



Where Is the Dharma Talk? Reflections on Parenting as Practice

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It is 11:15 on a Monday morning, and I am lying on the floor of my son's room meditating. To be sure, this is not a traditional posture. There isn't a zafu in sight, the windows are covered in dark shades to block out the summer sun, there are books and toys scattered everywhere, and there is a 25-pound infant asleep on my chest.

Going against the wise advice of every sleep expert on the planet, I have let my one-year-old fall asleep using me as a pillow and now am pinned to the floor for the next 30, 45, or (if lucky) 60 minutes. What to do? It's just this. Aware externally, I notice: there is the constant background sound of the fan, the drool sliding down around my collarbone towards the back of my neck, the faint background smell of the diaper pail, clean but somehow still emitting.... Aware internally, I notice: the solidity of the floor receiving our weight, bringing ease as I let us relax into it. I feel his heartbeat under my own sternum. There is fatigue, contentment tinged with resignation. I notice the interplay of his breath (short, shallow and loud, passing through small nostrils) with mine (now deepening, causing his whole body to rise). Nearly stuck together like this, questions arise: whose body is it? Does this little body belong to me? Does my body belong to me? And what's breathing both of us?

There is a story I have heard the Zen teacher and priest Norman Fischer tell that has come to mind often during this first year of motherhood. A pivotal moment in his own practice occurred when his twin sons were infants, and the family was living at Tassajara Monastery. One evening, the entire sangha (including his wife) was in the meditation hall listening to a revered master give a Dharma talk. Norman was outside feeding the boys in a wheelbarrow (so he could hose them off afterwards and facilitate clean up), when he suddenly understood that if the Dharma was real it had to be right there in that spot. The thought arose in his mind: this is the Dharma talk. He saw clearly that if he was really attending as he would if he were in the hall, he would be learning just as deeply. That particular grumbling mind-state, the belief that something more important is happening elsewhere, never resurfaced in him. This is the Dharma talk.

The essential question we are always asking, each in our own way: How might I approach these circumstances, whatever they may be, to wake up, for my own benefit and for those around me? Here on the floor, now, how can I relate to this mind? In this case, this mama-mind—devoted, fatigued, awe-struck, alternately dull and vigilant, tethered to the body—in a way that deepens wisdom and compassion rather than reinforces a separate and lacking sense of myself as the center of things?

In Bhikkhu Analayo's book, *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, he posits that the Satipatthana Sutta can be summed up in four words:

Keep Calmly Knowing Change

When contemplated closely, each of these words has enormous depth, so this is no simple directive. I am finding it a wonderful orientation for how to approach the practice of daily-life-as-Dharma-talk. The

following is couched in terms of parenting practice but applies in whatever daily circumstances you find yourself.

"Keep"

It takes a tremendous amount of ingenuity and intention to stay awake in the swirl of daily urban life. We know this, but it's so easy to forget. We often have to give up our notions of what practice is supposed to look like and honestly acknowledge where our hearts continue to get clouded and caught.

This year, once I finally acknowledged that a regular, consistent sitting practice morning and evening was not quite realistic (or effective) with a newborn, many possibilities opened up. I began to notice and treasure the few silent moments that would appear while my son was napping and use those for meditation. Not knowing exactly when they are going to occur or when they will end actually brings a bright urgency to the effort, like the monks instructed to sit on the edge of a well when they were dull and sleepy in their practice.

With my son in the stroller, I also began a daily walking meditation in the cemetery near my house. I realized one day that this was an ideal setting for inclining the mind toward the five recollections: I am of the nature to decay, to be diseased, to die; all that is mine will change and vanish; all beings are owners of their kamma. This has turned out to be unexpectedly profound.

In Joseph Goldstein's new book *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, he reminds us that in the "refrain" to the Satipatthana Sutta, the direction is to remain aware not only internally, not only externally, but both internally and externally. When we are in retreat or in formal practice, our internal experience is (more likely) in the foreground, while in daily life the tendency is for it to slip into the background as we go about doing what needs to be done.

Wherever we are, we can intentionally anchor awareness in our own bodies—receptive to the sensations of breath, discomfort or ease, or an overall bodily sense—but, quite honestly, as parents, our awareness is often anchored firmly (and somewhat unconsciously) on the body squirming across the floor, perhaps headed for that electrical outlet. It is not surprising, then, that we can come to the end of the day and feel as though we haven't touched into our own inner experience at all. This ability to maintain an awareness that is fluid instead of fixed is fundamental if we are to stay awake as we relate to and care for others (understandably, this forms one of the core instructions in Insight Dialogue practice as well). As our awareness opens to become more environmental and inclusive, the boundary between inside and outside, self and other, can start to dim, and there is simply experience unfolding.

"Calmly"

I have been fascinated to learn how much time, energy, research, and resources have been de-voted to figuring out how to soothe a baby's delicate nervous system in order to help them fall asleep. We try the best we are able to re-create the womb: we swaddle and sing and walk and bounce and drive; we buy white-noise apps and even vibrating cribs that are said to simulate a car cruising down the freeway at 55 mph. What if we cared about our own sensitivity half as much? Maybe if our own internal tension more frequently made an audible (and highly unpleasant) noise, we would! Just as each baby is unique, we each have to experiment and discover what combination of factors allows for the settling of our minds. Not settling ourselves to sleep, but settling ourselves to see. We settle so that we can see more clearly.

Central to Rodney's teaching is a receptivity to stillness. This is not pointing to an outer stillness, such that we depend upon calm circumstances in order to be calm, but to a complete lack of objection to the

noise around us. It's not how we thought it would be, how we hoped it would be, or how we would like it to be. But how is it?

Just as it is possible to physically soften around strong sensations or pain, we can mentally re-lease our resistance to external noise and chaos and actually abide in grounded, responsive stillness even when everything seems to be falling apart around us. When we are reactive, impatient, and “noisy” internally, we can relax around that too. We can be patient with our impatience, generous toward our selfishness, kind toward our anger. When monks would complain about it being too noisy to meditate in the monastery, Ajahn Chah would ask: “Is the noise coming in to disturb you, or are you going out to disturb the noise?”

The paradox, however, is that this may be impossible without some regular time in which the outer quiet prompts the inner quiet and we can attend more deeply and re-set. I once heard the poet David Whyte say (more or less): Make sure there is at least some time each day in which you can remember that on the deepest level you are nobody's mother, nobody's husband, no-body's daughter, nobody's boss or employee. The responsibilities that our many roles in life re-quire can be so compelling, it takes a strong intention to remember that they do not ultimately define us, and that by identifying with them completely (i.e., not being able to take them off), we suffer.

“Knowing”

To whatever degree we can remain aware, alert, and non-resistant to what is happening, both within and without, we will learn a tremendous amount. We will know not only what is happening now but also what conditions may have contributed to what has arisen and where it is leading. Our awareness may be firmly planted in the present moment, but we don't lose our context (traditionally, this is why mindfulness is paired with clear comprehension). We are aware of what is often a blend of motivating factors, and whether what we are doing is leading in a helpful direction.

For example, nowhere will you find a thicker “thicket of views” than in the literature on child-rearing—on everything from cloth diapering to vaccinations to sleep training, you will find a chorus of voices on all sides, declaring that what you decide to do about this issue will likely determine your child's entire future, so you had better get it right! One thing that we become aware of with this quality of clear-knowing is that each action we take does have a profound effect, but what also becomes clear is what we are and are not responsible for. We can approach each decision with as much skillfulness and wise intention as we are able, but we are not ultimately in control of the outcome. Isn't this our learning, over and over and over again?

The same is true in our “spiritual” lives. When we rely exclusively on the opinions and views of others to lead us to freedom, we can lose touch with our own wisdom. I know this is occurring for me when the Dharma books start to pile up beside the bed (alongside the child-development books). I can feel some of the fear and confusion that prompts reading about instead of relating to (or a deeper investigation), aided by some inertia—sometimes reading about can actually feel like doing. So I need to investigate and sense where it is leading. Ajahn Sucitto asks us to inquire: “Is this for my own long-term benefit and the benefit of those around me?” Looking honestly, I know that sometimes it is leading to more confusion, sometimes to a temporary respite or reassurance, but always there is a living, breathing little being that needs to be related to, moment after moment, the best I am able. Just so, there is always our own fluttering, sensitive heart-mind to be related to, which needs our awareness

“Change”

The heart of our practice—in daily life or on long retreat, with family or in solitude—is the understanding that what will ultimately benefit ourselves and others is to know ourselves and all life as a fluid, ever-changing, dynamic process instead of solid things, fixed and separate. To whatever degree, and at whatever level, we can incline our minds in this direction, it is helpful.

I once woke up abruptly in the middle of the night on retreat and—forgetting I was on the bottom bunk of a bunk bed—sat up sharply, whacked my head on the top bunk, and the phrase arose: “You are the process of unfolding.” While that became an extremely helpful (but slightly painful) pointer for me during that period of practice, on what level is it a lived reality? The retreat container is designed to allow us to experience this in our own way on a very deep level, without as many distractions, but change is not just the terrain for retreat. Whether at the level of our cells, or sensations in the body, or our feelings, reactions, and wave-like emotions, we can be aware. At the level of changing relationships, external landscapes, financial markets, or the earth itself, we can be aware.

I have lost count of the number of parents of older children who have stopped us on the street and said, somewhat wistfully, “Enjoy this time, it goes so fast. One day they will actually leave!” And it is true. The baby at birth is not the toddler who is emerging, is not the adolescent who will follow. And we are not the same, either. We learn that if we continue to respond as if conditions are static and the reality that we were navigating two weeks ago is the one we are in now, we will act unskillfully and will likely suffer.

And death is always close. In my experience, one of the most unexpected things about caring for a new child is how close death feels. How it truly is the other side of birth. Perhaps it is a heightened sensitivity to danger (or too much time in the cemetery), but there is a very real sense that in one too-long moment of distraction, the penny is swallowed, the car turns too sharply, the fever unexpectedly spikes too high.

This can either make you paranoid or make you tender. To the degree to which we contract and try to manipulate or brace against this reality, we suffer. The mind leaps forward and concludes: This would be a grief too great to bear. Indeed, many of the women who awakened at the time of the Buddha came to him after unthinkable losses—a child, a husband, an entire family—and were, in so many words, “mad with grief.” This too—even this—is a part of our human experience. And even in (or perhaps because of) that depth of suffering, they woke up.

Attending to change, inwardly, outwardly, we understand that we are not at the center of things; we are not in control, are not the station agent directing and managing the flow of events. And yet, as Ajahn Amaro says, “The point is to not keep flagging everything *anicca* (impermanence), *anicca*, *anicca*, but to really get a sense of how the mind lets go when it sees the fluid nature of things.”

So, still here on the floor with my son, there is nowhere else to be. I have a choice about what to attend to, and how? What I choose has a palpable impact. Noticing the familiar pull of nagging thought spirals that announce what I should be doing and am not, creating an identity out of my current conditions, I can watch them spiral out and simply feel the quivering uncertainty underneath. The understanding arises: “I know where this leads.” The awareness that simply sees and knows all of this feels like a holding—all of it, all of us, vibrating within it moment to moment, for however long. Who knows how long? When the mind inclines towards that and lets go, even a little, there is a lightness, a relief. Joy can come.