers, lives filled with unimaginable suffering, violence, and pain. Dukkha, Ryan said. They are suffering beings. Rap music was their vehicle of expressing their pain and anger and suffering. I could not help but gassho and bow to it all.

A year or so later, when Ryan had switched to a different kind of rap, which had a lighter, happier beat, he realized that it was the stronger rap beat that had kept him going, day after day, through the hardest part of his teenage years. Looking into my eyes, he said, "That beat kept me going through tough times, Mom," and added, "along with the Buddha's compassion and the sangha's kindness and care." I realized that, while listening to rap, he had also taken refuge in the Three Treasures.

Today, at 17, he no longer listens to rap. He seems to be especially fond of Mozart and Bach.

I've learned from this experience the wisdom of the Buddha Way. I've learned the importance of stopping and calming, of looking and listening deeply, of simply being present in the here and in the now, of approaching suffering with compassion. Parenting continues to challenge me, and I continue to rely on the Three Treasures for daily guidance.

I wish you a very happy Buddha Day and thank you for listening to my simple stories.

Namu Kie Butsu. Namu Kie Ho. Namu Kie So.

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