mothering as meditation practic

With the birth of her son, **ANNE CUSHMAN** began negotiating the dance between practice and parenting. She asks, "Are mothers changing the forms of Buddhism in America?"

For the first few weeks of my son Skye's life, he would only sleep if he could hear my heartbeat. From midnight to dawn he lay on my chest, his head tucked into the hollow of my throat, awakening every two hours to nurse. In the day, he'd nap in my arms as I rocked, a slideshow of emotions—joy, exasperation, amusement, angst, astonishment—flickering across his dreaming face, as if he were rehearsing every expression he would need for the rest of his life. If I dared to set him in his bassinet, he'd wake up with a roar of outrage, red-faced and flailing. He cried if I tried to put him in a baby sling, frontpack, stroller, or car seat. He cried whenever I changed his diaper. And every evening from seven to nine, he cried for no apparent reason at all.

When Skye was two weeks old, I ate black bean tacos for dinner and he screamed until sunrise, his body stiff and his fists clenched. While I sobbed along with him, my husband actually called the emergency room, where the nurse on duty told us, kindly, that it sounded like gas. The next morning, a nutritionist friend assured me that everything would be fine so long as I stopped eating dairy, wheat, yeast, soy, corn, legumes, garlic, onions,

Photograph by Nicholas Nixon

tomatoes, sugar, peppers, broccoli, and citrus fruit (and considered dropping fish, mushrooms, and eggs). As Skye finally fell asleep in the crook of my right arm, I collapsed on the sofa in my bathrobe, eating cold brown rice with my left hand and spilling it in his hair.

It was about that time that I decided that what I had embarked on was an intensive meditation retreat. It had all the elements, I told myself: the long hours of silent sitting; the walking back and forth, going nowhere; the grueling schedule and sleep deprivation; the hypnotic, enigmatic chants ("...and if that looking glass gets broke/Mama's gonna buy you a billy goat..."); the slowly dawning realization that there is nothing to look forward to but more of the same. And at the center of it, of course, was the crazy wisdom teacher in diapers, who assigned more demanding practices than I had encountered in all my travels in India—like "Tonight you will circumambulate the living room for two hours with the master in your arms, doing a deep-knee bend at every other step, and chanting, *'Dooty-dooty*-doot-doot-doo, *dooty-dooty*-doot-doot-doo.'" Or "At midnight you will carry the sleeping master with you to the bathroom and answer this koan: How do you lower your pajama bottoms without using your hands?"

Motherhood is a constant assault on my ingrained selfishness—a wake-up call to the snoozing bodhisattva within.

Like all great spiritual practices, these were exquisitely designed to rattle the cage of my ego. They smashed through my concepts about how things should be (rocking in the garden swing by the lavender bush, watching the hummingbirds, while my newborn slept in a bassinet by my feet) and pried open my heart to the way things actually were (standing by the diaper table, flexing one tiny knee after another into Skye's colicky tummy, and cheering when a mustard-yellow fountain erupted from his behind). And with every breath of my "baby sesshin," I was offered the opportunity to cradle my child in my arms like the baby Buddha and be present for a mystery unfolding.

Skye is almost seven months old now: a quirky, radiant little boy who's napping in his crib as I write this. He loves light switches, redwood trees, telephones, drums, just about anything with a keypad, and travels to just about anywhere. Things have gotten a lot easier, as everyone said they would; the madness of the first six weeks, which seemed as though it would last forever, has dropped away like the stump of his umbilical cord.

But the metaphor of mothering as meditation—the "18-year retreat," as Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn call it in *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*—remains a compelling one for me. Last week, one of my best friends left to study vipassana in Burma. I stayed home to study the effect of mashed bananas on Skye's stools. When I hear the story of the Buddha's life, I no longer identify with young Prince Siddhartha slipping out of his palace at night without saying goodbye to his wife and son to seek enlightenment in the forest. I identify with his wife, Yasodhara, left behind to raise a little boy named Rahula, which literally means "fetter."

When I look to Buddhist tradition, I don't find many role models for using mothering as a path to enlightenment. Meditation has been primarily a path for renunciate men. The Buddha's own mother died shortly after giving birth to him under a tree. The women who came to the Buddha and persuaded him to establish an order of nuns—led by the Buddha's aunt, Prajapati, who had raised him from birth—had left their family life behind them. *The Therigatha* (literally, the "songs of the women elders," the poems of the awakened women of early Buddhism) tells of women who turned to the dharma after their children were carried away by hawks, buried in mudslides, swept away down rivers. Their poetry sings of the freedom that can lie on the other side of unfathomable loss—"I have seen the jackals/ eating the flesh of my sons/ in the cemetery./ My family destroyed/ my husband dead/ despised by everybody/ I found what does not die." But it offers little guidance for how—if at all—it is possible to find that profound awakening while caring for children who are still alive, or still grieving for ones who have died.

True, Tibetan Buddhism offers the image of Prajnaparamita—the "Perfection of Wisdom"—as "the Great Mother," the "mother-consort of the Buddhas." The "womb of the Tathagata" is the vast emptiness that gives birth to the world. In *metta* (lovingkindness) meditation, we're often instructed to cultivate the immense, selfless compassion of a mother for her child. *(continued on page 154)*

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(continued from page 105) But those are all metaphors. Actual moms—cursing in childbirth, leaking milk, kissing bruises, pounding a wall in the middle of the night so they don't pound their babies—as spiritual practitioners? My search comes up empty.

That doesn't mean, of course, that mothers haven't been practicing the dharma for the past 2,500 years—just that their efforts (of necessity outside the official monastic structure) have not been recorded in a canon that they did not have the time or authority to contribute to. (It's worth noting that the only way I am able to sit back and reflect on mothering as a path is by paying someone else to care for my baby for a few hours.) But in twenty-first-century America, Buddhist meditation has become a lay practice, and the majority of all active practitioners are women—fifty-seven percent, according to James William Coleman's *The New Buddhism*. The dharma teacher on your Vipassana retreat could be nursing a baby between interviews; the shaven-headed Zen priest offering incense could be a soccer mom.

Could there be any better way to get my nose rubbed in the truth of impermanence than to love a child in a jagged, careless world?

As a new mother, I've found myself wondering: How are other women negotiating the dance between practice and parenting? How does their practice affect their mothering? How does being a mother affect their practice? Are mothers changing the forms of Buddhism in America?

And—the most compelling question of all for me—can mothering really be a path of practice every bit as valid as the monastic path? Can suctioning the snot from a sick baby's nose have the simplicity and purity of a nun's prostrations? Can wiping out a diaper pail lead to "the awakening of the Buddha and the ancestors?"

On one level, this question seems absurd. Nothing could be further from the regimented march of a formal retreat than the disheveled dance of motherhood. The books on my bedside table used to be about pursuing Awakening in

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the Himalayas. Now they're about preventing awakening in the middle of the night. There's a diaper changing table where my altar used to be; my zafus and zabutons have been requisitioned to cushion Skye's play area. Forget about chewing a single raisin for five minutes and admonitions to "when you eat, just eat"—I'm on the phone with Skye on my hip, ordering baby-proof plates for the electrical outlets as I eat cold veggie potstickers with my fingers straight from the cardboard box and rub fresh spit-up into the floor with one socked foot. It's hard to find the moment even to tell myself that this is a spiritual path—I'm too busy looking for Skye's other mitten.

But on another level, as Myla Kabat-Zinn reminded me, "Parenting is a unique opportunity to do a certain kind of inner work that's both different and the same as retreat work. It's about seeing more deeply into ourselves, and coming up against our own limitations and rough edges—seeing more clearly what pushes our buttons, what makes us afraid, what creates anxiety. It's the opportunity to see our children as they are, without the veils of our expectations and judgments and fears."

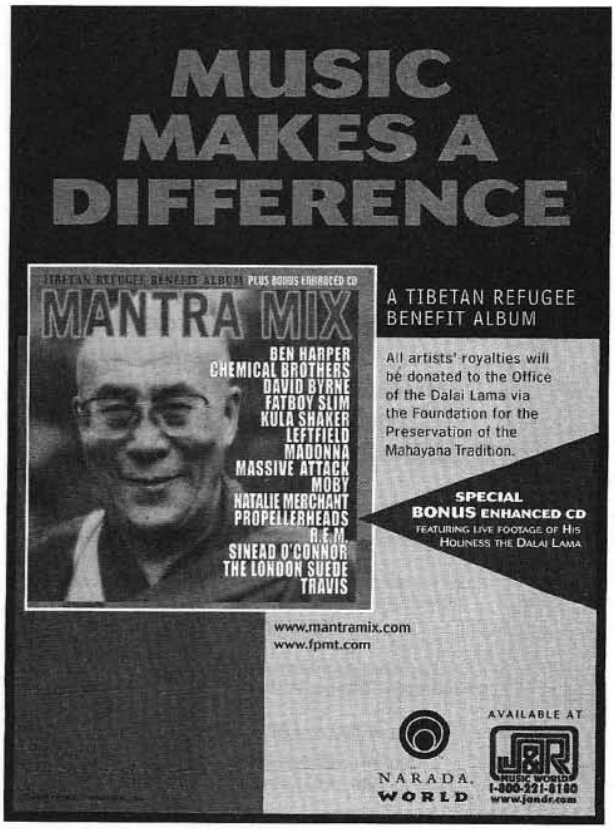
A few weeks ago, I had tea with Furyu Nancy Schroeder, a Zen priest and Director of Practice at Green Gulch Zen Center. Seven years ago, Fu and her partner, Grace Dammann, adopted Sabrina, a baby with a chronic illness whose birth parents were not well enough to care for her. Sabrina is now a thriving member of the Green Gulch community. I asked Fu how becoming a mother had affected her practice. "I became a human being," she told me. "And that's what Buddhist practice is all about—becoming a human.

"I had been making the classic mistake of thinking I could do it myself. Through meditation I had gotten very good at putting a little bubble around me. But after Sabrina came, I lost my ability to forgo certain states of mind. I was hysterical, anxious, riddled with doubt, exhausted. I was totally dependent on the kindness of everyone around me. I realized that I'm not isolated—I belong to a nexus of support. And the flood of pain that followed that was extraordinary.

"My love for this child was a crowbar that ripped open my heart."

I asked her if she felt any conflict between parenting and practice. She shook her head. "A priest's life includes everything," she said. "What's remarkable about a life of practice is that everyone can enter it with who they are and what they love to do."

On a practical level, of course, places like Green Gulch



are still sorting out exactly how families with children fit into community life. They've had to hammer out compromises to balance the obligations of practice, community work, and family. (For instance, while children are young, their parents are allowed to share their community jobs—the two parents, in effect, adding up to one full-time worker.) The family program at Spirit Rock Center—an Insight Meditation center in Woodacre, California—offers a family retreat every year. But as Vipassana teacher and mom Julie Wester describes it, it's more Buddhist summer camp than meditation retreat. "It's hard to get people to teach at it, because it's so chaotic," she admits.

A traditional meditation retreat offers opportunities that the daily life of a mother can't match: the chance to cultivate in silence, undistracted, the skills of mindfulness, insight, and one-pointed concentration. And in a tradition that has traditionally celebrated the monastic, renunciate path, the unique gifts of motherhood are not often explicitly acknowledged. When Wester became a mother at age forty-three, one of her own teachers warned her not to have another baby, "or you'll never teach again."

"I felt a lot of despair in the first years of motherhood, feeling that I had lost my practice," she remembers. "It took me a long time to realize that the activities of motherhood *were* the practice, rather than practice being something that I could fit in between those activities.

"Mothering is a meeting with the highest teacher, in the same way that death is. It's the deepest encounter we ever have with life. But it's like any teaching—it's offered, and whether we receive it is up to us. And to experience it as a teaching, someone has to name it as such—and it probably won't be the male teachers."

For me, mothering has been the deepest practice I've ever taken on. Motherhood is a constant assault on my ingrained selfishness—a wake-up call to the snoozing bodhisattva within. I'm letting go of props I thought were indispensable—a decent night's sleep, for example, or a morning ritual of yoga and meditation. I'm offered the opportunity to study my mind as it changes as fast as my baby goes from giggles to squalls. When I wake up to the sound of a cry at midnight, I can resent Skye for breaking into my dreams. Or I can rock him in the dark, milk pouring out of me, and let myself soak in the intimacy of a moment so precious and fleeting it breaks my heart wide open.

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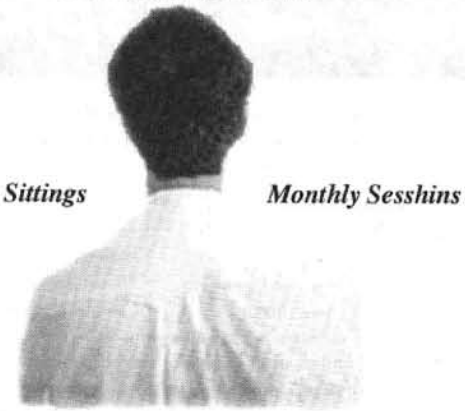

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jagged, careless world? Napping with Skye in my king-size bed—his head on my breast, my nose pressed against the dark silk of his hair—I watch the heartbeat fluttering in the soft spot on his skull. Forget about freeways, and plutonium, and stealth bombers—I've been sternly warned that even a teddy bear could suffocate him in his crib. At night, when he's been silent a couple of hours, I creep into his room and stand in the dark, not moving for fear of creaking a floorboard, until I hear him sigh.

And even if everything goes absolutely perfectly, I know that this particular Skye—the one who warbles and passionately sucks on the bill of his rubber duck as he splashes with me in the tub—is going to dissolve like bubble bath. Yesterday he was a kicking bulge in my belly as I swam laps in the July sun; tomorrow he'll be a middle-aged man, weeping and scattering my ashes in a mountain lake. Watching Skye rub strained carrots into his eyelashes, my husband says, "It's so beautiful that it hurts."

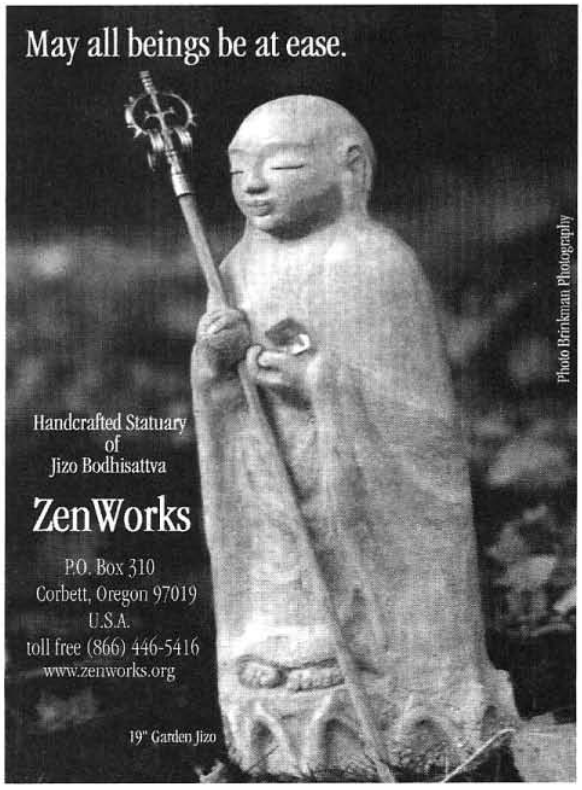
I feel plugged into the world now, in a way that I never have been before. As I feed my child out of my own body, I see how I am fed by the body of the earth. I'm crocheted to a chain of mothers before me, and a chain of unborn children who will inherit a world that I can't even imagine. I want Skye's grandchildren to be able to swim in the Pacific, and hike the granite ridges of the Sierra, and gasp at the blue herons standing on one leg in Bolinas Lagoon.

Is this "attachment"? Or connectedness?

I don't mean to be grandiose. I know these insights aren't the pristine diamond of *samadhi*. They're a sloppier, stickier kind of realization, covered in drool and Cheerio crumbs. But maybe this is the gift of mothering as practice—a kind of inclusiveness that embraces chaos and grit and imperfection. It's not based on control or keeping things tidy.

It makes room in its heart for a plastic dump truck in the middle of the living room floor, and rap music leaking under a bedroom door at midnight. It doesn't slip away in the middle of the night to search for enlightenment. It stays home with Rahula the Fetter, and finds it there.

As mothers, what can we make of that story of the Buddha leaving his family in the middle of the night? I asked Fu Schroeder. "Oh, but he wasn't the Buddha when he left his child. He was a young prince, in terrible pain," she answered.

"If you're awake, you don't leave your child. Where would you go?" ▲

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