

PATH OF PARENTING, PATH OF AWAKENING

by Jack Kornfield, from *Voices of Insight*

Just as there is a crisis in our ecology where we suffer toxic waste, ozone depletion, deforestation, and species extinction, just as there is a crisis in homelessness and hunger where every hungry person could be fed for less than ten percent of what is spent on weapons worldwide, there is also a crisis in parenting. These are the unwitting costs of modern consumer society. The same loss of connection with nature, the same loss of community and village, the same loss of the values of the heart that creates these other crises creates the crisis in child rearing.

Some days I find it a terrible thing to go to the supermarket. I'll see a two-year-old boy walking alongside his mother or father, and the boy accidentally knocks something over. Immediately the parent turns back, smacks the kid, and yells, "Don't you dare do that!" And the poor toddler is shaken up and doesn't understand. "What do they want from me?" he wonders. "I'm just learning to walk. It was an accident." Right then, this child learns that he's bad, and he also learns that if you don't like what happens, you hit somebody else.

Or sometimes I go to the playground and see people treating children in ways that make me cringe. "If you do that again, I'll—" a parent screams, making a kind of war on children. It's not that these parents don't love their kids, but that they don't know what to do. Often Mama and Papa are tired. They've got three kids and financial troubles or a bad marriage, and they haven't been sleeping well. All those difficulties enter into the way they relate to their children.

Even when you don't actually observe instances of bad parenting, you can see the effect it's had on the children. From time to time I used to go in to help in my daughter's class at the local elementary school where nearly half the children lived in single-parent homes. When I worked in the classroom I could often sense the kids who live in the midst of family crisis or are being raised primarily by TV and on junk food. You can feel their pain, their fears, their confusion and self-doubt.

At the other extreme there is a wave of children suffering from the "hurried-child" syndrome. These are the children whose parents begin pushing them to become successful before kindergarten, so that by age eight they go to doctors suffering from stress, fatigue, and fear that they will not get into an elite university. For overachieving parents, baby magazines advertise flash cards for infants and teaching materials for children in the womb.

But no one is supposed to say anything to parents in supermarkets and playgrounds or even to the parents of your own children's classmates at school. I've found a greater taboo against commenting on how parents treat their kids than against asking about their sex life or income. It's as if children are a possession, and many parents believe, "I can do with my possession whatever I think is right." And yet most parents are also beset by vast guilt and worry, pain, and fear: "Am I doing it right? Am I doing it wrong?"

As parents we usually repeat what was done to us, acting as we were conditioned to act by our own parents as well as the popular culture around us. Our child rearing is run on automatic pilot unless we are consciously taught another way.

Our country's postindustrial culture has left us to raise our children apart from a community of neighbors and elders. There aren't many grandparents around—they all live someplace else or they're off, like most fathers and many mothers, at the office or the factory. There aren't many uncles or aunts around to take care of the kids when parents become overwhelmed, or to initiate the teenagers (so that they don't have to seek initiation on the streets), to help them discover what it is to be a man or a woman and a productive member of the community. There isn't a community of elders from whom we can hear stories and learn practices that will keep us connected with our human heritage, with our instincts and our hearts.

Instead of village elders, American parents have turned to various "experts" and whatever fad or theory they have come up with. In the 1920s an influential school of child psychology actually taught parents that it was bad to touch their children. Several decades later, parents all across America read books that insisted we bottle-feed (not breast-feed) an infant every four hours and that we should not pick up a crying baby but just let it "cry itself out."

Every wise culture in the world knows that when babies cry, they cry for a reason, and that you pick them up and feed them, or hold them and comfort them. You have to really fight against yourself not to pick up a sobbing infant. Among the less technologically developed cultures of Asia or Africa or Latin America, children are always being held, always in someone's lap. Children are valued, are included in all family activities—in work, in ceremonies, in celebrations; there's always a place for them.

When children are valued in this way, the whole society benefits. In this spirit, there's a tribe in Africa that counts the birthday of a child from the day the child is a thought in its mother's mind. On that day, a woman goes out and sits under a tree and quietly listens and waits until she can hear the song of her child. When she has heard the song, she returns to her

village and teaches it to the man whom she has envisioned as the child's father, so that they can sing the song when they make love, inviting their child to join them.

The expectant mother then sings this song to the child in her womb and teaches it to the midwives, who sing it when the child is born. And the villagers all learn the child's song, so that whenever the child cries or hurts itself, they pick it up, hold it in their arms, and sing the song. The song is also sung when the young man or woman goes through a rite of passage, when he or she marries, and then, for a last time, when he or she is about to die.

What a beautiful way for human beings to listen to and to comfort other human beings. This is the spirit of conscious parenting, to listen to the song of the child in front of you and to sing that child's song to him or her. When a child is crying, we need to ask why this child is singing the crying song, what pain or frustration this child is feeling.

Yet our culture seems to be telling us to ignore our instincts, to distrust our intuition. The result is that many children growing up in our society are not bonded to an adult. One of the more painful statements about what we are collectively doing to our children came one year from a teacher named John Gatto who was voted New York City Teacher of the Year. At the awards ceremony, in front of the mayor and the school board and thousands of parents, he castigated his listeners for the "soul murder" of a million black and Latino children. He challenged the audience to consider the effects of American culture on our children: "Think of the things that are killing us as a nation: drugs and alcohol, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling-and the worst pornography of all: lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as a philosophy, all addictions of dependent personalities, and that is what our brand of schooling will inevitably produce in the next generation."

The average American child watches eighteen thousand murders and violent acts and half a million advertisements. Violence and materialism. We are feeding the next generation of children the very suffering we're trying to undo in our spiritual practice. With the highest rate of infant mortality of any industrialized nation and millions of "latch key kids," we have given up caring for our children. An increasing number are raised by day care and TV. We will end up with a new generation of Americans more connected to TV or video games (often violent ones) than to other people. We will have more Gulf-style wars and violent crimes than successful marriages. Because these children were not held enough when they were young, were not valued enough and respected enough, were not listened to or sung to, they grow up with a hole inside, with no real sense of what it means to love, with no real capacity for intimacy.

When the Dalai Lama spoke with a group of Western psychologists, he couldn't understand why there was so much talk about self-hatred and unworthiness. He didn't understand, because in Tibetan culture children are loved and held. He was so astonished that he went around the room and asked everyone, "Do you feel unworthiness and self-hatred sometimes?" "Yes." "Do you feel it?" "Yes." Everyone in the room nodded yes. He couldn't believe it, and he couldn't believe that this was a culture where people primarily talk about their difficulty with their parents instead of honoring them.

Contrast this with the healthy childhoods of the Buddha's time. The Buddha himself was raised by his mother's sister (after his mother died) and given all the nurturance, natural respect, care, and attention that every child needs. Later, when he left home to practice as a yogi, he had the inner strength and integrity to undertake six years of intensely ascetic practice: he followed every ascetic discipline, seeking to rid himself of his desires and fears, to overcome his anger, and to master his body and mind. The rigors almost killed him, yet he did not succeed in the fight against himself. Wholly exhausted, he sat down, and a vision came to him from his childhood that led directly to the path of his enlightenment. He remembered being a young boy sitting in his father's garden under a rose apple tree. He remembered sitting there and experiencing a sense of stillness and wholeness, a state of great concentration and wonderful well-being. He realized that he had taken the wrong direction in his practice, that the basis for spiritual life was well-being, not fighting one's body, heart, and mind. From this great insight he discovered the Middle Way of neither self-denial nor indulgence. He then took nourishment and began to care for himself. His strength returned, his vision returned, his lovingkindness returned, and eventually he became enlightened.

The Buddha had this vision of well-being from his childhood to draw upon in his practice. Most of us, though, have not had such an experience of well-being as children. And so years of our spiritual practice are spent dealing with grief, unworthiness, judgment, self-hatred, abuse, addiction, rage. This has become common for meditators in our culture. Of course, spiritual practice brings us to face the deep grief and sorrow and pain of the world, but for Americans, much of our pain is a hole in our soul, an empty space in ourselves that longs to be connected, that longs for intimacy and love. We all face this to the extent we didn't get it in childhood. For the next generation this suffering will be even more pervasive unless we bring a healing wisdom to parenting.

Parenting is a labor of love. It's a path of service and surrender, and like the practice of a Buddha or a bodhisattva, it demands patience and understanding and tremendous sacrifice. It is also a way to reconnect with the mystery of life and to reconnect with ourselves.

Young children have that sense of mystery. When she turned seven, my daughter, Caroline, had reached that age when the sense of mystery was getting fainter. That Christmas she announced to us, “I don’t believe in Santa Claus anymore. My friends told me. Besides which, I don’t see how he could fit down our chimney. He’s too big.” She was beginning to trade in the mystery of things for concrete explanations. She had mostly been living in a mythological, timeless world, where reindeer fly and Santa Claus appears. Now she was beginning to take out the tape and measure the width of the chimney.

But long after a child proclaims herself “too old” to believe in Santa Claus, there will be new mysteries. Anyone who has teenage kids is reminded that no one understands the mystery of sex. Teenagers don’t ask you directly about it, but you can feel it in the air. As teenagers grapple with hormones and embarrassment and love and sex, we do too. “What did you do in school today?” a father asks his teenage son. “Oh, we had lectures on sex,” is the reply. “What did they tell you?” “Well, first a priest told us why we shouldn’t. Then a doctor told us how we shouldn’t. Finally the principal gave us a talk on where we shouldn’t.”

Children give us the opportunity to awaken, to look at ourselves, our lives, and the mystery around us with renewed awareness.

Suppose we look at child rearing in the spirit of the Buddha’s discourses on mindfulness. We are instructed to pay attention to breathing in and out; to be aware when standing up, bending, stretching, or moving forward or backward; to be aware when eating or sitting or going to the bathroom; to be aware when the mind is contracted, fearful, or agitated; and to be aware, as we learn to let go, when the mind is balanced and filled with equanimity and understanding and peace.

To further develop our awareness, the Buddha recommends sitting in meditation, practicing by sitting up all night and contemplating the sickness of the body or aging, developing a loving empathy for the suffering of all beings, and bringing wisdom and compassion to them.

Suppose that the Buddha gave instructions in using parenting as practice. It would be a similar teaching. Be as mindful of our children’s bodies as we are of our own. Be aware as they walk and eat and go to the bathroom. Then, instead of sitting up all night in meditation, sit up all night when our children are sick. Know when they’re afraid and when it’s time to hold them or comfort them with lovingkindness and compassion. Learn awareness and patience and surrender. Be aware of our own reactions and grasping. Learn to let go over and over and over again as our children change. Give generously to the garden of the next generation, for this giving and awareness are the path of awakening.

Along with the practice of mindfulness there are four other principles of conscious parenting: attentive listening, respect, integrity, and lovingkindness.

The principle of attentive listening means listening to the Tao of the seasons, to our human intuition and our instincts, to our children. Here’s a story about listening. A five-year-old boy was watching the news with his father when the war in Kosovo was underway. The boy kept asking his father questions: How big is the war? How did it start? What is war? The father tried to explain why countries went to war, why some people thought wars were necessary and other people thought wars were wrong. But the boy kept asking the same questions night after night. Finally the father heard what his son was really asking, and he sat the little boy down and said, “You don’t have to worry. We are safe here. Our house is not going to be bombed. We will be safe, and we will do whatever we can to help keep other families safe.” Then the little boy became peaceful, because that was the reassurance his heart had been asking for.

This is the principle of listening. Do we hear what our children are trying to tell us? It’s like listening to the Tao. How long should we nurse our babies? How late should we allow our teenagers to stay out on dates? To answer those questions, we have to listen and pay attention to the rhythms of life. Just as we learn to be aware of breathing in and breathing out, we can learn to sense how deeply children want to grow. Just as we learn in meditation to let go and trust, we can learn to develop a trust in our children so they can trust themselves.

But some of us are confused by children’s needs for both dependency and independence, and instead of listening to them, we impatiently hurry them along. In an article on dependency in *Mothering* magazine, Peggy O’Mara wrote:

We have a cultural bias against dependency, against any emotion or behavior that indicates weakness. This is nowhere more tragically evident than in the way we push our children beyond their limits and timetables. We establish outside standards as more important than inner experience when we wean our children rather than trusting that they will wean themselves, when we insist that our children sit at the table and finish their meals rather than trusting that they will eat well if healthful food is provided on a regular basis, and when we toilet-train them at an early age rather than trusting that they will learn to use the toilet when they are ready to do so.

It is the nature of the child to be dependent and it is the nature of dependence to be outgrown. Dependency, insecurity and weakness are natural states for a child. They’re the natural states of all of us at times, but for children, especially young ones, they are predominant conditions and they are outgrown. Just as we grow from

crawling to walking, from babbling to talking, from puberty into sexuality, as humans we move from weakness to strength, from uncertainty to mastery. When we refuse to acknowledge the stages prior to mastery, we teach our children to hate and distrust their weaknesses, and we start them on a journey of a lifetime of conflict, conflict with themselves, using external standards to set up an inner duality of what is immediately their experience and how they're supposed to be. Begrudging dependency because it is not independence is like begrudging winter because it is not yet spring. Dependency blossoms into independence in its own sweet time.

We need to relearn how to listen with patience and mindfulness: this is at the heart of both parenting and our spiritual practice.

A second principle for parenting is respect. All beings on earth—your plants, pets, co-workers, lovers, children—thrive on respect, bloom when treated with respect. A story: A family settled down for dinner at a restaurant. The waitress took the orders of the adults, then turned to the seven-year-old. "What will you have?" she asked. The boy looked around the table timidly and said, "I would like to have a hot dog." "No," the mother interrupted, "no hot dog. Get him meat loaf with mashed potatoes and carrots." "Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?" the waitress asked the boy. "Ketchup," he said. "Coming up," she said as she started for the kitchen. There was a stunned silence at the table. Finally, the boy looked at his family and said, "You know what? She thinks I'm real." I saw the power of this respect in traditional cultures on our family sabbatical to Thailand and Bali some years ago. My daughter studied Balinese dance for two months with a wonderful teacher, and he proposed to stage a farewell recital for her at his school, which is also his home. When we arrived, they set out a stage, got the music ready, and then started to dress Caroline. They took a very long time dressing a six-year-old whose average attention span was about five minutes. First they draped her in a silk sarong, with a beautiful chain around her waist. Then they wrapped embroidered silk fifteen times around her chest. They put on gold armbands and bracelets. They arranged her hair and put golden flowers in it. They put on more makeup than a six-year-old could dream of.

Meanwhile I sat there getting impatient, the proud father eager to take pictures. "When are they going to finish dressing her and get on with the recital?" Thirty minutes, forty-five minutes. Finally the teacher's wife came out and took off her own golden necklace and put it around my daughter's neck. Caroline was thrilled.

When I let go of my impatience, I realized what a wonderful thing was happening. In Bali, whether a dancer is six or twenty-six, she is equally honored and respected as an artist who performs not for the audience but for the gods.

The level of respect that Caroline was given as an artist allowed her to dance beautifully. Imagine how you would feel if you were given that respect as a child. We need to learn respect for ourselves, for one another, to value our children through valuing their bodies, their feelings, their minds. Children may be limited in what they can do, but their spirit isn't limited.

Another measure of respect comes in the setting of boundaries and limits appropriate to our child. As parents, we can set limits in a respectful way, with a compassionate "no" and an explanation of why something is out of bounds.

Sometimes, if we didn't get respect ourselves when we were children, we may have such a hole in our spirit that we need therapy and spiritual practice to rebond with ourselves. We may need to relearn self-respect before we can treat our children with respect or teach them self-respect. Children are aware of how we treat them, but they are also aware of how we treat ourselves, how we treat our bodies, how we respect our own feelings. Is it okay for us to cry, or touch one another, or to be sad or angry?

That leads me to the third principle: integrity. Children learn by example, by who we are and what we do. They watch us, what we communicate by the way we drive, the way we talk about others, and how we treat people on the street. Another story: An old sailor gave up smoking when his pet parrot developed a persistent cough. He was worried that the pipe smoke was damaging his parrot's health. He had a vet examine the bird. After a thorough checkup, the vet concluded that the parrot didn't have any respiratory disease. It had merely been imitating the cough of its pipe-smoking master.

This is how children learn. We teach them by our being. Are we at ease or agitated? Are we impatient or are we forgiving? Students used to ask the Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche, "At what stage should we start to teach our children meditation and spiritual practice?" He said, "How do you know that you should teach it to them at all? Don't bother doing that. What your children need to learn is what you communicate from how you are. What matters is not that you give them any spiritual practice but that you do your own."

In a similar vein, Dorothy Law Noble has written a poem, "Children Learn What They Live":

If children live with criticism
they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility
they learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule
they learn to be shy.
If children live with shame
they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with tolerance
they learn to be patient.
If children live with encouragement
they learn confidence.
If children live with praise
they learn to appreciate.
If children live with fairness
they learn justice....
If children live with acceptance and friendship
they learn to find love in this world.

If we are to offer this kind of respect and integrity to our children, we have to slow down, we have to make time for our children, we have to participate in our schools. If you don't have a child of your own, befriend a neighbor's child, or help the children in a refugee family in your community. Often we think we're too busy, that we should be working longer hours to earn more money; there's great social pressure to work and produce. Let's not fall for that! Let's take the time to raise our kids, to play with them, to read to them. Let's allow our children to help each of us reclaim the child of our spirit.

The last principle of conscious child rearing is lovingkindness. The central image in the Buddha's teaching of lovingkindness is a mother holding and protecting her beloved child. Develop lovingkindness for yourself, for your own children, and for all beings in the world.

Many of us try to control kids with discipline, by shaming them, by hitting them, by blaming them. But when we come to sit in meditation, we see how much pain we carry from the blame in ourselves. We find so much judgment and shame and scolding whenever we try to sit quietly. How hard we are on ourselves. We were not born being hard on ourselves; we learned it from parents and school. "You can't draw well," so many of us were told. And we stopped doing the beautiful drawing that every child knows how to do, and we haven't drawn a picture since third grade. How sad it is when instead of receiving lovingkindness, a child is berated or shamed.

We live in a society that in many ways has forgotten how to love and support our children, that has lost the fundamental values of parenting. As traditional cultures remind us, we don't need more day-care centers or more money; we need to regain a respect and care and love for parenting. We all long to feel loving and to feel loved. To be the woman under the tree in Africa listening for the song of her child. To feel connectedness and community. To touch one another and to be held by one another. To feel that the child in each one of us is honored and respected.

Parenting gives us the chance to astonish ourselves with love. We've all heard stories of mothers and fathers doing superhuman deeds to rescue their children. I read in the newspaper about a paraplegic mother whose young daughter fell into a swimming pool. The mother rolled her wheelchair into the pool and somehow grabbed her child, dragged her over to the side of the pool, and held on for hours until someone came home to get them out.

Children can bring out this kind of love in us. They teach us that what really matters in life is love itself. As Mother Teresa said, "We cannot do great things in this life; we can only do small things with great love."

It is through our parenting of our own children and the children around us it is in supporting other parents and supporting our schools, that we can reclaim or restore this love. The Buddha taught us that the only way we can begin to repay our own parents and all the generations before us is by bringing the Dharma-which means respect, integrity, awareness, truth, and lovingkindness-to our parents, to our children, to all of life.

If we are to be a humane society, we must feed the children who are hungry, clothe the children who are cold, and care for all our children with respect, lovingkindness, and integrity. We must care for every child as if he or she were the Buddha. Then we will understand what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he wrote:

To leave the world a bit better,
Whether by a healthy child,
A garden patch,
A redeemed social condition,
To know even one life has breathed easier
Because you have lived,
This is to have succeeded.