

Family Life as Practice

by Lama John Makransky (Tricycle Magazine, 2001)

I'd been away on a silent retreat for several weeks. We'd engaged in a Dzogchen preliminary practice of self-inquiry in which one asks, "Who is meditating? Who, what is aware?" By retreat's end, wondering how my family was doing, I called home.

Jonathan, who was three at the time, answered the phone.

"Daddy!" he said, excited.

"Yes."

"WHO are you?"

I was stunned; my mind stopped. Jonathan giggled. "Just teasing daddy!"

Tibetan heart-mind training translates ordinary thoughts and feelings into fuel for the path. These practices redirect clinging and suffering into compassion; these practices empower mind to disclose its innate openness.

Family can act as a charged arena within which all such ordinary thoughts and feelings, clinging and suffering can arise. And the family is an intimate matrix for the exchange of self and other, the heart of training. Shantideva, the eighth century father of this practice, wrote: *"All the joy in the world comes from the wish for others' happiness... Whoever wants to protect self and others should practice the great mystery: Exchanging self for others."* The instant we perform Shantideva's exchange, infusing others around us with our sense of self, sensing them as the very focus of our "self"-concern, we find relief from our suffering, our self-obsession. The "mystery" is really something simple, accessible: it is the key to all our well-being, our deepest freedom.

It's good to first practice this exchange when alone for short periods: Bring family members to mind, one by one. Allow your own sense of self, your most intimate self-concern to arise within each of them. A natural wish for their happiness – as one's very "self" – accompanies the shift. Radiate well-being and happiness to them from the heart.

Secretly explore taking their suffering, worries, anxieties into yourself, and allow all this to dissolve completely into the empty ground of your being.

Do this privately, secretly in daily practice. Feel its quiet power, the natural joy it elicits. Little by little let this secret exchange exercise itself in the bustle of family life. When you pick up your children from school, or when you do homework together, or play: exchange self for other. Take their subtle suffering, worries, anxieties into your empty nature and radiate your deepest well-being into them as if they were your very self. Allow the practice to naturally extend itself to neighbors, co-workers, all whom you pass on the highway, all who come to notice in the newspaper and evening news. Gradually, our practice senses them through the heart in just the way it has sensed our family: No difference.

As we privately learn to do this practice with increasing rigor and continuity, family life itself transforms into training center, into multi-year “retreat”: quietly, dharma communicates its own deep curriculum to us, our loved ones, and others.

David, four, rushes downstairs to tell me he’s finished brushing his teeth before bedtime. He’s feeling proud.

“But have you brushed your feet yet?” I say.

David is puzzled. “No,” he says, looking doubtful.

“Well, go back upstairs and tell mommy you need to brush your feet, too.”

He rushes dutifully back up the stairs. But at the top, he slowly turns to look at me. “Daddy, are you teasing?”

“Yes,” I say. “But just do it anyway.”

David shakes his head, descending the staircase. He puts both hands on his hips, and looks sternly at me. “Daddy,” he says. “Put yourself in MY place. Suppose you were me, and I was teasing you. How would YOU feel?”

I laugh at my complete defeat. “Okay,” I say. “You’re absolutely right.”

Too often Buddhist “non-attachment” is misconstrued as “non-loving.” The purpose of Buddhist practice is not to “renounce” our families or community, but to shed habits of self-protective clinging that prevent us from loving them more unconditionally,

powerfully, enjoyably. The greater and more unconditional our love for others, the greater our wisdom that sees through, and compassion that feels through, the thought habits of communal suffering. The mutual care that family life expresses is our buddha nature, actualizing itself in its most palpable and tender ways.

When my son Jonathan was three, and his brother David still on the way, our teacher Nyoshul Khenpo came to us from Bhutan. He meditated with us and gave a talk. A young woman asked him how parents might impart spiritual values to their children. Khenpo replied simply, “If parents practice and embody those values, children will learn them. If not, they will have little interest.”

A sunny winter morning in New England. During my meditation, my son David, now six, comes running, bounces three times on my sitting bed, grabs the staff from Guru Padma Sambhava’s statue on the altar, jabs it three times toward me, and shouts gleefully, “Ee-ya, Ee-yah, Ee-YAH!” Returning staff to Guru, he bounces three more times on the bed, and runs out. Meditation suitably enhanced.

When my children first arrived, I tried as a stolid “dharma practitioner” to maintain my pre-child monastic quietude: Door shut, the whole world seemingly elsewhere for my morning meditation. Khenpo’s practice, over time, eased me toward more open-door policies: it gave me the freedom to explore the empty boundaries of quietude, the texture of family love as spiritual discipline. In some ways, this was a more subtle and rigorous practice than the “worldly life versus dharma” dualism I had previously taken as my model.

The purpose of Buddhist discipline has not changed: To cut through the subtlest causes of suffering. We suffer because we follow habits of thought, feeling, and reaction. We suffer because we take our thought of self or other to be that very person, not recognizing the difference.

The whole family is out, walking. David, who is not yet three, and passes the afternoons mostly with his mother, turns to me.

“Mommy, uh, I mean Daddy,” he says.

*“Mommy, uh, I mean David,” I say. We gaze at one another. “Buddha,” I say.
“Uh, I mean David.”*

*And David turns to Mommy, and says, “Mommy, uh, I mean Buddha.”
We all laugh and laugh.*

People are mysterious, unfathomable – like divinities: natural objects for reverence. But our habits of thought turn the people around us into objects, the means for our self-protection.

“Meditate on those with whom you are closely connected,” a Tibetan heart-mind training text says. Often our family is the most intense field of projection: We mistake wife, husband, child for our own narrow, accustomed thoughts of them, and for that reason, family can provoke great suffering. But family can act as the richest vehicle for spiritual practice. Spousal abuse, child abuse, elder abuse: when in bondage to suffering thoughts of self and others, family arises as curse. But when we learn to sense the emptiness of our thought habit, and through that our natural reverence and care for others, family arises as profound blessing.