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Spiritual Development in Children of All Ages

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Introduction

In the following presentation, I will explore how through the application of Buddhist principles we may aid children of all ages to flourish holistically, how to become empowered in an integral way and have a spiritually meaningful and enlightened start at the earliest stages of their development. In Buddhist philosophy the three interconnected bodies that constitute an individual, namely “body, speech and mind” (action, speech and thinking) will be used as a template for introducing some practical guidelines of enlightened parenting through physical, mental and spiritual nourishment. In order to provide a complete and rounded education, we have to strengthen and integrate all three aspects into daily life. With the word education, I refer to any kind of training or teaching given to another and pertaining to all aspects of life, and not only in the narrow use of the term in schools, academies or other institutions. New knowledge has to be introduced step by step, in a simple way. And the subject matter has to be relevant to the student’s life and be suited to his age, culture, interests and environment.

I am not a trained teacher, nor a parent. I work with holistic medicine and I am trained to recognize the interconnection of all aspects of body, speech and mind. In the last fifteen years of working with adults and children, I have noticed the tremendous potential children have for spiritual development. Buddhist precepts are ideal for this, for they can be adapted in parenthood, education even by those who are not Buddhist practitioners, and applied, in everyday life providing ethics, happiness, and a better quality of life informed with clarity, luminosity and therefore awareness and a higher level of consciousness. Buddhist values concerning life, human existence and the true nature of mind can be used as universal values whose goal is to cultivate spiritual development in children of all ages, the future generations.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has said:

In this century, there is much more self-centeredness of attitude that gives rise to more depression, fear, distrust, and suicide amongst youth has increased, and there is more anger, dissatisfaction and dysfunction in families and communities. We need to pay more attention to education, and develop more affection, kindness, peace and compassion. As individual happiness is very much dependent upon community, because we are interconnected, interdependent economically, environmentally and in many other fields, it is important to take care of the rest of the world and to develop inner beauty, inner qualities, inner peace and happiness. There is great importance and a sense of urgency to bring the Buddhist principle of compassion into education.

Research undertaken by various disciplines validates the pedagogical benefits of practices such as, mindfulness, contemplation, relaxation, yoga and the development of compassion and awareness. Neuroscientists agree that our brains are designed to change, that they have plasticity and are constantly changing. A child's brain continues to develop long after birth. During the preschool years, 90% of brain growth occurs. The experiences that a child has in the first few years of his or her life create the connections between brain cells and develop the foundation for relationships and learning throughout life. It is critical that parents and educators facilitate positive experiences and promote environments for the optimal development of children during these important years. Nutrition, sleep, regular physical activities such as play, and repeated positive experiences with caring adults, strengthen the connections and allow the growth of the brain and its parts that will enhance all areas of learning including emotional self-regulation. Developing brains adapt to the environment they are exposed to, either it is a negative environment or a positive one.

Hearts Full of Love

Ideally we can start the process of educating and imparting imprints on children while they are still in the womb. A mother nurtures the undelivered baby through her voice, her body and her mind; for example, by selecting what she eats, thinks, speaks and does at all times. After birth there is a variety of nurturing techniques including breastfeeding and infant massage. "Mother love influences brain development in many ways. Her breast milk contains nutrients

and biochemical substances that are essential for the normal development of the infant/child brain and is also essential for the development of the infant's own immunological system which does not mature until 5-6 years of age. The World Health Organization has recommended breastfeeding for "two years and beyond."¹ This is something we can see in all traditional cultures, where babies are breastfeeding until the age of two, and they are also being physically carried by their mothers or other relatives during the early ages of their lives. This is something that has been forgotten in our times, as mothers are very busy working. The IAIM (International Association of Infant Massage) teaches mothers and other relatives the nurturing touch to the children, techniques that we still see in Asian countries, but which they have been lost or forgotten in advanced societies. This is a very kind form of important bonding even for Buddhism since there are many Buddhist techniques where the practitioners are asked to visualize all sentient beings as their mother. For the first two years of their life, the social dynamics, and the bond and intimacy that occurs between mother and child is of vital importance. It leads to a bond of trust and the foundation of all high learning later, including the assimilation of positive values in life such as compassion, loving kindness, caring, and much more. Without enough physical contact, babies all over the world die or become ill, insecure and unsure of who they are as they grow up. In contrast, babies and children that have received full acceptance and nurturing touch from their parents, have more confidence, self-esteem and a stronger immune system. Furthermore, they grow more compassionate towards others and they can give to others the love that they have received during their life.

Short regular massage sessions in the classroom benefits children's behavior and wellbeing and also teach them to respect each other's bodies and to think about the needs of others. Massage increases levels of the 'feel good' hormones (dopamine and serotonin) in the brain, as well as oxytocin which relieves stress and is believed to help humans bond with each other, and help children to become happier, calmer and more focused.

¹ Prescott, James W. (1996). The Origins of Human Love and Violence. *Pre - and Prenatal Psychology Journal*. Vol. 10, No.3, pp.143-187. (Spring).

Educating in Spirituality

If we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children; and if they will grow up in their natural innocence, we won't have to struggle, we won't have to pass fruitless idle resolutions, but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace, until at last all the corners of the world are covered with that peace and love for which consciously or unconsciously the whole world is hungering --- Mahatma Gandhi.

There are schools which have demonstrated surprising results in the intellectual and spiritual development of children, having the vision to bring compassion and spirituality into education, based on Buddhist principles that include: introducing children to the nature and workings of their mind, and teaching them universal values such as honesty, generosity, love, and harmony with each other, with nature and with all of life. Buddhist principles provide a consistent and gentle guidance to help children recognize for themselves which actions bring them happiness and which actions make them feel insecure and unhappy. Moreover, using yoga practices, meditation, guided visualizations, breathing techniques, didactic narratives, attention exercises at the beginning and at the end of each class bring awareness to the child's state of being. There are many benefits in discussions centered on self-inquiry, on questions about life and death, thoughts and feelings, which help children to acquire important skills to handle life's events by maintaining an honest attitude, concentration, control over their emotions, and working in cooperation and collaboration with others. These educational approaches can remedy and prevent psychological distress and behavioral disorders of students, and - in the long term - they can help them to achieve personal, social and existential happiness.²

An essential purpose of rounded education is to generate compassion and understanding following the Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths that contain instructions about the workings of suffering and how to deal with painful emotions by understanding their nature and the interconnected nature of all things. Understanding and love often come together. You cannot love if you do not understand and you can only harm that which you do not understand. The first step in teaching compassion to children is to help them recognize their

² Valentino, Giacomini, "Universal Education Action - The Alice Project."

own emotions and the key to develop compassion in life is to make it a daily practice. This can start from parents and educators who should serve as models of honesty and compassion. This can be done by uncovering the mechanisms of empathy by asking children to ask themselves how others might feel, and encourage them to express their own thoughts about how they think others might feel in a particular situation. They should also be encouraged to draw and illustrate their emotions, to enact roles where they express different emotions, and afterwards be encouraged to describe how they feel. Developing a language for mental and emotional experiences give children more tools and possibilities to understand and regulate their different experiences, and to recognize them when they see them occurring in others. The ultimate lesson is to demonstrate in various ways how to ease the suffering of others by focusing on making others happier through kindness, through gestures,³ since that will make them happier and fulfilled in return. We have to teach children how to be happy by understanding the nature of suffering which stems from an egotistical preoccupation with oneself. Furthermore, happiness is contagious. If we know how to be happy then we know how to put an end to our suffering.

Following the Buddhist teachings on “no-self,” when we give something it is important to do so without placing any importance onto our action. We must teach children to give without expecting anything in return, no payment, and not even to be thanked, since this is how we can help them develop giving to others with detachment and from the bottom of their hearts.⁴ And the perfection of generosity can be applied in a variety of ways - through words, silence, forgiveness, offering time and space, or even a smile.

Reverence - Responsibility - Critical Thinking

Children are seldom taught about the origins of their cultural values, the effects of media and advertising on their desires and behaviors, and the ways in which societal values shape, repress or deny individual needs and wants. Similarly, they are seldom taught where their clothes or food come from, how the products they use are made, where their trash goes, how their electricity is produced, or what effects widely used chemicals have on the environment. Children are not

³ From 100% of our communication, 50% happens through our gestures, 40% from our voice's nuance, and only 10% from the words we say).

⁴ Carlos De Leon De Witt, 1987, “Atrevete a Ser Libre” (Dare to Be Free).

even taught basic information about ecology that underpins their lives. But in order to be able to make informed and responsible choices in their lives, they need to have such information, which is also the basis for critical thinking.

There is a Vietnamese saying, “When eating a fruit, think of the person who planted the tree.” Living in such a way, we can introduce the Buddhist notion of karma and our own responsibility for the world we live in. Though this may be a hard concept to explain, we can begin by teaching the important values of reverence, protection and honor. When a small child feels reverence for goodness, for nature, for the diversity of life, for individual rights, she will likely grow up and make compassionate choices and naturally respect will follow. If children learn to have reverence for other species, showing respect will mean that they won’t destroy or pollute animal habitats or knowingly participate in cruelty. It is much easier to promote respectful attitudes and behaviors among children who feel compassion, wonder, and awe. And students who actively endeavor these positive attitudes are emotionally healthier than those who don’t; their lives increasingly reflect compassion and kindness, and they enjoy a great degree of contentment and happiness.⁵

The Educational Importance of Play

Play is critical to healthy human development since it transforms the quality of life. A child develops natural curiosity and intense concentration when his attention is really captured.⁶ This can be ordinarily achieved with toys, not expensive ones but toys made in a simple and economical way from local materials collected from our surrounding environment. Helping to make toys from recycling and reused stuff, for oneself and for other children can be just as educational and fun, as well as a very good practice on how to become environmentally and socially conscious consumers, and to discover how resourceful we can all be. Moreover, it gives children the opportunity to appreciate their surroundings and to respect nature, learning from a young age not to consume, use or waste resources without consideration of the consequences. In addition to that, recycling examples can be used for the deeper understanding of emotional transformation. Negative emotions are useless but

⁵ Zoe Weil, 2003, “Above All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times.”

⁶ Rieke Hengelar and Inge Melsen, 2007, “Play, the key to development, the importance of play for children with Cerebral Palsy in Nepal,” pg.42, 44.

when they are transformed into positive emotions, they become useful. They were once garbage that has now turned into a treasure.

Singing Bowls – Mindfulness Gong

There is another tool that comes from the Buddhist tradition that helps children in a playful way to develop this practice. It is the Tibetan gong, the singing bowl, the mindful-bell or any other name we like to call it, that has been used for the practice of meditation. It creates moments of quiet, rest and mindfulness that support classroom environments. When we hear the sound of the bell, we can let go of everything, close our eyes and observe our body, our feelings and our breathing. Through mindful awareness children can recognize that they can control how they respond to situations even if they can't control the situation itself.⁷ To bring awareness to what happens in their mind and body is not to control their mind, but to transform it. Singing bowls can also be used in different ways. As a healing object or as a toy it can help children to hear their own music and to follow their own rhythm. The vibration of the singing bowls can bring a state of Alfa waves that corresponds to the state of deep meditation, and can help children to keep alive the connection between the sky and the earth, their mind and their body and sensitize them towards the realization of many different realities.

Ecological Consciousness

Our relationship with nature is also based on listening and understanding. If we encourage children to be in touch with nature, when they grow up they will find it difficult to harm the trees they have planted, the animals they hugged, the plants whose healing power they have been connected with. Given the environmental problems that we face today, it is even more urgent to introduce environmental values. We can do so in a variety of ways, for example by establishing community-school clean up days, taking care of stray animals and freeing others born in bondage, feeding birds and other animals, planting seeds and trees. Integral to this understanding in education is the introduction of tactile sensory experiences and play. This may include: collecting natural objects,

⁷ Susan Kaiser Greenland, 2010, "The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder and More Compassionate."

making mandalas on the earth, looking for patterns in nature, the sky, the clouds and the reflections in water, barefoot walking and much more.

We can start recognizing every being, every expression of life as sacred, as it really is. We can give new meaning to our existence, setting our goal as high as we can: Enlightenment. And enlightenment, from a Mahayana perspective, means just a simple thing: to become servants of all beings; to put the needs of others higher than ours and to create small paradises of consciousness as we go step by step, beyond the logic of "things" and "matter," and into the world of positive energy and love. Can Buddhism really solve our environmental problems? Can it find a solution to climate change? Can meditation bring back all the species that have become extinct? No, but it can make us more conscious citizens, more conscious human beings, and to take a collective responsibility for all these, since the health of one ecosystem is the collective reflection of the psychological and physical health of all its citizens.

Mindful Food

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche in one of his teachings reminds us that the precious human body is the vessel that takes us to the shore of enlightenment. As we cross the ocean of existence, the preservation of the body becomes an important part of the enlightenment process. Therefore, cook and eat as if you were to die the next day. Let fears, hopes and fixations dissolve. Just appreciate what you have at any given time.

The practice of non-harming, a fundamental view of Buddhist teachings, refers not only to the environment, but to all beings living in our blue planet. Food is the food from our cosmos. Eating is a basic need in our lives, and we all take food several times a day. This makes vegetarianism an ideal example of compassion in action in a personal, direct, and tangible way. Through vegetarianism, we can grow altruism and thereby compassion for oneself and all other sentient beings, for earth and the ecosystems that sustain all living forms.⁸ This doesn't mean that everyone has to become vegetarian. But we can at least be conscious of what we are doing and express our gratitude for every living being that we consume, and pray for its future benefit. All that we consume as food and liquid, and the way

⁸ Stepaniak, Joanne M.S.Ed., and Melina, Vesanto M.S., R.D., 2003, "Raising Vegetarian Children, A guide to Good Health and Family Harmony."

we do it, profoundly affect our physical and mental well-being. Since we are all interconnected and one's behavior affects the whole, it does not influence only our stomach or finances. Our feeding habits are not just a personal but a universal matter as well. Through taking time to taste and appreciate different varieties of food, we can think how it was produced, from whom and how, and in this way we can integrate our experience as buyers and as consumers, thereby increasing our consciousness. Our food can be seen to possess an environmental, nutritious, civilizing, and local financial value, instead of being degraded as an external object. We need to be in touch with mother earth when we eat, be present in the process, and have a mindful meal. The Buddha specifically advised us to eat mindfully so that we can maintain compassion in our hearts and ensure a good future for the next generations. He taught that if we take a shortsighted and selfish approach to the food and drink we consume, we will hurt not only ourselves but also our children and our planet. Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "There is a tremendous change that can come to the mind, clarity if we just only turn our "normal" diet to a better vegetarian, a more organic and pure diet."⁹

Children can be taught from a very young age to prefer pure nutrition without added sugar or other chemicals, to honor, respect, and appreciate whatever food they have, and take the amount they can eat without wasting food. Engaging children in the preparation of food, the act of cooking can be transformed to a unique chance to develop consciousness and it can also become an important educational time for instilling important values, as well as relaxing, taming the mind and nurturing the soul. With the use of mantra, prayers and love, the act of cooking can involve a conscious wish and intention to heal and nurture everyone who will receive the meal, and thus turn it into a merit-accumulating-activity by mentally offering the meal to all beings, many of which are hungry.

However, mindful consumption is not only about what we eat and drink with our mouth. What we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think, all that we sense with our body and all that we become aware of with our mind, is food for our sense consciousness. The surrounding environment brings bliss to the individual and the individual bring bliss to the place. If we live in a neighborhood with violence, then we consume violence. If we live in a community with peace, harmony and love, then we consume love. The Buddha said: *Nothing can survive*

⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, 2010, "Mindful Eating, Mindful Life", pp. 47, 50.

without food. This is an obvious but very deep truth. If we do not nourish our love, it will die, and may turn into hate. If we want love to last, we have to nurture it and give it food every day. Hate is the same; if we don't feed it, it cannot survive. Nourishing our bodies and mind with wholesome nutriment will help us achieve peace and happiness. And it is important to realize that our mind and body are not separate. In the age of mass-produced food, it is important to protect ourselves, and even more our children by being selective with what we use for nourishment.

Mind and Body are not separate - Respecting the Human Body

Many religious traditions agree that our body plays an important part in our spiritual development. If we don't respect our body, we don't respect our mind. This means nothing more than to be present and connected with what the body feels, and understand that body and mind are interconnected. A very interesting pedagogical work has been done with the Healthy Communities Puzzles.¹⁰ The Healthy Communities Puzzle comprises a set of two colorful puzzles. It was designed to help make health lessons easy. One puzzle details all the components of an unhealthy village comprising a dirty river full of dead animals and rubbish, and bored children throwing stones through the windows of their closed school. There are shops selling instant noodles and sweets instead of tsampa and fruit, and no one visits the local gompa. The second puzzle describes a healthy community consisting of cooperatively owned shops and businesses, volunteers teaching agricultural techniques at an ecologically-sound experimental farm. There is also a thriving monastery and nunnery. The puzzles are the focus of a fun learning activity which illustrates the differences between the villages, the people, and their healthy and unhealthy behaviors. A key aspect to a healthy life is how our bodies and mind are interconnected. Cultivating a deeper understanding of how thoughts and feelings can impact our health will help us to become the master of our body and health.

Speech and Listening

When we are masters of our mind, we are also masters of our speech. From a Buddhist point of view, right speech is an important aspect of the eightfold path, to know when it is proper not to speak at all and when it is proper to speak at the

¹⁰ THEO Health Learning Series, "Tashi's Dream."

right time. The first step to learning mindful speaking, which is also the greatest tool we have, is to learn how to listen and to learn to be silent. The great Tibetan yogi Milarepa is usually represented naked in the snowy Himalayas in a sitting position, with his hand raised behind his right ear and with a smile full of love and compassion, hearkening to the cosmic sounds of the universe, the transmissions of the enlightened teachers and the pains of countless beings wherever they are. Effective communication among humans is an art that starts and ends by listening to others. It is important to learn to be silent in order to listen. A very good exercise is the practice of “listening walks,” remaining silent while walking and just hearing everything carefully without exception, without attraction or repulsion. This practice may change the perception we have for ourselves and others, increasing real communication, while respecting and accepting others and everything as it is.¹¹ The tongue and therefore speech has the power of life and death. Destructive or encouraging words are sometimes all that someone needs in order to finish or to continue their path in life. Through compassionate listening, and by cultivating loving, truthful speech, using words that inspire confidence, joy and hope, we may relieve suffering and promote reconciliation and peace in ourselves and among others. In order to develop right speech and right listening among children, we can use games. For example, children can take turns one being the ear and the other the mouth, using a stick or a ball for the one who speaks as the other one is listening, recognizing and acknowledging constructive forms of communication. Showing children the power that words have in their life is a way to encourage them to recognize words than can potentially harm others. Complaining doesn’t change people. If something can’t happen in one way, for sure it can happen in another way. We could even use the alphabet to teach Buddhist perceptions and values - A for Awareness, B for Beneficial, C for Compassion, L for Love, and so on. When we use loving speech we can water the good seeds in our children and inspire them to do as we have done. With right speech and by following our own practice, our children will see and imitate us.¹² Words are the vibrations of nature; beautiful words create beautiful images. Ugly words create ugly images. It is important to put together mouth and mind in practice, and to start using a new language that derives from the heart.

¹¹ Gerouki Ariadni, 2011, “Αλλάζοντας τον Κόσμο ... από Μέσα” (“Changing the World... from Inside”), 134-136.

¹² Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008, “Answers from the Heart, Practical responses to Life’s Burning Questions”.

The web of Interconnection

We need to teach children that we are all joined together like the rings of one chain. We are connected with each other just like the hands, the legs, the eyes, the stomach are connected with the whole body. Having children imitating parts of the body, and also imitating birds, trees, and so forth as parts of a bigger body, will help them understand the interconnection of all things. Exercises like these will inspire them to make choices in the future to benefit other people and to become members of a generation where the 'we' will be the leader, instead of the 'I.' Training our speech and mind is not enough, we have to act accordingly. On the other hand, the most important thing is not what we do with our body and speech, but our mind and our emotions. This is where the children's education should be focused, to encourage them to come to know their mind and the way it interacts with the world. If their mind is polluted with egotistical desires and false views, the world will be polluted. If they learn how to control and purify their mental and emotional worlds, they will be able one day to protect and nurture the physical world, the earth and the environment.

There are so many books these days that outline examples and tips on educating children in spirituality, that everyone who is interested in this subject can find great ideas.¹³ The truth is that Buddhist values support morality, and bring happiness and worth in the world and in life, and go beyond the narrow confines of Buddhist religiosity. Buddhism is an ancient philosophy that is at the same time contemporary, practical and timely – “a discipline to counteract unhappiness” if you will.¹⁴ It teaches sharing, participation, genuine interest, caring, self-denial, consciousness, responsibility, solidarity and compassion. These universal values are within and beyond any religious tradition and are precious and needed, especially in this world, and in our times.

¹³ Tips for Nurturing Spiritual Development in Children, Sandy Smith, 2003.

¹⁴ Dimou, Nikos, “Ο Έλληνας Βούδας” (‘The Greek Buddha’).

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