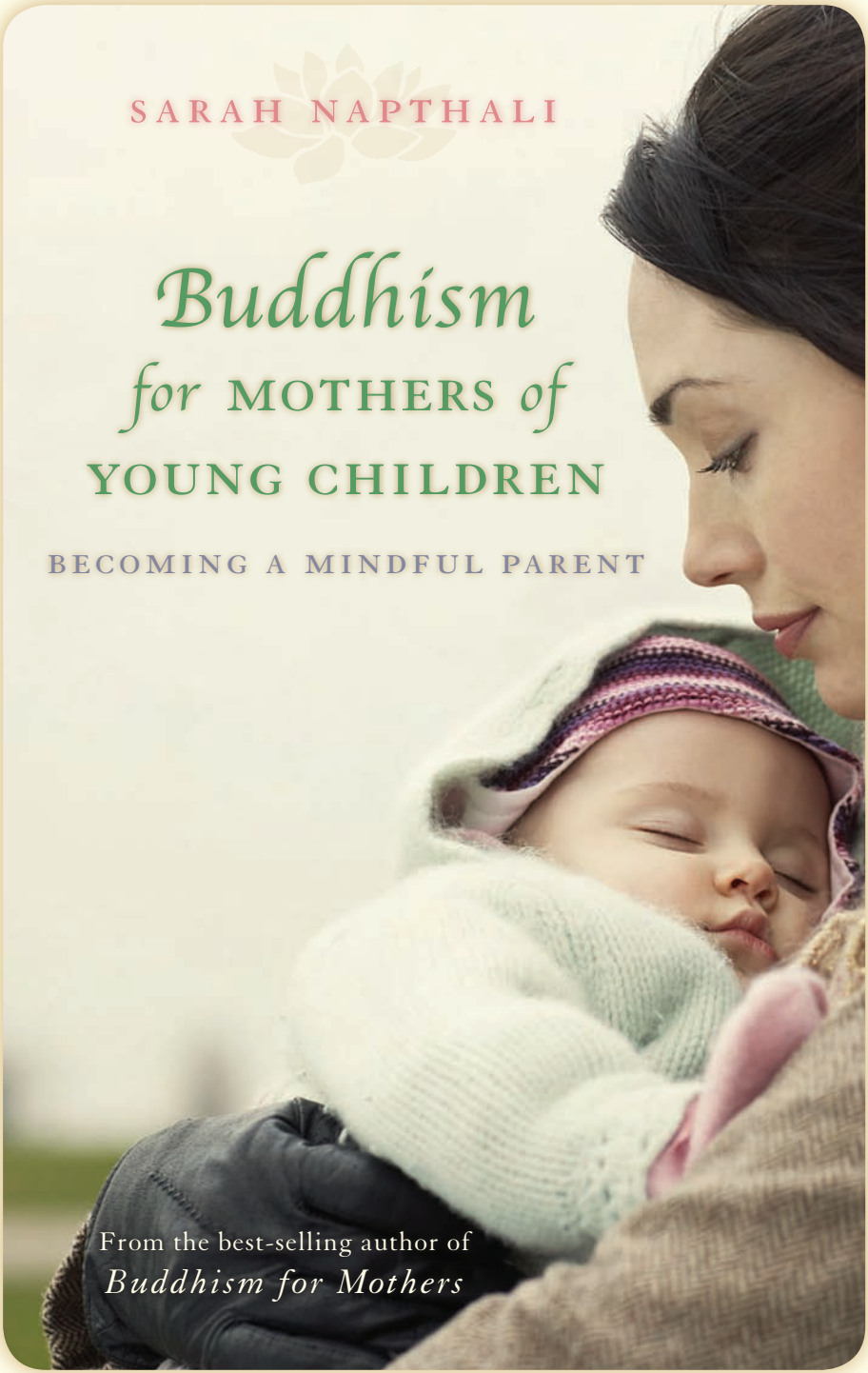
SARAH NAPTHALI

Buddhism for MOTHERS *of* YOUNG CHILDREN

BECOMING A MINDFUL PARENT



From the best-selling author of
Buddhism for Mothers

Praise for *Buddhism for Mothers*

'Buddhist practitioner Napthali has written an eminently practical book that gives frazzled mothers useable advice and empathy . . . precisely because she is not a teacher and is in the midst of mothering, Napthali offers the approachable and authentic perspective of a rank-and-file practitioner who lives the techniques and situations she writes about.'—*Publishers Weekly*

'Napthali's book focuses on Buddhist practices that will help mothers become calmer and happier in themselves. Follow her advice and we all know what comes next—better parenting.'—*Sunday Telegraph*

'Funny, uplifting, reassuring, real and wise. A truly "mothering" book for mothers . . .'—Stephanie Dowrick

'This is an excellent, practical guide to everyday Buddhism, not just for mothers, but for everyone who has ever had a mother.'—Vicki Mackenzie, author of the best-selling *Why Buddhism?*

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'. . . approach the day-to-day "highs and lows" differently and more positively, and yes—even more calmly.'—Childbirth Education Association

Reviews from Amazon

'I love this book. It brings such a calming sense of being just by picking it up.'—Kathleen

'I love this book! I would recommend this book to anyone, Buddhist or not. I'm so glad someone is finally talking about how to deal with the stresses of mother hood in a realistic way without inducing guilt or fear. The author's tone is both friendly and empathetic—just what we moms need. The book is empowering and has made a big difference in the way I parent and the way I view my life as a mom.'—T. M.-R.

'The author is very honest and refreshing. On every page you get the sense that the author is a very real person who can relate to both the best and the stressed in us all.'—Suzanne

'IF YOU'RE A MOM, BUY THIS BOOK! I am sceptical of anyone trying to preach an idea to me, and I do not claim to be Buddhist. I just LOVE this book. I checked it out from a local library, but am now purchasing it so I can always have it around. It not only approaches ways to be a calmer mom, but a calmer being in your daily encounter with the world. It has changed how I approach issues, big or small; it's also inspired me to demonstrate the same zen-buddhist coping tools for my children; and it has helped me to stay in the present moment.'—Kristin

Praise for *Buddhism for Mothers of Young Children* (formerly titled *Buddhism for Mothers with Lingering Questions*)

'Napthali is a lovely writer. She skilfully weaves interviews with other parents into her own thoughts. As for guilt, Tibetans don't even have a word for it, she writes.'—*Sydney Morning Herald*

'If you liked her first book, *Buddhism for Mothers*, then you'll adore this one. It'll give you a new perspective on parenting and may even help you enjoy it more.'—*Sunday Telegraph*

'This second book from Sarah Napthali . . . had me repeatedly crying out "yes" . . . By being focused, open and more attentive to the present moment we can enjoy a calmer and happier journey through parenthood; a great companion book for mothers struggling to cope with their new role.'—*Perth Woman*

'There is much here to learn; through Napthali's eyes, patience, reflection and calm become the vehicles to a deeper understanding of self, motherhood and family.'—*Junior*

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BECOMING A MINDFUL PARENT

inspired LIVING

ALLEN&UNWIN

Other books by Sarah Napthali

Buddhism for Mothers

Buddhism for Mothers of Schoolchildren

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Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
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preface

For many of us, it does not seem so long ago that the future was a complete mystery. Casting our minds back to pre-children days, we might remember a time when we had no idea who we would spend the rest of our lives with, where we would live, which communities we would belong to. Now we find ourselves at a stage where we know, and live, the answers to those big questions. Most of us have a fair idea of how we will spend the next few years, if not decades, of our lives. We have solved much of the mystery of how we 'turned out' or 'ended up'. Some of us gave the full report at our twenty-year school reunion.

Still, not many of us see ourselves as now 'living happily ever after'—for questions remain. Questions whose answers will determine the welfare of our families. These days, our questions sound more like: *What kind of people are my children growing into? What do they need from me? Who, now, am I? What do I need to make me happy? Is there more to life than this? Where am I headed? Am I doing anything wrong?* As we speculate on the answers, we feel every emotion from terror to elation, as we brace ourselves for the years of parenting ahead.

Since writing my first book, *Buddhism For Mothers*, my four-year-old Zac is now seven, my newborn Alex four. Life feels completely different to how it felt then. Many of the stresses have eased. I no longer change nappies, breastfeed or carry anybody. I still hose down temper flares—and dream of a tidy house. My husband, Marek, a mechanical engineer, remains equally disinterested in matters spiritual. Zac is at school. Alex is at pre-school three days a week, so these days I have time to work as a writer for a small number of clients from a home office.

Three years ago my greatest parenting challenge was being torn between the disparate needs of a suckling newborn and an active four-year-old. Today that gap has narrowed dramatically and the two play together—and squabble—for hours at a stretch. Since both boys were temperamental babies and strong-willed toddlers, I have moved from wishing the years would go faster to panicking over how quickly they now slip by. I worry that next time I look at Zac and Alex their childhood will be over.

My greatest challenge these days is dealing with the unrelenting naughtiness of four-year-old Alex. Apparently his behaviour is 'fine' when his parents are not around, but when we are, it is marked by a taste for boundary-pushing and button-pressing (mine). To illustrate, not long ago Alex found his way onto the stage at a musical performance at Zac's school. Running into the middle of the stage, he then turned around, bent over and wiggled his bottom at an audience of two hundred people.

Sometimes I look back wistfully on the days when Zac was Alex's age, four, and decided to call me *Sarah* instead of *Mum*. The phase only lasted a couple of weeks but hearing a tiny son call me by name seemed . . . inappropriate. When Alex is angry, which is often, he calls me *Stupid Bumhead*. A major line of questioning for my husband and me: Who is Alex and what kind of person is he growing into?

What can we do to nurture what is best in him? Sometimes our question is whether his parents will survive the journey.

Some of us find our questions only arise when we slow down. The questions might begin to surface on a holiday or during an illness. When a mother stops to take stock about what really matters and where she should concentrate her energy, the answer is usually the same: her children. She might decide they need more of her time. Or even that she needs to take a step back and allow them more space. She might realise the need for a new approach to a niggling problem. What matters, however—according to a bevy of Buddhists, psychologists, philosophers, academics and wise laypeople—is that we make time for reflection, to ensure that the way we live our days aligns with how we ultimately want our lives to unfold.

For parents, the price can be high if we fail to make the necessary space for the big questions of our lives. Socrates may have sounded extreme when he said 'an unexamined life is not worth living', but examining our lives brings us closer to finding contentment. This is not to say that we find instant answers to our questions, or that this book will tell you what your answers are. Even the answers we do find might change over time. Rather, these questions are our life's work. We learn to treasure the questions, keep them at the forefront of our minds, and allow them to keep us open and curious in our daily lives. Buddhists cultivate a lifelong spirit of inquiry rather than any presumption that we are already wise.

As questioning mothers, we seek to parent consciously. We cannot afford to parent on automatic pilot, let alone in a state of negativity. Instead, we challenge ourselves to find the most skilful approaches to family life. We avoid treating our children in knee-jerk, reactive ways, just as we avoid falling into ruts of crabbiness, snappiness and impatience. We know that every child is different from the next, and that each individual is different from stage to stage, even day to day,

and moment to moment. If we want to be the best parent we can be, we need to keep paying attention to the changing requirements of each new moment.

The word *Buddha* means 'one who is awake'. Buddhist teachings help mothers by encouraging us to be awake to what is going on now, to what is important and to how we can be happy. Buddhist practices help us to find answers to our deepest questions, such as how to find inner peace.

Siddharta Gautama, who eventually became the Buddha, was born a prince in a kingdom of Northern India. He was raised in a beautiful palace by an indulgent father who sought, at all costs, to protect his son from any knowledge of the misery in the streets outside the palace. The young prince eventually insisted on seeing the world and was deeply troubled to observe the suffering inherent in birth, sickness, aging and death. He decided to renounce the life of worldly pleasures and set about finding a way to end human suffering.

At first the prince tried the life of a yogi living in the forests but eventually saw that a life of asceticism, of denying the body its basic needs, was making him weak and ill, and bringing him no closer to freedom. By now he had turned against the extremes of indulgence on the one hand and denial of bodily needs on the other, such that we now refer to his teachings as the Middle Path. He decided to sit and meditate at the foot of a Bodhi tree in an effort to find liberation from suffering. There, he waged against the forces of his own greed, hatred and delusion.

With a clear mind and an open heart, he managed to penetrate the depths of human consciousness and discover a place of spaciousness and peace. He became enlightened. Having reached nirvana, he was now free from all attachment to worldly conditions. He spent the next forty-five years bringing his teachings to the various villages of India. His message was that we are all capable of awakening and

manifesting our true nature, our Buddha Nature. He had discovered a way to end our unease and our anguish.

The last words of the Buddha before he died were: 'Since there is no external saviour, it is up to each of you to work out your own liberation.' In other words, each of us is responsible for our own spiritual path. Our own lives are our best teachers.

In becoming mothers, we have already progressed along our spiritual path in that some growth comes automatically. When I ask even the most overwhelmed of mothers how the experience of motherhood has changed them, the answers are inspiring. I hear that motherhood has made them more compassionate, patient, loving, sensitive to others, stronger and more aware of the value of life, love and community.

The path of parenting and the spiritual path are, so often, one and the same, such that for many, the two paths commence at around the same time. Becoming a parent often leads to spiritual seeking. As with a Buddhist practice, parenting demands that we keep paying attention to the requirements of the moment. Both paths require self-awareness if we are to see clearly. And the parallels continue. Children remind us of the mystery in our lives, as we continually find that they are not who we thought they were. Parenting teaches us all those spiritual truths that we resist with all our being, but finally cannot avoid—that life can never be perfect, that nothing lasts, that the only time is now and that I am not who I think I am. The path of parenting forces us to identify, and question, our spiritual beliefs, for soon enough our children ask us what we believe in.

How easy it is to forget that parenting is a sacred responsibility. It is the most important work we will ever do and we only have one chance to bring our best selves to the challenge. When I catch myself parenting in ways I am not proud of, I must ask, can I afford to be half-hearted about this role? On the worst days, parenting becomes

mere time-filling before reaching some moments to myself. A Buddhist practice helps us to remember the importance, and the potential, of every moment, no matter how banal it may at first seem.

Motherhood sees us grow, develop and mature, but it can also have the opposite effect. We see control freaks become even more controlling; worriers become neurotic; complainers become unrelentingly negative. How can we secure our journey on the higher road? On a spiritual path, we find the means to cultivating wisdom and open-heartedness. On such a path, a mother uses whatever life presents to her as 'grist for the mill', to help her grow into someone who sees herself and her children with clarity.

One concern I hosted as I wrote this book was that I might give mothers more to feel guilty about. I have noticed the tendency in myself to use my Buddhist practice as a source of guilt. I have felt guilty for not meditating but also for meditating when there were so many other tasks competing for my time. I have felt guilty for forgetting to live in the present, for yelling at the children, for behaving insensitively to friends and family, and for a multitude of unwholesome thoughts and actions.

Mothers specialise in guilt, but keep in mind that guilt is never a Buddhist antidote to our problems. A Buddhist mother might still, out of habit, feel guilty from time to time, but she is also likely to commit to a degree of gentleness towards herself and even humour in facing her shortcomings. Intriguingly, the Tibetans do not even have a word for guilt in their language—remorse and regret, yes, but they have no word for guilt. This is the proof that it is possible to practise Buddhist teachings without beating ourselves up when we fall short.

Just as I did with *Buddhism For Mothers*, I open this book with the confession that it draws on all three of the main Buddhist traditions: Tibetan, Zen and Theravada. A true practice of Buddhism requires

us to commit to one of these. Personally, it took me many a month to choose one when I loved all three. When I finally did commit, I changed my mind a couple of years later. These days I attend Buddhist meetings which draw primarily from the Theravada, or Insight, tradition. Still, the five teachers come from both the Theravada and Zen schools. Some have practised in both but are careful not to mix the teachings when they present them. The differences between the three are endlessly interesting to me and most of the Buddhists I talk to, but we need to remember that a true practice does not mix the teachings together.

Another similarity of this book with *Buddhism For Mothers* is that I have drawn on the experiences of other mothers. One mother in particular features in this book for she allowed me to draw from her daily journal about her practice. Kim Gold is a Zen Buddhist and a mother of two girls, aged six and three. This book abounds with entries from her journal which provide inspiring examples of how Buddhist teachings can come to life for a mother.

Keeping her journal for the past year, Kim has experienced many distressing days, in and out of hospital, leading up to her husband's seventh episode of surgery—which was finally successful. She endured these crises along with all the usual trials such as transitioning her youngest daughter from her day sleep, staying sane throughout toddler tantrums and battling against her own high standards. As time progressed, Kim's journal revealed major shifts in her way of seeing the world. Her Zen practice opened her up to new ways of seeing her problems, new ways of relating to others and fresh approaches to parenting challenges.

Another interesting mother who features in this book is Subhana Barzaghi. Despite the exotic name, Subhana was born in Australia and has been practising Buddhism for twenty-five years. At the age of forty-five, Subhana is a qualified teacher in two Buddhist traditions,

Zen and Theravada, and has studied with many of the world's most prominent Buddhist teachers. She has founded, or co-founded, four different Buddhist centres, and led retreats in India, Australia and New Zealand. Starting her career as a midwife in the country, Subhana is today a psychotherapist in private practice. With one grown daughter no longer at home, she now finds herself living with three teenage boys, and her partner, so is definitely a teacher in touch with the realities of daily family life.

As Kim, Subhana and many among us have learnt, motherhood opens your heart to a new way of being. So does practising Buddhist teachings. We open ourselves to all kinds of experiences: to learning, to changing our perspective, to 'not-knowing' and to letting go of what we cling to. A Buddhist practice encourages us to live in a state of receptivity: What are my experiences teaching me? Can I see that my children, in so many ways, are raising me?

CHAPTER 1

where am I?

Driving a carload of rowdy six-year-olds to soccer practice, I am suddenly struck by how surprised I would have been, back in my twenties, to see myself now. The same feeling sweeps over me as I sit at a barbecue with some fellow parents: to think I didn't even know these people a few years ago… We have all had moments as mothers when we are struck by where we have suddenly found ourselves. We might smile as we marvel at the new world we now inhabit and how far away it seems from our old world.

Sometimes, we miss our old world, we struggle to surrender our former freedoms, our youth and all those evenings, weekends and holidays to ourselves.

Sometimes we look in our mirrors, look at our messy living rooms or at the clock that reads three in the morning, and ask, 'Where am I?'

A Buddhist would provide a short, simple answer: *Here, now*.

In the present moment

To be open to the wonder of the present moment, to the here and now, is an opportunity available to us whenever we choose it. Resisting the temptation to rummage around in our past, to daydream or sift through details of the days ahead, we reap the benefits of looking deeply into *what is*. To live in the present is to see our children for who they are in this moment, to notice our surroundings, and to listen attentively to others. It means being aware of what we are saying as we are saying it, of what we are feeling as we are feeling it, and tuning into what each of our senses is perceiving. The Buddha referred to the practice of living in the moment as 'a better way to live'. In his words:

Do not pursue the past.
Do not lose yourself in the future.
The past no longer is.
The future has not yet come.
Looking deeply at life as it is
In the very here and now,
The practitioner dwells
In stability and freedom.
We must be diligent today.
To wait until tomorrow is too late.
Death comes unexpectedly.

By the time we have children, many of us have become so achievement-oriented, so goal-driven, so addicted to busyness that we lose our ability to relax along with our capacity to notice what is going on in the *now*. One of the greatest gifts children bring is the way they guide, if not force, our attention back home to the present. Young children live in the present moment, oblivious to the past, unconcerned about the future. They see objects, people and events with fresh eyes, and with wonder. If we choose to, we can take on their viewpoint and see our surroundings as if for the first time. Once jaded, world-weary parents can find themselves lying in their backyards fascinated at the proceedings of an ant colony. If we let them, children can teach us the value of time with no objectives, a skilful kind of laziness free from the need for productivity.

In the book *Dharma Family Treasures*: *Sharing Mindfulness with Children*, Buddhist mother Barbara Gates writes about how our children can transform the quality of our awareness:

Before I became a mother I'd always been a dreamer, unaware of much that surrounded me. I would leave the refrigerator door

> open, crash into people in the market, step in dog messes and jay-walk between cars on busy streets. And I'd felt tied to the unrecognised forces driving me from within to burst without consideration into other people's lives.
>
> Now the tingling sweetness of Caitlin inspires me to cultivate awareness. I know how she thrives when she's truly heard and seen. I know her vulnerability to life's jangling knocks and jolts. And I know her mortality. So, when I cook her meals, when I answer her questions, or cross the street holding her hand, awareness begins to permeate my life.

Part of practising awareness of the moment is noticing the way we judge or evaluate whatever we perceive. We tend to rate everything as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Anybody who has watched their thoughts for any amount of time knows that so many of them carry a judgement about the desirability of the subject of our attention. With Buddhist awareness we experiment with noticing these judgements without buying into them, without becoming emotionally caught up in them. This means noticing, and letting go of, our usual opinions, longings and prejudices in favour of clearly seeing *what is*.

Of course, it takes practice to dispense with these habits of a lifetime and ideally we practise non-judgemental awareness in meditation. The more we practise non-judgemental awareness, the more we cultivate equanimity—a calm mind that is not at the mercy of extreme reactions.

Kim, mother of two girls, who I introduced earlier, speaks of carrying the benefits of non-judgemental awareness into her daily life, and finds similarities between her practice of *Zazen*, the Zen word for meditation, and the act of going for a walk.

> I used to over-analyse my feelings around the simple act of exercise: do I feel like doing it? Am I bored? Am I too tired? But now I see my daily walks as part of my Zen practice. I don't worry about whether I want to do it or not. I just assume the 'posture'. As with Zazen, once I'm on my cushion, with my back straight, and my hands in place…I'm there. It is so beautifully simple and devoid of analysis.
>
> The less I ask 'Am I enjoying this? Am I having fun?' the better. It's not that I'm against enjoying my walk, but in this culture of pleasure and convenience we constantly evaluate our situations and, more often than not, end up dissatisfied.

On the days that I reject practising presence, I need to ask myself a question. If I do not practise awareness of the present moment, then what am I practising instead and is it helpful? I might find myself practising resentment about the amount of housework. I might find myself entangled in angry, repetitive thoughts. Or maybe I'll practise daydreaming and fantasising which, if done to excess, is a form of escapism and rejection of my life as it is now.

If I avoid being present, I might find myself becoming obsessed with my productivity. Life becomes grim-faced as I surrender to being perpetually busy, to always achieving. This is the culture of our time and can become an addictive state of mind. When I find myself on this bandwagon I ask—is this making me happy? More often, I feel stressed. On one occasion I received a wake-up call from a newspaper article in Melbourne's *The Age* entitled 'Surrendering to the simple joys of motherhood'. Writer Joanna Murray-Smith reminded me of another way to be:

> Perhaps the modern mother needs not only a fairer deal, but help in relinquishing the temperament of obsessive productivity. Rather

> than managing our children, we need to relax into their company, take pleasure from the tiny transactions of baby-days, the pleasures of play. We seem to have lost a capacity for tenderness and time-wasting, obsessed with doing more than feeling, distracted by a society that measures purpose in little boxes and success by how quickly they can be ticked off. Has the modern mother lost the ability to find in her mothering the humour, the adventuring, the mystery of that experience?

I cut out that paragraph and stuck it on my fridge, underlining the words *humour*, *adventuring* and *mystery*.

Alive in every moment

As many parents do, I find myself breaking my life into compartments. Housework is one compartment, time with the children another, and then there's 'my time'. I notice a tendency to count down to 'my time' as the time when I please myself. Even when 'my time' finally arrives, I can find myself in a dither over how to spend it. I can even grow quite stressed at how I will fit everything into this invariably small window of time. On a good day, I wake up to see that dividing my life into sections is no recipe for happiness. After all, 'my time' is such a minuscule proportion of a typical day.

A Buddhist outlook helps me to embrace all the hours in my day as part of my life. Every moment is life. Every moment offers the potential to wake up. Spending such a large proportion of our week on housework and errands, it is important to our mental health that we adopt a skilful state of mind. If we practise Buddhist mindfulness—living with awareness of what we are doing as we are doing

it—throughout our day, then no moment is too small for our attention. As Kim wrote in her journal:

> At times my inclination is to see the day like a big checklist hoping to get to those parts that I 'enjoy', like my walks or my art. But then I am only really living for an hour a day! With mindfulness practice I am so much more alive, even during the so-called tedious times.

Subhana awakened to the possibility of mindful living after spending time with renowned Zen teacher Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh. Sixteen years ago, Subhana organised his national tour of Australia which included a few days in the spiritual community where she lived in northern New South Wales. Subhana recalls:

> His whole emphasis is on mindfulness practice in daily life and he opened my mind to the potential to be mindful in every moment in a way that none of my teachers before him had. Wherever he walked it was as if he was in his monastery doing walking meditation. He never rushed. There was no moment that was not his practice. Even when he was about to enter a room, we all knew it was him because the door-handle would turn so slowly.
>
> His effect on children was mind-boggling. We had about eighteen children living in the community then, aged from four to ten, and he insisted on holding the retreat in their midst. I was very nervous about whether eighteen children would behave for him but he ensured they all had meditation cushions so that they could sit for five or ten minutes. And they did!
>
> I remember an amazing scene when he was doing his walking meditation in the fields. Wearing one of those sloping Chinese hats, and flowing robes, he would slowly walk with his arms

> slanting outwards and all these children would hold onto his arms or parts of his robes. Occasionally he would stop to examine a flower and the children would too. He would walk along the road and the children would actually do half an hour of walking meditation. They were absolutely mesmerised by his presence. The children—and especially the adults watching from a distance—were just in awe of this man.

Subhana's account of Thich Nhat Hanh's effect on children suggests that if we were more grounded in the present moment, it might have a calming influence on our sons and daughters.

In a new place

As mothers we are privileged to be with our toddlers when they experience their first encounters with common objects like mirrors, shadows, puddles, bugs or autumn leaves. If we pay attention, our children reconnect us to these simple wonders of everyday life. The tiniest sound could stop two-year-old Alex in his tracks. 'What's that?' he would ask rooted to the spot, mouth slightly open with anticipation. Nothing else existed for him, his attention was fully consumed. I was intrigued by how long he spent examining a spider in its web. It lured me to scrutinise along with him as I tried to see with his eyes.

Two-year-old Alex bounced on a trampoline smiling from ear to ear shouting, 'Fun. Fun. Mum too.' Up, down, up, down—how could that be fun? I clambered onto the trampoline, started jumping and realised I could only enjoy it by rediscovering feelings from childhood: feelings of freedom and exuberance that adults rarely touch. Later, I reconnected with these same feelings on the swing at the park, when I climbed a tree or played hide and seek.

Alex taught me to adopt what Zen Buddhists call a 'Beginner's Mind' where we come to each new experience as if for the first time rather than with all our old prejudices. A toddler has Beginner's Mind by default because he is a beginner at life. These small people challenge us to take a look at familiar objects and situations as though we had never seen them before.

One Zen practice that cultivates a Beginner's Mind, or a 'spirit of enquiry', is to repeat to ourselves throughout our daily tasks the question, 'What is this?' Two-year-old Alex reminded me of this teaching by asking me 'What's that?'—sometimes twenty or thirty times a day. I see ordinary objects and phenomena afresh if I can adopt his viewpoint. Alex is a spiritual teacher, my own resident Zen Master.

This oft-repeated Zen tale serves as a call to embrace a Beginner's Mind:

> A great scholar visited a famous Zen master. While the master served tea, the scholar talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, but, rather than stopping, continued to pour. The scholar watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer keep silent. 'It's overflowing! No more can go in!' the scholar cried. 'You are like this cup,' the master replied. 'How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?'

In Zen Buddhism, wisdom is more about questions than answers. More about openness than certainty. About mystery and wondering rather than knowing. Wisdom is an acknowledgement of not-knowing, an ability to meet each new situation free from bias or any sense of our own expertise. With this definition of wisdom, parenthood clearly made writer John Wilmot wiser, for he said: 'Before I got married, I

had six theories about bringing up children. Now I have six children and no theories.'

One day I sat next to Alex for his very first train trip through the suburbs. He was all attention as the scenery whizzed past and passengers came and went—so much to take in. He was experiencing a new world, where he could hurtle through the landscape in a huge box connected to other boxes. I was surprised that, for once, he sat still: he was in awe. On our return journey, errands done, Alex turned his focus to the faces in our carriage. He examined each one and when he had eye contact he smiled, inducing the passenger to smile back. I enjoyed our train trip so much—adopting his point of view—that we caught the train again the following week. Just for something to do.

Alex, just turned four, makes me read *Peter Pan* to him every day. For the first few weeks I see the task as something I do for him—there is certainly nothing in it for me. As he continues to request this book each day, I fill with dread when he hands it to me and admonish myself that I keep forgetting to hide it. But then I change my mind. Again, Alex is a Zen Master in disguise trying to teach me the value of a Beginner's Mind. For him, each reading is as if for the first time. He experiences all his feelings anew on each visit.

Rather than think my own thoughts as I read, I decide to bring my attention back to the story and try to understand his devotion. And now I can see clearly: Imagine yourself as a child, flying out your bedroom window with a fun-loving guy who has a fairy for a pet. They fly to a faraway land… *There were fairies living in the treetops. There were mermaids swimming in a lagoon. There were real red Indians in a village on a cliff. There were woods full of wild animals. Best of all, there was a shipful of pirates—wicked ones, with a specially wicked leader, Captain Hook.*

Peter Pan lives with the Lost Boys in an underground house—and the story has not even begun. I have started enjoying our Peter Pan time, and I read it with more expression, now that I can see with the eyes of a four-year-old.

Beginner's Mind can make even the most mundane experiences seem miraculous. Driving home alone from Alex's pre-school this morning, I imagined that this was my first experience of driving a car. How strange and awe-inspiring it was. Sitting in a comfortable armchair, and with only slight pressure from my foot on the accelerator, I career through space, covering distances in one day that pre-automobile peoples would not cover in a lifetime. I imagine how thrilling this would be if I was one of my ancestors doing this for the first time. I am living their wildest imaginings, their science fiction. In my car my body flies through space, taking corners on a whim and with only the slightest movement from my arms. I feel alive in every moment for it is my turn on this fun ride.

Not where you thought you were

Our thoughts, our inner talk, determine the nature of the place we find ourselves in any given moment. Our thoughts can limit us, torment us, trick us and run our lives if we let them. They certainly provide effective fuel for a bad mood. Whether we are dealing with painful memories or fears for the future, we can short-circuit negative thoughts simply by choosing another place for our attention. It is often easier than we assume, to simply change what we pay attention to. How much attention we give to any given topic is our choice. Throughout her husband's health crisis, for example, Kim observed:

> I have noticed how the moment always gives us many choices. For example, I could dwell in my own depression or I could play with my kids. I could worry about something, or I could focus on the beauty of the grey sky. I could sit here replaying stuff in my mind that I know makes me feel bad, or I could take the kids to their favourite restaurant for a fun dinner. Up until yesterday, I chose to dwell on the more negative side of the moment.

This does not mean we live in denial, suppressing any negativity. On the contrary, Buddhist teachings emphasise the value of becoming more familiar with the nature of negative thoughts and emotions. While a meditation sitting is the ideal time to do this, we can still make such space in our daily lives. But after we calmly observe any negative thoughts, we let them go. Kim continues:

> I need to learn how to feel the negative side, rather than run from it—but then to *move on* to all of the joy that is before me. I need to see the myriad of choices the moment offers, and choose to experience the joy, rather than only the pain.

One time we can practise awareness of where we place our attention is in our conversations with our partners. These are usually our most honest conversations but the danger is—and I speak from experience—that they become a daily whinge session. Although it can be constructive to discuss problems together, or vent frustration to someone sympathetic, it is easy to fall into the habit of using time with our partner for the sole purpose of reliving the difficulties of the day.

In its extreme forms, the daily whinge session is a competition to prove who has the hardest life. It is worth challenging the usefulness of such conversations for they often reinforce a negative outlook in both parties. After all, it is easy enough to turn the conversation around to

what was inspiring, humorous or uplifting in the day. Growing children make so many amusing comments, ask the strangest questions and often behave with a fresh unpredictability—why not tell our partners about some of the many delights of our day? This is likely to lead to a shared sense of gratitude rather than victimhood.

Just as conversations with our husbands can turn to habitual lamentation, so too can conversations with mother friends, as we complain together about our husbands. Many a mother's group bonds through sharing frustration about our common enemy: the male. While commiserating with each other about gender inequities brings the relief of knowing that much suffering is shared, some of us risk reaching the point where we only see the worst in our partners. Where anger and resentment blinds us to the possibility of compassion for the other. Again, it is easy enough to turn such conversations around by remembering the strengths of our partners, along with the reasons to feel gratitude toward them. Some of us have to dig deeper than others, but most of us can come up with something.

We have the choice to place our attention on what inspires us, but we also have a choice in the way we interpret our situations. There is rarely only one way to interpret the moment you find yourself in and rarely only one way to rate it, or to judge how pleasant or unpleasant it is. We are far more empowered to see life clearly, and resolve our issues, when we have a flexible perspective, when we can see that we have choices about how we see our moments.

In his book *The Art of Happiness* the Dalai Lama says:

> It seems that often when problems arise, our outlook becomes narrow. All of our attention may be focused on worrying about the problem, and we may have a sense that we're the only one that is going through such difficulties. This can lead to a kind of self-absorption that can make the problem seem very intense.

> When this happens, I think that seeing things from a wider perspective can definitely help—realizing for instance that there are many people who have gone through similar experiences, and even worse experiences.

When Zac was put into his new class to start the school year, I felt disappointed that, for the second year in a row, none of his close friends were in his class. Although he knew many of the boys in his new class, he had never made a strong connection with any of them and a couple of them were extremely disruptive. Might this affect Zac's enjoyment of school? Just as the Dalai Lama described, I became, for a few days, increasingly absorbed by this problem. I asked the principal if Zac could join the other class but it was full.

I was eventually able to change my perspective on the situation and see some real benefits with his staying in his current class. I began to see that he could grow as a person from working with less than ideal conditions. Being with close friends in the other class might have made him playful and distracted, and it was probably better that he avoid comparing his academic progress with these friends, some of whom were well above average. Moreover, he was not particularly perturbed himself and was more relieved to have a teacher he felt comfortable with. He could play with his old friends at lunchtime just as he did the year before. I changed my perspective on the situation, and then let go of my anxieties.

Whenever we feel dissatisfied, we can challenge ourselves to not only shift but also enlarge our perspective. Imagine we start to feel glum about a lack of time to ourselves. If we approach the problem from a wider perspective, we are more likely to deal with the problem wisely. We might, for example, ponder:

- How have women coped with this lack of time to themselves throughout history? Or in my grandmother's and mother's generations?
- How are women coping with this problem around the world today?
- What are the external influences in society that contribute to this problem?
- Are there any positive aspects?
- Will it last forever?
- Am I the only person with this problem?

To contemplate the answer to any of these questions removes the edge from our negativity. We start to feel less isolated, less confined to our own walls. We might also compare our problem to other problems women have faced and still face today. For millions of women throughout history, the challenge has been to keep their children alive.

For our problems to feel controllable, the Dalai Lama argues in *The Art of Happiness*, we need to be able to look at them from a distance, from a different angle and in a way that reveals any positive aspects to our problem. What opportunities does our problem provide for us? He also makes the point that once we identify any positive angles to our problem we need to *repeatedly remind* ourselves of these if we are to bring about a change of attitude. The long-term goal is to train our minds to be flexible and supple so that we can 'maintain our composure even in the most restless and turbulent conditions'.

Karen, a mother of two girls yet to start school, worked with her perspective to deal with a problem of loneliness:

> Before I had children I was always highly social and rarely did anything on my own. As the first among my friends to have children, I knew very few women available for company during

the day. I even felt restricted in arranging to see new mother-friends because we always had to be home for our children's day-sleeps—that left only small windows for socialising.

At first I didn't tell anybody how lonely I felt because I was ashamed of my neediness but eventually I read about a study suggesting that three-quarters of new mothers struggle with feelings of isolation. To know that my problem was common meant that I no longer had to take it so personally. Time alone was simply part of this stage of life rather than unique to me. Feelings of loneliness were suddenly normal.

My point of view shifted still more when I heard the Buddha's advice to 'delight in solitude'. To an extrovert like me, the whole idea seemed so novel and it struck me that learning to enjoy my own company would be a crucial lesson on my spiritual journey.

These days, when I find myself alone in the park with no adult to talk to, the children off playing, I embrace the time when I can practise being self-contained, independent and relatively still. Looking back on how I used to be, motherhood has made me stronger and more self-reliant.

Sometimes, when our worldly concerns overwhelm us, it is our children who expand our perspective. Margot, a mother of two, speaks of how her children sometimes help her to rise above the turmoil she experiences at work:

Occasionally I have a dreadful day at work—I come home and can't seem to shake off the stress. All I want to do is drink wine and eat chocolate in front of the telly, but no, I have to prepare the dinner, help prepare a hat for the school parade, and answer questions about the early settlers.

Halfway through preparing dinner I look out the window to see my four-year-old wearing only a jumper and gumboots and riding his scooter. I break into a smile and half the stress floats away. My older son is consumed with cutting cardboard for his parade hat. He is so excited about the parade. In a heartbeat, I realise what really matters. A bad day is just one bad day. Suddenly I can see how much I have and what is important. My work problems are back in perspective.

In an imperfect world

It is about four o'clock in the afternoon. The boys, home from school, are expressing displeasure about the lack of interesting food in the pantry when the phone rings. It is Sally, a mother of three, and since she's shouting to be heard over the noise of overexcited children in the background, I ask, 'Where are you?'

'I'm just at home,' she answers, 'but it's chaos here. The house is a mess. I have a million things to do and I'm suddenly stuck helping Robert do his project on Amazing Inventions. Due tomorrow. How are things at your end?'

'Similar,' I answer.

Later I find myself on the phone to Lisa, a mother who has been suffering postnatal depression. The reasons for her illness are complex but she concedes that being a perfectionist has provided considerable fuel for her condition. Before she had children, Lisa could control many aspects of her world and although her perfectionism could be a problem, the chaos and unpredictability of small children pushed her to the brink. A large part of her healing process is learning to accept the state of her house and the general lack of control she must now surrender to.

So one answer to a mother's question, 'Where am I?', is that she inhabits a world characterised by imperfection. Any hopes for order, predictability or freedom from unsatisfactoriness are but a dream. As the Buddha taught, the conditions that surround us are of a transitory nature—they will not last in their current form, so we cannot rely on them to bring lasting happiness. Of course compensations abound, but now we need to allow for what Buddhists call the 'Eight Worldly Conditions': Gain and Loss, Pleasure and Pain, Praise and Blame, Fame and Disrepute. If we cling to the more comfortable of these conditions, we suffer when they leave or when its opposite arises.

Accepting the inevitability of chaos and imperfection can relieve us of some of our frustrating efforts to make family life problem-free. It also relieves us from the pressure to be a perfect mother. Family relationships can improve when we remove the need for family members to be flawless, and when we accept that problems and human flaws are part of the package. Letting go of unrealistic expectations of family life frees us to spread our energies into other directions, be they other relationships, or involvement in our communities.

The fact that there is suffering in life is the first of the 'Four Noble Truths' the Buddha taught. A Buddhist, however, is unlikely to use the word 'suffering' but rather the Pali term the Buddha himself used, *dukkha*. While we can translate *dukkha* to mean suffering, stress or anguish, it includes even mild feelings of dis-ease or irritation. One definition of *dukkha* is the gap between what is happening and what we wish was happening, be it large or small. The word *dukkha* also covers the imperfection, the unsatisfactoriness, of all phenomena—which is caused by the transitory, impermanent nature of all things.

Children make the First Noble Truth inescapable: struggles and difficulties are as much a part of life as pleasures and triumphs. They teach us that our lives and those of our children will not turn out the way we planned, and if we do not surrender to this truth then

we will never know inner peace. We explore the next three truths in the chapters to follow but for now we can understand them as having the structure of a medical diagnosis: the Buddha outlined first our symptoms (*dukkha*), then the cause (desire), next the prognosis (*dukkha* can end) and finally the prescription (the Eightfold Path). In short, these Truths provide a map to end *dukkha*.

Although the Buddha advises us to understand the causes and conditions of our own *dukkha*, rather than conveniently cover them up with denial, we can still, to a considerable degree, control how much *dukkha* we experience. In any moment we do have a choice in where to place our attention, as Kim shares:

> My mantra, uttered about a thousand times a day, has been Thich Nhat Hanh's 'breathing in I calm myself, breathing out I smile'. By the time I'm at the smile part, I'm feeling a little better. I have a lot on my plate right now: two small kids and a husband with a chronic illness. Lots of worries and aggravation. One thing I've learned recently is to build myself up with all the 'jewels' available to me at any moment: looking deeply at a flower, my children, enjoying my breathing. Now when the worries come, I don't try to chase them away. I just let them pass across my sky like clouds, then refocus on my breathing. I stay in the moment.

At times it helps us to turn inward and ask: Is now a time to consciously place my attention somewhere more inspiring, or rather to stay with the dis-ease and learn about the causes and the nature of my *dukkha*? The answer might vary. In the midst of a busy day we may not have the time, or the quiet surroundings, for deeper investigation.

On another day, Kim realises the need to see the beauty of not just 'now', but also 'here':

I am a nature girl stuck in the suburbs. As grateful as I am for the beautiful city I live in, I still wonder 'If only…'. If only I lived in a place where people shared my ecological views, a place that wasn't so crowded, a place where the main body of water wasn't horrendously polluted with sewage, a place where people were a little nicer and less competitive.

But I'm here. And so I look for beauty every day. I look for connections with people. I study the wildlife in my own neighbourhood. When I think of the Zen attitude of 'be here now', the emphasis for me is usually on the 'now' part, but I'm realising it also needs be on the 'here' part as I learn to love where I am. The idea of the perfect place to live has definitely proven to be a delusion for me. If I live in the mindset of 'if only' then I'm missing all there is right here—and most likely I would miss it in the 'perfect place' as well.

I am beginning to realise how you can learn to love a place. It's not a romantic, instantaneous 'feeling' but rather a mindful seeing of the beauty that is there, even in the midst of ugliness. It takes practice but the more you mindfully live in a place, the more you come to appreciate it.

With your breath

Something I have neglected to mention about being aware of the present moment—perhaps it goes without saying—is that it is tremendously difficult. If you try right now to ground yourself in the moment, free from thoughts of past events, refusing to speculate or plan for the future, you find that it is only a matter of seconds before your mind has wandered. This is normal. It is the reason we need to

practise paying attention both during meditation and while performing the tasks of our daily lives.

It helps to have an object on which to concentrate and most Buddhist traditions opt for the rise and fall of the breath. Some teachers express this as 'cultivating intimacy with your own breathing'. Paying attention to the breath makes sense for several reasons: the breath is always with us; the sensations are so subtle that you have to pay close attention to notice them; and it is difficult to *think* about breathing and this helps stem our usual torrent of thoughts. If we do have thoughts about breathing, they tend to be helpful. For example, no two breaths are the same so paying attention to our breath reminds us that everything is constantly changing. Each breath arises and passes away reminding us of the teaching of impermanence. The breath is a reminder of our mortality: my life depends on there being another breath after this one. My breathing keeps me alive.

So how do we go about paying attention to the breath?

It is a matter of noticing any of the sensations of the breath in as much detail as we can. We might choose to concentrate on the expansion and contraction of the stomach, the rise and fall of the chest, the feel of the cool air as you breathe in and the warm air as you breathe out. I once heard a Tibetan nun advise her students before a meditation sitting:

> Consider yourself a mountain, your mind a blue sky. Any sensations, thoughts or feelings that arise are like clouds that float across that blue sky in many different forms, but always leaving the sky clear as you return your attention to the breath.

When the Buddha gave instructions on mindfulness of the breath, he said:

> Breathing in, one is aware of breathing in.
> Breathing out, one is aware of breathing out.
> Breathing in a long breath, one knows, 'I am breathing in a long breath.'
> Breathing out a long breath, one knows, 'I am breathing out a long breath.'
> Breathing in a short breath, one knows, 'I am breathing in a short breath.'
> Breathing out a short breath, one knows, 'I am breathing out a short breath.'

Many Buddhist teachers advise beginners to count their breaths up to ten and start again as this seems to make it easier to anchor your attention to the present moment. Eventually, such counting may become less necessary as our concentration improves.

As our mind inevitably wanders from the breath, we are patient and non-judgemental about it, perhaps noticing an unusual sense of space around each thought that arises, or noticing that every feeling or sensation arises, only to pass away. As we continue to practise bringing our attention to our breath as often as possible, whether in meditation or throughout the day, we notice that it makes us calmer, clearer and more grounded in the present.

Mother and Zen teacher Susan Murphy in her book *Upside-Down Zen* discusses the value of 'fasting' our usual busy minds in order 'to choose complete, intentional rest':

> The mind that is being fasted in meditation is the mind of 'me' and 'mine', the mind of endless self-concern and self-defence, of have and have not, right and wrong, included and excluded. When self-concern is quiet, heaven and earth lie open in complete generosity. That is the mind of abundance, the mind of flowing.

> When self-concern is noisy, the world is narrow and risky, and resources of the anxious self appear perennially scarce.

It might be difficult to find time for a formal meditation sitting, but even the busiest days provide a multitude of moments to bring attention to the breath. Waiting at traffic lights, standing in a queue, 'on hold' on the telephone, waiting for your computer to boot.

With time, many Buddhists move on from mindfulness of the breath as their main practice, to mindfulness of the body sensations, or thoughts, or whatever they notice in the moment. It is for each individual to choose their own technique for practising being in the present. And we practise our technique in a way that is kind and compassionate towards ourselves, never stern and disciplinarian. If our technique leads to feelings of guilt, inadequacy or failure, then we either learn to let go of such judgements as they arise or change to a new technique.

HERE, NOW . . .

So we have some answers to our question, 'Where am I?' We are always in the present moment, so may as well pay attention to it. We are in a new place, if we could only see this with a Beginner's Mind. The world we inhabit is not perfect, and will inevitably present us with times of turbulence and chaos. Yet it is always possible to shift or enlarge our perspective. We are always with our breath, and paying attention to it anchors us in the present.

Our presence is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children for they will grow up knowing they are noticed, important and loved. Being present with our children is also a gift to ourselves. Have we not lost count of the number of times we have heard older mothers sigh, 'They grow up so quickly…'? We might have started to say this

ourselves, having noticed that we no longer have babies, then that we no longer have toddlers and suddenly that our children are all at school. Since they do grow up so quickly, it is all the more important that we are there, paying attention at every unique stage of the process.

Recently I sat with an older mother-friend sorting through photos from when her now-grown children were young. Like so many of us, she never did find the time to put them into albums. She showed me a photo of her sitting on a rug in her backyard with her three small children having a picnic in the sunshine and said, 'This is a favourite but it makes me wish that I had lived in the moment more. I don't have these little children anymore and at the time I doubt I realised the preciousness of this stage.'

What we can do

- Allow your children to remind you of how to live in the present.
- Practise non-judgemental awareness where you avoid becoming emotionally caught up in your ratings of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.
- Ask yourself what you practise if you do not practise awareness of the present and where might a different practice take you?
- On any given day, consider whether you are in touch with the humour, adventuring and mystery of motherhood.
- Entertain the possibility that all moments have value rather than racing through 'unpleasant' moments to arrive at 'pleasant' ones.
- Challenge yourself to observe the objects of your surroundings as if for the first time, that is, with Beginner's Mind or a 'spirit of inquiry'—just as a young child might repeatedly ask the Zen question, 'What is this?'
- Recognise that you can choose where to place your attention, so after you have noticed and observed any negativity, place your attention somewhere uplifting.
- Question your perspective on your current situation. Can you shift it or enlarge it? Are there positive angles?
- Surrender to the inevitability of some imperfection in yourself, your children and your family life.
- Practise bringing your attention to your breath throughout your day, or in meditation, as a way to strengthen your awareness of the present moment.

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CHAPTER 2

where am I going?

For most of the years since becoming a mother, I have been working from home, writing memoirs for clients who want to leave their families a record of their life story. The hours are family-friendly and the work, at times, satisfying, but I find myself asking: Is this what I want to do for the next twenty years? At home, working alone, definitely has its advantages but occasionally I feel cut off from the action, as though life is happening elsewhere. I worry about losing contact with the 'real world' outside my home where I imagine people are developing new skills, expanding their networks and leaving me far behind.

I start to feel a need to prove myself out in the world again. I notice that many of my mother-friends with children at school successfully hold down work outside the home. They have 'real careers' in hospitals, schools and offices, and I want to be like them. I long to see myself as important, in demand, an interesting person to talk to at social events. I want to be proud of my place in the world—and wear a suit.

Before long, my concerns take on an element of panic. If I don't find a job outside the home soon, I might never find one. It might already be too late. Having a child at pre-school for three days—days significantly shorter than the working day—seems to rule out most career options, yet I am resolved that a job outside the home will end my anxiety. Some days I find myself fixated with the job search, waiting for the life-changing phone call, checking my emails every few minutes. I allow my lack of what I perceive to be a 'real' job to take over my thoughts and my life. I become blind to all the blessings around me, obsessed with the one thing I do not have.

After a few months my job prospects look bleak and I concede that the limited number of part-time jobs available are either too poorly paid to cover childcare costs, or so sought-after that a placement seems as likely as my winning a Miss World contest. These are

humbling discoveries in a time of so-called high employment. How would I fare in a recession?

Many of us take time out of our careers to be with our young children. Some of us are in a position to choose never to do paid work again. Others have returned to their pre-family careers. A large number of us face re-entering a competitive workforce with the handicap of a 'career gap'. As mothers we may have to rethink our career direction and what we want from our lives. We face an extended period of questioning: *What do I want now*? *Where am I going? How can I achieve a balance so that no area of my life is neglected? Is it even possible?*

Needless to say, my struggles to find this job that I don't really need are not making me any calmer. I catch myself frowning throughout the day and realise I am tense, tetchy and resentful. This is because I am banging my head against the Buddha's 'Second Noble Truth': that the cause of *dukkha,* of suffering in all its forms, is desire.

Craving, grasping, clinging, attachment—this is the cause of our anguish. *Aspiring* or *wanting*, these are not the problem. It is *insisting* and *demanding* that hurts us. Still, the distinction between aspiring and desiring confuses some. As one visitor to my Buddhist group asked: 'We love and care for our families, friends, and careers—at what point does deep caring become clinging? It must be a very fine line.' Subhana answered that we recognise clinging when we notice feelings of possessiveness, a desire to own or hold onto a person or thing very tightly. Clinging creates a tension within and often springs from some form of fear. Our desires blind us, entangle us and become the obstacles on any path to freedom.

For mothers, desires abound. We desire that our children be happy, smart, popular and beautiful. We want our partners to appreciate us, to do their share around the house and to live up to our expectations as fathers. We want our lives to be sometimes stimulating, sometimes

relaxing. At times we want friends to clamour around us and at other times to leave us alone.

The flipside of attachment is aversion, a strong desire for our lives to be other than they are. Our aversions, too, can be numerous. We often find ourselves wishing the present moment to be other than it is. We resent the tantrums, the whining, the nagging. We begrudge our partners working long hours away from home. We rail against the insensitivity of our friends or relations.

From our own experience we know that when these desires and aversions become too intense, they undermine our ability to be calm and content. Although we know on a rational level that perfection cannot exist and that we will never satisfy all these desires, we continue to behave as though it is possible. It is not that the Buddha sees desires as sins. They are perfectly natural. The Buddha challenges us, however, to study our desires. What happens when we satisfy them? Do we live happily ever after? What happens when we don't satisfy our desires? How do desires make us feel? Are we ever free of them, in any moment, and how might this feel? The answers to such questions are clear to us all, yet we continue to live as though happiness is a simple matter of fulfilling our current desires.

The Buddha taught the importance of understanding our own experience of *dukkha*. Once the mind understands how clinging leads to suffering and unease, it will naturally avoid it. As Subhana puts it, 'Ours is a practice of noticing and investigating clinging.'

Tibetan Lama Gendun Rinpoche is a poet whose work is translated by well-known Westerner Lama Surya Das. In a poem entitled 'Happiness', the Lama writes:

Wanting to grasp the ungraspable,
You exhaust yourself in vain.

Of course, putting a stop to all this craving is no small project. Those who have done so are said to have reached Nirvana. The poem continues:

> As soon as you open and relax this tight fist of grasping
> Infinite space is there—open, inviting and comfortable.

Experienced meditators sometimes develop a sense of what it might feel like to stop wanting. Mother and Zen teacher Susan Murphy describes her understanding of the experience in her book *Upside-Down Zen*:

> Body and mind begin to loosen and fall away, and we grow wider and more free, wanting less, *wanting nothing*. The most ordinary and subtle happiness arises in this wanting nothing. We dwell for a time open to all of the offers of life, without moving toward or moving away from a single thing.

Towards patient acceptance

For Buddhists, finding happiness is not about attaining what you believe you want and ridding your life of annoyances. Rather, it is about fostering enough inner peace that external conditions no longer matter so much. The Buddha and his followers visited a town where they met a trouble-maker intent on making their lives difficult. One follower suggested they move to another town, but the Buddha replied:

> No…We had better remain here and bear the abuse patiently until it ceases and then move to another place. There are Gain and Loss,

> Pleasure and Pain, Praise and Blame, Fame and Disrepute in this world; the Enlightened One is not controlled by these external things; they will cease as quickly as they come.

On a visit to my local Tibetan Buddhist centre I listened to a nun talking about ways to cultivate patient acceptance. The mind of patience, she explained, accepts whatever occurs. It acknowledges that we cannot control external irritations. They will always be there. So we train our minds to be accepting, for this is the only way to achieve inner peace. She advised us to use our difficulties, including our negative emotions, as our practice. Taking our negative emotions seriously, as we do, seems to intensify them. Could we not simply see them for what they are: passing bad weather? Rather than panic about the unpleasantness, she dared us to experience the feelings with an awareness free from self-judging.

Later in the week, I spend what seems like an hour making a healthy dinner that I believe Alex the Fussy Eater will like. He refuses to eat it. I am furious about my wasted efforts. I believe that I absolutely cannot tolerate this situation. Enraged I shout loudly, 'You ate it last week, why don't you like it tonight?' He asks me to add an egg to it, which I grudgingly do, and he eats half the meal.

I could continue in my fury or I could start to bring awareness to my body and see what is going on. I find tightness in my shoulders, shallow, uneven breathing, I feel the intense scowl in my facial muscles. I realise that I am grasping and craving in my thoughts, insisting the moment be different. I remember all the times I have heard that allowing meal times to become an emotional wrangle is likely to inspire the defiant child to greater fussiness. The drama, after all, ensures they are the centre of attention. I concede my rigid obsession with the five food groups. I remind myself that my difficulties are my practice. And I surrender. I stand still, take some deep breaths,

consciously let go of my expectations along with the tension in my body, and accept what has happened.

Part of me fears, even rejects, the idea of patient acceptance. How could I ever accept that my son will not receive all the essential vitamins? How can I simply accept my job situation, if my whole future career is at stake? What if I suddenly find myself with no clients for my home business? I might never work again. How would I cope with the feelings that scenario would trigger? However, the next question is, does my reaction of panic, worry and obsession help? Followed by, is it leading me to become the person I want to be? The answer, of course, is a resounding no. In fact, the more I react in an unskilful way, the more chance that I will react in this unskilful way again. This is karma as we will discuss later in the chapter.

A Buddhist would point out that it is not the external problem—Alex being a fussy eater, the lack of a job outside the home—that hurts. Rather it is all my thoughts, feelings and judgements about my situation. My own aversion is creating all the pain. If I could only entertain more constructive thoughts, the problems would not exist at all. I would simply feed Alex the best I could, do what I could to find the job outside the home, and in the meantime, be patient and accepting of my situation. If I let myself, I could even be quite content.

Of course, plenty of mothers have problems that are far more difficult to accept than mine. Their Fussy Eater might be on the point of malnourishment, or they may be looking for paid work as the sole financial provider for their children. Buddhists would maintain, however, that if we bring calm, patient mind states to our problems, as hard as this can sometimes be, and regardless of whether the problem is large or small, we fare better than if we practise fear, anxiety and catastrophising.

Towards gratitude

To my surprise, when I ask some of my friends in permanent jobs what sort of work they dream of, they describe the situation that I have: working for themselves from home. I say to these friends, but look what you've got! Only to hear them say the same back to me. It makes me wonder if we are not all busy struggling to attain whatever it is we do not possess and once we have it, wishing for what we used to have, all over again. If the grass is always greener elsewhere then the only way to appreciate what you have is to pretend you are somebody else. Or perhaps it would be more practical to take the Buddha's words to heart: 'The greatest loss is to receive without gratitude.'

Focusing on the irritations, how often are we thankful for the positives of our situation? Why, I ask myself, can I not sit back and enjoy the stage I have reached in a spirit of gratitude? Perhaps many of us feel the same as Melissa, a Buddhist mother who says:

> I've found a husband. We have a mortgage and three children. I have a part-time job which fits into my life well, yet now I find myself asking, what next? Is the adventure finished? In other words, I have come face to face with my habit of always grasping for something new and stimulating. It's a habit that threatens my hopes of enjoying the life I have worked so hard to set up. It might finally be time to calm down, to stop looking for ever-greater stimulation and learn to appreciate simpler pleasures. I guess it's time to find contentment within myself rather than from the world outside me.

Importantly, gratitude is an effective antidote to our relentless state of wanting. It allows us to let go of our desires. Knowing this, some

Buddhist mothers cultivate a 'gratitude practice'. They make a habit of reminding themselves what they can be grateful for. Some write a short list each day:

My children's smiles
Their new freckles
Caring friends

Perhaps the wisest of these mothers encourage their children to do the same, finishing the day with gratitude for many blessings that might otherwise have gone unnoticed, and nurturing in their children wholesome habits of mind.

Making a conscious effort to practise gratitude requires us to focus on what is positive and uplifting in our lives, what pleases us. Many of us have developed habits of mind where we dwell on the negatives: the criticism rather than the praise, what went wrong with our day instead of what was inspiring. How many of us, for example, have ever considered being grateful for the gift of our life? Buddhists use the word 'precious' when talking about the gift of a human life, and science lends its support to the idea. To open his best-selling book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, described on the back cover as a travelogue of science, Bill Bryson starts by congratulating the reader because 'getting here wasn't easy':

> To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and curiously obliging manner to create you. It's an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once.

He continues a few pages later with:

> Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years…every one of your forebears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to live long enough to do so.

Using this large perspective to appreciate the miracle of our lives, why not vow to love and appreciate it unconditionally, whether or not it is delivering what you believe you want. After all, we are only here, living this life, for the shortest period of time—for this reason alone, should we not be grateful for our time in this world?

Through my pregnancy with Alex, in which I suffered nausea for the first half and diabetes for the second, I learned to be grateful for my health. Even four years after the pregnancy, I revel in having a fully functioning and relatively comfortable body. That pregnancy taught me to enjoy my energy and to never take for granted my temporary freedom from discomfort. In the same way, catching the common cold is a reminder to appreciate our usual state of health. On recovering we can enjoy the simple act of inhaling since we know how difficult this is during a head cold.

Towards slowness

It is hard for me to understand why any self-respecting woman would vow at her wedding to 'obey' her husband. Why did so few, in days gone by, question what society told them? It makes me wonder, what will my grandchildren find outrageous about my generation? Are there messages that modern-day society sends us that we fail to question? Maybe our grandchildren will be outraged at the greed and materialism of our generation and the damage we did to the environment. Or perhaps they will be agog at our addiction to busyness.

We live in an age where busyness is a virtue. If we are busy, we must be very important. The greatest insult is, 'She must have a lot of time on her hands'. The greeting of the day is, *How are you? Busy?* And who would dare to reply, *No, not really*. Yet what is the price of all this busyness? We know from our own experiences of being overstretched that busyness leaves us with less time to sit around enjoying each others' company, less time to appreciate the beauty around us, less time to reflect on the reasons we rush around and where we are headed. For those who have opted to be manically busy, the questions might go deeper. Am I avoiding emotional engagement with my life? Am I avoiding an emptiness inside? Am I compensating for a lack of fulfilling relationships?

If we never slow down, we give our children the message that hyperdrive is normal. If this is the culture they grow up with, they are likely to live like this as adults and run the risk of never understanding the benefits of balance, of slowness, of down time. The Buddha had a clear message on the subject of busyness: 'The restless, busy nature of the world, this, I declare, is at the root of pain.'

Children do not seem to appreciate us being too busy. This was certainly the finding of the American study *Ask the Children*, by Ellen Galinsky, where 44.5 per cent of children said the time they spent with their mothers was rushed. Children in the study gave higher marks to parents when the time spent together was not rushed but 'focused and rich in shared activities'.

Danielle, a mother I know with an older child at school, reflected on her feelings around the time after her second child was born:

> I don't know whether I had full-blown depression, but I was certainly feeling very low for several months. I remember asking people how they were, and being told, 'Oh, you know, busy.' At that vulnerable time in my life, hearing that someone was

busy made me feel so much worse. Not free to participate in the world outside my home, I felt like an incomplete person because I was not frantically busy. I felt as though everyone had a life except me.

My blues passed but even today, I feel that telling people we are busy creates an unhealthy distance in our relationships. When friends tell me they are 'flat out', I make a mental note to leave them alone because I would not want to take any of their time. If they are always 'flat out' though, they become unapproachable because I can never feel completely comfortable spending time with them, especially if they seem stressed.

I started questioning, why does everybody have so much respect for busyness? I knew that if I joined this movement it would undermine my ability to enjoy motherhood. Between the chores, motherhood required me to do things that did not make me look or feel busy—playing or chatting with my older child or reading books together. My intuition was telling me to spend time cuddling my baby. This was a time to take her on long, soothing walks in the pram, to snuggle up as a family in bed, or hang out together.

We might notice busy patches in our lives when we only communicate with our children to pull them into line. Yet, as we learnt at those parenting seminars, if we only talk to our children to reprimand them then they learn to win our attention by misbehaving. In the case of often-misbehaving Alex, I cannot afford to ignore this advice. I make a point of coming down to his level several times throughout the day and looking him in the eye to hear what he wants to say. During these small encounters, I allow him to dazzle me with the blueness of his eyes, the vibrancy of his imagination and the earnestness of his speech.

I might remind myself that Alex will never be four years and two months again so I had better notice it while it lasts. We need to acknowledge the value of consciously setting aside time each day—possibly only a few grabbed moments—to take delight in our children. We work so hard to raise them, it is the least we can do for ourselves.

Of course, I can only set aside this time if I surrender to the fact that the house is not yet tidy or that dinner might be delayed or that I will not be able to make all those phone calls. Sometimes we hear people speak high praise of those who listen with attention: 'When you talk to her, she makes you feel like the only person in the world.' I hope that my boys might one day say this of me and notice that their most basic needs for attention came before the housework, the schedule and the phone calls.

Judith Costello, co-founder of the American magazine *Parenting with Spirit*, agrees:

> Just this morning I wanted to finish up some housecleaning chores but instead I took a moment to sit down and hold Peter in my lap. Then Brigit, who is sixteen months old, paraded before us trying to put on a hat. She walked in circles, her form of dancing, while she kept readjusting a hat that would slide into her face. She looked out from under it slyly. Peter and I laughed together. It was a special time that I would have missed if I had been busy cleaning. It takes lots of patience and acceptance of 'what is' in order to find time for such moments.

We do go through stages where busyness is unavoidable, especially if we have several children, but we can still practise awareness of the present moment. Being busy provides all the more reason to practise. A practice of mindfulness is of limited value if we cannot bring its

benefits into our daily activities. Feeling stressed is an excellent opportunity for observing our thoughts and their effects on our bodies. Self-awareness flourishes if we are capable of being present in times of chaos. As the Zen saying reminds us: 'Beneath the one who is busy is one who is not busy.'

Towards our karma

The Buddha taught, 'If you want to know what your future life will be like, look at your life right now.' If we have unresolved issues now, we are likely to carry them with us into the future. A book by Zen Buddhist Jon Kabat-Zinn captures this idea with the pithy title *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. We might try to flee from our problems but no matter where we go, they come along with us. There is no escaping our karma, the fact that our actions—or more accurately, the mind states behind our actions—have consequences.

Our thoughts are the fuel for our karma. Whatever we choose to think about each day will play a greater and greater role in our life and shape the person we become. Recurring thoughts become habits, habits shape our character and our character determines our destiny.

Asking ourselves *Where am I going?* we might speculate on what the world holds in store for us. We imagine the world outside us providing events and developments that determine our capacity for happiness. What truly determines our ability to be happy, however, are our responses, attitudes and beliefs about these external events. While we cannot always control external events, we can control our reactions to them for we can choose our thoughts. So our karma is, for the most part, in our own hands.

From a Buddhist perspective, the unresolved issues we carry into our future relate to our tendency to push away unpleasant feelings

and cling to what is pleasant. When we crave something, whether it be the perfect job or the perfect marriage, we assume that the object of our desire will bring us lasting happiness. This delusion has a negative effect on our karma as we cope with the frustration of forcing life into our ideal image and the eventual disappointment when, if we even partially achieve our goal, the desired situation changes or vanishes altogether.

It is often easier to see the karma of the people around us, their recurring unresolved patterns of behaviour, than our own. The friend who keeps choosing cold-hearted partners as a way to resolve an unloving relationship with her father. The brother who clings to a misspent youth that is clearly over. The woman who will not end friendships that have grown destructive. The father who only talks to his children when he's angry with them. As we have so often seen, the future of each of these individuals is likely to hold more of the same, even though their game plan is clearly not working.

In our own lives we reinforce the delusion, *If I could just have x, then everything would be fine.* On the back cover of *What Women Want Next*, writer Susan Maushart illustrates the problem:

> When I was a teenager, I thought love would solve everything. In my early 20s, I thought sex would solve everything. By my late 20s, I thought a career would solve everything. At age 30, I thought marriage would solve everything, and then . . . when it didn't . . . I was sure that motherhood would. By my late 30s, following a brief period of certainty that therapy would solve everything, I became convinced that divorce would solve everything. At 40, I saw how absurd this all was and decided to renovate.

Do we still believe in the perfect marriage, job, relationship, lifestyle, home, children or friends? Maybe we would never catch ourselves

admitting this to be the case but is this how we live our lives? As though we can fix things to create lasting happiness? We might have to look deeply into our minds to unveil what we cling to. It can feel embarrassing to admit, even if only to ourselves, that we live to impress others, amass wealth or just keep ourselves amused.

We might be aiming to raise children who are always happy, or always achieving. Are we trying to construct the ultimate social life or perhaps to collect enough people to make us feel loved? Some of us envision lasting happiness in a long list of impressive qualifications or achievements, while others see happiness in stamping out all the irritations of family life. While most of these behaviours aim to fulfil normal human needs, we do have a tendency to deny ourselves happiness until we have our ideal conditions. Even though these never arrive.

As we endure the pain of striving for the objects of our desires and, if successful, the anxiety of holding onto them, we might develop habits along the way—anger, impatience, self-absorption and pride—that also become our karma. Personally, I reached the point with my job search where I saw my obsession turning me into an emotionally distant mother with a narrow mind and a disturbing self-focus. I decided to forget about the whole issue—at least until Alex started school—and concentrate on appreciating what I already have.

So how do we bring a stop to some of the troublesome patterns of behaviour that become our karma? We are likely to have had limited success with punishing ourselves, feeling guilty or thinking our way out of them. The Buddha advises us to observe our thoughts with non-judgemental awareness. When our minds finally perceive their tendency to add clinging or aversion to every experience, to almost all that we perceive, and how troublesome this can be, the natural response is to stop, and try to see things as they are. If we could realise, on a deep level, that pandering to our cravings is not the way to achieve happiness, we would *let go* of our clinging and aversion.

A change in our habits can be sudden and dramatic or gradual. Subhana managed to gradually turn around a tendency to be critical and negative about herself. She could have pushed these unpleasant thoughts away, refusing to watch them and their effects, but their nagging presence would have tainted all her experiences and, left unexamined, they would have kept returning. By observing her negative thoughts about herself over many years and trying to refrain from judging them, she managed a transformation:

> As soon as a self-critical thought arises I am aware of it and might smile to myself, 'Here I go again.' Over time I have learnt that I needn't buy into these thoughts, that I can just let them pass. Bringing non-judgemental awareness to them, they no longer stick around. When I was younger, feelings of inadequacy would haunt me for hours or even days, but now I would only have such thoughts once or twice a year and I never fall into their hole.

Subhana explains that an insight experience, achieved in meditation or through mindfulness in daily life, leaves us with a lasting understanding. Integrating this understanding into our lives may be a longer journey but the understanding remains.

Using the present moment to cultivate a pure mind is a sure way to take care of our karma. Each time we practise clear seeing of the present, without clinging or aversion, whenever we practise patient acceptance, gratitude or compassion, we strengthen a habit and from there we begin to recreate our character and our destiny. Finding peace and contentment from life is not about rearranging our external conditions but about realising the nature of our minds—understanding from first-hand experience what leads to happiness and what does not.

What we can do

- Challenge yourself to do your best but then patiently accept the way your life unfolds. Know that this is the path to inner peace.
- Establish a regular practice of gratitude where you cultivate a spirit of thankfulness for the positive aspects of your situation and the joys in your life. Encourage your children to do this too.
- Remember to be grateful for the gift of your life, no matter what state it is in.
- Resist the culture of busyness and recognise that motherhood requires pockets of inactivity when we can just *be* with our children.
- Identify what it is that you crave and grasp for. Observe your thoughts around these desires. When a grasping thought arises, treat it with non-judgemental awareness.
- Recognise that your future happiness is determined by your inner world—your thoughts, attitudes and beliefs—not your external conditions.

CHAPTER 3

who am I?

MOST OF US HAVE reached a relatively settled stage of life but when we sit in self-judgement, as we do, are we comfortable with who we have become? Examining our achievements thus far, the quality of our relationships or our behaviour in the day-to-day, we arrive at a certain level of confidence. We might, to all appearances, be responsible grown-ups now, yet the emotional freedom of unshakeable self-confidence can elude many of us. We might still have a yearning to prove we are likeable, competent, attractive or important.

We all aspire to being dedicated, loving mothers but we feel the need to be more than this. Where does our sense of self come from? Perhaps we look to others to tell us who we are. We believe ourselves to be the perception other people have of us—at least to the degree that we can fathom this. Part of our self-image comes from our role in society, or the view that we *are* what we *do*—paid work is the source of identity. Those 'at home', job-seeking or dissatisfied with their job can find their sense of identity under severe threat.

In this chapter we begin the Buddhist search for a self. When I first discovered Buddhist teachings through the book *The Heart of Buddhism*, by Guy Claxton, it was the teachings about the self that most intrigued me. These teachings, which we explore in the latter half of this chapter, are the most important of all the Buddha's teachings for they are the key to awakening. It is a challenge for any writer to explain such life-changing spiritual truths—truths that can take even the monastery-dwelling monks and nuns a lifetime, or more, to penetrate. So keep in mind that what follows is only the beginning of an investigation. To look more deeply into these teachings, we need to reflect on our own experience of having a self, particularly during meditation, where many a Buddhist explores the question, *Who is 'I'?*

Not my thoughts and feelings

As we sit in meditation watching whatever comes up, we notice a stream of thoughts and feelings arise…and eventually cease. To varying degrees, we might find ourselves identifying with these visitors, allowing them to give us a sense of who we are. We might have thoughts of vengeance, lust, anger, self-aggrandisement—and come away feeling like a highly flawed self. We might observe feelings: I love her, I hate him, I don't have any strong feelings about this, I need to avoid that. Our likes, dislikes, and even neutral feelings of neither liking or disliking, also feed an image about ourselves and the kind of person we are.

According to Buddhist teachings, we experience thoughts and feelings but this does not mean we *are* our thoughts and feelings for they are all transitory: they arise only to pass away. After all, where does a thought go when we are finished thinking it? It vanishes. This can be a liberating realisation in that we no longer need to feel so identified with these mind events. Moreover, if we are mindful, we can take responsibility and choose what to do with them: guide them, stop them, dispute them or replace them. Our thoughts need not run our lives for they are not who we are. If I observe myself having fearful, pessimistic thoughts about the future, it does not mean I am a fearful pessimist. They were only passing thoughts and I am equally capable of more wholesome thoughts if I choose them.

One way we use our thoughts to define ourselves is through constant self-evaluation where we ponder, *How good am I at this?* or *How well am I doing?* I have recently joined a local singing group. It is low-key with no auditions, performances or pressure. The aims are simply to learn new songs and enjoy ourselves. The first two nights I spent persecuting myself with self-evaluation: Am I singing the right notes? Have I picked up the tune? How do I sound? I spent no time

listening to the beautiful harmonies we were creating as I was too focused on my performance. Only at the end of those two evenings did I check in with the state of my body where I discovered it to be full of tension.

Other singers I spoke to raved about the experience yet, at the end of each of those two evenings, I felt a nagging dissatisfaction. Of course, I knew the reason (too much self-evaluation) and I knew the solution. As Buddhists often say, I needed to 'get out of my own way'. I made a resolution to stop evaluating my performance and surrender to all the joy inherent in the simple act of singing with friends. Needless to say, the singing sessions that followed were far more satisfying.

It is all too easy to believe in our self-evaluations as though they were absolute truths. Our current preoccupation might be: *How clean is my house? How many friends do I have? How often did I yell at the children today? How am I managing 'the juggle'? How fast am I reading this book?* Sometimes we only allow ourselves to be happy and sure of ourselves when we perform well. We ignore that who we are is so much more than our day-to-day performance of arbitrary tasks or how others are treating us. Always judging our worth, we block the possibility of joy in our daily life. Next time we catch ourselves doing this, we can notice our judging mind, perhaps smile, let go of the judgement, and return our attention to the present moment.

Once we understand the fleeting, insubstantial nature of thoughts and feelings, and the fact that they usually have little relation to reality, we stop buying into them so much. We stop allowing them to upset us. We might stop using our thoughts and feelings to define, or judge, ourselves. We may even learn to smile at them: 'Here I go again, assuming I can read other people's minds…' or, 'What? Still catastrophising?'

In the same way, we *have* opinions but this does not mean we *are* our opinions. I remember being a 'visiting Buddhist speaker' at a friend's book group and talking about the pitfalls of identifying too closely with our opinions. One woman asked me, 'But if I didn't have any opinions, wouldn't that make me a bit wishy-washy?' Her question reveals how we use our opinions to define ourselves. We treasure our opinions, and fight others over them, because they help us to feel like a specific somebody. Just as with our thoughts and feelings, opinions can be helpful but clinging to them to reinforce a sense of self only limits us and separates us from others. In a Buddhist practice, we open ourselves to questioning all our thoughts, feelings and opinions, or at least to holding them more loosely.

Independent of others' views

After reading my first Buddhist book at the age of twenty-four, I started to practise observing my thoughts to become more familiar with my mind. I was rarely impressed by what I observed but tried not to be too judgemental. Shining the light of consciousness onto what have usually been our half-conscious thoughts is definitely humbling. One tendency that alarmed me was how much time I spent wondering what other people thought of me. I would re-run in my mind recent conversations in an attempt to ascertain how I came across. Did I talk too much? Was I too negative? Was I insensitive?

In retrospect, I can see that I was relying on other people to provide me with a sense of self. If others laughed at my jokes, then I must have a good sense of humour. If others found me interesting, then I must be a likeable person. If anyone took a dislike to me, my whole sense of self was threatened. What if their negative view of me

was correct? That raised the challenge of proving they were a bad person whose opinion could not possibly count.

This was all quite embarrassing to notice but the years would teach me that I was not the only one conducting postmortems on my conversations to check whether I was too this or too that. I eventually befriended a woman who needed to phone me a few hours after our every conversation to apologise or clarify something she had said. Another very self-aware friend confessed to spending her spare time running a mental commentary for her friends and family back home in New Zealand, in an effort to impress them with the new self she had created in Australia. These days she keeps a web log for this purpose.

The need to seek approval, or admiration, from others is part of the human condition. One month, a book called *The Consolations of Philosophy* came up on my book group's programme. The writer, Alain de Botton, made a disclosure that reminds us of how normal it is to seek the approval of others in order to feel like the 'self' is okay. At the discussion I read the following passage aloud only to hear several members, men and women, pipe up, 'That's me!'

> In conversations, my priority was to be liked, rather than to speak the truth. A desire to please led me to laugh at modest jokes like a parent on the opening night of a school play. With strangers, I adopted the servile manner of a concierge greeting wealthy clients in a hotel—salival enthusiasm born of a morbid, indiscriminate desire for affection. I did not publicly doubt ideas to which the majority was committed. I sought the approval of figures of authority and after encounters with them, worried at length whether they had thought me acceptable. When passing through customs or driving alongside police cars, I harboured a confused wish for the uniformed officials to think well of me.

It might be human nature to look to others, to some degree, for our sense of self, but it can also be perilous, as Buddhist mother Katrina found:

> As a younger, less confident woman I allowed what other people thought of me to control me. It took me years to recover from normal life experiences like rejection, criticism or the end of a friendship. Obviously, my craving to be seen in a certain way by others, like all cravings, led to suffering. I can now see that requiring the approval of others disempowers me and makes me needy.

Most of the time we can only guess at the views of others, but that does not stop some of us from tormenting ourselves with speculations. Our perception of 'what she thinks of me' becomes something solid and concrete rather than the figment of our imagination that it is. We ignore the fact that someone's view of us is far more a function of their own conditioning than an accurate assessment. Nobody can really see another with any clarity, free from their own delusions.

It is the karma of those pre-occupied with how others perceive them to become a self-conscious person. On a Buddhist retreat held in 'Noble Silence', not being able to speak helps you turn inwards and notice your own mental chatter. On my first retreat, of three days, I did not know the other retreatants very well and I was surprised to discover my persistent self-consciousness when among them: Am I doing the right thing, in the right place, at the right time? Did anybody notice that I did not wash my plate very mindfully? Would they be able to tell? Would I get in trouble for sleeping in and missing the early morning meditation (twice)? Would people be shocked at how I looked without my usual lipstick on? Would anyone be offended that I was wearing army pants? I like to think that by noticing my self-consciousness without too much self-condemnation, I may even have let some of it go.

For mothers, the most painful attacks on our sense of self come from those who criticise our mothering. The stern stranger who asks us to control our children. The in-law who tells us we're doing it wrong. The 'friend' who tells us we're too strict—or permissive. At such times, we need to turn inwards. If we have been paying attention, then we know our children better than anyone else and, while open to suggestions, ultimately need to trust our own intuition.

Not only do we define ourselves through our perceptions of how others see us, but we also *compare* ourselves with others. We use the people in our lives as barometers of how we are faring. The tendency is quite laughable when we acknowledge that comparing can make us feel self-satisfied or inadequate, depending on which set of people we choose to compare ourselves to. We might choose old school friends, other parents, the people in our street, but most likely the people we see in our day-to-day lives.

Our tendency to compare ourselves with others has led to an epidemic of what Alain de Botton calls 'Status Anxiety', a painful preoccupation with one's position on the ladder. A Buddhist diagnosis of this malady would be that the sufferers neglect their inner life and focus too much attention on the world outside them, relying on external indicators to provide feedback on the worth of the self. The more comfortable we feel about who we are, the less reassurance we need from the world. But who are we? Or perhaps the question is, what is our true nature?

Not who I think I am

Vanessa is a mother of three who gave up a job as a journalist to be with her young children. Her decision brought her face to face with a threatened self-image:

I have always felt that each of my children was more needy than the average child. One struggles with his schoolwork, another struggles with finding suitable friends, and the little one just wants to be with me all the time. It all points to the need for me to remain a stay-at-home mum—I simply have to be there for them after school. I am fortunate that I have the option of staying home but I can't deny that it has caused much pain and soul-searching for me.

I was raised to achieve and impress and fulfil my potential. Like so many women of my generation I expected to have it all. When asked what I do for a living, it is incredibly hard for me to give up my identity as a journalist. It is in such moments that I have the most exaggerated need for an identity. It is even harder to contemplate a future which might never again provide me with paid work in my field. I have been out of the workforce a long time now and I do miss the mental stimulation.

I doubt that I will ever be completely healed from this loss but it does help when I concede that a large part of the suffering comes from what Buddhists see as a false self-image. It helps to remind myself: I am not my job. I am not my status in society. I am not how other people perceive me. I am not even my feelings about myself. It is as though I am rewiring my brain so that I can value myself for qualities that are not about worldly achievements.

In *Buddhism For Mothers* I wrote about the Buddhist teaching of *not-self* which explains that we do not exist in the way we think we do. Although we might develop a false sense of self based on memories of our past actions and experiences, or the fact that we seem to have a body separate from others, it is impossible to find any evidence for the permanent, consistent self we believe ourselves to be. Any sense of self we have is, to use the words of the Buddha, 'a fictional construction' which is 'quite illusory'.

The Buddha taught that our attachment to a view of the self as solid and discrete causes all our other attachments and therefore all our *dukkha*, all our suffering. The Buddha does not expect us to attack each individual attachment, but rather to concentrate on the source of all our attachments: our false sense of a separate, consistent and enduring self. If we can deal with this attachment, the other attachments fall away on their own.

Our 'self-clinging', or 'I-grasping', has all kinds of implications for how we live our lives. Our efforts to create and maintain a self give rise to the need to be someone quite specific, to cling to certain relationships and shun others, to seek status at any cost. In her journal, Kim writes:

> It is weird how much time and energy I spend maintaining the self that I've constructed, like a house I've built that needs so much attention. Threats come from so many places: the possibility of dissolution, damage, looking bad, trying to look good, trying to look better than the house next door, trying to prevent things from happening to my house . . . My thought patterns reveal themselves to be this constant feeding, the tedious caretaking, of my construct of self. What a waste, and what an impediment to enjoying life.

A strong sense of 'me' flows naturally into a strong sense of what is 'mine'—we identify with certain objects as expressions of who we are and feel possessive of these objects as though they are parts of ourselves. All this is normal and certainly nothing to feel guilty about—for we were all taught as children to use the words 'I', 'me' and 'mine' as though they were permanent, unchanging phenomena. 'I', 'me' and 'mine' became fixed, solid and unchallengeable. And, according to the Buddha, our greatest delusion.

In meditation, as we watch the experiences of our body and mind, we see an ever-changing stream of voices, sensations, emotions, ideas, complaints, discomforts…with no pattern or consistency that would suggest one coherent, unified entity behind them. In *Beyond Therapy*, Guy Claxton speaks of how, with progress in our meditation, we might eventually identify with an inner 'witness' who watches the stream of mind phenomena with relative detachment:

> But now 'I' watch them happen; I do not 'do' them, and therefore am less caught up and swept away by them. Peace arises, as I see that no possible experience I can have can threaten me, because I have given up taking sides. I need not struggle in my mind with my self-righteous little judgements about all and sundry, nor with the defensiveness and shame that bubbles up when I am caught at it. Who I am is unbesmirched, and I can look at myself with the slightly amused yet compassionate detachment with which parents can react to the tantrums and panics of their children. Inside ourselves there is a vantage point from which we can look out on all those dramas that used to be so important, so meaningful and so personal.

Claxton also explains that eventually the meditator will even let go of this 'witness' as just another aspect of the stream of consciousness.

Unable to come up with a neat, reliable identity for ourselves, the work of a Buddhist becomes realising her true nature, otherwise known as her 'Buddha Nature'. Our Buddha Nature exists right now and in every moment, as the core of our being, as our underlying nature. As one Buddhist text expresses it:

> Under the floor of some poor man's house lies a treasure
> But because he does not know of its existence

He does not think he is rich.
Similarly, inside one's mind lies truth itself
Firm and unfading,
Yet because beings see it not, they experience
A constant stream of misery.

Our Buddha Nature is our fundamental nature, albeit obscured for the time being by our misconceptions and delusions. It can shine through after we have done the work of peeling away the layers of our conditioning. We give up *self* with a small 's' to find *Self*.

Our Buddha Nature is awakened, and able to live in peace and wisdom, with compassion for all beings. It has a pure, clear mind, no longer perceiving a separate self but understanding our oneness with everything and everyone. When Buddhists bow before statues of the Buddha, they bow to their own potential to be awake and beyond delusion. When they bow to each other, they recognise the essential Buddha Nature in the other.

Kim adopts the Zen custom of referring to 'small self' and 'big self' to capture the difference between our conditioned, habitual selves and our Buddha Nature:

> When I step back and notice my thoughts and emotional states, I become aware of the thing that is doing the noticing. It's like a promise that there is something beyond the small self.
>
> The small self gives me a headache. The more I observe it, the more I see that the small self is like a talkative, whiny toddler: I want this, I want that, I like this, I don't like that, I need that now, this sucks, this is great, I'm a jerk, you're a jerk, I hate my life, I love my life. Oy. Enough already.
>
> So I need more of the big self—more moments in meditation, or walking, where I can taste the vastness. Where I can taste

> something beyond preferences, emotions, duality, cravings, words, images, clinging, repulsion, judgement. It would be worth trying to bring more of this to my moment-to-moment existence.

What can be life-changing for mothers is to draw our sense of self from our true nature instead of our false sense of self. Stuck in old ways of seeing ourselves, our actions are ego-driven. We are more likely to be defensive, reactive, self-protective, self-absorbed. Over-identified with our egos, incidents that appear to attack the small self create a pain well out of proportion to the slight.

Our ego, or falsely constructed self, is at the mercy of how the world outside treats us. Aware of our underlying Buddha Nature we grant our minds spaciousness so that we become less vulnerable to daily incidents and less vulnerable to our own self-judgements. Our egos might receive their most brutal battering from our own fault-finding minds, but mindful of our Buddha Nature we know that these judgements are only thoughts, and not immutable truths about who we are.

In Buddhist practice, we value 'being nobody, going nowhere, and having nothing', for such is the life free from attachment and aversion. This is not the path of passivity and disengagement as it may at first seem. Rather, without attachment to identity, goals and possessions, the compassion and wisdom of our Buddha Nature will shine unimpeded. How crowded and claustrophobic our minds can feel with all the jostling, and even conflicting, desires. Drop these for even a few moments and we find calmness, spaciousness and wisdom.

Not my habitual reactions

My husband Marek astounds me with his ability to take a stand on any topic presented to him. On every world issue, news item or moral

dilemma, he can hold forth and always knows exactly what he thinks. I am the same if human rights are at stake, but for issues less clear-cut I tend to reserve judgement until I have accumulated a mountain of information, weighed the views of a number of experts, asked twenty questions and finally come to a decision. If I am not too overwhelmed or confused.

Buddhist psychology describes three personality types to correspond with the 'Three Mental Torments': greed, anger and delusion. Of course, we all struggle with each of these, but most of us have one in particular that dominates our experience. The *Visuddhimagga*, a text from the Theravada tradition, describes each type's tendencies in the areas of *posture*, *action*, *eating*, *seeing* and *states of mind*. Although I spent some time confused as to whether I was an angry type or a deluded type, I eventually recognised my indecisiveness as a sign that I am, predominantly, the deluded type.

Deluded types can be a little vague, especially in the mornings. They are often out of touch with their own feelings until they hear the views of others—which explains why I always head for the 'Letters to the Editor' in the newspaper. Deluded types are capable of feeling disoriented in even familiar environments and often feel baffled. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, as translated in Sharon Salzberg's book *A Heart as Wide as the World*, this is how deluded types see:

> When one of deluded temperament sees any sort of visible object, he copies what others do: if he hears others criticizing, he criticizes; if he hears others praising, he praises; but actually he feels equanimity in himself—the equanimity of unknowing.

The latter refers to ignorance or indifference, but on the positive side, deluded types are relatively easy to live with, especially if their partner is a greedy type.

Greedy types are quick to notice all the details of the options available and make sure they reserve the best for themselves, whereas a deluded type is unlikely to notice many of the small details until later.

Greedy types are reluctant to face the inevitability of change, aging or death, and concern themselves with acquiring, and owning. This is how greedy types see:

> When one of greedy temperament sees even a slightly pleasing visible object, he looks long as if surprised, he seizes on trivial virtues, discounts genuine faults, and when departing, he does so with regret as if unwilling to leave.

A greedy type, sometimes called a lustful type, would rather overlook difficulty and complexity and keep their lives ever-pleasant. They are optimistic yet prone to practising denial.

Angry types do not want to accept the way things are. They also suffer mind states such as fear and shame. They are good at finding fault and are often cranky. They can have quite a negative outlook but are at least capable of defending their convictions. This is the way they see:

> When one of angry temperament sees even a slightly unpleasing visible object, he avoids looking long as if he were tired, he picks out trivial faults, discounts genuine virtues, and when departing, he does so without regret as if anxious to leave.

At the Parent Meeting I attended last night (which lasted three hours!) I saw all these types in action. The 'greedy' optimists open to whatever fundraising idea was on the table. The 'angry' nit-pickers who could only see the pitfalls. And those, such as myself, who felt unequipped to make any decision until they had heard more discussion.

Doubtless, many are thinking at this point—especially the 'angry' types—that these descriptions are overwhelmingly negative. However, there are in fact six personality types, for the three described above, under the right circumstances, can each transform into a purer form. The essential ingredient for a transformation to take place is awareness—when we clearly see our less skilful tendencies we readily replace them with wiser alternatives. Greed, for example, can develop into faith, 'owing to its special qualities being near to those of greed'. In Buddhism, 'faith' applies to your belief in your own capacity to awaken. The energy that went towards chasing sensory pleasures becomes the pursuit of 'special qualities of virtue'. The tendency to cling to what is harmful becomes a tendency to hold onto what is beneficial.

Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, gives teachings on the three personality types. She speaks of how 'the tendency towards greed, also indicates a willingness to draw near to things, to experience life fully, to surrender to experience'. She explains that faith allows us to do the same but without 'the stickiness and obscuring intoxication of greed'.

An angry temperament, with awareness, can transform into a wise one, again, 'owing to its special qualities being near to those of anger'. As the text says, rather than 'seek out unreal faults', the angry type is capable of discovering 'real faults'. There can be a move, for example, from condemning people themselves to condemning only their harmful actions. An angry type can use their intelligence to question, probe deeply and face up to what is unpleasant, where others might practise denial.

A self-described deluded type, Sharon Salzberg teaches that, with mindfulness, delusion can transform into equanimity. Feelings of detachment, the result of being oblivious to the present moment, can transform into a full connection with experience, free from clinging.

The purpose of these personality descriptions in the original text was to provide a guide to choosing a method of meditation. A greedy type is advised to practise mindfulness of the body, including the breath, posture, movements and sensations. This way they eventually learn, as the Buddha did, that all that arises—every pleasant sensation, every discomfort—also ceases. Nothing is worth clinging to. If lust, in the sense of sexual longing, is the problem for the greedy type, then mindfulness of the body can include the impurities of the body as a way to diminish feelings of attraction (the Buddha's list included bowels, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, lymph, tears, semen, spittle, nasal mucus, oil of the joints and urine). Angry types need to practise loving kindness meditation and deluded types can work on developing single-pointed concentration, usually with the breath as the object, to make them mentally sharper.

It is worth keeping in mind that our character type is not who we are, nor need it give us an identity to which we cling. Our type is a result of our past karma. Causes, such as our culture, our upbringing, our experiences and our genetic inheritance, are behind our day-to-day habits. We have all been conditioned by many different causes but the conditioning need not determine who we are. The Buddha taught that freedom from our conditioning is available to all of us, in any moment, if we are willing to be present and look deeply into causes and conditions.

Interconnected

We go through life using our seemingly separate bodies to justify our sense of having a separate self. Perceiving ourselves to exist within the boundaries of our skin, we divide the world into 'me' and 'not me' and allow this view to rule the way we think and act. We feel compelled

to protect the interests of what is inside our skin and we perceive everything outside in terms of how it can help, or threaten, 'me'. According to the Buddha, our view of ourselves as separate alienates us from others, from our surroundings and from our true nature.

The Buddha taught that, in reality, nothing is separate. In his book, *Teachings on Love*, Thich Nhat Hanh provides an example:

> When we look deeply into a flower, we can see the sun, the clouds, seeds, the nutrients in the soil, and many other things. We understand that the flower cannot exist as a separate, independent self. It is made entirely of what we can call 'non-flower elements' … I am made of non-me elements … Nothing can exist by itself alone. Everything has to inter-be with everything else in the cosmos.

When we look more closely at the container called our skin we discover a picture of interdependence. If we were truly separate and cut off from the world outside us then there would be no 'non-me' elements within the boundaries of our skin. Yet we take air and food and drink from our environment. To do this we need all the manufacturers who provide the food and drink along with all the systems, man-made and in nature, that support those manufacturers. And all the people that, in turn, support those manufacturers. The site we call 'me' interacts continuously, importing and exporting the air and nourishment we depend upon.

Studies on what makes humans happy invariably mention the importance of having a connection to something larger than one's self. This is no doubt why humans have been religious throughout our history. In Buddhism, there is no God but rather the opportunity to realise our oneness with all that exists. In the words of the Buddha, 'Whoever can see the interdependent nature of things can see me.' To again use the words of teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, when you learn

to 'inter-be' you can 'restore your wholeness and connect to the nature of awakening that is within you'. Reconnecting with our essential Buddha Nature, we escape the smallness of self where the world is made up of 'me' and 'not me'.

What can we do in our daily lives to remind ourselves of our essential connectedness, our oneness? All kinds of seemingly banal moments provide an opportunity to see interdependence. Have we ever stopped to wonder how many people helped provide our bowl of cereal? A Buddhist cultivates gratitude towards all the farmers, factory workers, truck drivers and shopkeepers. She is thankful to all the people who sustain those workers: their parents and partners and then all the people who in turn sustain them, and so on. Here is a Buddhist prayer, spoken at mealtimes, acknowledging this reality:

> The joys and pains of all beings
> are present in the gift of this food.
> Let us receive it in love
> and gratitude…

Since becoming mothers, our connection to our children has helped us turn away from our sense that we were the centre of the universe. In *Buddha Mom,* a book that chronicles a spiritual journey through motherhood, author Jacqueline Kramer speaks of a mother's need to recast the role of her ego to make way for her child:

> I felt a sense of impending death during pregnancy, childbirth, and early mothering. I now realise that it wasn't physical death that I felt breathing down my neck. The death I felt was the death of certain aspects of my ego. To be the mother I wanted to be I needed to be less full of my 'self' and thus more available to nurture another. I had to grow up.

Jacqueline adds that this is extremely challenging in a society that encourages us to be obsessed with the self and its worldly achievements. Yet, in giving up part of our ego, we free ourselves to find mothering 'easier, richer and more fulfilling'. Buddhists would argue that surrendering some ego for the sake of our children makes us happier. Research from all over the world on personal well-being suggests that people who are focused on others are happier than those who are self-absorbed.

For many and varied reasons, most of us will do our utmost to refute the teaching of not-self. Perhaps the main reason is our fear. We are afraid of losing the familiar boundaries of our skin. But if we expand our sense of our boundaries and comprehend our oneness with all that we experience, we lose our vulnerability, for there is no longer an 'I' to be threatened.

A LOVING BEING

Since we all have Buddha Nature, we are all, at heart, loving beings. When we extend our love to others we grow in confidence, for we are closer to our natural state, to our true nature. Buddhists connect with the unconditional love in their hearts through practising loving kindness meditation, a method practised since the time of the Buddha more than 2,500 years ago. Cultivating a loving mind in meditation, we take it with us into our daily lives.

In loving kindness meditation, we start by wishing for happiness for our self. We move on to a friend or relative who we love, then to a neutral person and finally to someone we find difficult to love. We finish the meditation by extending our love to all living beings. We express our wish for happiness, for ourselves and others, by repeating phrases such as:

May I be happy.
May I be safe.
May I be well.
May I be peaceful.
May I be free from suffering.

We keep the language simple. It is not an intellectual exercise. Nor a mind-numbing drill. Generating, and increasing, the *feeling* of loving kindness, is our focus. People who struggle with a lack of compassion for themselves may choose to focus on wishing themselves happiness as their main meditation technique.

Buddhist teachers often advise us to remember the care that a loving adult may have shown us during our childhood. Feeling warmed and grateful in the memory, we can use this feeling as a starting point in generating love for ourselves. Alternately, we can consider our easy-flowing love for our children as the model. As the Buddha said:

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.

Many a Buddhist claims that loving kindness meditation has transformative powers. The most impressive feedback I ever heard came from a sweet-looking lady of about seventy years. Attending a talk by Theravada monk Sujato, a renowned specialist in loving kindness, I noticed her in the audience looking open and attentive as she listened. I spoke to her in the break, where she told me of her gratitude to Sujato for teaching her loving kindness meditation. In her words: 'I used to get so angry with my husband that I used to daydream about chopping through his head with an axe. Since practising loving kindness meditation, all I can feel is kindness for him.'

I inquired whether her husband's behaviour had changed since she discovered these feelings, to which she replied, 'I no longer care! His behaviour is irrelevant to me now, because I can access these feelings of loving kindness.'

I have to admit to initially finding this response a little strange. Had she become a doormat for her husband to mistreat at will? But I soon saw the miracle of what she had achieved. Unable to change her husband, she had changed her own mind. Instead of living out her retirement in a state of never-ending anger, she had conquered strong emotions.

We are capable of forgiving anything in our children and loving them come what may. Knowing what we are capable of with a maternal perspective, perhaps we can harness some of this benevolence for other relationships.

What we can do

- Avoid identifying with your thoughts and feelings. As you watch them, realise they are not who you are.
- Be aware of any tendency to evaluate yourself and how it can keep you from accepting yourself as you are.
- Realise the error in clinging to your opinions to define yourself.
- Notice when you rely on others to tell you who you are and try to let go of any clinging to others' approval.
- When criticised as a mother, tune into your own intuition on the matter.
- Rather than compare yourself to others, remember your own Buddha Nature for this is who you truly are.
- Consider valuing yourself for qualities other than your worldly achievements.
- Start trying to see yourself for who you really are, your true nature, your Buddha Nature, rather than your false sense of self.
- Know that with awareness you can convert greed to faith, anger to wisdom, delusion to equanimity.
- Pause to recall your essential interconnectedness with everyone as well as with all that surrounds you.
- Remember to cultivate gratitude towards the millions involved in providing your meals.
- Practise loving kindness meditation where you wish people well, but remember the Buddha's instruction to start with yourself.
- Acknowledge that you grow in confidence when you feel loving towards others, for this is your true nature.

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CHAPTER 4

who are my children?

Part of knowing who our children are is conceding that we cannot know who they are completely, much less who they are going to become. It is only realistic to surrender to some not-knowing. We often assume we know the characters of our various family members and friends, but admitting to the mystery inherent in every living being allows us to perceive their behaviour with an open mind, making it more likely that we give people the benefit of the doubt.

We often find ourselves describing the character of our children to others, perhaps comparing personality traits between siblings or their friends. We might call one child an extrovert, another child quiet, one child a dreamer, another a trouble-maker. While it is normal for mothers to enjoy describing their children to others, we have not necessarily solved the puzzle of who our children are. An often overlooked challenge of parenting is being able to see our children clearly without becoming stuck in our views. Seeing them clearly also takes an awareness of how our own hopes, fears and expectations distort our views.

Not who I expect them to be

I have always been sympathetic to feminist issues yet, eventually, had to admit to myself a secret desire for Zac to behave, in many ways, like a stereotypical man. I have boasted, 'Zac has no fears', 'Zac never has nightmares' or 'Zac is sports crazy'. I swelled with pride when a friend said, 'If Zac ever decides he wants to get in touch with his feminine side, I'll tell him: you don't have one!' I grew accustomed to perceiving Zac as daring, adventurous and emotionally thick-skinned. In retrospect I can see that I insisted on this image of him as a reaction to my fears that he might ever suffer. A 'man's man', despite his faults, is often charismatic, confident and popular. If I

kept telling myself how tough Zac was, I could avoid the truth that he would inevitably experience feelings of loneliness, anxiety or self-doubt.

I learnt, however, that my view of Zac did not always coincide with reality, and it even led me to make unwise decisions. There was the day when we took him, at the age of four, to join a soccer team and, being the youngest, he was too shy to leave our sides to enter this unknown world of bigger boys. On another occasion, my husband and I treated ourselves to a holiday, leaving Zac behind, before he was ready to cope with our not being there.

My view of Zac as tough, at times, made me slow to see reality. When Zac's taekwondo teacher told me she found Zac to be a quiet boy, I felt wronged—'How could she so misunderstand him? Zac is not quiet!'—but maybe, sometimes, he was. Eventually I heard this from a number of his various teachers. He's not like that at home, I told them all. I learnt the need to be open to his contradictions and complexity, to stop boxing him in with labels that only served my own psyche.

No sooner had I adapted to seeing Zac as a quiet-natured boy than I saw him at his taekwondo class attacking an opponent—a foot taller than him. The sheer ferocity of Zac the Fighter made me realise that 'quiet' was not the word to capture his character either. He is, in fact, a stream of surprises. 'Who he is' is an always-intriguing mystery to grapple with. Each moment with him invites me to open my mind to the new self he presents.

Along with our desires relating to the character of our children, we also become attached to our expectations of their talents and skills. In *When Will the Children Play*, a book that questions the trend to over-schedule children with after-school activities, Angela Rossmanith suggests the need for self-awareness if we are to protect our children from our unrealistic expectations:

> One of the greatest gifts that we can give children is our acknowledgment and appreciation of their unique nature and the unique combination of talents and skills they have. This can be easier said than done, and you might need to ponder your long-held ideas about what makes people special, and what you expect of children—yours in particular. We all tend to have deep-seated notions of what makes people special or successful or happy. We need to step back from those ideas and recognise that they are limited and not always in a child's best interests.

Initially, I was not particularly thrilled when Zac's taekwondo master approached me to report that Zac was a Good Fighter and should do tournaments. If it was up to me, he would be reading more books or developing an appreciation of the Australian bush. Still, it would be disrespectful to Zac if I forced him onto my course rather than his own. My job as a mother is to support him in finding his own path. In fact, with time, my love for Zac brings me to embrace and celebrate his choices.

I recently read *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, who shot to fame by turning down an offer to appear on Oprah's *Book Club*. Although it's fiction, commentators see *The Corrections* as a reflection of how life is for numerous modern families. The story is disturbing to any mother in that three children grow up to find the company of their parents intolerable. The mother, Enid, seems innocent enough yet she irritates her children intensely. The reason seems to be the burden of her expectations. Her children feel as though they disappoint her because, despite some impressive achievements, they fail to conform to their mother's ardent hopes. Renowned chef, academic—these vocations, although satisfying for her children, did not quite fit Enid's aspirations. Nor did their taste in marriage partners. Enid wanted

them to adopt the norms of the families around her even though these suited none of them.

In *Everyday Blessings*, a book exploring mindful parenting, Buddhist parents Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn write about allowing our children their sovereignty, their right to be their own person, and suggest that it might be the most important gift we can give our children:

> If sovereignty means being who one truly is and becoming who one can become, then could it not also be the answer to the larger question, 'What does everyone at heart most desire?' And even, 'What does everyone most deserve?'

They discuss the Buddhist quest for an individual to realise their true self, their fundamental nature. As we discussed in the last chapter, everyone has Buddha Nature at their core, a self that is unique while being one with the whole of creation, a self that is fully awake, conscious and knowing.

For our children to grow into their true selves, we need to allow them the space to blossom into who they truly are. The Kabat-Zinns emphasise that sovereignty is not about allowing children to behave like royalty, answerable to nobody, but about allowing them to grow into every aspect of their being, at the same time respecting the sovereignty of others. To remind themselves of the sovereignty of their children, Jon and Myla often bow to their sleeping children, either inwardly or with their palms together over their hearts, to show respect for what is divine in the other.

So how can we see more clearly who our children are? We can start by shifting our focus from who we want them to eventually be and pay attention to who they are right now. We shift our focus from all the potential pitfalls ahead and focus on who they are in the present at this wondrous stage in their development. We spend time

with them, listen to them and watch them. We help them discover and explore what interests them. We look out for what makes them happy, always open to the fact that what we find may not reflect our own passions.

I have always found that giving my children attention, even if it means neglecting the housework, the paperwork or returning phone calls, is the best way to avoid feelings of guilt. Then, no matter how out of control life becomes, I can tell myself that at least I have attended to what is most important. My mother is a primary school teacher and confesses to setting homework for the sole purpose of bringing children into conversation with their parents. Like many teachers, she believes that a significant proportion of parents are too busy to make this time of their own volition. Doubtless for the same reasons, and with shifting definitions of homework, teenagers might these days be set homework such as 'walk the dog with your father' in recognition of the lack of time spent in communication.

Protected from their parents' egos

When we think of children suffering from the effects of their parents' egos, we picture pushy 'show business' mothers who want their child to be famous and bring them glory. Or we think of the parents who use sporting events to rant and bully their children into fulfilling their own dreams. Extreme cases abound, yet few of us are completely innocent of inflicting our ego needs onto our children. In Buddhist terms, clinging to our false construction of a self produces all sorts of attachments such that we lose our clear-sightedness along with any chance of liberation from delusion.

Our sense of who our children are is interwoven with our sense of who we are ourselves. The more I can accept and understand

myself, the more I am capable of doing the same for my children. It can be worth asking, am I patient and forgiving of myself? Do I value myself unconditionally or do I feel like I have to earn my self-respect? Can I see the effects on my parenting when I am harsh and judgemental towards myself? Do I treat my children this way too?

When we lack a sense of our own wholeness, we are less likely to mother well. When we inflict the needs of our unsatisfied egos onto their lives, we cannot see our children for who they are. We might use our children to compete with others, to convince us through their achievements that we are good mothers, or to bring us glory. Yet children need to feel loved for who they are, not for meeting our expectations.

It would be a shame if their self-respect throughout their lives hinged exclusively on how much they achieved, or on the approval of others. Many a parent, and many a school, is so focused on results they forget the importance of praising a child for their effort. A child can only do their best and this is what we need to acknowledge if we want to help them come through their youth with their self-confidence intact. It might also reduce the current high incidence of final year high-school students taking anti-depressants to cope with exam pressure. They need to understand that they are not their exam results.

As never before in history, parenting today has become an onerous responsibility full of anxiety and worry. Buddhists might say ours is a time of unprecedented clinging and aversion as parents get attached to their ideas of who they want their children to be. With the phenomenon of the 'hovering parent' who needs to manage every detail of their child's life, children can lose room to breathe. The antidote lies in Buddhist non-attachment where we love and care for our children without insisting on particular outcomes, without fostering a string of obsessions, and without losing our equanimity.

We do not own our children and have little control over who they are or who they will become. Parents who come to Buddhism are likely to ask, how could I possibly free myself of 'attachment' to my children? And would I even want to? Many a Buddhist teacher refers to a poem written in 1923 by thinker Khalil Gibran to answer this question. From his famous philosophical work *The Prophet*, it explains what non-attachment to our children might mean. I have occasionally heard it read at Buddhist gatherings even though the writer himself is not from a Buddhist background. Gibran warns us:

> Your children are not your children.
> They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
> They come through you but not from you,
> And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.
> You may give them your love but not your thoughts.
> For they have their own thoughts.
> You may house their bodies but not their souls,
> For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
> You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
> For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
> You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The poem is not about *de*tachment from our children. Non-attachment means: not demanding that they succeed and achieve, not using them to prop up our own self-esteem, and not expecting them to be just like us. We allow them to be themselves and love them as they are. Our work is to teach them to respect the feelings and rights of others and avoid harm. Otherwise, they are free to unfold in their own way.

Chittaprabha, a mother from the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, further explained what it might mean to practise non-attachment with our children:

> If I devote all my attention to my children's desires, I would only be focused on my immediate world and I'd be giving up the opportunity to become a true individual. When I embrace the wider perspective available through meditation, I become more creative, free and responsive to the whole of life around me and less grasping and attached to my children and the things that bring me pleasure. The pleasure of loving and interacting spontaneously with children lessened if I tried to hold on too tightly. So I've always tried to seek a range of wholesome sources of pleasure.

I have found her words helpful to assuage my guilt in situations such as going out on a weeknight without my children or treating myself to a weekend away *sans* sons. Engaging in the greater world beyond our children can be a healthy practice of non-attachment.

A former midwife, Subhana speaks of the need to achieve a 'healthy attachment' with our babies but, as they grow older, to find a balance between healthy attachment and giving them appropriate autonomy. For Subhana this meant that in order to provide some continuity of care, she never went away on retreats until her children were four or five years old. After that, leaving her children with a loving father, she felt they were old enough to cope with the absences required of a Buddhist teacher.

Not exclusively ours

Separated from extended family and doing the heavy-lifting of parenting on our own, many of us develop the habit of seeing ourselves as one

of two, if not the only, parent for our children. Yet the African adage that it takes a village to raise a child is increasingly recognised of late. Child psychologists are encouraging parents to foster relationships with other adults, be they friends or relations, who show concern for our child. This is also a way to practise Buddhist non-attachment to our children: by seeing them as not exclusively ours. After all, throughout the great part of human history, children have been raised by a network of caring adults rather than only one or two.

Sharing the parental load with others is also good insurance. If our children eventually join the ranks of the numerous teenagers who distance themselves from their parents in order to claim their autonomy, then at least other adults have a presence in their lives. The most at-risk teenagers, we are told, are those completely disconnected from the adult world.

With Marek's family living in Poland, the friend who shows the most active interest in my sons is Marek's ex-wife with whom he came to Australia in his early twenties. She adores our boys and showers them with kindness and generosity. Many a friend is bemused that I 'allow' this relationship, but with everybody winning it would be madness to stand in the way. She is effectively a doting Polish auntie to the boys, an ally for life.

Sharing the role of carer for our children might mean allowing other adults to guide our children when they misbehave. I dabble with this idea with friends and family who are all welcome to provide 'redirection and guidance' for young Alex when he is out of line. As most of us have experienced, children are more likely to co-operate when an instruction comes from Someone Other Than Mother. If we are overly attached to our children, holding too tightly to our role as their carer, we take reprimands from others as personal insults and forget to thank the other adult for their help. Some may ask, what if the reprimand is *intended* as a personal insult? Thank them anyway.

It is a way to practise the advice of a Buddhist nun I know who, when dealing with difficult people, advises: 'Kill them with kindness.'

The fact that children do not 'belong' to anyone exclusively raises the question of how we can play a role in the lives of children other than our own. While this is often easier with nieces and nephews, we might take the opportunities to acknowledge or connect with more of the children we know. As mothers, we know how much we appreciate other adults capable of seeing the preciousness of our own children.

When we can love more children than our own, we practise kindness not only toward those children but also their mothers. I met a mother, for example, who suffered a degree of social alienation because her toddler hit and pinched other children. One mother from her mother's group took a liking to her son in spite of his toddler-flaws and this was a great solace to the alienated mother throughout this phase. Connecting with children other than our own creates healthy, interconnected communities and helps us to practise Buddhist equanimity where we aim to love all beings more equally.

Equanimity is one of the Four Divine Dwelling Places the Buddha spoke of as gateways to awakening (which also include: loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy where we delight in the happiness of others). The Buddha described equanimity as 'non-attachment' and said, 'Non-attachment is the way of looking at all things openly and equally.' The 'near enemy' of equanimity, or a trait that is easily mistaken for equanimity, is indifference or apathy towards others. For mothers, equanimity means seeing the preciousness of all children and not just our own. I have found one valuable way to practise this is to include photos of children other than your own on your fridge or mantelpiece.

The temptation can be strong to focus on our own children, to see their needs alone. (Permit me a judgemental moment to say that

some mothers 'help in class' yet hardly leave their own child's side.) An exclusive focus on our own children can reach the point where other children become either invisible or mere objects. They become objects of competition for our children, objects we want our children associated with, or not, or 'obstacles' to our children. Within my community, the mothers I have tremendous respect for are those who do the humble and relatively invisible work of voluntary, one-to-one literacy tutoring at school. These mothers must care deeply about the needs of children other than their own.

Beings worth seeing clearly

How do we feel when in conversation someone finishes our sentence for us—such a person assuming they know what we are going to say—only to get it wrong? In the same way, we do our children no favours when we believe we know their minds, when we assume we can predict their behaviours based on past experiences. Our assumptions are especially perilous when they take the form of negative labels for our child such as 'hellraiser', 'whinger' or 'drama queen'.

We need to trust in the potential for our children to realise their true nature, their Buddha nature, for if we typecast them as villain, we tend to reinforce the stereotype. I know from experience how unhelpful it is to develop a negative attitude towards a testing child, and how easy it is to forget that their true nature is still in there and capable of shining through when we least expect it.

Usually we make assumptions about our family members without much awareness, and some of our assumptions are helpful. Yet, we owe it to our children to be open to the inevitability that they will change, mature or act inconsistently. Undoing our habitual approach of running on assumptions is a matter of adopting Beginner's Mind,

asking ourselves, who is my child *in this moment?* Subhana believes that seeing your child clearly is one of the greatest challenges of parenting for it is so easy for our views of our children to crystallise. An experienced mother, she has noticed that by imposing our labels on our children, we construct boxes around them which can be immensely frustrating for them to live in.

Even adult families suffer from the tendency to label each other's characters, assuming consistency over time, rather than looking deeply at the person who stands before them in the moment. Many adults lament that revisiting their childhood families forces them into old roles that no longer suit who they are today. Always labelled 'strong and independent', one mother is distressed by a lack of help from her family when she starts having children. Another mother, always labelled 'the baby of the family', resents her family's help, for she now sees herself as strong and independent. Just as our own characters evolve and change over time, so do those of our children.

We are more likely to see our children clearly if we actively try to give them the benefit of the doubt. When our children go through difficult stages, it is easy to assume the worst of motives: he's trying to annoy me, he wants to upset me and cause trouble. In a state of anger we label our child difficult, temperamental, wild, brattish or even sadistic. The risk is that when we expect the worst from our children, we often create a self-fulfilling prophecy where we are more likely to bring out the worst in them.

Conversely, if we continue to believe in their innate goodness, we are more likely to see the best of their nature. Rather than growing cynical about our child's behaviour, we have the option of being compassionate. What is the world like from their point of view? Are they tired or hungry? Are they adjusting to change? Are they receiving enough love and attention? Are they feeling overlooked, rushed, misunderstood, criticised? Is it a phase they need to work through? All

kinds of variables affect their behaviour. A loving approach is to avoid knee-jerk reactions of anger and blame, and look more deeply.

Another aspect of seeing our children clearly is remembering that they are children. They do not need to behave like a grown person yet, so we keep our standards of behaviour realistic and avoid treating them as trainee adults. This might mean accepting that very young children accidentally spill milk, get dirty, forget their manners and need to run wild occasionally. In social situations in particular, when we might be conscious of the judgements of others, we need to check that we respond to our child in a way that is mindful of the stage the child is at, rather than insisting on adult standards of social decorum.

Part of seeing our children as children is acknowledging their need for play. Dr David Elkind is a leading advocate for the preservation of childhood and has been studying what he calls 'Hurried Child Syndrome' for more than two decades. He is the author of several books pleading with parents to stop hurrying their children through childhood. In an interview with 'WBZ News' in Boston, Dr Elkind said:

> …piling on too much too early not only takes away from time for free play, which is an important activity for children, it can also add strain that kids aren't ready to handle. Whenever you put a lot of pressures on kids and don't allow them enough time to play and relax, stress and stress symptoms come out.

Since the 1970s, children have lost twelve hours a week in free time, including a 25 per cent drop in playing and a 50 per cent drop in unstructured activities, according to the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. This is due to increased time in front of screens but also the modern tendency to enrol children in numerous after-school activities. Over-scheduled, our children lose time to

connect with their true nature, to be themselves and to be children. They lose the time to be creative, solitary and resourceful. Over-scheduling also affects the quality of family time, as we lose a relaxed atmosphere in our homes and the good memories that family time might have created.

Although parents loathe hearing the words 'I'm bored', even doing nothing is valuable time for resting, thinking and dreaming. And boredom forces children to be resourceful, to discover their interests. They might pick up a musical instrument, travel into their imagination, draw, construct, create. Importantly, allowing our children to be bored from time to time helps to equip them with strategies to work through the feeling and master the situation. As I often need to remind myself, I am hardly helping my children if I teach them that life is an endless stream of entertainment and activities, that they never need to create their own fun.

Television, DVDs, computer games and PlayStations also devour time for our children to play. Zac and Alex could easily spend all their spare time using such technology and I have spent many hours hearing all about their displeasure at my restrictions. When I consider how easy my life would be if I allowed them to sit in front of screens for all their spare time, I can only conclude that all mothers who restrict screen-time are unsung heroes, saints and martyrs. Still, my reward for weathering all the nagging is to see them eventually settle into imaginary games or creative projects. Pursuits where they can be themselves.

Precious mortals

An inescapable aspect of the impermanence of all things is our mortality. Whereas a typical Westerner tries to live in denial of their

mortality, a Buddhist makes time to consider this inevitability. A Buddhist approach to life is one that, in recognising the certainty of death, realises the preciousness of each day and of each moment. Since we all face the certainty of death, a Buddhist values all lives as precious and tries to treat others accordingly.

Life teaches most mothers about the preciousness of life through incidents such as this one. A friend and I push our sons on the swings at a park, when Alex suddenly falls off backwards, banging his head on the ground. The clunk is loud enough to signal a serious accident. He wails with pain. I feel the egg-like bump at the back of his head. Eventually he calms down but starts to fall asleep. This being a sign of concussion, I have to keep him awake, but it is time to pick up Zac from school. In the car, I try to keep Alex awake with promises of ice-cream.

He survives the incident with only a bump. No trip to the emergency ward this time but, still, I feel immensely emotional. The strength of my empathy drives me to spend a large part of the afternoon embracing him and, just for the day, I cannot help but let him have his way in all the arguments with his brother.

An accident is always a poignant reminder of how much our child means to us. We realise the fragility of a human life. We experience a glimpse of human mortality. I spend many hours feeling grateful for Alex's life—even though the gratitude is tinged with fear. I am in a place that all mothers visit from time to time.

Yet what is my experience compared to that of the family of five-year-old Sophie Delezio who three years ago suffered severe burns to 85 per cent of her body after a truck crashed through her childcare centre. A couple of years later she is back on the front pages of the newspapers after her stroller was run down by a car on a pedestrian crossing, putting her in a critical condition all over again. Her six-year-old brother had not even finished seeing a counsellor to help

him through the first incident before the second came along. Now that Sophie has recovered and left hospital, it is hard to imagine her parents taking the life of their daughter for granted for even one day for the rest of their lives.

Along with being mortal, our children, like everybody and everything, are in an ongoing process of change. The Buddha emphasised the transitory nature of all things, that everything arises and passes away. This is the teaching of Impermanence and nowhere do we see this more clearly than with our growing children who remind us of Impermanence all the way through their lives.

Motherhood requires us to constantly deal with the loss of who our child used to be, as each day, each moment, they grow into new beings. This makes them precious in every moment, for a moment like the present has never happened before and will never happen again. Liz, a Buddhist mother with whom I occasionally exchange emails, shared with me her experiences of the teaching of Impermanence in relation to her three-year-old daughter:

> I awoke the other night to the sound of Alicia talking and laughing in her sleep. Overwhelmed with my love for her I also felt a sense of melancholy that took me a while to work out. Some time later I was able to put words to the feeling for I realised motherhood is about facing a series of deaths. As the mother of a three-year-old I have effectively lost my baby daughter and my treasured two-year-old. I remember so few of the moments and as time passes they become more of a blur—lost forever. I have only photos and videos left. These mementoes make me smile but I also feel sad about losing each of these Alicias, and I know this process of letting go of who she once was will continue for the rest of my life.

Interestingly, this realisation affects Liz's approach to being with Alicia. She feels more likely to prize her childhood and be there for it, rather than feeling like her job is to usher Alicia into adulthood. She now focuses more on the question '*Who is Alicia now?*' than on '*Who is she going to be?*'

Beings with human rights

I never set out to write a book telling mothers how to raise their children and it is clear from my struggles with Alex that I am hardly one to give such advice. Yet if we are to parent according to Buddhist principles, there is one parenting tool that we might consider removing from the kit altogether—and that is smacking.

That is not to say that I have never done it. I have. Almost never with Zac, but my impish Alex loves to see how far he can push me. Yes, the floodgates have at times broken. In my defence, I can only claim that such incidents are extremely rare. I have always discussed them with him afterwards—and apologised.

As dramatic as it sounds, smacking is an abuse of our children's basic human rights. Children are the most voiceless in society, not to mention powerless to defend themselves. Why do we call it 'assault' when an adult so much as touches another adult, but not when a larger person uses their strength against society's weakest?

Even the proponents of smacking say that it should not be done in anger but, if my experience is anything to go by, why else do we smack if not because our children have pushed us to our limit? It is hard to imagine someone with a calm head smacking a child. For a Buddhist, the arising of anger is like the red warning lights that appear on the dashboards of our cars. *Potential danger ahead. Proceed with caution. Do not act when head is hot.*

Proponents also point out that a smack is a useful last resort when a child refuses to obey us. Yet how much of our need to smack is the toddler inside us who will not settle for anything but her own way, and who will stop at nothing to achieve it? The urge to smack is the exact time to look inwards at our own attachments and aversions, our impatience and over-reactivity. And let go. It is not about letting our children 'get away with murder' but showing them non-violent ways to solve problems.

Although the great majority of experts argue against smacking, studies from Western countries suggest that an overwhelming majority of parents do smack. This raises the question, do we rely on age-old fallacies such as 'Everybody does it so it must be okay', or, 'Parents have always smacked so it must be alright', and even, 'I got smacked and I turned out fine'.

Violence, as we know, is not only physical for we can be just as damaging with our voices, through shrieking or abusive language. While we can forgive ourselves for 'losing it' occasionally, we need to acknowledge the times when such behaviour is becoming a habit. When children are young, we get away with our outbursts: children are not only powerless but extremely forgiving. This is unlikely to remain the case, however, as they become adolescents, so it is worth using the early years as a training ground to develop the patience and equanimity that will earn their respect in later years when their judgement is more mature.

The opposite of mistreatment is the modelling of respect and courtesy for our children. This can be challenging when we are so often rushing them. As adults with a degree of control over our own schedule, it is easy to forget how frustrating it feels to be in the middle of a project and suddenly have to stop. I notice when I am writing, reading or chatting to a friend, being forced to stop before the natural end feels like a brutal jolt.

When children are playing an imaginary game, enjoying their Lego or drawing a picture, they are deeply absorbed. This is pure childhood and there is something sacred and magical about the mental space they inhabit. Many a wise mother at least gives her children notice: 'Five more minutes, kids' and later, 'Two minutes left.' This is not only an effective way to prevent a scene, but also expresses courtesy and respect for our children.

With all the pressures on the modern mother, regular failures to model respect and courtesy are inevitable. Forgive yourself when you have been a fishwife and remember that most mothers unravel from time to time. Examine what happened. Pinpoint the causes and learn from the incident. But avoid beating yourself up. As we all find if we look closely enough, feeling guilty does not seem to bring about change.

Spiritual masters

I was bushwalking with Zac and started discussing his next day at school when he interrupted me, 'Let's not talk about school tomorrow. I'll get too excited and won't be able to concentrate on this bushwalk.' 'Hang on,' I thought, 'who is the Buddhist here? Who has been writing copious pages about living in the moment?' I had to remind myself that I was walking alongside a spiritual teacher.

An analogy that can help us live wisely with children is to see them as spiritual masters—live-in Buddhist teachers, hosting a retreat that lasts at least twenty years. I like this analogy firstly because it is humbling. It helps us acknowledge that it is not so much a case of me raising my children as each party, adults and children, raising each other. Seeing our children as teachers also relieves us from the pressure to be perfect and the guilt that comes when we fall short, for such a

view allows us to see ourselves as learners too. We open ourselves to learn and grow rather than seeing ourselves as the great teacher with all the answers. It might also mean we apologise to our children from time to time—a valuable gesture in family life.

Our children are our teachers regardless of age. Subhana explains that her teenagers have been only too happy to tell her information about herself that nobody else would be prepared to, and she has definitely learnt more about herself from their observations. It seems we mothers of young children have much to look forward to in the area of self-knowledge. Children teach us an enormous amount about ourselves, often exactly what we have been avoiding. They hold up a mirror for us. This, too, is humbling, for most of us learn that we are not the pleasant, calm, friendly person we always liked to think we were. Yet they also show us how generous we can be, how caring and selfless and loving—at least on our good days.

Children bring us to recognise and deal with our anger problem in a way Buddhist monks and nuns living in monasteries are spared. In doing this we learn exactly what we are attached to: it might be domestic order, domestic harmony, time for self, ongoing intellectual or social stimulation. Seeing her attachments, a Buddhist mother chooses a journey of loosening her hold on them in order to cultivate the seeds of happiness.

Often the lessons children teach are uplifting. Children model unconditional love. As we all know, even children of abusive parents seem to love and protect their parents without question. My children have always forgiven and forgotten my temper flares, in a way that few adults might.

Children provide endless lessons on how to love others. The love we feel for them opens us to a new way of seeing others. We can feel compassion for just about anyone when we imagine them from a parent's point of view. After experiencing love for a child, we find

patience for slow cashiers, nuisance callers and road ragers. All we have to do is imagine the compassion we would feel if this person was our child. Mothers have first-hand insight into what the Buddha might have meant when he advised us to love all beings as a mother loves her child.

What we can do

- Pay attention when you find yourself describing the character of your child. Our labels may be incorrect, outdated or tinged by our expectations, fears and prejudices.
- Be aware of your deep-seated notions of what makes people special, successful or happy.
- Ensure your children feel loved for who they are, not what they achieve.
- Recognise the need to let your child choose their own path.
- Pay attention to who your child is right now rather than who you expect them to be in the future.
- Be aware of the risk of inflicting your ego needs on the life of your child.
- Allow other parents to play a role in helping your child on their chosen path.
- Be open to playing a role in the lives of children other than your own as a way to practise Buddhist equanimity.
- Consider the reasons for misbehaviour rather than assume your child is attacking you personally.
- See your children as children rather than trainee adults.
- Ensure your children have ample time to have a childhood, to play.
- Understand the preciousness of every moment with your child.
- Refrain from smacking. Recognise verbal violence. But forgive yourself when you lose it. Investigate the causes rather than giving in to guilt.
- See your children for the spiritual masters they are.

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CHAPTER 5

is this all?

One of the most influential books of the last century, *The Feminine Mystique*, opened thus:

> The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?'

The problem with no name was that women were kept from achieving their potential. Since the late Betty Friedan wrote these words in 1963, women's choices have multiplied but many of us still have occasion to ask ourselves, 'Is this all?' Young families depend on routine, on repetition and predictability, such that many of us can feel restless and crave excitement or drama. This might lead us to plan flashy holidays, buy more stuff or make major changes to our lifestyles. Such efforts may, for a while, soothe our unease but the question—Is this all?—often lingers regardless.

Many of us have children as a way to answer the Big Question, what is the meaning of life? Yet most of us come to realise that living through, or for, our children, not only makes us dull company but also places an unfair burden on our children to provide The Answer and fulfil us.

We can spend the rest of our lives shuffling the externals, tweaking our living arrangements, but there comes a time when the only answer is to turn our attention inwards. Seventeenth-century philosopher

Blaise Pascal wrote, 'All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot sit quietly in their own chamber.' Our need for stimulation, intoxication and reassurance has rendered us incapable of sitting quietly in our own room. When at first we try to, we find ourselves self-conscious, anxious or restless. We want to run away just as we live our lives in a state of perpetual flight.

When everything isn't enough

Part of a Buddhist practice is conceding that even when we attain whatever it is we want from the world, it fails to give us lasting happiness. Our desires never cease, regardless of whether we succeed in fulfilling them.

David Michie is a corporate communications consultant and the author of *Buddhism for Busy People*. From the age of eighteen until well into his thirties, David spent his spare time writing thrillers. In fact, he wrote ten books but none of them reached publication. Finally, when David was in his mid-thirties, a publisher accepted a book from him, published it and asked for more. He moved from London to the Australian city of Perth where he enjoyed sunny weather, rainbow lorikeets, scarlet bottlebrush and regular beach walks. In his words:

> I had realised the ambition I'd held since the age of eighteen, I was now living my dream. Only a short while before, back in London, the very idea of such a lifestyle would have seemed hopelessly unattainable…But now that all my hopes had been fulfilled was I happy? Of course not! I had quickly discovered that being a full-time novelist in a Mediterranean climate isn't all it's cracked up to be!

David found that he missed many aspects of his busy life in public relations: the network, the regular feedback, the support from other professionals. It is the same for all of us: as long as we seek lasting satisfaction from the world outside us, we will continue to ask the question, 'Is this all?'

I have a friend who could only have her two children after several punishing years of IVF treatments, years which strained her marriage and drove the couple to the limits of their endurance. Some years down the track, as we discuss the usual challenges of parenting. I can't help but ask her: 'Do you think that after all the struggle to have your children, you appreciate them more than the average mother? Is it easier to cope with those daily challenges?'

Her answer: 'No. It isn't. It makes no difference at all.'

Even when life delivers what we thought was our heart's desire, it continues in the same old imperfect way it always did.

I have found myself asking, *Is this all?* during meditation. I might have finally calmed my mind to concentrate on my breath only to observe myself thinking: 'Where are the visions? The life-changing realisations? The bliss?' Yet making such demands on a meditation sitting is missing the point. Meditation is where we practise a non-grasping acceptance of the moment. We avoid judging the moment. We avoid demanding anything of it. We meditate with the hope that we might gradually bring this mind state into our daily lives. When impatience or craving arises, we stay with such feelings, and learn from them…What are their causes? Where do they lead? Do they last?

Would we have it any other way?

At times, the routine and drudgery of domestic life gnaws away at our mental health. We feel trapped in our kitchens and laundries, only

emerging to clear the mess from other parts of the house, provide transport or go to work. Sometimes appreciating what we have feels like a tall order. But can we imagine what 'freedom' from the so-called domestic grind might be like? I had a small taste during an overseas trip that changed the way I felt about family life at home once and for all.

I had never seen the town in Poland where Marek grew up, so when an opportunity arose to stay with Marek's family there we were keen to seize it. Knowing a three-week trip to Poland held little to amuse our five-year-old, we accepted the offer of a friend to mind Zac in our house. Assuming Zac was an easygoing child who loved being with his friends, I had arranged play-dates for him each day, hoping this would keep him entertained. Marek and I left for Poland with 18-month-old Alex who was still breastfeeding.

Over in Poland I was enjoying the ideal holiday: tours of the countryside with knowledgeable locals, fascinating lessons in European history and daily feasts I did not have to prepare. Spoilt beyond description, I eventually found a way to feel wretched. Throughout all the long car-trips I could not stem the flow of my concerns for Zac. Was he okay? Did he miss us? Would he feel abandoned? I rang him every day and told him long stories about any superhero he nominated. He was perfectly cheerful for the first week, but by the second week he was starting to miss us and misbehave for our friend. 'When are you going to come home, Mum?' he began asking. I was overwhelmed by the intensity of my longing to be with him. My firstborn needed me and I failed to be there for him.

Marek and I visited Auschwitz, the World War II concentration camp, and took the three-hour tour. At one point I was standing at a window looking upon a room filled with the shoes of the children who had died at Auschwitz. The smallness of the shoes had me, and all the women in the group, weeping. It occurred to me that the

question that most haunts my life—'How could I cope with the death of a child?'—has confronted thousands. My pain, arising from a brief separation I had volunteered for, stood no comparison with what others had suffered. How could I ever have overlooked the gift of endless time with my children?

Marek honourably agreed to my returning home early, leaving him to look after Alex for an additional week in Poland. Leaving Alex with his grandmother, Marek drove me to Austria for my flight. He would book into a hotel in the Czech Republic for the night and it occurred to me that my little family of four would spend that night in four different countries. Over-emotional, I judged myself harshly for failing to keep my small brood together.

Reunited with Zac I found my anxiety was partially healed, but now I had to cope with a week without Alex who I had abruptly weaned from the breast the day I left him in Poland (even though it was about time he gave it up). The day after my return Zac told me, 'How could you go to Poland without me? You know I always wanted to go to Poland and now I'll never be able to go.'

Ever since those separations from my boys I realise that I now accept the unrelenting nature of family life any day, if the alternative is being apart from them for any extended period. On a long day at home alone with both sons, amid the toy-strewn rooms and noisy demands, as well as the laughter and affection, I understand that being with my sons is where I belong and, in spite of any delusions I might entertain of travelling the world as a free spirit, my deepest need is to be with them. At least while they are young.

My separations lasted only a couple of weeks but I often spare a thought for the thousands of women forced to work in foreign countries. The Philippino maids, for example, who flock to Hong Kong or Saudi Arabia to earn money for their families. A South African friend told me about his parents' maid back home who

descended into alcoholism from the pain of being separated from her family. Of course, in every country, thousands of mothers miss their children throughout the long hours they must work to help provide for them. I have had only the smallest taste of the pain these women must suffer, but it helps me to be grateful for the time I can spend with my sons. Even when that time feels less than idyllic.

We can also feel grateful that in our generation, where so many women miss out on motherhood altogether, we had the opportunity to mother. While some consciously choose to forgo having children, most do not. According to research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, as many as 28 per cent of Australian women will never have children and only a quarter of these would choose childlessness. Figures in the United States and England are not dissimilar.

I have watched a number of women around me suffer the grief that comes from not having children. While one of them ended up with triplets, others missed out due to devastating relationship or fertility problems. In Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *Baby Hunger,* a book investigating the trend for increasing numbers of women to miss out, one woman interviewed lamented: 'So after the third miscarriage we had to walk away—to heal our wounds and recoup our various losses.' Yet this woman still has to live with her feelings about children: 'It's as though my flesh yearns to hold and hug a small body. I sit and watch toddlers in playgrounds and listen for their laughter.' Reading their stories, I have cried for the pain these women experience and remember to never take my two blessings for granted.

Consider the state of the world

In Chapter 2, Where am I going?, we looked at the possibility of being more grateful for our precious life. Simply being alive is grounds

for appreciation. But if we are lucky enough to be reading a book then there are still numerous reasons to practise gratitude, not least that we enjoy the privilege of being educated. When we consider the relative comfort and freedom of the lives most of us lead, compared to most of the world's population, we do not even dare to ask, 'Is this all?' We can only appreciate our lives and change the question to, 'How can I help?'

I have been fortunate over the years to spend time living and travelling in developing countries, such as India. The grind of a life of bare survival was visible in so many faces. My middle-class guilt reached a peak: Why do so many people have to live like this? But also, how could I ever have failed to appreciate what I have? How could I ever have taken my 'problems' so seriously? Yet how quickly I forgot these epiphanies when I arrived home.

In the UNICEF report *The State of the World's Children 2005*, we learn that of the 2.2 billion children in the world, 1 billion—almost every second child in the world—live in poverty where they suffer at least one form of severe deprivation. More than 140 million have never attended school. More than 640 million suffer 'severe shelter deprivation'. AIDS has orphaned 15 million children. Earlier UNICEF reports inform us that almost one sixth of the world is illiterate. As middle-class Westerners we raise our children as part of a very small but highly privileged minority.

Setting our sights higher

I have noticed, coming to the end of my thirties, that many people around me these days go to church. When I was in my twenties, I rarely met anyone who did. Is it that once people attain the partner, the mortgage and the children, they find themselves less than perfectly

happy? Does 'having it all' in fact lead to some soul-searching where we ask, *Is this all?* Perhaps at our stage of life, it is time to set our sights higher than achieving materialistic goals. In the words of one Tibetan master, even the insects spend their lives looking after their material well-being—surely as human beings we can set our sights a little higher.

We have all seen the studies listing the ten keys to happiness, or the ten secrets of longevity, where we invariably find religious faith in the list. Nuns, for example, have been found to live longer than their lay sisters. Other studies tell us that people with a faith have better health, visiting doctors less frequently, than those who do not. It seems people with a belief in something larger than themselves are happier and healthier.

For Buddhists there is no God to put our faith in. Buddhism does not provide something to 'believe in' so much as something 'to do'. It is a practice. Buddhists put their faith in a path that leads ultimately to liberation. *Dukkha* can end, according to the Third Noble Truth, and the life of the Buddha, who achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, is the evidence. Two schools exist in Buddhism when it comes to interpreting the Buddha's assertion that *dukkha* can end.

In Zen, the end of suffering is available to us in any moment whenever we are prepared to live right here, right now, with clear-sightedness. In the Theravada and Tibetan traditions, enlightenment has stages and is something we work towards until finally arriving, once and for all, at freedom from desire, freedom from the false sense of a separate self, and the ensuing experience of peace, joy and tranquillity. Depending on the school, enlightenment might be achievable in this lifetime or it could take several lifetimes. Yet, enlightenment is beyond words, and cannot be captured by any explanation in a book.

In the Fourth Noble Truth, the Buddha offered a path out of suffering and stress, the Noble Eightfold Path. Everybody, Buddhist or not, is on a path. The question is, does our path create more *dukkha* in our lives, or is it a path that liberates us from *dukkha*? It might be worth asking ourselves, what exactly are we striving for from day to day? What is our path and is it worth the effort? What is worth striving for? A Buddhist's answer would be: happiness. The Eightfold Path is a path out of *dukkha* and into happiness. Walking that path we aim to return to our true nature, free from our past conditioning and the ego-needs that support our false sense of self.

Before taking a closer look at each component of the path, however, keep in mind that the Buddha never expected unquestioning obedience or blind acceptance of any of his teachings. He certainly did not expect us to cling to, or pin our identity on, his teachings—the last thing we need is another attachment to separate us from others. In his words, 'Try something that I have discovered, and then judge it for yourself. If it is good for you, accept it. Otherwise, don't accept it.'

The Buddha expected us to investigate his teachings using our own lives as the testing ground and with a spirit of inquiry. When the Buddha talks about the components of the path as 'Right Understanding' or 'Right Thought', he does not mean 'right' according to himself, or right according to some preset moral code. It is for each individual to work out, in their own heart and with honesty, what is right and what is not, or what causes harm and what does not.

So next time we find ourselves asking *Is this all?*, we might start to examine the possibilities offered by organised religion where most of the answers are clear and closed for further discussion (especially where the role of women is concerned). In many cases, institutionalised Buddhism is no exception. Or we could, alternatively, decide to examine the Buddha's path, as expressed by the Buddha in the

Eightfold Path, which allows us to keep questioning, with our critical faculties open.

The Eightfold Path

Right Understanding

The way we see dictates the way we act making Right Understanding the foundation stone of the Path. The Buddha said: 'Just as the dawn is the first indication of the rising sun, so is Right Understanding the forerunner of wholesome states.' Our flawed understanding, or view, of the world is the root of our suffering, so the Buddha, who awoke to the true nature of reality, shared his enlightened understanding on how to end *dukkha* in all its forms.

For the remaining forty years of his life after awakening, the Buddha taught that the Three Characteristics of Existence are impermanence, *dukkha* and not-self (the lack of any inherent or separate existence in any object or person). It is our inability, or refusal, to clearly see these characteristics that causes stress. We suffer because we resist change, flee pain and over-identify with our ego or false sense of self.

Right Understanding is a matter of deepening our awareness of the true nature of reality. It is also about making peace with the way things exist. These teachings from the Buddha, all of which this book has touched on in the previous chapters, are worth taking some time to contemplate, for they help us to foster Right Understanding:

- Everything and everyone is changing all the time.
- We cannot impose any lasting order on our lives.
- Nothing we strive for will bring us enduring happiness.

- *Dukkha* is an inevitable part of every experience.
- You are not the separate being you believe yourself to be.
- Who you *think* yourself to be has little to do with who you are.
- No object—including your self and others—exists in the way it *appears* to your mind.

We start with an intellectual understanding of these truths, which might lie as a mere layer on top of all our existing beliefs and attitudes. Gradually, with meditation and spiritual progress, we have deeper insights into these truths, beyond words and thoughts, insights which transform the way we live.

Right Thought

In my first brush with Buddhist teachings, at the age of twenty-four, I was fascinated by the Buddhist approach to dealing with unwholesome thoughts. I already had considerable experience in trying to suppress thoughts that appalled me. I was often left feeling guilty and defeated over my failed attempts to crush thoughts of envy, cynicism and anger. Pushed around by my thoughts, I felt a victim.

Discovering the Eightfold Path for the first time when I read *The Heart of Buddhism*, by Guy Claxton, I learned that Right Thought came from an intention to purify your thoughts, to replace thoughts of greed, hatred and delusion with their more wholesome equivalents. Claxton described the Buddhist way to achieve this:

> …this intention does not mean suppressing or struggling with such thoughts, for to do so is just more of the mind's normal, ineffectual way of operating. It means instead that you are going to face up to these thoughts and desires, not in a spirit of self-

> recrimination, but with a deep, committed inquiry into their origins and consequences.

I would start to experiment with replacing my usual reaction of guilt with an attitude of curiosity towards the *origins and consequences* of my thoughts. This was a path where I could examine my thinking process with compassion rather than judgement. Looking at the origins of my thoughts enabled me to feel more understanding for myself. All my thoughts were conditioned by a range of factors such as my past experiences, the state of my health, entrenched habits in my thinking, or my mood. Thoughts, like all phenomena, according to the Buddha, never occur in a vacuum but are dependent on other conditions.

Paying attention to the consequences of our thoughts, we learn how easy it is to harm ourselves and others when our thoughts spring from greed, hatred or delusion. We also notice that every time we choose an unwholesome thought, we increase the likelihood we will choose it again in the future. We condition ourselves with each new thought, so we may as well take care of our karma by cultivating skilful ones.

The next challenge was to apply the lesson—of inquiring into the origins and consequences of my thoughts—more often, rather than falling back into habitual ways of thinking. In moments of doubt I have asked how necessary it was to deal with these impure thoughts. Maybe the effort of dealing with them outweighed the cost of living with them. But the Buddha was unequivocal on the importance of our thoughts:

> We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world.

> Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own mind, unguarded. But once mastered, no one can help you as much.
> As the shadow follows the body,
> As we think so we become.

The oft-quoted summary of Buddhist teachings—'Learn to do good. Cease to do harm. Purify the mind'—leaves little doubt concerning the importance of wholesome thinking, which is free from greed, hatred and delusion.

Right Speech

The Buddha held that the process of awakening could not progress independently of skilful behaviour in the world. For this reason, he included Right Speech, Action and Livelihood as the ethical components of the Path. Given that so many Westerners are initially attracted to the meditation offered in the Buddhist Path, we are prone to overlook the Buddha's continual emphasis on the importance of ethics. Interestingly, not only does the Buddha address Speech separately to Action (even though speech is an action) but he makes a priority of Right Speech by mentioning it first of the three ethical components of the Path.

To use the Buddha's words:

> And what is Right Speech? Abstaining from lying, abstaining from divisive speech, abstaining from abusive speech, abstaining from idle chatter: This, monks, is called Right Speech.

His words are often translated into their more positive equivalents: our speech needs to be *truthful, kind, gentle* and *helpful*. In practising Right Speech we might ask ourselves:

- **Can I remember compassion when others are back-biting?** I have long lost count of the number of workplaces and social groups I have belonged to where group members found a bond through a common enemy. Criticising the boss, a teacher, the school principal or the social misfit can feel like effective stress-release, but a more sympathetic viewpoint is readily available to any mind. We need only imagine our children in the position of the current enemy under attack and our compassion will flow naturally.
- **Do I express appreciation of others?** It is rarely openly admitted but we all have a strong need to feel liked and respected and can think of few punishments worse than being disliked and not respected. With this in mind, we all have the power to relieve some human suffering through the simple act of expressing appreciation and respect for others.
- **Am I ever silent and attentive?** The Buddha asked us to consider the interests of those we speak to, by restricting our speech to what the listener is interested in hearing. This suggests that we might not need to speak all the time and raises questions like, how often do I listen? Do I listen deeply in a spirit of generosity? It might be worth pondering the advice that women from high society once gave to young debutantes: 'People don't want to be charmed. They want to be charming.' Listening can take humility but it is often the most generous of gifts.
- **Am I aware that my body language and intonation say more than my words?** The breakdown we usually hear is that body language conveys 55 per cent of a message, intonation 38 per cent and words a mere 7 per cent. It is worth being mindful of how all three might affect the people we communicate with. Smiles, eye contact, open posture and friendly intonation speak louder than our words and guide the listener as to how genuine our words are.

- **Do I raise my voice at family members mindfully?** If my household is anything to go by, many children do need to be shouted at occasionally when we have exhausted other options—if only to get them out the door and into the car on time. We can do this mindfully if we resist emotional entanglement in our yelling, if we can remain calm on the inside. Again we learn from the Zen saying, 'Beneath the one who is busy is one who is not busy'—as mothers we can also substitute the word 'yelling' for 'busy'. We do need to protect ourselves from the negative karma of habitual anger, and leave room for more creative solutions. I reduced my morning yelling by providing Zac with a checklist of tasks to tick. Mornings have been more peaceful since, for instead of snarling, 'I've asked you three times…', I now calmly repeat, 'Check your list, darling.'

Right Action

I once asked a mother who helped found a local playgroup, and sat on a committee at her son's pre-school, what motivated her to be so active. She was not, to my knowledge, a practising Buddhist so her answer came as a surprise: 'I have always believed in karma. When you help others, good things come back to you.' Although a common interpretation of the word, this is not the Buddhist definition of karma if you are thinking of outward benefits like expanding your social network and being involved in your child's life. From a Buddhist point of view, if you also had sound motives of wishing to benefit others, you would enjoy the good karma that comes from compassionate action. This is because each time we think in a skilful way, we increase the chances of thinking this way again. It is about conditioning ourselves.

Not all parents have time to help their schools and childcare centres, and many of us would love to give more. Other mothers are understandably tired of the constant demands such places make on their time and the way that 'small' jobs often turn out to be large commitments. From a Buddhist perspective, the important point is that when we give our time, we do so with awareness of our motives. When we help at school or childcare, for example, are we hoping that others will benefit, or that we are being seen to help? Are our efforts about avoiding feelings of guilt, or about heartfelt concern for each of the children?

When we find our motives to be self-serving, we can shape them into a more skilful form by generating compassion for those we help. Helping in Zac's classroom, I am aware of my desire to give disproportionate attention to Zac over his classmates, but when I soften my heart and cultivate concern for each of the children in his class—as well as for the teacher who has to spend all week with them—I avail myself of positive karma from the experience.

Practising Right Action is about increasing our honesty with ourselves about our actions, at the personal, social, political and global level. Right actions protect and help others, always avoiding harm. We might need to examine how we treat the people we love as well as people we are not close to—the call-centre workers, the supermarket cashiers and the drivers we share the roads with. A Buddhist aims to develop what Sharon Salzberg called one of her books: *A Heart as Wide as the World*.

By way of guidelines for Right Action, the Buddha taught the Five Precepts—where we refrain from killing, taking what is not given, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying and consuming intoxicants that cloud the mind. On hearing the precepts, those new to Buddhist teachings have many questions: Can I kill cockroaches? Does that mean I can't drink? How do you define sexual misconduct? What

about white lies? Some are disappointed that after looking so alternative, Buddhism has restrictive rules after all. It seems to be about restraint and, worse, renunciation. Why would we want to do this to ourselves?

Yet the precepts do not serve as commandments to obey without questioning. We can see the precepts more as experiments. The Buddha advised us to make our own decisions about how to behave by asking ourselves one question: Will this harm? In other words, would my decision—to have another drink, to 'borrow' this pen, to flirt with that irresistible guy—lead away from *dukkha* or straight into it? We are to reach our own conclusions using awareness and brutal honesty. Restraint and renunciation have a part in any genuine practice, but since selfishness causes separation, isolation and suffering, practising morality is a means to be kind to ourselves.

After contemplating the Five Precepts over the years, I eventually decided to drink less alcohol. Trying to meditate with my Buddhist group one evening after having a wine or two, I observed a complete loss of mental sharpness, an inability to stay focused and a strong desire to sleep. On social occasions, I had noticed that alcohol affected my ability to practise Right Speech by making me a tad tactless. Still, I felt there were many social gatherings where complete abstention seemed unnecessary, especially in the case of a celebration. I eventually opted for a middle ground of one drink. My decision led to a spike in my popularity, possibly because I became more tactful, but probably because I became known as a designated driver.

Right Livelihood

A Right Livelihood—livelihood being the way we earn a living—is one where our dealings with others are honest, kind and respectful. If any aspect of our work does not sit comfortably with our values,

we confront the issue rather than ignoring it. As well as wisely resolving any moral dilemmas arising from the way we earn a living, we use our work to increase our sense of connection and compassion for other living beings.

Achieving a Right Livelihood requires us to engage in an honest investigation of our integrity in the workplace. What are our motives in going to work? Do we work merely to earn and consume, or do we also have a sense of contributing to the well-being of others, be they co-workers, customers or the community? What is our attitude at work? Are we involved in any form of exploitation, corruption, 'us-and-them' thinking or cynicism? Do we use our influence to create division, intolerance or other forms of harm?

I remember driving past a cigarette factory and remarking to my husband, 'I don't know how the staff there can live with themselves when you consider all the harm they do.' Unimpressed with my comment, Marek, who loves a debate, retorted, 'You're privileged enough that you never have to *consider* working there. You have a choice and no understanding of the simple man who has to pay his mortgage and support his family by whatever means he can.' Admittedly, my comment had not sprung from a place of inner compassion. Our 'debate' lasted a while but we eventually agreed that each individual should make the most ethical decision on how to earn their livelihood that their personal circumstances allow.

Right Effort

It takes effort to be mindful, to cultivate the wholesome and rid our inner lives of greed, hatred and delusion. Yet it is easy for Westerners to misunderstand what skilful effort means in a Buddhist context. In an article for the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, Zen teacher Barry Magid addressed our confusion about Right Effort:

> All too often what we call meditation or spirituality is simply incorporated into our obsession with self-criticism and self-improvement. I've encountered many students who have attempted to use meditation to perform a spiritual lobotomy on themselves—trying to excise, once and for all, their anger, their fear, their sexuality. We have to sit with our resistance to feeling whole, to feeling all those painful and messy parts of ourselves… The paradox of our practice is that the most effective way of transformation is to leave ourselves alone.

Our tendency to become attached to the ideal of a future, improved self, free of the less likeable parts of our character, can turn practice into an inner battle.

Our past conditioning gives us the habit of working towards final results. Slaves to our egos, many of us are achievement-oriented. We cannot help but approach Buddhism assuming toil and strain will make us a better person some time in the future. Our assumption ignores the fact that life happens now. We can shift our efforts to *noticing* when we become attached to the future results of our practice and then surrender to the moment, minimising self-judgements and expectations. 'Now' is what needs our attention, not some future ideal of ourselves.

As Kim learnt from her Zen teacher:

> Whenever I think that meditation is going to make me peaceful, or calm, or a good Zen student, I have lost the point. The idea is to just be, without trying to be anything.
>
> The theme of the talk last night was not to 'try' during meditation, but to be quiet and still. It was a really peaceful sitting for me, mostly because I am in the process of letting go of 'trying' so hard. It doesn't matter if your sitting is anxious,

> busy, depressed, joyful, angry, loving, sleepy, peaceful, happy, sad, preoccupied, impatient, bored…whatever. No need to try to make moments other than what they are.

The emphasis of some Zen teachers on 'not trying' may at first make the Buddhist path look rather relaxing and laid-back, yet there is also a saying in Zen that we should 'practise like our hair is on fire'—suggesting great urgency. This seems like a contradiction. As does the need for Buddhists to actively cultivate virtues yet never become attached to 'becoming a better person'. The Buddha was not offering a course in self-improvement, yet Buddhists seem to want to perfect their characters (hence the Six Perfections: generosity, ethics, patience, energy, concentration and wisdom). When I discussed this apparent contradiction with Buddhist teacher Victor van der Heyde, he mentioned that Easterners generally, and a small minority of Westerners, are able to cultivate Buddhist virtues without being obsessed with becoming a better person, without giving themselves a hard time. It seems that self-acceptance is an important ingredient in our practice.

The question of what constitutes Right Effort can become confusing such that at times we need to turn inward and ask our 'inner yogini' what kind of effort our current stage requires. It might require no effort or enormous effort depending on the moment we find ourselves in. As in other aspects of our lives, effort can sometimes be an obstacle and other times an essential ingredient. Generally, it can be helpful for new meditators to let go of effort, to stop straining and trying to be a better person, in order to open to the moment. We may on the other hand need to make enormous effort, in the ethical areas of the Path, in order to avoid causing harm.

Our efforts usually run parallel to numerous self-judgements about our progress, yet practising Buddhist teachings is not about how we

might change or what we might attain, but how we can become who we already are more fully. Kim continues:

> Letting go of the judgement that takes up so much mental space is also freeing. You don't realise how much space until some of it starts to fall away. So slowly, the trying falls away, the judgement falls away, and space opens in my mind. A beautiful, open, free space…At least for a few moments.

Right Effort is *gentle, patient and persistent*, and includes letting go of both our guilt over our imperfection as well as our impatience with our monkey minds.

Right Mindfulness

As mothers, we realise the potential to live as slaves to our *To Do* lists where the purpose of our days seems to be 'to get stuff done'. We race through many of our activities, leaning into the future, denying ourselves the benefits of opening to the present moment. Right Mindfulness is an alternative to this state of mind and is about being there for your life as it happens. Honouring each moment with our attention, mindfulness is a way to show appreciation for all we encounter. Put simply, it is about showing up for your life. The pleasant parts as much as the unpleasant.

Practising mindfulness, we may choose to tune into any of our senses: notice our surroundings, listen to the sounds, feel the sensations arising in the body, or taste more than the first bite of our meal. Mindfulness of the moment might mean observing our stream of thoughts: being aware of what we are thinking as we are thinking it. We exercise what Buddhists call *bare attention*, minimising our usual ratings, interpretations and judgements—but if these do arise, we note

them and let them go. The challenge is not in understanding what mindfulness is, but in how to hold onto mindfulness without our thoughts of the past and future seducing us away. The opposite of mindfulness is forgetfulness. We forget the present.

In Chapter 1 we discussed mindfulness but it is worth reiterating that although we practise mindfulness in meditation, it is a tool available to us in every moment of our lives. Kim tries to make her daily walk mindful:

> I've been walking regularly since I was a kid, back in the days when a 12-year-old could safely walk around by herself. During these walks I do various mindfulness practices.
>
> I'll do a 'Zazen walk' where I have periods of just being my breath. Sometimes I'll try to meditate on inter-being by picturing myself in the sky, the trees, the rocks, all around, to understand that I am not bound by my skin or my lifespan. I practise being in the present moment by repeating, 'I am walking, and I know that I am walking.' I try to 'be' the walk: I feel my feet touching the ground, the muscles in my legs working, my heart rate increasing. I keep a good posture, my arms swinging naturally at my side. I feel the energy generated by the upright posture.
>
> I look at everything. Especially trees and birds. I look very closely. I also feel the heat, the breeze, the scents, rain. And when I'm breathing in the air, I become aware that I am breathing in the universe, and that I do not exist as a separate entity.
>
> I have begun to really enjoy listening. I used to always walk with music, or deep in thought. Now I walk with my breathing, cultivating stillness of mind, and I can really *hear* things. I get so much joy from the sound of the wind through the leaves, birds, the sound of rumbling traffic, my footsteps, the dog panting.

I even enjoy driving in silence. As a music junkie, I never thought it would come to this.

Right Concentration

Right Concentration is the work of cultivating a mind that can be what Buddhists call *one-pointed*. Concentration being so difficult, we practise it in meditation, usually by focusing on the breath. The reason the Buddha includes concentration in the Path is that only a clear, sharp mind, free from desires, dullness and distractions, has any hope of deeper realisations into the nature of reality.

If we can develop the discipline of concentration, we are less likely to ignore the arising of unpleasant emotions which need our attention. We find ourselves equipped to face our anger, our lust, our cynicism, gaining direct insight into their origins and consequences. With practice, we bring heightened levels of concentration to our daily situations.

While some meditators have a natural propensity for concentration, others struggle and become frustrated with themselves. Subhana agrees that it can be extremely difficult to hold onto concentration during meditation sittings in the midst of our busy lives. It is far easier in the ongoing quiet of retreats when we remove ourselves from our daily lives for extended periods. Her advice for most town and city-dwellers, who lack the freedom to attend retreats, is to include in our sittings mindfulness meditation—where we practise awareness of body sensations, feelings, thoughts and mind states—rather than restricting ourselves to only concentration on a single object such as the breath. Judiciously using both concentration and mindfulness can often be the most practical approach. Concentration on the breath is a useful starting point as well as a place to return to when we grow distracted.

What we can do

- Consider the value of sitting quietly in your own room.
- Remember that whatever it is you most want will not deliver you lasting happiness.
- If you are tired of the company of your children, remember the alternative of extended separation, which so many mothers through history have endured.
- Practise gratitude for what is a life of privilege when compared to the lives of most of the world's inhabitants.
- Remember to attend to more than only material needs.

As we walk the Eightfold Path, we can:

- Take every opportunity to remind yourself of the Characteristics of Existence—impermanence, *dukkha* and not-self (Right Understanding).
- Rather than flee or deny unwholesome thoughts, commence an investigation into their origins and consequences (Right Thought).
- Never underestimate the importance of your thoughts, for they all have karma (Right Thought).
- Practise speech that is truthful, kind, gentle and helpful (Right Speech).
- Be aware of the motives behind your actions and cultivate generosity and kindness (Right Action).
- Question whether your livelihood allows you to develop honesty, kindness and respect in your dealings with others (Right Livelihood).
- In applying Buddhist teachings to your life, consider whether your effort is gentle or harsh towards yourself. Don't 'improve' yourself but become who you are more fully (Right Effort).

- Keep introducing mindfulness into more of your daily activities (Right Mindfulness).
- Consider making time to practise one-pointed concentration for this improves your ability to stay present when unpleasant emotions arise (Right Concentration).

CHAPTER 6

what does this moment require?

I HAVE NOTICED A tendency in myself, and others, to dwell on whatever is irritating. I have also observed how effective this tendency is in creating a dark mood. In times of mindlessness, I fixate on one detail: the barking dog next door, the pimple on my chin, the negative feedback I received, my more testing relationships. Why do we do this when it so clearly sabotages our happiness? Is there some kind of perverse enjoyment in finding fault? It certainly seems addictive.

When facing that which I cannot change, I have found a measure of redemption through substituting the question *What bothers me?* with *What is required of me?* Whether I am dealing with difficult personalities, coping with a disappointment or approaching my tenth hour in a row with demanding children, I always have a choice in how I respond and Buddhist teachings offer no shortage of suggestions.

JOY

One mother I know has a little sign stuck to her bedroom mirror, 'Dare to be joyful'. She finds the phrase amusing but also useful. It suggests that joy takes not only courage but a surrender of our usual state of mind. Her little sign also reminds her that the state she most wants for herself is available to her in any moment—it is just a matter of remembering. The reminder, she tells me, provides a circuit-breaker to habitual mind states such as worrying, guilt and general disconnection.

It intrigues me that even as we engage in our favourite activities, whether we are travelling, pursuing our hobbies or spending time with close friends, we manage to find ways to remove the joy. We might de-joy an experience by insisting that we perform perfectly. Or we compare ourselves to others. We feel guilty that maybe we should

be doing an activity other than the one we are doing. We might concentrate on finishing the novel rather than enjoying the journey. We even spoil the time by dreading that it will end.

In *Nothing Special: Living Zen*, Zen teacher and mother Charlotte Joko Beck writes: 'Joy isn't something we have to find. Joy is who we are if we're not preoccupied with something else.' Joy is in fact our natural state, not something we need to go seeking. So what has gone wrong? Why do we not feel joyful? Joko Beck continues: 'Joy is exactly what's happening, minus our opinion of it.' Our experience of life, she explains, depends on what our senses perceive. We ruin our enjoyment of our perceptions by engaging in self-centred evaluation: 'Is this next episode in my life going to bring me something I like, or not? Is it going to hurt, or isn't it? Is it pleasant or unpleasant? Does it make me important or unimportant? Does it give me something material?'

I cannot quite embrace her claim that joy is 'exactly what's happening minus our opinion of it' for there will never be any joy in suffering chronic pain, driving an injured child to the emergency ward, or crashing your car. At least not for the unenlightened. Still, when it comes to our daily lives, there is so much more potential for joy if we could only stop buying into our opinions as though they are great truths.

We are inclined to bring numerous evaluative, judgemental thoughts to whatever we perceive and so see nothing clearly. This way of operating becomes automatic. We develop a taste, an addiction even, for the drama inherent in deeming everything good, bad or indifferent. The idea of seeing clearly can at first seem rather dull compared with our usual emotion-charged perceptions. It feels satisfying at some level to judge, to loathe, to indulge in righteous anger, to roll our eyes in derision. But joy comes through pure perception, free from our mental projections.

We will never be able to set up our lives to achieve lasting perfection, for as the Buddha taught, everything that arises ceases. We all age, or at least die. We need to be capable of feeling joy no matter what is going on, an unconditional joy, but this takes practice, especially when we have not even considered opening ourselves to joy for many years. Just as in Chapter 2 we spoke about practising unconditional gratitude for the gift of our life, so we can challenge ourselves to practise joy, no matter what we face.

This may at first sound like a practice of denial. My child is whining for no apparent reason: How can I feel joyful? In fact you feel angry but this is a chance to be with the anger and learn how it cuts you off from your natural state of joy. This is an opportunity to watch the thoughts which sow the seeds of anger, to understand our emotional reactions and where they lead. It might take many years of practice, but when we finally see clearly the way our reactions lead to suffering, we drop them and increase our capacity to feel joy

I found two entries in Kim's journal about how she practises welcoming even the difficult. In the first, she writes:

> My day was packed with errands. I spent hours driving, waiting in waiting rooms, standing in queues, picking up and dropping off. Such days remind me that if I can't learn to be at home in the present moment, whatever form it takes, I will not truly be able to be at home in the pleasurable moments either, for I would only cling to them and create tension.
>
> I am noticing that I can be doing something that I love, something that I have anticipated, and still I have that craving to…I don't even know what! It's a mild, nebulous dissatisfaction. It is almost under the radar, and it doesn't last long or control the situation, but its presence always makes itself known.

> So I try to welcome days like yesterday, times that help me to practise being present to the moment as it is. I welcome times when I am doing things that are not exactly to my liking as a chance to open to what is.

A few weeks later Kim was trying to meditate at her weekly Zen group meeting. Afterwards she wrote:

> It was so unbelievably hot. Even with fans and open windows. The incense only added to the heat. The teacher said: 'Don't try to be peaceful, or cool, don't try to clear your mind, don't *try*! Just sit. Just surrender to the present moment—*this hot, sticky now*.'
>
> So that's what I did. It's amazing how when you let go of the battle to make the moment other than it is, you find a kind of freedom. My mind was busy, my body was hot, but that was all okay.

The everyday offers myriad opportunities for joy, but some Buddhists are privy to unsurpassable, life-changing experiences of joy, also known as 'enlightenment experiences'. A small minority of meditators develop such a gift for concentration, are so skilled at stilling their minds, that they can access states of bliss, joy and delight within a short time after sitting down. This is more likely to happen to those with experience in meditating, especially those on retreats or in monasteries. Such experiences are well-documented in *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* by Jack Kornfield, renowned co-founder of two major Insight Meditation centres in the United States. In his book numerous interviewees describe extraordinary experiences in meditation.

Subhana has been a meditator for whom blissful states have always come relatively easily but she warns, like many others, of the risk of becoming stuck at this seductive stage and not pushing to a higher

level. The Buddha taught that there are nine levels of increasing meditative absorption called *jhanas*. The initial jhanas provide euphoric experiences but as one advances through each level, the mind becomes increasingly capable of penetrating into the true nature of reality.

I am always fascinated to hear about Subhana's experiences in meditation, such as the times she challenged herself not to move—at all—for several hours.

> When I was in India around the age of twenty, I was meditating with the teacher Goenka, who is well-known these days for running those rigorous ten-day silent meditation retreats all over the world. He encouraged us to try meditating without moving for a full hour and he challenged a couple of us to try two hours. It was voluntary, of course, but I had heard that one of the Buddha's followers meditated without moving for three hours and became enlightened. Being only twenty, I naively assumed that this might be possible for me so I vowed to sit for three hours without moving. I was a determined and intense yogi in those days.
>
> On other retreats I extended such sittings to four hours and then five hours without moving. I was curious about the limits of my pain threshold and I wanted to observe my mind's relationship with pain. However, when I was in deep concentration, I experienced no pain. The moment I lost my concentration though, when it was interrupted by a thought for example, I was struck with excruciating pain. In those days I would sit for literally hours in bliss states without being bothered by physical pain. The pain only hit me when I came out of the meditation.
>
> This intense practice did not bring about the realisation that I had hoped for but it was instructive in a couple of ways. When the mind is very focused and capable of entering single-pointed concentration states, it becomes blissful and can

override pain and bodily signals. The refined inner experiences of bliss also helped me relinquish some of my attachments to the lustful pleasures of the world as my primary source of happiness.

Compassion

One of Marek's closest friends lives in the country with his young family and we catch up with them every few months. Both our families have young children and theirs have always been sound sleepers, co-operative eaters and generally model children. During overnight stays on their property, I have often felt embarrassed at how wayward Alex could be at the dinner table, how few vegetables he ate and how late both my sons went to bed. Our hosts have always been cheerful and accommodating about our wilder ways but when their children ask, 'May I leave the table?', I am sure my skin turns conspicuously greenish.

Recently our country friends visited us and reported that their formerly sweet-natured four-year-old son had turned into a monster. He had suddenly become disobedient, stubborn and hot-tempered. They had no idea how to handle him for nothing seemed to work. I felt so happy to hear this that I could hardly keep the grin from my face. For the next week I smiled every time I thought of their new difficulties.

They call it *schadenfreude*, when one takes delight in the misfortunes of an 'enemy'. I even caught myself daydreaming about all the tough spots they might find themselves in, before reminding myself that I could hardly be a compassionate Buddhist when the struggles of my friends could be such a source of entertainment. I was clearly caught up in my own ego-needs: the need for my children to compare well

with others, the need to feel like a good mother, my fear that others might think poorly of my parenting skills and that they might even be right. After all, what worse insult is there than friends perceiving you as an inadequate mother? The transformation of their son, presumably brought on by a surge in testosterone, was my vindication.

The Buddha said, 'Loving kindness is sixteen times more efficacious in liberating the heart than all other religious accomplishments taken together,' but as my example shows, our egos can so easily produce obstacles to loving even our friends. It is little wonder the Buddha emphasised the need to conquer our egos for they are the greatest hindrances to awakening. My *schadenfreude* pointed to my inability to imagine life from my friends' point of view. If I could only see the *dukkha* in their lives, I might even feel worried about their new parenting situation. All families have their share of struggles, and if we give some thought to these, we can only find compassion for each other.

The aim of Buddhist practice is for compassion to arise spontaneously and equally for all living beings. Kim, for example, now cultivates a newfound compassion for members of the public:

> Next time I see that frazzled mother at the supermarket yelling at her kids, or the grumpy stressed-out cashier, or the overworked waitress, maybe I can find it in myself to say, 'Things must be really hard for you right now.' Because they are all me. I've been there. Yesterday, to be precise.
>
> My husband, who in so many ways is a more evolved human being than me, has often turned a situation around by doing this. Whereas I sometimes get annoyed or defensive if someone is nasty or surly, he has often made eye contact and said something pleasant. The response from the other person who feels understood

> and acknowledged has been surprising. Something melts. They look at him and smile. Remembering what it feels like in that negative space keeps you from feeling separate from another person, and that connection heals.

A few months later, Kim had been in her car listening to a CD of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. She used his advice on compassion to help her cope with her husband's health crisis:

> Thich Nhat Hanh talked about how we need to understand the suffering of others, not just intellectually, but by *being* them. This resonated with me because my husband is really suffering right now, preparing for his sixth major abdominal surgery in a few weeks. Although I am aware of his pain, and sympathetic, I can take it up a level by mindfully trying to *be* him—remembering in fact that I am him. Not separate. I can give the gift of my attention to his suffering. I contemplate what is it like for him. How does he feel? What is going through his mind?

Many women worry that the Buddhist emphasis on compassion will undo all the gains of feminism and return women to the subservient, duty-bound roles of old. Could compassion open us to exploitation and burn-out? Is compassion a return to always putting others first? Will I lose touch with my own needs and desires if I am sucked into constantly responding to the needs of others?

The difference between Buddhist compassion and traditional female service is in the motivation. With compassion, the impulse to help others comes from within, not from perceived expectations of others and not from our past conditioning to always be 'nice'. Compassionate action feels spontaneous, wholehearted and natural. If thanked for an

act of compassion, we might find ourselves saying, 'How could I have done any differently? How could I *not* help?'

Recently a close friend needed me to dedicate the best part of a day to driving her to a doctor. With a sense of how much she was suffering and with compassion for someone I love, I believed this was the least I could do and felt eager to do more. The challenge I face is to keep expanding my circle of compassion to include more than only close friends and family. Buddhists make this happen by practising loving kindness meditation as described in Chapter 3.

How do we bring ourselves to feel the kind of compassion that sees us genuinely wanting to help others? Compassion arises from a sense of our interconnectedness and solidarity with all beings. We all need each other. We serve from a space of gratitude towards other beings for we cannot live without them. With practice we come to understand that helping another is helping yourself just as harming another is harming yourself, for we are all one, springing from what Tibetan Buddhists refer to as the Great Ground of Being.

Compassion also arises from an understanding of *dukkha*, first in our own lives and then in the lives of others. We are all in the same boat: we all grapple with *dukkha*. Buddhists often speak of 'near enemies' or inferior traits that are easy to confuse with the ones we seek to cultivate. The near enemy of compassion is pity. While compassion is about opening ourselves to the suffering of others, pity tends to reinforce our false sense of separation from others and their suffering. With pity we feel a vast, and often convenient, distance from others. With compassion we see the suffering of another as an expression of the very pain we experience ourselves.

Compassion arises from an understanding of *dukkha* but the opposite is also true—compassion can arise from an understanding of joy. When we experience a spiritual opening, when we see that our cup overfloweth, or when we just feel happy and open to the world,

we want others to share in our delight. Happiness leads naturally to generosity—we like to share our pleasant emotions. We want others to have what we have found.

So compassion does not deplete us but, rather, enriches us. It arises from a space of inner strength and wisdom. We take the Buddha's advice and always start with compassion for ourselves. We nurture ourselves to give us the strength to attend to the needs of others.

Humour

The Buddhist scriptures reveal that the Buddha had a taste for wit, irony and gentle humour—especially in the context of debates with those who challenged his teachings. Despite this, I have at times wondered whether the Buddhist path might turn me into someone serious and introspective, someone too fascinated by myself. Having listened to talks by dozens of different Buddhist teachers over the years, however, I have been impressed by their humour. None of them seem to care about the old social rule of not laughing at your own jokes.

Take well-known Tibetan lama Sogyal Rinpoche, who advised the audience at a public talk I attended: 'If you suffer from low self-esteem, then think about your Buddha Nature. If you find that you become bloated and full of yourself, then think about your karma.'

If Buddhist teachers and other long-term Buddhists I have met are any guide, then it seems that a sharpened sense of humour is an inevitable by-product of practice. Clearly, we are more open to the humour of the moment if we are awake rather than lost in our thoughts and attachments. If we approach each moment with openness and curiosity, we are more likely to see the subtle ironies than if we see our lives through the fog of old biases and baggage. After months of committed practice, Kim said:

> I am undergoing the process of emptying myself of ridiculous expectations, self-imposed responsibilities and deadlines, worries about what people think, my own big ego…and various other silly things…I am finding that it is leaving room in my life for more spontaneity and fun.

Family life, in my experience, offers a multitude of moments in which we can either laugh or cry. So we may as well laugh. After all, we find ourselves only too ready to laugh in the re-telling when we are with friends. In the relative calm of adult company, we realise the absurdity of most domestic flare-ups and finally see the humour in them. Why not avail ourselves of this humorous perspective when it could help us most, in the times when it could prevent us from becoming too caught up in anger or despair?

When I mother alongside my childhood friend Vivienne, who has children the same age as mine, everything that goes wrong provokes our laughter—and there is no shortage of material. Together, we are keenly attuned to the ridiculous and it is a perspective that I can take home to use during the hours when I am the sole adult. The Buddha did advise us to choose *wise* friends. I personally choose to interpret 'wise' as including an ability to see the absurd.

Of course, more often than not we have to opt for inner laughter, in cases when we need to discourage a particular behaviour. Alex has recently learnt to scowl and give me 'the finger' whenever our wills clash. I usually have to leave the room to conceal my laughter at his brazen insolence. Inter-sibling fighting can be a rich source of comedy if we can suspend our automatic aversion to it. What self-respecting scriptwriter would dare to go anywhere near the passion of reality:

> 'I hate you, Zac, and I'm never going to change my mind,' spits Alex, red-faced, eyes bulging.

'See if I care, loser,' replies Zac, unmoved.

'Try to speak nicely to each other, boys,' interjects their well-meaning mother.

Only minutes later, the boys congratulate each other over their respective Lego constructions. The heated emotions that fly over the most trifling of issues are more dramatic than any TV soap. It is often no great stretch to see the humour.

Of course we still need to respond to a situation before it escalates, and do whatever the moment requires, but staying open to the absurdity, even if we have to hide our reaction from our children, can help us retain our equanimity—or sanity, as the case may be. Some mothers assure me they would never be capable of laughing at the bickering. But this is perfectly possible. I remember my father (whose sense of humour is arguably somewhat over-developed) grinning with amusement through every argument his three daughters ever had. His attitude seemed to be 'sit back and enjoy the show'.

Humour, silliness and playfulness are all states we can learn more about from our children. They come with an in-built appreciation for this part of life—for jokes, riddles, funny faces, mimicry and pranks. They re-awaken these qualities in their parents and prevent life from becoming too grim-faced. How refreshing it can be to lose our very important self in horseplay with the children.

Back in the more difficult early days of motherhood, frazzled from a long day with a two-year-old and worried about my capacity to 'hang in there', I opened *Naked Motherhood*, a book which debunks any myths about motherhood being domestic bliss. I read under the heading 'Help for Hanging in There' where, among other tips, author Wendy LeBlanc advised mothers to nurture their sense of humour:

> Too many of us get bogged down in exhaustion, low self-esteem and feelings of having been abandoned. Somewhere in the mire we lose our sense of humour—which is unfortunate since it is the one thing guaranteed to help you survive when all else fails. The real danger is that once your sense of humour is buried beneath the rubble of motherhood you may forget that you ever had it. Sometimes it takes years to dig through the debris of self to stumble upon it once more.

One lesson I aspire to passing on to my children is an ability to laugh at themselves, that prized quality of Not Taking Yourself Too Seriously. An ability to see the funny side is useful for many areas of life, not least the school playground. The ability to shrug off a joke made at your expense, as opposed to going on a rampage, helps prevent a child from being the target of bullies. I heard this at a Bully-Busting workshop where parents were also advised to joke with their children to make them more familiar with how humour works and where the line is between well-meant humour and cruelty.

Most of all, I want my children to look back on their childhood as a time full of fun and laughter. I want them to remember me as someone who, while firm and consistent, was usually smiling, whipping up good times and a cheerful atmosphere. To realise this future scenario I have, at any point in time, only the present to work with.

Solitude

The children are in bed. The kitchen is clean. You have one, maybe two, hours for yourself. What will you do? Some of us (most likely our husbands) are in the habit of spending any spare time watching television. Occasionally time to ourselves feels so foreign we have no

idea how to spend it. But most often we feel overwhelmed by how much we want to squeeze into that window of potential. We might want to re-acquaint ourselves with our partner, read a book, write in a diary, meditate or be creative.

The Buddha encourages us to take delight in solitude. Whether we are writing, reading or meditating, it is in solitude that the important questions can arise—What really matters? How can I solve this problem? What is another perspective? Solitude allows time for reflection. So often we take our questions to others. We read books, seek opinions or automatically conform to the culture around us. How often do we sit alone and ask, what feels right to me? Do we ever find a place of stillness within and listen to our own inner wisdom? Under the layers of delusion, we all have Buddha Nature—a higher self that tends to know what our lower self is up to. It is worth making some time to connect with this inner knowing.

To ensure times of solitude occur, Subhana makes time to 'self-retreat'. Usually Buddhists go on a retreat led by a teacher, but some benefit from running their own retreat, alone. Subhana claims that we do not necessarily have to leave home to self-retreat. Sometimes she examines her busy schedule for an empty day and blocks it off on her calendar as 'sacred time'. When the day arrives, she does not answer the phone or the door, nor does she attend to chores. It is a day for meditation, be it walking or sitting, and for only slow, mindful activity. It is a day to turn her focus inwards.

The Buddha emphasised that our own lives are our best teachers, but we miss the opportunity to learn and grow if there is no time for solitude and reflection. The more we can make this time, the less we depend on the views of others and the better the decisions we make. Through regular time alone, we come to trust our judgement as we start to see more clearly what is going on in our own lives.

The occasional wrong turn is further occasion for contemplation and growth.

Doubtless, some of us will be giving ourselves a large tick at this point. Yes, I have no problem whatsoever with delighting in solitude, we assert, remembering the times we locked ourselves in the bathroom, hid up on the roof or feigned death in order to find some. Alas, an attachment to solitude, as with any attachment, leads to *dukkha*. The Buddhist path is also called the Middle Way, or the path that runs between extremes. We delight in solitude—without clinging to it.

Patience

Patience is one of the most important qualities that Buddhists seek to cultivate, not least because it is the opposite of anger and irritation, the greatest threats to our spiritual practice. Using anger to obtain what we want may, at first glance, appear to solve our problems. Smacking children makes them obey you, but only, the experts add, when you are in the vicinity. Many claim it only teaches children to be more devious. In the same way, yelling at our partner to control their behaviour may achieve our immediate objectives, but often at the price of the goodwill in the relationship, the affection and respect.

While part of patience is refusing to surrender ourselves to anger, another part is accepting imperfection. In accepting the inevitable unsatisfactoriness in every aspect of our lives, we realise that our very urge to flee, or fight, is the source of our suffering. For the umpteenth afternoon in a row, Alex has burst into loud crying because he cannot have what he wants. As always, everyone is at their lowest ebb at this time of day. Especially me. To teach him that his crying does not work, I have to ignore him and put up with the noise. I go outside and close the door, but I still hear it. I feel myself sink into despair

with my aversion for this situation. I tell myself through gritted teeth, 'I can't stand this. This is utterly unbearable. Why me?' Bringing my attention inwards, I notice my breath is stilted, my posture downcast, my shoulders tense.

All of a sudden that Buddhist truth twigs: it is not his crying that hurts me but my aversion to it. My insistence that it stop, my belief that it is unbearable and that nobody should have to put up with this—these reactions are the fuel for my desperation. I spend some moments allowing these truths to sink in and try to return to a present moment free of judgements and dramatic interpretations. Alex will eventually be all cried out. Impermanence, the fact that all things change, can be a mother's best friend.

At this point, I am in danger of adding guilt to the mix and feeling ashamed of myself for losing my equanimity. However, an experienced Buddhist would see the anger merely as passing bad weather of the mind—no need to add more negative reactions, just observe it with curiosity. Hmmm . . . anger . . . how does that work? Every mother 'loses it' occasionally and as long as we have not physically hurt anybody, and it is not too frequent, it would be fair enough to forgive ourselves and move on.

With children, especially in the school holidays, we learn that we cannot be happy unless we accept the moment the way it is. If we crave for it to be other than it is, then we create *dukkha* for ourselves, be it a gnawing irritation or whole-hearted anguish. Before we had children we were relatively free to make adjustments to our environment and convince ourselves that we could find perfect and lasting satisfaction—even though we never could. So children help us to cultivate patience—we must constantly attend to the needs of the moment. Kim experienced this truth after being stuck on a freeway with a hungry, screaming daughter:

> I was driving home with my younger daughter. We were still twenty minutes from home but she was hot, tired and hungry and started to melt down. The minute she started to whine, I began my usual routine of trying to stop her, using a variety of techniques that never work. Whining became screaming. I started to get really impatient, stressed and found myself shouting, 'Quiet!!' She screamed louder. Then it occurred to me, I can't stop her from being cranky because what she needs is lunch and a nap, and she'll get that in twenty minutes.
>
> The main reason I am so stressed and angry is because I am trying to make this moment something other than it is. Some moments simply suck and we just need to let them pass like clouds through the sky. Fighting them is the source of suffering. I needed to stop trying to change the moment, just let it be what it is, and breathe. And didn't my daughter have the right to be cranky, anyway? Didn't I forget to bring a snack for her? So I breathed in, out, in, out. She still screamed, but much of my misery was gone.

So often with children we can see that moment of choice where we say to ourselves, I do not need to be so emotionally entangled in this situation. My aversion is causing the *dukkha*, the stress.

Then again, none of this is to say that a Buddhist practice is about passivity. We do whatever we can to improve a situation, yet we avoid clinging tightly to any particular result. After taking what action we can, if any, we work on accepting the result. As Kim wrote:

> Lately, I've been going through the day asking myself 'What does this moment require of me?' and for the past few weeks, it has been a challenge.

My younger daughter has been going through a shift in her sleeping habits. We have been tweaking her bedtime and day-sleep schedule, but so far to no avail. So she is sleep deprived and a basket case the entire day. As a result, everyone in this house is tired and cranky.

So what does the moment require of me? It requires me to respond to constant crankiness and frequent tantrums with patience. Or at least to not get angry. Which is hard because my sleep is disrupted, so my patience reservoir is having a drought.

The moment requires me to constantly let go of my ideas of what constitutes a 'good day', and to deal with what is before me: the reality of my present situation.

It also requires me not to get stuck in the 'little picture'. I've done this sleep-transition phase before with my older daughter and it does not last forever. The big picture is that it is just a phase. In fact, I can barely remember exactly what it was like the first time around.

So all day, I take it moment by moment and keep asking, 'What does this moment require of me?' Sometimes I get cranky and sometimes I respond from my Buddha Nature, but I try to look at each moment anew, not judge, and remind myself that one day this phase will be a distant memory.

Generosity

Modern Western culture has taught us to hoard for ourselves, that giving leads to scarcity. More than ever before in human history, we have come to see ourselves as separate from others. This cultural conditioning can make an act of giving seem imprudent when, in fact, generosity is the very key to spiritual growth, allowing us to

practise *letting go* of our attachments. Unlike the God presented in the Bible (who said it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God), the Buddha had no objection to personal prosperity. What he saw as a problem was miserliness.

A Buddhist outlook inspires generosity by emphasising our indisputable dependency on each other. Only through the efforts of other human beings can we enjoy food, shelter, friendship and every other aspect of our lives. Understanding this interdependency, a Buddhist cultivates gratitude towards all living beings, and, as we have all experienced, we feel more inclined to give to someone towards whom we feel grateful. So giving to another is a way of giving to yourself, for we are all one interconnected whole.

Kaye from my Buddhist group shared a memory from a ten-day meditation retreat she attended:

> For the whole retreat, nobody pays a cent until right at the end when you make a voluntary donation. The idea is that throughout the retreat we consider the goodwill of others who have made the retreat possible through their generosity. This way we feel our dependency on others, particularly those who went before us, throughout the retreat.

As Kaye found, it is only realistic that we remember our indebtedness to other human beings and give something back.

We have already discussed earlier how important it is to our karma to give with an attitude of compassion and open-heartedness. Yet we also bring awareness to our attitude when it is time for us to receive gifts from others, be they gifts of time, assistance or material. Often, we Westerners deny others an opportunity to practise generosity. We are so attached to seeing ourselves as independent and self-sufficient

that we deny others the fruits of giving. With this ideology, old age, a time when most of us need to allow others to take care of us, can only be a time of great suffering.

So what can we give?

We live in a world screaming with need and there is no lack of charities asking for our help. Recently I was inspired by a front-page news story in *The Sydney Morning Herald* by Adele Horin reporting on the dramatic increase in philanthropy. The Giving Australia project found that, over seven years, Australians have increased the amount of money they donate to charity by almost 60 per cent, and that in 2004 almost 90 per cent of Australians made sizeable donations (up from only 68 per cent seven years earlier). The study concluded, with strong statistical reliability, that the overwhelming majority of Australians were giving several hundred dollars, an average of $424 each year, to charity.

We can also give our time. They say time is the new money, and in being so valuable we might earn extra karmic credits when we give our time to others. With children at school, or in care, we have discovered the insatiable demand from such institutions for volunteer labour. They want presidents, treasurers, class mums, council representatives and bakers galore for all the cake stalls. Canteen duty, helping in class, working bees, planning committees, fundraising events—these are only the beginning of the long list of duties for the volunteer army.

We can put up our hands for only so many responsibilities, but if we see such volunteering as a practice of generosity, something we do in a spirit of openness, then we grow from the experience. At times we may roll our eyes at the endless requests for help, or quietly curse all the parents who never volunteer, but we could also focus on the increased sense of connection and belonging we enjoy from being a part of something larger than ourselves. We can choose a perspective

where we see our voluntary work not as an obligation that interrupts the flow of our life, but as an essential part of a life well-lived.

For the Buddha, part of generosity is giving protection to other living beings, or helping others to be safe. Many a Buddhist will mindfully usher an insect out of their house rather than swat it, just as we teach our children never to kill spiders and other creatures for mere recreation. Providing protection is practising respect for the preciousness of life in all its forms.

Still, many a mother will question her Buddhist teacher about the risks of generosity. As Buddhist mother Joanne, who gives her time generously, says:

> I have a personality type that hates to say no and feels an irrational need to please all the people all the time. Aware of this, I make an effort to tune into my own energy levels and avoid taking on too much. I do need to foster compassion for myself and ensure that I make time to recharge my batteries. Generosity cannot only be for others. We need to remember to give to ourselves too.

We practise generosity towards ourselves by being aware of when we need rest or family time. Generosity towards ourselves might mean making time for solitude, for reflection or meditation.

Many studies show that those who are happiest are not those who are wealthy but those with strong emotional connections to others, so it is definitely worth teaching our children to be generous. Some Buddhist communities in the East encourage children to give something every day, whether it be a smile, a hug or a piece of their art. Whereas in the West we tend to ask our children what they learnt today, these parents ask their children what they gave. My friend Julia, here in the West, encourages her seven-year-old son to make time to chat to

elderly people he meets. As she explains, many of them live alone and might not talk to anybody for hours in a day.

Simple acts of friendliness—a pat on the arm, an effort to connect, a compliment—are acts of generosity that benefit the giver and the receiver. We can listen generously, with our full attention, and we can use our imaginations to look deeply into the lives of others to understand their needs. One form of generosity is to give people the benefit of the doubt and spare them from our judgemental first impressions. Kim explored this idea in her journal with her usual refreshing honesty:

> It's weird but I feel like I'm running into spiritual seekers all over my neighbourhood. I don't live in the kind of area where you would expect to find people into meditation and spiritual healing. In fact, when we first moved here I considered myself kind of a misfit. I later realised that I had an air of superiority about my not fitting in (what a jerk I am sometimes) but as I keep finding *over and over again*, when I make judgements about people I am always wrong.
>
> I think it is finally time to learn the lesson not to make judgements. People are people. It doesn't matter how we choose to classify them. We are all the same substance. I need to be open to people so that I can see them in terms of their goodness, our common humanity and our shared wish to be happy.

What we can do

- Instead of asking 'What bothers me?', ask 'What is required?'
- Acknowledge that you choose your responses, that they are never dictated by the situation.
- Open yourself to feeling the joy in any moment, for this is your natural state if you could only stop adding your opinions.
- Practise compassion by taking some time to *be* the other person, to remember your oneness with them.
- See the humour in domestic dramas. Value friends with whom you can laugh.
- Allow your children to re-immerse you in the playfulness and fun of childhood.
- Value humour as a means to create a cheerful atmosphere in your home.
- Treasure solitude as time to reconnect to your inner wisdom.
- Remember that imperfection does not hurt you but your reactions to it do.
- Let gratitude fuel generosity, for we are all dependent on other living beings.
- Notice your attitude when you give—for the sake of your karma.

CHAPTER 7

what can I do about all the housework?

Two and a half hours each day. Not counting time spent with children, this is the amount of time a mother spends on housework, such as cooking, laundry and cleaning. While this figure comes from the 'Time use survey' of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, mothers in other Western countries are not working any less. Whoever said the only certainties in life are death and taxes neglected to mention housework. From a Buddhist perspective, the most important question concerning this workload is: What is the state of our minds throughout these hours?

We all know the potential to spend this time in a state of resentment. When can I finish this and move onto something more stimulating? Why isn't my husband doing more of this? Why can't my children take more responsibility for their belongings? These might be valid questions and I do not suggest that we become 'surrendered wives'. On the contrary, we need to continue the struggle to allocate housework more fairly. Still, even if we achieved such goals, the typical week will always demand many hours of domestic toil, so we may as well develop a spiritually skilful approach.

Even if we have moved past resentment, we might find ourselves numbing our minds with daydreams or other forms of mental dullness. We are likely to have described ourselves as 'brain-dead' after hours of housework. Yet practising negativity, or numbness, for a potential sixteen hours each week can only have an adverse effect on our karma. Our thoughts condition our minds, they become habitual and shape our character. As Susan Maushart writes in *Wifework*, a book discussing the unfair distribution of domestic work, 'All work and little play not only makes Mum a dull girl—it makes her a cranky one too.'

What hope do we have for peace and contentment if we use these hours to practise their opposite? Even if we meditated daily, we might undo some of our good karma by practising unskilful mind states for more than two hours a day during housework. It is worth

being open to new approaches, for if we can use those sixteen hours for spiritual advancement, our chances of becoming a calmer, happier person multiply.

Interestingly, the Buddhist scriptures give several examples of women who became enlightened while doing housework. One woman known as 'Little Sturdy' had her first deep realisation after burning the dinner. She had heard the Buddha speak and had been contemplating his words while preparing dinner. Seeing the meal turn to ashes gave her insight into the impermanence of all things. Another woman who lived in the time of the Buddha experienced a lasting insight into impermanence when she spilt the water she was carrying and saw it disappear into the earth.

This chapter provides a variety of ideas for making housework more spiritual. It is up to each of us to choose one, or several, of these ideas, if not some ideas of our own, to suit our individual situation

Consider your past approach

The Buddha taught that all things exist due to their causes and conditions. Nothing exists in a vacuum, everything is dependent. This includes our thoughts, beliefs and attitudes (Appendix 1 deals in more detail with this dependence on causes and conditions otherwise known as the Buddha's teaching on Emptiness). Our beliefs around housework, for example, are not the immutable truths we usually believe them to be. Rather, they have been conditioned by a multitude of influences, from our upbringing to the culture around us.

It can be worth taking a step back and considering how our current attitude developed. Everyone's story is different, and we have all come to different conclusions on how clean our houses need to be and who, in a partnership, should do what. As we become more aware of what

has shaped our attitude, we might become equally aware of the possibility of dropping the unhelpful beliefs—or at least loosening our grip on them—and adopting spiritually skilful ones.

One condition that is bound to affect our attitude to housework is the way it was handled in our childhood homes. Back in the seventies, when mothers in the suburbs were starting to absorb feminist principles, my mother was raising her three daughters for academic achievement, not a life of domesticity. She was prepared to do all the housework if it gave her daughters more time for study and self-development. A messy person by nature, I never learnt to overcome my ways.

In my early twenties I consumed piles of feminist literature and absorbed—no doubt distorting for my own purposes—many of its messages. I would never be a 'traditional woman' trapped in domestic servitude. I managed to choose boyfriends who were neat and domestically capable—and who invariably struggled to cope with my slovenly ways. After I first met Marek, he paid a surprise visit to my chaotic unit where I lived by myself. And he has never allowed me to forget that my fridge hosted nothing but a carton of milk.

Easily, housework has always been, by far, the most sensitive topic of our marriage. On no other subject have there been so many arguments, so much emotional angst. Before children, Marek and I occupied the two extremes on the tidiness continuum—he orderly, me sloppy. After being at home with children, I learned the value of keeping the house relatively tidy, or at least the cost when you don't (clutter reaching avalanche proportions, the lack of clean clothes, the frustration of lost shoes, hats and permission slips). I came to see housework as a practical necessity rather than only the work of oppressed women. Meanwhile, Marek learnt that with children around (the boys take after me, unfortunately), one has to accept a certain degree of clutter.

Both of us mellowed from our extreme positions but disagreements about the state of the house will always punctuate our marital life. At least I can claim that we have reached that more settled stage in marriage where we are both *equally* displeased most of the time.

Stop judging it

If we find ourselves in a bad mood when we do the housework, it is because our mind is busy assigning negative ratings. Phrases which float through my mind as I clean the house—'monotony without end', 'Stepford wife', 'wasting my intellect'—are heavily laden with negative judgements which do nothing to cultivate a calm mind. A Buddhist approach is not so much to convert these phrases to positive ones—'domestic goddess', 'serving my beloved family'—as to refrain from judging altogether. To use the words of the Buddha when he taught us about mindfulness, 'One remains established in the observation, free, not caught up in any worldly consideration.'

With a Buddhist practice, we strive to see things as they are, free from our usual mental projections. This means the task of sweeping the house is *just sweeping*. Nothing other than it is. At first I felt underwhelmed by this teaching—of course, sweeping is just sweeping—but then I examined some of my mental projections about sweeping. This revealed that sweeping, for me, could be many other things, none of which helped me enjoy the job. I found, for instance, that sweeping was:

- 'women's work' and therefore a means for my own oppression
- unpaid and therefore invisible, unrecognised, unappreciated
- something my husband should do more often

- a nuisance of a task which should be done quickly so that I can find something more meaningful to do
- a means to impress (or hide the truth from) visitors
- boring work and best avoided.

Clearly, my experiences of sweeping had little to do with *just sweeping* and everything to do with my conditioning and personal hang-ups. The numerous chips on my shoulder were the obstacles to any enjoyment I might have found in the simple act of sweeping. One surprising observation I have made since becoming a mother is that whenever one of the boys, as toddlers, took the broom away from me to 'help', I felt disappointed. It was not just that they would mess up the work I had done. Part of me, a long suppressed part, wanted the satisfaction that comes from clearing, cleansing and, yes, cleaning.

We become aware of our mental projections by watching our thoughts as we sweep. We notice our long-held views and negative associations, but rather than indulge them, rather than believe them, we try to *let them go*. I have learnt that it is worth creating even the shortest of pauses when we do our housework, to bring our concentration back into the present moment, a moment where we remind ourselves that we are *just sweeping*.

Practise mindfulness

Mindfulness is not only something we practise in the stillness of meditation. Its true value is in bringing it to our daily activities. The repetitive movements of our domestic chores provide excellent opportunities to practise mindfulness. For mothers with very young children, or mothers whose lives offer no space for formal meditation, housework may be the best opportunity to practise being present. If

we choose, mindful house cleaning can be space away from the noise of our racing thoughts and feelings. The back-and-forth motion of a broom creates a rhythm to focus on. The act of preparing a meal invites all the senses to attention. Even scrubbing a saucepan gives us a chance to return our attention to our bodies and our inner world.

Being mindful while you perform household chores might mean focusing on the movement of your body as the muscles stretch and loosen—and the effect on your breathing. It might mean focusing on the job to the exclusion of all distractions. At times it means paying attention to the thoughts streaming through your mind without losing your awareness of them, without letting them carry you away.

Subhana learnt the value of mindful housekeeping from the world master of mindfulness, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, after being his attendant on his tour to Australia. In her words:

> Housework had always been a nuisance for me, something to get out of the way so that I could move on to more important things. Thich Nhat Hanh was the first teacher to introduce me to the possibility of threading a practice of mindfulness through my daily life. By *being there* with the experience of cleaning the kitchen, or hanging the washing, I began to find pleasure and joy in daily activities. No longer chores, they became rituals infused with a quality of mindfulness that brought them alive. It was a major shift of attitude.

Subhana says she chooses a couple of her daily tasks to peg her practice to, be it cleaning her teeth or loading the dishwasher, and changes them from time to time. This helps her to bring the awareness she develops in meditation into her daily life.

In Zen monasteries, chores, referred to as Work Practice, are an essential part of the daily routine, not only because they are necessary

to the functioning of the monastery but because of their spiritual value. Meditation and cleaning are seen as completely interdependent: a practitioner needs to be able to transfer their calm, concentrated state to their daily chores. It is not unheard of for residents of a Zen monastery to spend four hours silently scrubbing the kitchen with the monk, or nun, overseeing the work only too happy to provide the feedback, 'You missed a bit'.

Eva discovered that focusing on the past, instead of the present, accounted for most of her frustration when she did housework:

> I used to work myself into a state of bitter resentment with every minute I spent tidying the house. 'All I ever do is tidy up!' I would moan. 'And everyone just messes it up again! I've been doing housework all day. And it was the same yesterday.' Of course, tidying the house in this state of mind left me drained and grumpy but I lived like this for years. With Buddhist practice, I made peace with housework. I stopped tormenting myself with reminders of all the housework I had done *in the past* and practised placing my attention on the job at hand in the present.

Focus on the process

You might have noticed in yourself that tendency to postpone your happiness until the housework is done. Then you can relax. But why wait? Especially when we consider that with young children we never arrive anywhere near a finish line. Our minds feel clearer when the house is tidy and organised and the final results of housework can definitely be satisfying, but Buddhism, Zen in particular, challenges us to see the process of cleaning and tidying as our motivator as much

as the end result. The work you are doing, as you are doing it, is just as valuable as the final reward.

In his landmark book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh explains that there are two approaches to washing the dishes: a) to have clean dishes, or, b) to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes. Favouring the latter he explains:

> If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes'. What's more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash the dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future—and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life.

Thich Nhat Hanh is by no means the only one who teaches that housework provides a chance to be truly alive. I chanced on a magical little book that can transform the act of home care into a pleasure. Zen Buddhist and lay monk Gary Thorp in *Sweeping Changes* offers perspectives on housework as a chance to reconnect with yourself.

Thorp speaks of housework as an act of reverence for all the little things that keep our lives going. We can feel gratitude in relation to each object we handle—imagine if you had to make that battery yourself? As we clean our houses, we find constant reminders of our interconnectedness with all the other living beings who helped deliver the services (water, electricity, garbage removal) or all those who produced the objects that surround us. He reminds us that those simple, age-old

chores, such as dusting and sweeping, unite us with our ancestors and with people all over the world. He speaks of 'the potential to come alive through the ordinary', for Zen teaches that 'understanding has its roots in the events of daily life, that action is one of the keys to serenity, and that wisdom resides within the ordinary'.

Treating myself to a working day in the city, I spent a morning perusing *Sweeping Changes* at the State Library in the centre of Sydney from where I took the short walk to the Art Gallery to see an exhibition of the works of one of the first Impressionists, Camille Pissaro. Serendipitously, I opened the program and read on the first page a quote by the artist that echoed what I had been reading all morning in *Sweeping Changes*: 'Happy are they who see beautiful things in modest places where other people see nothing.' Soon enough, I saw that the paintings of Pissaro were of the commonplace, the ordinary, the everyday—city streets, market scenes, maids at work. His paintings included *Girl Washing Plates*, *The Wash House*, *Apple-picking*, *Peasants Gathering Grasses*, *Peasant Girl Drinking her Coffee*. Pissaro seemed determined to open our minds to the beauty in what we so often see as drudgery.

Most of us know women, or may even be women, who take delight in maintaining the sanctuary of the home, and the likes of me can learn from their example. Such women enjoy planning nourishing meals, recreational baking, collecting fresh linen from the line and creating beautiful living spaces. Doing housework is a chance to connect with the surroundings that become a half-visible blur when we cannot be present. One domestic goddess I know tried to explain to me her pleasure in home care:

> Home is precious. I see my home as a work of artistic expression where I surround myself with treasured photos, fresh flowers, art work and other reminders of my good fortune.

> I see housework as the act of caring for the things that support my life. An expression of gratitude—we don't neglect the things we value. My husband is an artist in his spare time and he finds it relaxing to paint pictures of ordinary items like spoons, mugs and brooms. He, too, sees the value and beauty of simple household objects. I often make time to sit still in my home and appreciate what I have around me. Even when it's messy!

Jacqueline Kramer, author of *Buddha Mom*, finds cleaning therapeutic but, sensing from society a lack of respect for housework, confesses, 'I usually kept my wanton enjoyment of cleaning a well-guarded secret.' Recognising the importance of enjoying the process, she writes:

> The process of mindful cleaning and organizing can be healing. It can be an opportunity to become centred and more attentive to the moment, more simple. After a challenging week, and while the children are playing or the baby is sleeping, cleaning affords an opportunity to create a refuge from the messiness of everyday living.

Adopt Zen values

According to Zen teachings, we increase our capacity to live mindfully in the present when we value simplicity. A Zen approach to household maintenance challenges us to rid our homes of clutter, freeing ourselves of any object that is no longer useful. The usefulness of an object is always subjective: for many of us, purchasing one of the numerous Buddha statues available in home living shops would only add to

household clutter; while for some, a well-positioned Buddha statue would be a useful reminder to be calm and patient.

As with all housework, expelling extraneous objects from our house is a job never done, so it is wise to enjoy the process of de-cluttering rather than postponing satisfaction until the job is finished. If I am any guide, this is not difficult—I love adding objects to the disposal bag telling myself something like, 'This is the last time I will ever pick up this spinning-top'.

Importantly, Zen encourages us to be careful about what we even bring into our homes by encouraging mindful consumption. Before we make a purchase, we ask ourselves, will this item simplify or complicate my life? Am I looking merely to *have* it, or could I, more importantly, *use* it? In Zen, we value the functional over the decorative, an approach which helps us to focus on our purpose rather than on amassing material objects.

We set up our homes to support what we do, to support our business in this life, and should avoid importing objects that only create excess. One wise friend, Julia, sticks to her rule: 'Whenever I bring something into the house, I have to give something away.' With less clutter around us, it is easier to see clearly, both physically and psychologically.

A commitment to simple living protects us from our society's consumerist values. Kim questions the materialism of her family in this journal entry:

> I have designated the past couple of weeks for cleaning, organizing, recycling and throwing away. I have been in heavy Work Practice mode cleaning closets, going through old clothes, old toys, everything—even the car, basement and garage.
>
> I am appalled by how much stuff we have accumulated. Something needs to change. I feel that we, as a family, need to

have a shift in the way we look at our possessions. We need to be more mindful of what we purchase and *why*.

As Christmas approaches it is time to see purchasing in a new way. The mad rush to buy things has begun. We are bombarded with advertisements for toys, electronics, clothes, jewellery. It is totally insane. Materialism is one of the more embarrassing aspects of Western culture and I'm sad to say it is far too present in my family. So my task is to transform this impulse both in my family and in myself.

In later journal entries, Kim talks of feelings of triumph when she returns from the shops empty-handed, other than her groceries.

Inspired by Kim's cleaning frenzy, I dedicated a few hours to my own house, my target being toys no longer played with. It felt satisfying to (secretly) rid our house of around three-quarters of the toys. I also enjoyed a sense of 'getting my life back' knowing that I would spend so much less time moving toys from room to room. The domestic landscape looked much clearer and this relaxed me. Arguably, I took my project a little too far but the boys eventually recovered from their losses.

Some of us torment ourselves with an aim to create, and hold onto, 'sacred space' and fantasise often about achieving a perfectly clean, organised, clutter-free home. Yet any attachment to this vision will, like all attachments, lead to *dukkha*—if only because other family members will not allow us to achieve our objective. Rejecting extremes, the Buddha taught the middle way. In the context of housework, the middle way is a path that lies between rigid perfection and disarray. Maintaining a perfect home is not only difficult to achieve, but also inflexible and limiting for family members. A Buddhist mother makes room for the occasional housework-free day, for the accidental spillages and the creativity of children.

Question your intentions

One situation sure to propel me into a frenzy of cleaning is having visitors. Knowing that visitors are about to arrive I am suddenly fired with determination to make my house presentable. Examining my thoughts as I fuss around the house, I find my motives relate to how my visitors will perceive me. Depending on who it is, I might seek to impress—'That Sarah always has everything under control!' Or I strive for that point between keeping their respect and avoiding their disapproval. In some cases, I want to convince visitors who know how messy I used to be that I am now spectacularly reformed.

Of course, the above motivations do nothing constructive for my karma—or the way I condition myself to behave in the future—for they only ensure that I reinforce a self-image based on approval from others. A more Buddhist motivation would be to consider the comfort of my visitors. I might dedicate the cleaning to my visitors, reframing it as a show of respect or a wish that they might feel calm and relaxed in my home. Tidying up becomes an act of generosity we perform for the sake of our visitors. Such a motivation might at first seem far-fetched or contrived, for it is effectively a radical reconditioning of the way our minds normally work. Yet, if we make a habit of this way of thinking, then our karma improves dramatically.

Tibetan Buddhists make a practice of dedicating all their actions, whether they are making a cup of tea or cleaning a toilet, to the enlightenment of all beings. This might explain why they excel in the area of compassion for everybody without exception. Accounts abound of Tibetans capable of feeling compassion for their Chinese torturers and gaolers. Dedicating simple acts to the enlightenment of all beings reconnects Buddhists to all human life, and ensures that their minds are spacious enough to care about the whole world, no matter what they are doing.

Connect to the world

Like most mothers, I spend a sizeable chunk of my time standing in the kitchen, packing lunch boxes, chopping fruit and vegetables, stirring the dinner and scrubbing saucepans. A Zen monk living in a monastery might use kitchen time to focus on the process, bringing single-minded attention to the task at hand. A Tibetan might concentrate on dedicating their work to others, each task an act of kindness and service. A Theravada Buddhist is likely to watch their thought stream or pay attention to the sensations of the body. Me, I listen to the radio.

I tend to miss most of the seven o'clock television news because of the demands of the evening routine, so the radio is my main source of news. For a while, I wondered whether listening to the radio could be deemed a spiritual activity, but it definitely is. Isn't the aim of Buddhist practice to increase my compassion for all living beings and, ultimately, help others? Just as we cannot effectively help our children if we do not know what is happening in their lives, we are less likely to be helpful to others if we fail to understand the forces behind their *dukkha*.

Even if we are too busy to help those outside our immediate community, we still need to be informed enough to vote in elections, choose the charities we wish to support and explain the world we inhabit to our children. Importantly, an idea of world events helps us to keep our own problems in perspective and prevents us from becoming overly self-absorbed. The larger our field of concern, the more realistic we can be about the state of our lives.

A relatively recent movement in Buddhism, going back fifty years and co-founded by the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, is *Engaged Buddhism*, which aims to combine Buddhist teachings and non-violent social action. Some argue that Engaged Buddhism is a tautology—how

could Buddhism be anything but engaged? Could there be such a thing as *dis*engaged Buddhists? An international network, Engaged Buddhists have been involved in work promoting peace, environmental consciousness, human rights and social justice.

Feeling concern about the *dukkha*, the suffering in the world, is part of a Buddhist practice and if we care about this suffering we take an interest, or even take action, if only in our local communities. Buddhist engagement in the world comes from a realisation of interdependence and interconnection between all people and every aspect of life on our planet. This is why engaged Buddhists are so often advocates for the environment.

It deepens our spiritual practice if we can be aware of our reactions to the news stories we hear, for we begin to discover and even question some of our attachments to our own views. I recently experienced loathing for the English soldiers caught beating and taunting Iraqi teenagers. Likewise, I have hated perpetrators of human rights abuses, child-killers, child-molesters and all those corrupt leaders of the developing world who are happy to live in luxury among poverty-stricken people.

Yet Buddhism challenges us to hate only their crimes, to remember that everyone ultimately has Buddha Nature, albeit well-buried, to remember even that I am that perpetrator and that the perpetrator is me. I, too, am capable of violence for we all have the seeds of hatred and the seeds of compassion within us. It is a matter of which ones we choose to water.

Even without the radio on, housework provides opportunities for us to connect with the world for it is an opportunity to practise caring for the environment. We do this through activities such as recycling, composting, avoiding products with lots of packaging, conserving electricity and water, and even growing our own food. Most of us have heard about the benefits of such measures but, leading stressful

lives, many of us postpone making them a priority. Still, many a Buddhist would argue that to live ethically in the world is to realise the need to take care of the planet and to take responsibility for the effect of our actions on the environment.

One way to increase our environmental consciousness and motivate ourselves to make adjustments to our lifestyle is to see the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, featuring former American Vice-President and once presidential candidate Al Gore. This motivated me to attend to an activity I had been postponing for years: composting. Getting started was humbling as many a friend looked at me in horror: 'What? You haven't been composting?' I was delighted to find Zac, at least initially, keen to be involved with the process. It became an opportunity to establish some environmental consciousness in the next generation. We take from the earth but we also do our best to give something back to it. Deepening my connection with the earth in this way, I was surprised to find the work of composting felt nothing less than spiritual.

Remind yourself of death

Sydney Buddhist teacher Carol Perry suggests that as we peg the washing on the line, we think to ourselves, 'This might be the last time I ever hang the washing.' After all, our life is on temporary loan to us, death a certainty. Although we assume death is still a few decades away, we cannot know for sure—it might well be the last time we hang the washing.

While Westerners go to great lengths to avoid thinking about death, Buddhists try to remember death as often as possible—monks and nuns in the East meditate in graveyards. Mindful of the certainty of death, we appreciate even the seemingly banal moments of our

lives. Try vacuuming the carpet, dusting the shelves or folding the laundry as if for the last time, allowing our potentially imminent death to sharpen our concentration and bring the task alive.

We can never know the date of our death, but how would we feel if we could? Would it make a difference to how we lived our lives? I have just visited a website called deathclock.com, answered a few questions, and discovered that I will die on 12 November, in the year 2046 at the age of seventy-nine. At the time of writing I have only 1,278,472,915 seconds left to live. I also discovered that if I could change from being *neither-a-pessimist-nor-an-optimist* to a simple *optimist*, I would extend my life by another ten years. (We must spare a thought for the unlucky visitors to the site who discover they have twenty-four hours left to live. Is it too late to become an optimist?)

Yet how often do we Westerners give any thought to the certainty of death? And how much more could we appreciate each new day of our lives if we did? We would see more clearly the truth in the Buddha's teaching that all phenomena are impermanent. With an understanding of the brevity of our lives, we would use our time more wisely, in a way that can benefit others. We realise the preciousness of every moment, including those spent on housework.

Perhaps our minds are at their clearest when we start a sentence with 'Life is too short to…' With death in mind we see what a dreadful waste of our short life it is to hold a grudge, argue or ruminate. We see the wastage in drifting off to places other than where our bodies are now. We become more present to the fullness of each moment our lives present.

Understanding the importance of death to a well-lived life, Subhana has run a course entitled 'If I Had Six Months to Live'. A realisation of the need to embrace death came early in Subhana's life when, aged nineteen, she journeyed to Nepal for her first meditation retreat. A thirty-day retreat, the Tibetan monks instructed meditators to

contemplate only one thing: the meaning of death. Of the almost 150 Westerners who started the retreat, Subhana was one of only thirty or so who lasted the distance. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald* a couple of decades later, she reflected on that experience:

> That was very challenging… But the lamas do that because it encourages you to live every moment of life as if it was your last. Contemplating death… creates liberation and the desire to live your life to its fullest potential.

Still in India, Subhana continued her investigation of death by visiting the burning ghats of the Ganges every sunrise:

> It was a hard practice to see burning bodies, to watch women wailing with grief. It's the harsh, stark face of death. But I would go back totally in love with life, cleansed and joyful rather than depressed.

The full article, 'Stopovers on the way to peace: If I had one year to live', appears in Appendix 2.

Change your perspective

Our experience of housework comes down to the perspective we bring to it. Rather than assuming our perspective is the only one available, we can acknowledge that alternatives abound. Along with the perspectives explored so far in this chapter, we might experiment with viewing housework as good exercise, as stress release or work that brings instant, visible results. I find it helps to light a stick of

incense before I start a session of housework. This ritual, along with creating a pleasant smell to accompany the work, serves as a reminder that I can let go of my habitual attitudes to housework and adopt a spiritual approach.

Kim was able to shift her perspective on many household chores after her Zen centre sent an email entitled 'Work Practice' to attract helpers to stuff envelopes for a mail-out. She saw that such work is not separate from spiritual life since stuffing envelopes is practice, something that volunteers can do mindfully in a spirit of generosity.

After this Kim saw the potential to label all kinds of activities as practice such as 'cleaning up the mess practice' or, when her daughters argued with each other, 'peacemaking practice'. We can bring mindfulness, and other spiritual qualities such as openness, curiosity and kindness, to any of our activities and make them part of our practice. A typical day might consist of 'tidying up practice', 'reading to our children practice', 'listening practice', and 'driving our children to after-school activities practice'.

All the same, while agreeing that mindfulness can infuse everything we do, Subhana believes practising Buddhists need to be judicious when saying 'everything is practice' for it might lead them to neglect the formal aspects such as meditating, studying, listening to teachers and spending time with their spiritual community.

Another interesting perspective to experiment with, one that helps us to be mindful of the present, is to imagine you are just dropping in on your life for a day. Imagine that usually you are someone else, but thought you might try life in someone else's shoes. What is it like? How are you finding it? What do you notice? Just as when we travel to new places we pay closer attention, when we adopt the perspective of somebody 'just dropping in on this life' we increase our intimacy with the present.

In the interests of keeping our spirits high and avoiding the karma that comes from negativity, we may opt to play uplifting music while we do the housework. Whether we listen to Tibetan chanting or Norah Jones, we practise enjoyment rather than irritation. Joan, an octogenarian friend of mine, raised four children in the days before washing machines, dishwashers and microwaves (not to mention disposable nappies and takeaway options). Her days were filled with housework from beginning to end, yet she looks back fondly on those times. Ask any of her children how they remember their mother and they smile and answer, 'Always singing.' After a full-hearted singing session, you might even feel lucky that you are the one who can stay home and do the housework.

What we can do

- Identify the causes of your current attitude to housework and consider letting go, or loosening your grip on, any views that only make you irritable.
- Understand that sweeping is *just sweeping* and need not be anything other than it is.
- See housework as a chance to practise mindfulness.
- Recognise the potential to enjoy the *process* of cleaning the house rather than only the results.
- Notice the beauty in the ordinary.
- Value simplicity. Avoid the clutter that mindless consumption brings. Keep only useful objects in your home.
- When visitors are coming, clean up as an expression of respect and generosity rather than to influence the way they perceive you.
- Tune into the news while you work as a way to increase your sense of connection and compassion for others. Watch and reflect on your reactions to news stories.
- With death a certainty, and life so short, don't waste a minute: live more fully in the present.
- Consider alternative perspectives on housework: good exercise, stress release, visible results.
- Listen to music or sing while you work. Find a way to enjoy yourself.

CHAPTER 8

can I change my ways?

I NOTICE THAT SOME people drift into a Buddhist practice because it offers a good fit with their personality. They are naturally calm types who enjoy simple pleasures and always see the best in people. I was different. I felt like Buddhism provided a counterbalance to my very un-Buddhist nature. As a younger woman my credo had been: *Experience everything! Meet everyone! See it all!* Desires running rampant, I demanded endless stimulation and excitement from the world outside me. I was constantly restless, incapable of spending a whole day at home.

My pleasure-seeking/pain-avoiding lifestyle of travel, entertainment, activism and evening courses was my way of distracting myself from *dukkha*. I have plenty of fond memories of those days but with *dukkha* and impermanence marking every experience, as they do, disappointment and anti-climax also played a significant part. Of course, none of these activities were wrong in themselves but when we become attached to them, use them to identify ourselves and prop up our sense of a self, they do eventually disappoint us.

Some of my busyness could be put down to an adventurous spirit, such as I see in young Alex. It only became dodgy when clinging and attachment entered the picture and I gradually developed a character that insisted on daily excitement as the only way to avoid a tormenting restlessness. Defining myself through my interests, I reinforced what Buddhists refer to as a false sense of separation from others by being judgemental of 'quiet' people who 'never went anywhere', blind to the fact that I could have learnt from them.

It has been a relief over the years to gradually shed the frantic personality that I had constructed, to downsize my weekends—and discover the truth in that delightful quote I mentioned in Chapter 5 by Pascal about the importance of being able to sit quietly in my room. Some of my quietening down came from meeting Marek who is more of a homebody. Some came naturally with age and some of the settling came from practising Buddhist teachings and meditation

with their emphasis on peacefulness, simple pleasures and turning inward to find happiness.

Starting from such a low base, I feel as though I am anything but a model Buddhist. I hesitate to tell those who enquire that I am a Buddhist from fear that they will laugh and say, 'You! But you've always been so hyper/restless/flighty!', to which I could only reply, 'Imagine what I'd be like if I wasn't a Buddhist!' Alas, I am still a work in progress. As Kim once remarked, 'At this early stage in my practice, I am still a nervy and edgy person but I am becoming a lot more accepting about it.'

We might at first be attracted to a Buddhist practice in the hope that it will change us. Eventually we realise, however, that such motives are a form of attachment: an attachment to becoming someone other than who we are. It calls to mind the picture where a Zen Buddhist, looking at himself in the mirror, chants: 'Every day, in every way, I become a little less attached to self-improvement.' A Buddhist practice requires self-acceptance, for we learn that we are already complete and need only peel away those layers of delusion to reach our true nature.

Working from a position of self-acceptance, we can still apply Right Effort to deal with our less skilful habits. We all have aspects of our character that we know lead to harm, stress or suffering and that we aspire to change. Yet even when we have tried our hardest, we often cannot drop a habit. Our issue might be over-eating, over-spending, over-sensitivity, temper flares, gossiping, but whatever it is, it can seem like it is here to stay.

Not with guilt

Our automatic reaction when catching ourselves 'at it again' is to feel guilty. Susan Maushart, author of *What Women Want Next*, heard a

speaker tell a room full of working women to get rid of guilt because it doesn't help anyone. Maushart wrote of her reaction:

> I don't really remember what she said after that. To be honest, I couldn't concentrate anymore. 'Get rid of guilt'? Just 'Get rid of it'! To me, it was like telling an audience of heroin addicts to just take up knitting.

In Buddhism, guilt is not the antidote to our problems. Following the Buddhist teachings, we do have a hope of 'getting rid of guilt' for we learn to cultivate feelings of kindness toward ourselves. A Buddhist practice can bring about forgiveness of self for being imperfect, as Kim has found:

> Lately as I have been doing my various meditations, walking meditation, Zazen and mindfulness throughout the day, I have noticed that I am feeling much friendlier towards myself after years of being harsh. If I took the things that I said to myself and said them to someone else, you would think I was the cruellest person on the planet. Just having that nearly gone from my mind is like being given a new life.
>
> This began to happen intensely a few weeks ago when I finally gave up trying so hard. When I realised that everything and anything that came up in meditation was okay. It was all *okay*. Now when I sit, I feel a sense of ease, a sense of 'bring it on' towards my thoughts and emotional states.
>
> And this can't help but radiate outwards. I have definitely been a better mother. More fun, more spontaneous, more loving. Perhaps the wisest cliché is to become your own best friend.

In Tibetan, without a word for guilt, the closest translation is

'remorse' and this seems like a more constructive approach for dealing with our mistakes. In her book *A Heart as Wide as the World*, Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in the United States, explains that remorse arises when we recognise our actions as harmful and experience the pain from causing harm. Remorse, however, is followed by forgiveness and letting go whereas guilt tends to lead to ongoing anger towards yourself, a lack of forgiveness and, for some strange reason, repetition of the action that caused the guilt in the first place. The harmful action often becomes a habit because we never achieved the resolution in our minds that comes from forgiveness and letting go. Guilt keeps our minds captive and this creates restlessness. It is better to mindfully watch the painful feeling that arises from causing harm, feel the pain, then let go of the experience. If we do catch ourselves wallowing in guilt, we try shifting our attention to the underlying feelings instead of only the thoughts that feed them. Aware of these feelings we do not flee them but stay the course until we are ready to let go.

Remorse, as opposed to guilt, can be an excellent teacher. For a while I found myself snapping at Zac for not trying hard enough when he read aloud to me. One day I felt such remorse over this that I knew it would never happen again—and it didn't. It was a matter of seeing the potential karma of my actions, but also of forgiving myself.

Disappointed with my tendencies to 'lose it' with Alex, to think negatively of others or to succumb to dark-mood thinking, I can feel like a hypocrite for calling myself a Buddhist. I have found it important to remember that I need not expect myself to be enlightened yet. It helps to take a long-term view and see that, committed to a spiritual path, we grow incrementally, gradually overcoming the habits of the years. This is more constructive than beating ourselves up every time we slip. And, of course, if we can be gentle to ourselves, it is easier to be so to others.

Only with awareness

Another reason it is so difficult to overcome destructive habits is that in engaging in certain actions again and again, we have conditioned ourselves. The antidote, according to the Buddha, is in cultivating and deepening a penetrating awareness.

When we find ourselves tempted to behave in our habitual way, this is the time to practise awareness of what is going on. Ironically, these will be the times when we avoid turning our attention inward for our negative thoughts and emotions are hardly pleasant places to place our attention. Yet facing our inner world in this way is the path to freedom from the habits that enslave us.

So instead of going to the pantry when we feel unease, we might examine the inner causes of our mood. Instead of bickering with our spouse when we feel irritable, we return our attention to our bodies to see what is going on. We observe our habit of self-doubt, *without judging what we see*, or at least noticing the judgements and letting them go. We learn to watch the arising of anger, the triggers in our thinking, and in doing so, catch ourselves before we act on our anger.

Life operates according to the law of karma, the law of causality. The Buddha taught us how to intercept our karma, to influence the stream of cause and effect in our lives. We have cultivated certain seeds in our characters and neglected others, but Buddhists argue that it is perfectly possible to create the conditions for our true nature, for all that is best in us, to prevail, paving the way for peace and happiness. Some of our unskilful habits disappear in an instant through insight, some more gradually, while others, such as our clinging to our sense of self, are a life's work.

In this chapter, we look at some of the situations that most spark our conditioned responses, those situations where we try to hide from

too much examination. I have experience with that human tendency to make a convenient compartment out of areas of my life that I do not want to examine. I have seen my capacity to see certain people as 'special cases' for whom there is no call to practise patience or compassion. In the same way, I have labelled certain recurring situations—loud crying by Alex, dogs next-door barking—as 'too difficult' for a spiritual approach and given in to automatic, unexamined reactions. Spiritual progress comes from owning all of it.

We need to shine some light on our blind spots, those compartments where we are not prepared to look deeply, for these are the very areas that make us suffer. These are the areas where we cling, where we fail to let go. Driving on our roads, dealing with bickering children, locking horns with an impossible child—these are the areas where a conscious approach can, in any given moment, free us.

Driving practice

Behind the wheel, I am approaching the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It is extremely important that someone lets me into the lane on my right soon otherwise I will end up in the wrong part of the city. I see a slight break in the flow of traffic but I will only feel comfortable if this black car slows down a little to let me in. It does not and I am furious at the selfishness of the driver. I bang on my horn with a clenched fist.

I manage to slip in behind the black car just in time and I stay behind it hoping to remind the driver of his thoughtlessness. How could he be so malicious when I was in such a desperate situation? Hoping he feels unsettled at being beeped, I continue glaring just in case he looks back at me in his mirror. Suddenly I notice that his numberplate bears the letters 'ATN' and my brain does the obvious

conversion: Attention! I laugh to myself: it is a message. Now would be an ideal time to pay attention to what is really going on.

I had eagerly volunteered for the role of victim. I believed my thoughts even though they were quite ridiculous. How likely is it that the driver saw the difficulty of my situation, in the instant available to him, and wanted to make me suffer? A feasible interpretation is that he was absorbed in his own thoughts and did not notice me. Besides, even if he was filled with mal-intent for a complete stranger, then his state of mind is so dismal that he deserves only my compassion. My initial reading of the situation heightened my sense of drama providing me with a villain and an innocent party (me), but did it help me on my path to equanimity? Was it good for my karma, given that all our thoughts have the potential to become, or reinforce, a habit?

It can be a revealing exercise to observe your thoughts as you drive. For some reason, driving brings out the worst in us. We find ourselves cursing other drivers in a spirit of unchallengeable self-righteousness. The world becomes very black and white on the road. In Buddhist terms, we become caught in *dualistic* thinking where other drivers are good/bad, nasty/kind, local/foreign, male/female. We ignore all the possible explanations for imperfect driving: maybe the faltering driver in front of us is lost in a new suburb, or adjusting to tragic news, or trying to stop a violent fight between children in the back. Perhaps they are even incompetent drivers, but does this entitle us to feel angry? Can we not simply allow them to be imperfect humans?

As with any regular activity, we can make driving a spiritual practice. We have opportunities to practise kindness as we allow plenty of space for drivers who want to join our lane. Some years ago a friend of mine driving over the Sydney Harbour Bridge went to pay her bridge toll only to be told that the stranger in the car in front had already paid it for her. She was free to drive on. She was so touched by this anonymous generosity that she still feels inspired by

it years later. Yet even if we lack the means to pay others' bridge tolls, opportunities abound for showing consideration for other drivers.

Traffic is an ideal place to practise patience. Noticing my tendency to frown and grow tense at red lights, I now try to use them as an opportunity to come back to my breathing and release any tension in my body. Red lights provide an opportunity to come home to our bodies, in the present moment.

We concentrate on what the moment requires and it requires us to be present, for both spiritual as well as safety reasons. I have heard many people speak of that feeling you experience on the road when you have no recollection whatsoever of the past few minutes of driving. Lost in thoughts, we travel miles from where our bodies are—and driving might not be the ideal time for this…

The whole issue of road rage and cranky driving in general reminds me of the Buddhist analogy of the empty boat. Imagine you are rowing your own newly painted boat on a foggy lake. Suddenly another rowboat emerges from the fog and comes straight for you. It crashes into your boat, giving you a fright and damaging the paintwork. Your anger with this fool flares up as you curse and yell at him but then you notice the other boat is empty. Your anger vanishes for now it is pointless.

Buddhists use this analogy to highlight that the people 'attacking' us are also empty boats, for they are empty of the enduring, consistent self we conveniently assume them to possess. They are only acting according to their habitual reactions and conditioning. The man abusing you over your driving could be responding to the stressful day he has had, his ideas about 'women drivers', his sore back, his habit of blaming others, or his habit of expressing any discomfort he feels. We need not take the attack personally. We can still take responsibility for being careful drivers, but any abusive outburst from another driver has really very little to do with us.

Since everybody and everything is empty of a self, there is effectively nobody to blame in any situation. No behaviour occurs in a vacuum but is informed by a stream of causes and conditions leading up to it. Ignorant of this truth, we experience life as though there are people in that other rowboat who intend us harm. At certain points in our lives, we find ourselves angry with a whole string of empty boats.

Although there is nobody to blame in any situation, we still need to take responsibility for our actions, for the Buddha taught us that through awareness we can take back control of the causes and conditions in our lives that lead to our automatic, habitual responses.

Bickering practice

When we learn to meditate, our instructor will challenge us to sit still, like a mountain, capable of withstanding all kinds of weather. Being still has always been a struggle for me: too soon I start to ache and itch. For a couple of years, I dismissed the advice to sit still: I scratched my itches and made numerous adjustments to my position. Eventually, a teacher reminded me of the reason we try to sit still. It is a way of challenging the mind's usual reactivity, where it responds automatically and unthinkingly to every minor impulse and becomes agitated when it meets an obstacle.

Inter-sibling bickering provides an excellent opportunity in which to train ourselves in non-reactivity, if only because of the frequency of practice opportunities. If we allow ourselves to become too reactive, we find the constant arguments, with all their tale-telling, pettiness and melodrama, pushing us to the brink. It helps to remember, however, that it is not the bickering that hurts us but our own impatient response to it. The bickering can be crazy-making and we find ourselves intervening from a space of extreme agitation. Sometimes intervention is necessary if, for

example, physical violence is about to erupt, but more often than not, we can accept bickering as a normal, and universal, part of childhood.

Accepting the bickering may seem tremendously difficult at first, but the best way to teach our children the value of peace, and peaceful problem-solving in particular, is to model non-reactivity for them. We are sound role-models if our children see us responding to life with relative calmness and clarity rather than with hot-headedness. Besides, three angry people can only be worse than two, so why add more fuel? It is easy to overlook the fact that when we provide a hysterical reaction, children often learn to enjoy the drama and are likely to argue more to see whose side mother will take.

Benita, a Buddhist mother of three, offered this tip:

> An interesting experiment when my daughters fight has been speaking quietly and slowly. I learnt this from my daughter's kindy teacher who has a reputation for never raising her voice yet still manages to keep the class in order. There have been several advantages to this quieter approach. First, it is a way to keep myself cool-headed and mindful. Second, my daughters will sometimes automatically lower their own voices. This is so much better than having all four of us shouting. Of course, there are still the days when nothing works and the days where I snap but they are becoming more of an exception.

We can see their arguments as opportunities to teach our children lessons in fairness and consideration for others, but we can do this without becoming too emotionally entangled. Importantly, if we can learn to stop reacting emotionally to bickering, then our reactivity to irritations in other areas of our lives might also decrease.

It is worth noting, too, the way we lament to ourselves, 'This is the fifth argument this morning!' or, 'I can't believe they've spent the

whole holiday bickering!' Yet these observations about the past only feed our reactivity and bring us to the end of our patience. A more Buddhist approach would be to focus on the argument that is taking place now and what it requires from us. It may require patient acceptance, calm intervention or a stern, but mindful, reprimand, but we are more likely to remain calm if we forget the past and stay in the present.

The ideal place to practise non-reactivity is in meditation. When I first tried to resist the urge to scratch and wriggle, I noticed my mind assuring me that the discomfort would only grow worse. Sometimes it did, but more often the discomfort arose, transformed and passed away. By sitting with an ache or an itch, we learn 'I can handle this'. I do not need to panic or flee at the slightest hint of suffering. I do shift position if discomfort turns to pain, but it has increased my confidence to discover that I can cope with so much more than I originally thought myself capable.

In a typical day we might notice the impulse to snap at our family members, to bicker with others, to curse bad drivers, to keep preparing ourselves snacks when we're not hungry, to say whatever pops into our minds, or to identify with every passing thought or emotion as if it was a truth. By keeping still in meditation, we learn that we do not need to respond to our every whim. We start to take our impulses less seriously.

'Impossible' child practice

My relationship with mischievous Alex has reached crisis point. The boy is adventurous, affectionate and outrageously funny but he insists on sabotaging every detail of the daily routine, whether it is cleaning his teeth, climbing into the car or staying seated for meals. His

disregard for the boundaries I try to enforce leaves me in a state of despair. My efforts to rein him in are a joke to him. He is playing what for him is a highly entertaining game called Decimate Parental Authority. Where, I ask, are the parenting books about how to *lower* your child's self-confidence?

On an almost daily basis, he manages to drive his father or me to our emotional depths. Why is parenting Alex so hard? With more than seven years' experience as a parent, I know about the need for consistency from both parents, the need to give children attention and praise when they behave, the need for clear boundaries. What am I missing? Which Buddhist teaching applies? I can take some solace from the teaching about impermanence. This phase will not last forever. Zac had certainly been a difficult four-year-old but eventually blossomed into a sweet-natured, well-behaved boy. Still, Alex seems more extreme so we cannot afford to be complacent.

Marek and I agree to experiment with the idea of a calm approach where we never raise our voice with him. This will be especially difficult for Marek who has a high-pressure job, but we agree to try it for one week and monitor the results. The next day we do not even make it through the outrages of the morning before the idea has died a quick but certain death. What made me think we could conquer overnight our years of conditioning in responding with anger? Our relationship with Alex has fallen into a rut, where our habitual ways of relating blind us to any fresh possibilities.

Marek and I start arguing again about whether we should smack him. Marek sees it as the only option left, while I do not believe in it. At least we agree: whatever we have been doing up to now has failed and we need to be open to a new approach. With a We'll-Try-Anything attitude, I decide to call a parenting hotline for some telephone counselling.

I present my case to an older gentleman and by the time I hang up, I am inspired. Without Buddhism even being mentioned, he provides advice that resonates strongly with my Buddhist practice. It went something like this: 'I think you need to take a step back from all the drama and be more emotionally removed. It sounds like Alex is thoroughly enjoying your reactions to him.'

I have little doubt that the Buddha himself might have said something similar had I the opportunity to ask his advice. After all, the Buddha always favoured working with one's own mind over trying to change uncontrollable conditions.

Next came the specific details of a new approach: 'You don't want Alex to learn that yelling and arguing is okay behaviour,' the counsellor said. 'When he starts to push your buttons, don't shout, don't give him eye contact, use only a minimum of words. He needs to know that he cannot pull your strings.'

This sounded like the Buddha's teaching on Right Speech, from the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha counselled his followers to use speech wisely, always mindful of the power of words. I have often felt that when I rant and rave at my children, inundating them with words, they do not hear my message. How much more powerful might a few carefully chosen words be, delivered in a quiet, steady voice?

The next piece of advice sounded especially Buddhist: 'So when he flouts the house rules, send him to his "thinking chair" which is a place for him to reflect on his behaviour and whether it achieved what he wanted. The aim is for your child to have his own insights into what kind of behaviour is effective in getting him what he wants.'

I was amazed that the counsellor had used the word 'insight', one of the main aims of Buddhist practice.

The counsellor continued: 'Just sit him down and tell him that you are not going to shout at him anymore but from now on, if he

is naughty, he will go to the "thinking chair". You might have to take him there with a firm hand at first and carefully choose the words that might keep him there. Tell him, for example, that you will lock away his favourite toy for a day if he does not sit there.'

I was not so sure about whether Alex would sit. Still, I knew families that swore by the efficacy of the thinking chair, mat or step.

By the end of the conversation, I saw that I could let go of many of the negative emotions marking my relationship with Alex. It was perfectly possible to be calm and emotionally centred throughout our encounters. I could ease up. In time I discovered that most of the current parenting literature recommends parenting with a cool head where a mother avoids yelling, avoids over-reactions and avoids becoming embroiled in rapid-fire exchanges with a defiant child who has an answer for everything. I learnt about the technique of calmly but firmly repeating the same instruction to Alex, as a way to avoid never-ending debates—and as a way of boring him into submission. Of course, there would be days when I slipped back into old habits of anger and impatience, but at least now I could see a better way forward.

Months down the track I could see that I had become less emotionally entangled by his behaviour. He still seemed to be a similar character to when I made the phone call to Parentline, and he eventually threw the 'thinking chair' over the back fence, but he was definitely improving incrementally with each passing month. Still, I had uncovered a widely held but often overlooked attachment: our attachment to the view that every problem must have a solution.

We delude ourselves that we can think our way out of a problem or we see it as a matter of finding the right person to advise us. We become beggars for our problems, asking numerous people for an opinion. So often, we refuse to relax until a problem is fixed, only to discover that our inability to relax was most of the problem. The

answer in our case was not so much about giving up as in loosening up and not allowing his behaviour to bother us so profoundly.

My lack of progress in 'changing' Alex pointed to a need to surrender to not-knowing, and to being, at least for the time being, stuck. I had been treating Alex as a problem to solve, overlooking his copious positive qualities in the interests of creating someone more socially acceptable, someone more easy to live with. I started opening myself to the fact that every 'flaw' has its flipside. His defiance is also a capacity for critical thinking and independence. His taste for mischief is also his sense of humour and fun. His stubbornness will one day manifest as determination and courage. I have always felt certain that when he is an adult, he will make fascinating company.

The world needs revolutionaries, rebels, pranksters and comedians. Besides, he is only four and still has plenty of time to mature. It is my job to teach him to channel his energies into forms that do not harm others, but after that, he needs to be free to become who he truly is. These days, interspersed with periods of struggle, I enjoy his crazy little character immensely—he makes me laugh many times a day.

Toddler tantrum practice

Pema Chodron, a Canadian teacher in the Tibetan tradition, suggests that in the moment we notice ourselves falling into a familiar reaction, we pause, and try something new. She argues that the act of doing something entirely different from your old habit breaks up stale energy and all the entrenched thinking patterns around it. This might mean simply ignoring a toddler's tantrum or, as in the case of some of the more inventive mothers I have met, singing a song, doing a dance, standing on your head, joining in the wailing or grabbing the video camera. Kim, for one, took Pema Chodron's advice:

> I tend to get really unravelled by my kids' whining. I find myself lost in old thinking patterns that weigh me down, like, 'Why does this always happen to me?' and, 'Why do they have to be so difficult?' So where I would usually threaten a time-out, I am simply trying something different. I drop what I am doing, walk over and give them a big hug. Getting angry never worked, anyway.

This advice, to simply try something new, can resolve some of our long-running conundrums. For months Marek and I put up with Alex joining us in the middle of the night until it dawned on us to move his bed into Zac's room so that he would not be alone when he awoke. Problem solved. A friend went through frustrating months of begging her child to leave the playground after pre-school and get into the car, before an expensive counsellor told her, 'Why don't you just say, race you to the car?' Again, problem solved. When our children are toddlers we learn the value of distracting them away from trouble rather than fighting them, but as they grow older, a simple answer is at hand more often than we think. Such answers are more likely to pop into our heads when we are relaxed, and in a state of openness, rather than when we feel exasperated.

Kim had a breakthrough with her challenging toddler:

> One of my greatest difficulties is in dealing with my younger daughter's strong-willed personality. She has tantrums, she wants to do everything her way, she seems immune to time-outs, often daring me to give her one, and sometimes in desperation I resort to the parental behaviour I detest the most: yelling.
>
> Last night I endured a forty-minute potty episode, in the middle of the night, in which she did not really need to go but claimed she had to. She did not want to leave the toilet and was

> playing with everything in sight and even dropping things in the toilet. Finally I had to wrestle her into her pull-up and carry her screaming, kicking and flailing back to bed. I lost my temper and, sounding like a madwoman, yelled, 'Stop fighting with me over everything!!!'

For some time, Kim tried to find Buddhist teachings to guide her with such problems for she sees the difficulties as part of her practice. Amidst the struggle, she knew there was a lesson. The day after the potty incident Kim listened to a guided meditation on cassette, which required that she dwell on a difficult relationship and try to see her oneness with the other person. The speaker guided her to contemplate the Buddhist truth 'She is me'. As the Buddha taught, we are not separate from the difficult people in our lives. Separation is an illusion which hides our essential oneness. In Kim's words:

> She is me. I was totally floored by that. That is how I can handle her. She is me as a difficult toddler (and I was one), screaming and kicking. Me as the baby I am inside, needing care and nurture. Me as a crazy, irrational person who needs someone to understand me and not judge me. Me needing to feel like I can express my bad side and still feel safe and loved. I'm onto something. I've actually had a shift in how I experience her behaviour since then.

Tantrums, brat attacks, melt-downs—whatever we call our children's emotional outbursts, we need to find ways to avoid being sucked into the vortex. The challenge is to clearly see the precise moment of choice, the moment when we are at the fork in the road: I can join in all this emotional intensity or I can rise above it. If we are mindful enough to see this moment (and it does become easier with practice), then we are in a position to change our ways, our karma and our very character.

Speech practice

A Buddhist friend Judith Lai, a young grandmother who lives with her teenage granddaughter, told me about a course she completed called Nonviolent Communication, also called Compassionate Communication. Judith found the approach aligns strongly with the Buddha's teachings on Right Speech from the Eightfold Path. In fact, courses in Nonviolent Communication attract numerous Buddhists, many of whom have become certified trainers. The approach, pioneered by American Marshall Rosenberg, applies to all relationships, not least to children.

As Judith explained to me, 'When applied to children, Nonviolent Communication is a language based on recognising needs rather than relying on your power as an older or larger person. The emphasis is on fulfilling needs and fostering empathy, in both yourself and your child, instead of getting what we want through shaming and punishing.'

'So how would I go about making Alex tidy up his toys?' I asked Judith.

'Instead of starting with a judgement—*What a mess!*—you make an observation—*I can see Lego, textas and toys on the floor*. Then you tell him what your need is: *I have a need for a tidy home so that I can relax here*. Next you make not a bossy demand, but a respectful request that he tidy it up.'

'What if he ignores me or refuses?' I asked.

'Empathise or find a way to show him that you understand his feelings. You could say, for example, *I can see that you're enjoying your game at the moment so I will ask you again in two minutes*.'

I could see such a conversation with Alex lasting for a long time, but I also saw the potential for empathy to play an increased role in our communication.

Judith told me that learning to communicate this way had radically changed all her relationships and solved what she described as her lifelong problem with Right Speech. She told me she had learned to take responsibility for her own feelings rather than to start from a position of blame. Yet for myself I struggled to imagine talking that way. Although I could see the value of communicating in empathic terms, it also seemed mechanical, formulaic and unnatural.

When I next saw Judith, she gave me a booklet by Marshall Rosenberg and in it he addressed my reluctance by quoting Gandhi: 'Don't mix up that which is habitual with that which is natural.' In other words, I have been raised in a culture that relies on punishment, reward, blame and guilt, a culture that relies on power relationships. Little wonder gentler forms of language do not feel natural.

Rosenberg wrote of the potential to dehumanise children with the label 'child'. He points out that the language and tone we use to solve a problem with our neighbour is starkly different from that which we use for similar problems with our children. Of all the people we deal with in our lives, it is our children that we are least likely to speak to with respect and compassion.

We see it as our responsibility to make a child behave in a certain way. Yet demanding that our children conform to our standards ignores reality: when we use demands, many children are likely to resist because we 'threaten their autonomy'. We might be able to remember the feeling from our own childhood when certain adults pushed us around and showed little respect for our needs and feelings.

Of his own three children, Rosenberg wrote:

> They taught me that any use of coercion on my part would invariably create resistance on their part, which could lead to an adversarial quality in the connection between us. I don't want

> to have that quality of connection with any human being, but especially not with my children.

Rosenberg explains that we want our children to understand the reasons why certain behaviours are better than others. We do not want them to obey us only while we are in the same room, nor to obey us merely to avoid punishment.

Just as the Buddha saw the delusion in dualistic thinking, Rosenberg discourages moralistic language, such as right/wrong and good/bad, in favour of needs-based language. He provided examples:

- Instead of, 'It's wrong to hit your brother', we can say, 'I'm scared when I see you hitting your brother, because I have a need for safety'.
- Instead of, 'You are lazy for not cleaning up your room', we can say, 'I feel frustrated when I see that the bed isn't made, because I have a real need for support in keeping order in the house'.

Our relationships have the potential to move from a concern with power to an emphasis on empathy. Still, we are so entrenched in habitual ways of communicating that our only hope of changing is to bring consciousness to our daily communication with children. It takes effort, commitment and awareness to change our ways. It also takes patience as we continually find ourselves reverting to our well-worn paths.

Interestingly, it is easier to notice disrespect in the voices of other adults when they talk to their children ('I hope I never sound like that,' we think to ourselves) than it is to be aware of our own tone of voice. It helps to have the humility to at least apologise after our more extreme bouts of unskilful speech. This way we express a fundamental respect for our children.

Difficult-time-of-day practice

The time after picking the boys up from school and pre-school, late afternoon, is the time they are most likely to be obstreperous. This is when they squabble, complain, argue with me about television rationing or nag for unhealthy snacks—all while I try to straighten the house and prepare dinner. Day after day I found myself being emotionally dragged down by this daily low. I would dread it and, in the thick of it, react automatically and unthinkingly to all the irritations.

In quieter moments I have asked myself: What will it take for me to remember that this time of the day is part of my practice? Why do I compartmentalise it from the rest of my practice and allow it to drag me down? What will make me remember that I have choices in the way I react, choices about my own emotional responses? My problem seemed to be one of forgetting.

A breakthrough came in the form of an attractive, white Buddha statue which I positioned in the backyard after removing the redundant clam-shell-sandpit. The statue is visible from the kitchen and living room, and I have committed to putting my hands together and bowing to it whenever it catches my eye, which is often. I find this practice uplifting and enjoyable. Bowing to the Buddha is a way for me to remind myself of my own Buddha Nature and the potential to be calm and steady in my reactions. With such frequent reminders, I have been able to reduce my reactivity to daily irritations. I find myself taking them far more lightly, for I have a higher path in mind.

What we can do

- The secret to freedom from destructive habits is awareness. Pay attention.
- Practise awareness of thoughts and emotions while driving. Cultivate kindness and understanding of other drivers.
- Don't take anything too personally. Angry people are only acting according to a long history of causes and conditions.
- Practise non-reactivity to bickering.
- Avoid becoming over-emotional as you wrangle with a stubborn child. Try to keep your speech calm and quiet.
- Surrender to periods where you are stuck. We cannot solve every problem instantly. Surrender might be as close as you come to a solution.
- In the moment you notice yourself falling into a familiar habit, try something new.
- In the times when someone is driving you nuts, remember 'She is me'.
- Experiment with Nonviolent Communication which shifts the emphasis from power to mutual empathy.
- Bow frequently to a Buddha to remind yourself of a higher path.

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CHAPTER 9

how do I handle my negativity?

It is Sunday. A day of rest. A day for quality time as a family. But not for my friend Jane, mother of three. Her well-behaved children are usually the envy of her friends but they are set to make today an exception. Jane faces a morning of rushed preparations as one child is off to a party and another is to perform in a music concert. Her three-year-old is staying with her but is behind on sleep and rather grizzly. Her husband cannot assist for he must help prepare the music concert and his cover band is playing later that day—at another venue.

Fast forward to mid-afternoon: Jane has watched the music performance and picked up her son from the party but her three-year-old is inconsolable having missed his day sleep. Her son is grumpy from too much party food and her daughter sulks because her mother, busy reprimanding her sons, did not provide enough positive feedback on her musical performance. Jane speculates that her husband might also be disappointed with her as now they are running late for his gig.

Jane has done nothing but attend to the needs of her family all day yet they are all cranky with her. I speak to Jane on the phone at this point and remind her of the old adage, 'No good deed goes unpunished.' Part of the job description for motherhood is an ability to endure bad days and even, at times, a whole string of them. With husbands working long hours, many of us endure such days on our own. In our dark moments we would agree with another friend of mine who says, 'One thing having children teaches you is resentment towards your husband.'

If our thoughts and moods, or those of our partner, are negative too often, the atmosphere of the house suffers. Yet we need to ensure that our children live in a peaceful home, and ideally a cheerful one. Many children do not hesitate to inform their parents when the emotional tone of the house is out of balance, demanding to know, 'Why are you always so cranky?', or that old clanger, 'Why can't you

be more like Gemma's mother?' Children can be harsh, but at times we recognise their accusations as a wake-up call.

Times of negativity, where we feel put upon, used up or sucked dry, are an inevitable part of any mother's journey. With varying degrees of success, each of us learns tolerance for the numerous imperfections in our lives. If we do not cultivate some tolerance for the unsatisfactory, we experience bad moods. We add fuel to a bad mood by allowing ourselves to think too much, or, alternatively, by practising denial where we try to ignore or suppress what is going on inside us.

THINK LESS

We can avoid negativity by challenging our thoughts, or by shifting our perspective as discussed in Chapter 1, but we can also opt to think less. With its emphasis on meditation, Buddhism offers an alternative to modern-day 'analysis paralysis'. Most of us assume we can *think* our way out of any unpleasant situation or mood. If that does not work, then we *think* even harder: we worry. While a certain amount of rational thought can be useful, the process can turn to relentless rumination, where we turn our problems into obsessions that depress our mood. This is attachment in action, a stubborn insistence that things be other than they are.

Buddhist teachings emphasise that our problems are never so much about actual events as the way we think and feel about them. Our attitude to *dukkha* hurts us far more than the external problem itself. To think less about a problem is a way to practise patient acceptance of what we cannot change.

If we can stop the torrent of thoughts, we grow calmer, and drastically diminish the intensity of our problems. Effective problem-solvers are

not those that stew and lose sleep but those who place their attention in areas that keep their spirits high. Then, when they face their problems, they have the energy and optimism to resolve them effectively.

But how can we think less when it is our habitual response to our problems?

To think less, we might practise bringing our attention to our breath and finding that place of inner tranquillity and stillness. We can do this wherever we are, but it works best if we have practised the skill in meditation where we hone our concentration. A popular Buddhist analogy is the pool in the forest. After wind and rain, the forest pool is cloudy, full of sediment and debris. It is not clear enough to see to the bottom. We cannot clear the pool water by trying to control the contents of the water for any attempt to do so increases the cloudiness. The only way to see to the bottom is to patiently wait for all the sediment to settle. In the same way, we cannot see clearly by mere thinking—thinking was what agitated our minds in the first place—but rather through concentration on the moment. This provides the space for our minds to settle.

An alternative to focusing on the breath is what Buddhists, and all manner of meditators, call a body scan. In this we release the tension in our body, starting with our scalp and facial muscles and gradually working our way down to our toes. This meditation is not only pleasant, but a way of returning to the body, in the here and now. We can adapt it for the amount of time we have available too. Many a health professional prescribes the body scan meditation to insomniacs as a way to release the tensions of the day and settle their minds for rest.

We can share these useful techniques with our children so that they, too, will have some mechanisms to manage stress when the time comes. Zac often begs me to guide him through a body scan meditation

as a way to put him to sleep. Stealing phrases from several of my meditation teachers over the years, I speak slowly and softly to him as he lies in bed: 'Imagine your face as melting butter, your jaw relaxed, your tongue soft, any tension draining away.' Working down the body, mentioning each part, and the need to relax it, I continue: 'Your limbs feel floppy like a rag doll's as you surrender to gravity. Your tummy feels soft. Feel the points of contact between your body and the mattress.' I end the meditation by bringing his attention to the inward and outward movement of the breath. What does it feel like? What does it sound like? Where do you feel it? Can you feel it in your chest? Your stomach?... Of course, this routine can become a sneaky way for him to keep me by his side well into the night, so on many a bedtime I instruct him to run his meditation himself.

When our thoughts eventually return to our problem after the mental break provided by meditation, and from a position of spaciousness, we might even become more open to a bright idea, or a new perspective, that can transform a problem. For this reason, Subhana recommends occasionally using the end of a meditation session to ponder a question that troubles us. In meditation we have cultivated a position of stillness and calmness, which helps us to bring awareness to our thoughts and feelings around a problem. The focus is not so much on 'fixing' our problem but learning about our reactions and thought patterns. Often, a solution will pop up as a by-product of this process.

At the age of thirty, Subhana used meditation to help her decide on a new career. She had enjoyed her twenties as a midwife in the country but decided that this work was no longer financially viable. She took a six-month break in which she meditated regularly. At the end of her sittings, when her mind was clear, she asked the question, 'What should I do with the rest of my life?' The answer that kept arising was to become a psychotherapist. Fifteen years later, this is

her day job, running parallel to her responsibilities as a senior Buddhist teacher in two traditions.

According to the Buddha, unenlightened beings do not perceive reality clearly so our thoughts are, for the most part, based on delusions. This means we would be wise to take our thoughts with one massive grain of salt. Clear seeing, or insight into the true nature of reality, can only come through realising, on a deep level, the Buddhist teaching of Emptiness. For those relatively new to Buddhist teachings, an intellectual understanding of Emptiness is possible, and Appendix 1 provides one explanation. A deep and lasting understanding takes some spiritual work.

Practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

When we are in the grip of a bad mood, we have a valuable opportunity to practise mindfulness. As the Buddha taught, the clarity that mindfulness introduces to our state of mind diminishes our distress. Interestingly, even the intention to bring mindfulness to a bad mood instantly takes the edge off the emotion: it is difficult, for example, to be both angry *and* aware of it at the same time. The act of observing our experience as it happens inevitably changes the experience for the better. We do not necessarily feel like being mindful at the time we find ourselves in a negative mind state, but if we want to make progress spiritually, we eventually go against the grain and examine what is really going on within us.

But what exactly are we supposed to be mindful of? Did the Buddha provide specific instructions? In the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, seen by many as the most important of the Buddhist texts, the Buddha lists exactly what we need to pay attention to in order to practise

awareness and eventually achieve insight. On a standard ten-day Insight Meditation retreat, a teacher is likely to instruct retreatants to spend two or three days concentrating on each foundation.

Mindfulness of the body

By paying attention to our body and its sensations, we might see the role it plays in our bad mood. We may notice that we are slumped or slouched, frowning, eyes half-open, mouth downcast, breath shallow or muscles tense. We might see that these gestures create a prison of despondency. Sometimes, after feeling the sensations, simply making adjustments to any of these stances can subtly shift our outlook.

To use the Buddha's words, he challenged us to experience 'the body as the body'. The aim is to perceive our body without our usual projections of *I, me* and *mine*. This means we avoid attaching to the body as an expression of who we are, or as a source of identity. Rather, we look at it for what it is: the breath, a collection of parts, a series of movements, a stream of sensations. We investigate the potential to perceive our bodies in a way free from the needs of our ego. Is it possible to experience our bodies without a stream of judgements about its acceptability, desirability and youthfulness? With awareness of our body, all its movements and sensations, we can open ourselves up to making peace with the vehicle that takes us through this life. We can begin to take delight in the simple gift of our physicality.

Mindfulness of feelings

Buddhists differentiate between feelings and emotions. Feelings are those instantaneous judgements about the desirability of what we perceive, so we describe them as either 'pleasant', 'unpleasant' or 'neither pleasant or unpleasant'. Practising awareness throughout a

day, we notice how all day long we categorise everything we perceive with our senses, as well as our thoughts and actions, into pleasant, unpleasant or neither and, perhaps most significantly, we fully believe in all our ratings as though they reflect the truth.

Awareness of our feelings is important since our tendency to grasp for what we deem pleasant, and avoid what is unpleasant, is the fuel for our suffering. If we label a person unpleasant, then we allow her to make us angry, irritated or sad. If we label something pleasant, we might experience greed or longing. If we see something as neither pleasant or unpleasant, it often leads to apathy or ignorance. Some of our snap judgements as to the pleasantness or otherwise of what we perceive are practical and helpful, but many of them are automatic and unchallenged and prevent us from seeing clearly.

Believing our ratings, we develop attachments around what is worth having, attachments to our views and opinions, and to who is worth being with and who is not. If we could stop believing so ardently in our ratings, then we would go a long way towards alleviating some of our suffering. Yet we use our tastes and preferences to prop up our false sense of self, so letting them go can feel threatening. We cannot face losing our sense of self, even though the Buddha discovered it to be our greatest liability.

A Buddhist aims to be discerning rather than judgemental—she makes decisions based on clear seeing, based on an awareness of subtlety, complexity and her own biases. We are less likely to find ourselves in a bad mood if we can shine the light of our consciousness on our reflex to label everything pleasant, unpleasant or neither.

Mindfulness of mental states

Mental states include craving, freedom from craving, anger, calm, confusion, and whether the mind is distracted or concentrated. So

when we are aware of a mental state such as anger arising, we merely label it 'anger', and watch it, without judgement, without trying to distort it into a more acceptable state and without endlessly analysing ourselves. We do not flee, panic, fear or become lost in the anger, for such reactions complicate and escalate the emotion.

Looking on our anger, or any other mental state, with curiosity, facing it squarely with a view to understanding it, we also notice it change form and eventually dissolve. Sometimes this happens quickly. On several occasions I have experienced, and expressed, flashes of fury with Alex, yet only moments later—remembering that he is only four and seeing the futility of my wrath—I have seen more clearly, apologised and returned to the task at hand. If an insight occurs at a deep level, however, when the mind is concentrated, the personal transformation is lasting.

Part of seeing who our children are is understanding the inner demons they grapple with, but we can only do this if we are familiar with our own inner landscape. Do I understand what triggers my mind states, what thoughts and body sensations bring them about, how they change in form and eventually leave? Knowing the answers to these questions enables us to compassionately help our children when strong emotions grip them.

Mindfulness of Dharma

Mindfulness of Dharma happens on two levels. It is mindfulness of all that is happening in our present moment, within us and outside us, the sights, smells, sounds, thoughts and feelings that make up our moments. It is also mindfulness of Buddhist teachings in any moment. It includes how mindful we are throughout our day of the Three Characteristics of Existence, namely, impermanence, *dukkha* and the lack of a separate, coherent 'self' in any person or thing.

Become familiar with your visiting emotions

As we grew up, we may have been taught that our negative emotions were unacceptable. As a result, many of us came to see the less socially acceptable emotions as dangerous. Experiencing our emotions fully might suggest a loss of control, as they run rampant, wreaking havoc. Numbness, or aloofness, might have become the answer in the face of strong emotions, but confusion, guilt and fear are more likely. This led to a complex mixture of emotions, turning many of us into complex individuals. The arising of anger, sadness, sexual craving or pride are likely to panic us as we rush to substitute them with a less threatening emotion. Kim has experienced this:

> Right now I am concentrating on my propensity to flee what is unpleasant. I so want to be happy that if I wake up in a bad mood, or if my feelings are hurt, or if I am feeling angry or worried or stressed, I try to quickly make myself feel better.
>
> These days, trying to approach any emotional state with a spirit of non-judgemental curiosity, I have noticed that the first reaction I have is one of judgement: I *shouldn't* be feeling this; I should be happy/peaceful/calm/loving. Then I quickly try to attain a state of happiness/peace/calm/love. I have noticed that I often use (or misuse) my Zen 'tactics' to achieve a more desirable state of mind. I'll start counting my breaths, or following my breathing, not as a way to be in the moment, but as a way to *change* the moment. Aha! So now I am experimenting with staying with that non-judgemental curiosity towards whatever comes up. This was very useful this morning, because I woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

A misunderstanding of Buddhism might only reinforce this quashing of unexamined emotions. We might start suppressing negative emotions,

convincing ourselves, and those around us, that we are peaceful, calm Buddhist types now. We may tell ourselves that it is wrong to feel anger and other negative emotions, that now we must be content all the time. Eventually we would feel all the strain of our forced, not to mention false, contentment. Yet the Buddha was never promoting emotional passivity, nor denial.

To use modern psychological terms, denying parts of ourselves that we are not willing to work with only adds to our 'shadow' side, that part of our personality, hidden from view, where we hide the parts we do not want to own. Unfortunately, our shadow side has ways of making itself known when it becomes overloaded. It is almost a cliché in Buddhist circles now to hear about meditators on retreat who are amazed to discover how much anger had been simmering away beneath the surface.

Pushing negative emotions away empowers them. Guilt empowers them. Inattention empowers them. Rather, the Buddha advises us to *note* the negative emotion and *be with it*. We see ourselves as a guesthouse receiving visitors who do not need our judgements but our attention, before they eventually leave. For they will. We learn that this emotion is not 'who I am'—there is no need to identify with it, for it passes. The aim is to see the negative emotion for what it is: impermanent, not who-I-am, and not a separate entity but a result of certain causes and conditions. Allowing the emotion to take its course does not mean that we act on it and if we can understand this, our fear diminishes. We have also practised patience by not running away from what is unpleasant.

Many of us notice that we are less likely to meditate and less likely to look deeply into *what is*, when our emotional state is negative. Yet this can be the most valuable time to turn our attention inwards and learn. Struggling with a bout of anxiety, her husband in hospital, Kim decided to sit with her distress:

> I was reading *Everyday Zen* by Charlotte Joko Beck today and found a very relevant passage about how we should respond to suffering: we shouldn't fight it. We should accept it, absorb it, and be it: complete openness, complete vulnerability to life, is the only satisfactory way of living.
>
> My suffering at the moment is fear and anxiety. The anxiety is palpable. It's uneasiness in my stomach, insomnia and many other little physical and emotional manifestations. My initial impulse is to fight it: 'I shouldn't be anxious, I should be at peace. I need to get rid of this anxiety!' But that makes it worse.
>
> The other night during my meditation sit, I allowed myself to feel the feelings in all their miserable reality. The feelings came, the feelings went, and I wasn't overwhelmed by them. And when they went, I was able to focus on things that bring me pleasure, like playing Magnetix and building blocks with my daughter.
>
> If I had spent my mental energy trying to be peaceful, I don't think I would be as in touch with reality as I feel today. I would be trapped inside my mind, trying to bend my feelings to a preconceived notion of how I should react. I would have missed the special moments.

As Jack Kornfield says in *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*:

> Awakening to the emotions means to feel them—nothing less, nothing more. It does not require changing our feelings—feelings change all the time on their own.

When we have the courage to pay attention to our negative states, we come to a first-hand understanding of the impermanence of our emotions. On another occasion Kim wrote:

I have been going through a mini emotional breakdown lately—the culmination of many years of dealing with my husband's surgeries. It seems to have all caved in on me at once. He will need one more surgery next month to permanently remove the ostomy. So now is the time for my Zen practice to really go into action.

I have really improved my ability to observe my emotional states. I am aware that these painful moments are just moments. They may seem interminable, but they pass.

Let go

The Buddha taught that *dukkha*—suffering, stress and also low levels of unease—is an inescapable characteristic of existence and that the cause of *dukkha* is attachment. To minimise our *dukkha*, and give ourselves less cause for negativity, we need to *let go* of our attachments, the things we crave, cling to or insist upon. The journey of motherhood provides a highly effective lesson in letting go. Again and again, we let go of the need to respond to our own sensory desires—the desire to take a nap or do some exercise—in order to attend to our children.

Motherhood sees us let go of long-held opinions as we learn more about human nature and the extent to which we can influence a growing being. We learn that we have only limited influence over the temperament of our children. We learn that most boys love playing with guns no matter how peace-loving their mothers and that most children love junk food despite our efforts to channel their tastes. So much for policies such as 'No weapons!' or 'No junk food!' or, 'No obnoxious behaviour under my roof!' We might still try to wield some influence on these issues but if we cling to unrealistic expectations, we experience *dukkha*. Given time, few mothers lack experience in letting go.

Only if we relinquish our more unrealistic ideals can we be at peace. If we crave a lastingly sparkling clean house, we suffer. If we cling to a view of how our children should be—focused academics, sports-crazy extroverts, artistic musicians—we set ourselves up for disappointment or we see our children suffer from the pressure. If we expect ourselves to be perfect mothers—hosting numerous play-dates, organising craft activities, baking cakes—then we live in a state of guilt. We can only do our best and, after that, let go and live at peace with ourselves.

Ultimately, the task of parenting is a continual process of easing our grip until we finally allow our children the autonomy they require as adults. Subhana provides some long-term perspective for mothers of younger children in describing how the only way to live with her anxiety about teenage behaviour was to loosen her hold:

> Each stage of raising a child presents its anxieties and the one that has tested me the most has been the late teenage years. The boys push the boundaries, take risks and experiment, leading to many a sleepless night for me as I wonder what they might be doing. Managing my anxiety has become a practice in itself. Eventually I acknowledged the need to find a deeper place of trust in myself: I have laid the groundwork and done everything I could to guide them. Now I can only warn and advise and then leave them to live their lives. To allow them their independence—and prevent my fears getting the better of me—I have had to let go of their reins to a large degree.

As was once discussed at my Buddhist group, the process of aging can require us to escalate our capacity to let go. Along with the need to let go of older children, one woman shared her realisation that, for her, the age of forty seemed a suitable time to let go of her need

to be 'cool'. A tough task for many women is letting go of vanity. As Kim writes:

> I used to be really obsessed with my appearance. The attachment to looking a certain way took up a lot of mental space and energy. For the past two months I have felt released from that. I have come to a place where I accept myself. As long as I eat healthily and exercise, that's what is important. I'm not burdened with that heavy attachment anymore. I feel mentally lighter, and definitely happier. I have been undoing years of cultural programming about female youth and beauty.

In retrospect, Kim admits that although she feels at times like she has conquered an obsession, she can find herself backsliding in weaker moments. Subhana casts some light on this tendency to progress only to fall back again by explaining that we are more likely to sustain our insights if they arise when we are in a state of deep concentration. The more still our minds when we realise a truth, the more likely that the realisation can have a lasting effect.

The Buddha himself continued to let go, to relinquish, long after his enlightenment. 'Mara' continued to stalk the Buddha for the remaining fifty years of his life. In Buddhist scriptures, Mara plays a role similar to the devil in Christianity but is seen as a metaphor for any habits and tendencies that obstruct our way along a spiritual path. After his enlightenment, the Buddha continued to be assailed by the forces of doubt, lust, greed and other old habits, but he was able to conquer these. He had the ability to observe his own urges without fixating on them.

It is far from easy to let go of our anger, our opinions, our ego needs or our sensual desires. It is difficult to leave behind the comfort of the known and walk a path of relative uncertainty. Most difficult

of all is to relinquish our entrenched sense of who we are and make way for our less familiar true nature. What could motivate us to make the effort? How do we let go? We develop a deep understanding, especially in meditation, of the way our craving makes us suffer. To see this is to let go.

For some, meditation provides the incentive to let go. One of the teachers from my Buddhist group, Chris MacLean, has managed to relinquish a string of addictions and harmful habits over thirty years of practice, and he claims that he was moved by the glimpses of his true nature which came during meditation. He simply saw who he could be.

A true practice of Buddhist teachings is a practice of continual letting go. This is one of the many differences between Buddhism and the New Age movement with its emphasis on feeling relaxed and happy all the time. Although we take joy in our practice, we also acknowledge that a Buddhist practice, especially with its emphasis on ethics and personal responsibility, is not always about feeling good. Even though this is the end result.

When we find ourselves irritable, anxious or sad, when we find ourselves suffering, the question is 'What am I clinging to?' and then, 'Can I let go?' Given the difficulty of relinquishing our most entrenched attachments, and the fact that our attachments are too numerous to address, the Buddha advised us to concentrate on the mother of all attachments, the attachment to having a self.

We explored the teaching of *not-self* in Chapter 3 but it is interesting to notice how our attachments all relate to our false sense of an ongoing identity: wanting a permanently sparkling house relates to our ego-need to feel in control; if our children excel, we look smart and feel proud of ourselves; if our children are well-behaved, we feel like competent mothers. Our ego-grasping tendencies are behind all our attachments. We weaken this ego by refusing to buy into its products: its self-

serving thoughts, views and emotions. We notice our attachments, as non-judgementally as we can, but then let them go.

Emotional rock-bottom

You may have just had the most upsetting argument of your entire marriage. Maybe some disheartening feedback about your child has thrown you into a spin of anxiety. Or you might have reached the end of your stress limit from being too damn busy for too long. Painful emotions run amok. Your body is one huge knot of tension, your mind at the height of agitation. You might start to lose sleep, or your appetite, as your emotions spin into a downward spiral. Where can we go from this point?

I have found, at such times, that I was unable to meditate, unable to sit and be with my emotions. Buddhist mother Dianne reports the same problem:

> I usually have a great relationship with my sister and we're very close, but recently we had a huge argument over a parenting issue which spilled over into a string of 'home truths' from both sides. We patched it up soon after, but I still went home feeling angry and wounded. I tried to meditate but the emotions I sat with overwhelmed me and I couldn't concentrate. I slept badly that night and woke up feeling teary and exhausted. I knew that if I meditated, or sat with my emotional exhaustion, I would only upset myself more. With a busy day ahead, including several face-to-face interactions, I couldn't afford this.
>
> My aim for the day was to distract myself. I knew I couldn't face my unresolved emotions until I had some sleep. Still, I wondered how Buddhist my attitude was. Shouldn't I have been

> grabbing this opportunity to look into the nature of a negative emotion?

I scratched my head over Dianne's question for a few days but then I attended a public talk by Theravada monk Venerable Sujato, who clarified the issue with these words:

> Meditation isn't the answer to all our problems. For example, some problems require communication, or other forms of action. Then again, it is often said that meditation starts where psychotherapy ends.

Many a Buddhist teacher acknowledges that meditation is not recommended for people who need professional help to calm their minds. In such cases, meditation can even make problems worse. Sometimes we need to find alternative remedies for our mind state until the intensity dies down.

Subhana agrees that sitting is not necessarily the best action to take when we experience anguish:

> When emotions are running high, mindfulness is weak and emotions inevitably take over and suck us into a sea of distress. We end up re-running the source of distress again and again, and the thoughts whip up more feelings and the feelings trigger more thoughts. This is not helpful at all and can even lead to depression. What I often do when I experience strong emotions is walk, or jog, to shift my mood and avoid becoming stuck. When we are eventually ready to sit and feel our emotions, we neither suppress nor wallow in them, but connect to our ability to step back and observe.

> I also find it useful to share my distress with others where I can name my feelings and feel the safety of a sympathetic spiritual relationship with a member of the Buddhist community. Then I can feel heard, understood and responded to. Sitting in isolation can sometimes amplify the pain.

Even if we choose distraction as our coping mechanism, we can still focus on whatever task we are doing. It is still possible to distract ourselves in a conscious way, aware of the discomfort beneath the surface but giving our attention to the duties of the day. Dianne continues:

> The next night I slept heavily. By the time I woke up, the significance of the argument had halved and I could start to consider ways to resolve my feelings. To my surprise I received a two-page apology letter from my sister in the post, and I immediately sent one to her in return. Now, I was ready to put the episode behind me and resume daily meditation.

Meanwhile, another Buddhist friend, Rebecca, facing marital problems admitted to me that her tendency to distract herself—even through her trips to her ambient Zen meditation centre—were helping her to survive emotionally. Her crisis lasted a number of months, and there were definitely times when observing her emotional states was helpful. She found that bringing awareness to her emotions helped her to hold them more 'loosely'. Still, there were also days when distraction was the only answer. As Kim says:

> I think ultimately the goal of true happiness will be best achieved by learning to experience all states without judging, running or

clinging. It's really freeing to have a bad mood, or a negative feeling, come up and just let it be.

Of course, there can be no discussion of 'emotional rock-bottom' without considering the incidence of depression. According to Beyondblue, an Australian organisation addressing issues related to depression, one in four females experience depression at some point in their lives, with postnatal depression affecting 14 per cent of new mothers in Australia. A close friend, Lisa, has suffered depression and it seems to oppress her for several months, clear up, but then recur. When not affected by her illness, she is an enthusiastic, vivacious and energetic professional, but when depression strikes she becomes overwhelmed, and incapacitated, by the sudden weight of her responsibilities.

I was interested to hear about the group workshops she attended. She had read my first book, *Buddhism For Mothers*, and was surprised to find much of the advice the counsellors gave in the workshops resonating strongly with Buddhist teachings. While drugs are often necessary to treat depression, health professionals also emphasise the importance of our thoughts in treating the illness.

One of the most common approaches for treating depression is 'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy' which recognises that the way we think affects the way we feel. It teaches that we have choices in the way we perceive what happens to us and that we need to think about events realistically, rather than negatively (or even, for that matter, positively).

I noticed that Lisa has written in her workbook, in large bold print, 'It is not a *situation* that makes us *feel bad* but rather the way we *think* about the situation.' This was followed by that well-known quotation of the Buddha: 'We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world.' The

workbook contains several exercises which aim to show the link between negative thoughts and unpleasant emotions.

Next in Lisa's workbook came practice in changing negative thought patterns by disputing them, that is, replacing them with more realistic thoughts. We might for example think, 'Although that woman at the supermarket knows me, she pretended not to notice me because she doesn't like me.' But we could replace this thought with any number of more *realistic* thoughts: 'She did not see me', 'She did not recognise me', 'She did not have time to stop', 'She was too absorbed in her own problems', 'She does not feel very social when she's shopping' or even 'Must everybody adore me before I can accept myself?'

Lisa has noted in the margin of her workbook: 'It takes time to develop the habit of challenging your thoughts. Keep practising.' What Lisa's workbook does not say—perhaps it is assumed—is that we need to be aware of our thoughts before we can dispute them. We need to be capable of observing them otherwise they take us on their journey and control our lives. This is a matter of remembering, and reminding ourselves, to be watchful and aware of our thoughts.

Lisa also learnt from the workshops that another way to avoid anxiety is to live more fully in the present moment, specifically, to tune into any of our five senses to check what we are perceiving. What can I see? What do I hear? Smell? Feel? How does my food actually taste? Notice the details, the nuances, the interrelationships. In a typical day, so much of this passes us by.

As do an ever-increasing number of medical experts around the world, Lisa's workshop counsellors taught a range of meditation techniques, seeing meditation as a valuable tool in treating depression and preventing its recurrence. They saw meditation as a means of stopping the flow of negative thoughts and growing calmer. Then again, many Buddhist teachers warn that meditation might not be

helpful for every sufferer of depression—or there might be times when an alternative approach would be more appropriate.

Lisa and I chat on the phone from time to time. Her isolation, as a mother of young children, makes phone calls from those who care about her valuable. I know she is a perfectionist with harshly high standards for herself so at the end of our calls I usually tell her, 'Make sure you're gentle and kind with yourself. Be for yourself the loving mother you are for your children.'

Minimising the damage of bad moods

We needn't scold ourselves, or feel like a failed Buddhist, when we fall into a crabby mood. Moods are our internal weather and, as such, it is normal for them to change constantly. To own our bad mood, rather than blame our circumstances or other people, is an act of honesty and humility. After noticing a mood, we patiently accept its presence, reminding ourselves that, like all things, it will pass.

We also remind ourselves not to place much stock in our negative thoughts, and certainly avoid making decisions or taking action, until we are in a calmer state of mind. I have also found it useful to warn family members when my tolerance threshold is low so they do not take my over-reactions personally.

Bad moods can become habitual so if they are a persistent problem, we need to ask what we can do to protect ourselves. The answer may vary for each of us. Lisa, has pondered:

> I so wish someone had told me the value to a new mother of daily exercise. I will always wonder if I could have avoided the dark moods, which turned into depression, if I had just kept my serotonin levels higher through exercise.

As this book so far has pointed out, meditation contributes to a peaceful, calm mood. So does slowing down. And humour. Knowing what really matters in our lives, and sparing ourselves from excesses of busyness, can help. As does practising kindness, generosity and compassion for others. It is worth pausing to reflect on what it takes for us to be our best. The next chapter might help.

What we can do

- Avoid rumination. Thinking and talking are not the only ways to deal with our difficulties. Meditation helps your mind to grow tranquil and still, creating space for an answer to arise.
- Practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: body, feelings, mental states and Dharma. Mindfulness helps us learn how our moods work.
- Be with your negative emotions in a spirit of curiosity rather than a sense of panic or guilt.
- Pay attention to your craving to understand how it leads to *dukkha*. This takes the effort out of letting go.
- See a bad mood as passing bad weather of the mind. Take your negative thoughts at such times with an enormous grain of salt.

CHAPTER 10

how can I be my best?

If I had the opportunity to ask the Buddha how I can be my best, I imagine he would answer: Cultivate virtues, purify your mind, avoid harm, generate love for all beings, practise mindfulness in every moment, live ethically, act with compassion, follow the path. While we can see the value in all these ideals, we wonder how we can make them real in our day-to-day lives. This chapter explores some of the structures we can add to our lives so that we do not neglect the spiritual, as well as some general principles that help keep us spiritually fit.

One reason I practise Buddhist teachings is to ensure that I am in the best form I can be. Of course, there have been weeks over the past few years where, for all kinds of reasons, I have neglected my practice. What has always brought me back is the realisation that I have, spiritually speaking, let myself go. In such weeks, I allow people to frustrate me, I forget to be compassionate, I yell at the children disregarding other options, I become self-absorbed and then bored by the smallness of my world. Eventually I remember that I need some structures in my life to inspire me to a higher path. Structures that radically extend the boundaries of my world.

Meditate

In the earlier years of motherhood, my routine was never neat enough for a daily meditation sit. My sleep was all over the place, the housework relentless, and interruptions highly likely. My approach to meditation in those years was 'ad hoc'—half an hour here, ten minutes there, the occasional one-minute while standing in a queue, a week of daily commitment followed by a week where I barely touched the cushion. Meditating in this sporadic way helped me but eventually it was time to shift meditation up in my priorities by making a fixed space in each day.

Boldly, I announced to Marek: 'From now on, I will set my alarm clock for 6.15 and meditate for at least twenty minutes.'

Marek looked bemused at my declaration. He, of all people, knows that I am no 'morning person', that my eyes take at least an hour to fully open. Making this pledge to Marek reinforced my commitment. Now I was locked in.

'I'm happy about it if you're happy,' he said good-naturedly, but never missing an opportunity for irreverence, added, 'I just can't understand why anyone would want to get up early to think about nothing.'

'I won't be thinking about nothing,' I answered. 'I'll be concentrating on my breath—and whatever else comes up.'

'Same thing, isn't it?' he asked. 'I mean, what exactly do you get out of that?'

This conversation between Marek and I is a typical one. I could have spent more than an hour answering that question but since Marek is an engineer who respects science, I decided to tell him about a recent experiment that was in the news not long ago. In the study, Professor Richard Davidson from the University of Wisconsin demonstrated that after an eight-week course, his sample of twenty-five new meditators showed more activity in the left frontal region than the right side where stress and anger shows. They were also less likely to contract the flu.

Marek, of course, always has a scientific explanation like, 'If you believe something is going to help you, then it will. It's just a placebo effect.'

To which I reply, 'It would take more than a placebo to change the way your brain works.'

Professor Davidson had also conducted studies on the brains of Tibetan monks. Again, he found that the mental training of meditation created more activity in the left side (associated with positive feelings)

than the right (the seat of negative feelings). In other words, regular meditation can help us to adopt a state of acceptance about what we cannot change instead of a fight-or-flight mode.

Back in 2003, a feature article appeared in *Time* magazine about the growing popularity of meditation and how so many doctors are recommending it to their patients. In the article, writer Joel Stein refers to Davidson's research: 'Tests using the most sophisticated imaging techniques suggest that [meditation] can actually reset the brain, changing the point at which a traffic jam, for instance, sets the blood boiling.' The article compared the two sides of the prefrontal brain in concrete terms: 'People who have a negative disposition tend to be right-prefrontal oriented; left-prefrontals have more enthusiasm, more interests, relax more and tend to be happier, though perhaps with less real estate.'

This was not the only occasion I have had to explain my reasons for meditating to my sceptical husband. Usually I have said something like, 'I meditate to practise another way of being. When left to its own devices, my mind jumps around, criticising, worrying, craving, getting caught up in passing moods and actually believing whatever comes up as though it's the truth. When I meditate, I practise calming this flighty mind and then, throughout the day, I'm better able to recapture this calmer way of being.'

At other times I have explained that by watching my breath, I clear my mind so that next time a thought or feeling comes up, I see it more clearly. I start to notice the thoughts and feelings that keep arising.

Ever dubious, Marek will ask, 'Okay, you notice your thoughts and feelings, but then what? How does that help you?'

I tell him that this is how I become more self-aware—I grow more familiar with the contents of my mind. And people who are aware of their feelings have more control of their lives.

Psychologist Dr Daniel Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, writes:

> Self-awareness—recognising a feeling as it happens—is the keystone of emotional intelligence . . . the ability to monitor feelings from moment to moment is crucial to psychological insight and self-understanding. An inability to notice our true feelings leaves us at their mercy. People with greater certainty about their feelings are better pilots of their lives, having a surer sense of how they really feel about personal decisions from whom to marry to what job to take.

When we are aware of our feelings, and the thoughts that fuel them, we are in a position to manage them. Without awareness, our feelings push us around and run our lives. Mere awareness of negativity is often enough to dispel it—why would we knowingly cultivate a negative state of mind? Yet without conscious awareness, this is exactly what so many of us do—we can spend literally hours feeling angry or worried or sad.

The benefits of meditation have recently become measurable, observable and interesting to doctors and scientists. A number of the mothers I know who meditate do so because a doctor suggested it as a way to help deal with a medical problem, be it insomnia, anxiety, pain or cancer. Still, many of the benefits of meditation are subtle. Often, we cannot be completely sure if a raft of improvements in our lives is directly attributable to meditation. For example, my chronic insomnia has improved remarkably. Perhaps I simply grew out of my insomnia or perhaps meditation relaxed me to a point where I could sleep more restfully. I'll never know for sure but will always suspect meditation had a role.

With a meditation practice we learn to spend more time living in the present moment. We also find ourselves accepting, perhaps even welcoming, more of the moments we find ourselves in. As we become less emotionally entangled with our experience, less judgemental about what is pleasant or unpleasant, we grow more calm and patient. We find ourselves more connected to our surroundings and others, rather than caught up in our reactions. We are likely to experience increased creativity, stability and clarity.

Patience and calmness seem to be the common thread in the answers mothers give as to why they meditate. This is evident in the answers from Tara, Louise and Lisa:

- I see meditation as a way of overwriting my past conditioning. It is a chance to familiarise myself with more wholesome mind states like compassion, patience, presence and contentment. In meditation I rehearse a state of mind that I can bring into daily life.
- Meditation gives me a longer fuse so that I can be more patient with my children. It has helped me to become less knee-jerk. These days I feel more of a space between an event, say a spilled drink, and my reaction to that event.
- I just meditate for calmness. Following the patterns of my own parents I can find myself yelling at the children too often and I'm left feeling guilty. While meditating I practise accepting the moment as it is, welcoming whatever arises and creating a spaciousness of mind. It's a way of reminding myself that I can be content so much more often than I am.

In *Choosing Happiness: Life and Soul Essentials* by Stephanie Dowrick, I was amazed to read the following paragraph written as advice on how to overcome 'bad-mood thinking':

> Even optimists have fluctuations in mood.
>
> In fact, the only people I know who have very little fluctuation in mood are those who have been meditating faithfully for many years and have established an inspiring stability of mind and deep inward confidence. This is lovely to be around and provides yet another reason to meditate regularly.

As a former director of a publishing house, experienced psychotherapist and mother, Stephanie would have met hundreds of people on whom to base her observation. Her words inspired me to commit to becoming, through meditation, one of these people with 'very little fluctuation in mood'.

Relatively new to meditation, Kim, who once described herself as an introvert, found benefits from the start:

> One of the subconscious effects I have noticed since I have been meditating is that my spirit has really opened up. I keep meeting incredible people wherever I go and we have these 'exchanges'. At the park. At the hardware store. At the vet. Yesterday, while getting my hair cut, I suddenly found myself talking to someone and we just connected. Whether it's just a one-time conversation or the beginning of a friendship, we're both left with a positive feeling that I'm sure radiates out to others for the rest of our day.
>
> This keeps happening and I love it! I don't know what to attribute it to, but I have a hunch that it has something to do with a relaxed spirit of acceptance and openness cultivated during Zazen. People tune into this and it makes these beautiful connections possible.
>
> Each day I am seeing more of the value of meditation. It softens me up. I become more accepting of myself and others. I slow down, become more open, less self-conscious. It creates

distance between events and my reactions to them, making me less impulsive. I am able to see the bigger picture of experience—the ebb and flow of emotions and circumstances. It gives me stability. Sitting in the upright posture is a form of yoga, my teacher says. It is like a statement: I am grounded, rooted and open-hearted.

Zen writing

Writing can be useful when our minds feel too agitated for meditation, and, for those with long-term unresolved issues, it could provide the therapy they need before they are ready to commit to regular meditation. The page becomes a place to cultivate clear thinking and make sense of our daily worries, obsessions and delusions. Judging from the number of Buddhism-inspired writing retreats on offer around the world, writing is for many a powerful form of meditation in itself. Pen in hand, we focus on where we are now, what is going on in our minds and how we can best respond. Through writing we make friends with ourselves, find our own voice and learn to trust our own inner wisdom.

Unlike the writing we do for work or study, in Zen writing we silence the voice of our inner critic. Nothing we write is good or bad. We don't plan, edit or review. When we write for the eyes of others, our continuous evaluating can hinder the natural flow of words. In the same way, when we write to prove to ourselves that we are good writers, we inhibit our stream of thoughts. In Zen writing, we keep the pen moving as we practise *just writing*. We can start the writing session by bringing our attention to our breath, or the sensations of the body. We might return to our breath or our body sensations intermittently, as we write, as a way of tuning in to how we are feeling and what is going through our minds.

When we dump negative thoughts on the page, it often leads to a practical inquiry about new ways of seeing. Writing with a spirit of openness and curiosity, we find ourselves writing questions: What am I overlooking? Why am I responding this way? What is stopping me from letting go? By doing this, we identify the blocks and obstacles that keep us from experiencing inner peace.

Important questions arise: How is my childhood affecting my parenting? How is my own parents' style affecting my parenting? To what extent are my personal issues and experiences affecting my children? What philosophy of life am I modelling for my children? On paper, we find ourselves challenging our more self-defeating assumptions: I must finish everything today; good mothers never falter; my children must always be happy and never suffer.

While writing, we might guide ourselves to remember the brighter moments in our 'bad day': how Jack learnt to skip and skipped all the way home from school or Eliza snuggled up for a mother-daughter chat. We rediscover the value in the cliché of counting our blessings.

My own diary entries from over the years follow a consistent structure, which was never intentional, but evolved naturally. I have only ever used a diary at the times when I am in poor mental form so each diary entry starts as a lengthy whinge-session where I dump all the negative thoughts and emotions. Next come the questions investigating how my thinking could ever have become so dark or muddled. Finally, I finish with points that lift my spirits: options to investigate, or, a list of the current sources of joy in my life.

As I have found for myself, such writing sessions can become the Buddhist practice of letting go of our attachments, or at least of some of the intensity around them. Interestingly, reading over my own diary entries, I find a common theme is the need to be patient and wait for events to unfold in their own time, instead of demanding instant

fulfilment. My diary entries suggest that attachment and aversion are clearly the source of *dukkha*, just as the Buddha taught.

Carrying a notebook around throughout her day, Kim enjoys the benefits of a particular form of Zen we know as 'Haiku'. She says:

> I was drawn to Haiku because of the way it trains me to be mindful of the ordinary. Haiku is a short, one-breath poem, consisting of moments of being alive, conveyed through sensory images. Most contemporary Haiku is not of the traditional five-seven-five syllable structure. The point is to crystallise an instant in its fullness. It aims to capture the specialness of 'mundane' moments.
>
> Through Haiku, I don't dwell quite so much inside of myself, but rather focus outwards on the universe, nature, reality. I become more aware of the treasures around me and thus become, little by little, happier.

Kim shared some of her Haiku poems with me. Here are three moments that might have gone unnoticed had she not been open and aware:

> Tears dry
> As she rides
> With her head out the window.
>
> —
>
> Husband away
> His cats look at me
> And say 'you're not him'.
>
> —
>
> Her sparkling blue
> Fingernails against
> The white sand.

Zen drawing

For children drawing is as natural as singing and dancing, but as they grow older most eventually stop. As adults we can learn the lost art of non-judgemental drawing from our children. Just as in Zen writing we suspend our inner judge to journey inwards, so in Zen drawing we are free of rules, standards or concerns about whether we have any talent. We do not need an eraser. There are no mistakes.

We might choose to draw the face of a family member, a piece of fruit or a pile of clothes. We do not restrict ourselves to objects traditionally seen as beautiful, but give ourselves the opportunity to enter into a relationship with any object free from our usual judgements of pretty or otherwise. Absorbing our object with full attention, as we record its lines and contours, we might barely even glance at our paper. Intimately familiar with our object, we capture every aspect—its texture, angles, the way it catches the light.

With a Zen approach, we aim to become one with the object we draw. In the words of Frederick Franck, author of *Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing: Meditation in Action*:

> When the eye wakes up to see again, it suddenly stops taking anything for granted. The thing I draw, be it leaf, rosebush, woman, or child, is no longer a thing, no longer my 'object' over and against which I am the supercilious 'subject'. The split is healed. When I am drawing leaf or caterpillar or human face, it is at once de-thingified. I say yes to its existence. By drawing it, I dignify it, I declare it worthy of total attention, as worthy of attention as I am myself, for sheer existence is the awesome mystery and miracle we share.

Drawing provides a welcome rest from language, after days of reading, writing, speaking and listening, as we stop the continual separation into categories that language relies on and practise a way of seeing the world which honours our oneness with all things.

It is not only Zen Buddhists who see the spiritual value in drawing. In the 1800s John Ruskin, an artist, scientist, poet and philosopher, dedicated years to writing books about sketching and running his popular courses in drawing. By bringing people to notice their surroundings, Ruskin taught that sketching is a means to live more fully in the present. The neglected skill of drawing, far from being the preserve of the artistic, is the birthright of every human. He even argued that drawing was more important to an education than writing, because only drawing could teach us to see and to notice: 'To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, all in one.' For Ruskin, one of the earliest environmentalists, drawing was a means of connecting with nature. As he writes in his book *The Elements of Drawing*:

> I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love nature, than teach the looking at nature that they may learn to draw.

Adopting a sketcher's perspective, we give more time to our surroundings and look more deeply. Sketching a tree, we start to see the constituent parts, how they connect to each other, but also the tree's history and its future course of growth. We increase our understanding and appreciation of an object we might normally overlook. Ruskin lamented the invention of cameras, noticing that tourists allowed their cameras to do the looking for them. Travellers stopped taking the time to soak up the atmosphere and notice the details because they could capture it with the snap of their camera. A sketcher, on the other hand, rather

than taking a photo of a landscape, would pause and ask, 'What is the texture of the grass?', 'Are these stones round or angular, rough or polished?', 'What are the shapes of the shadows?'

Backpacking in Indonesia in my twenties, I recall former travel companions sitting down with their diaries to sketch a scene—mountains, rice fields, lakes, details from daily life. I envied their talent but my perceived lack of ability need never have stopped me from dabbling in an experience of wordless oneness. How many experiences of wonder and awe did we miss during past holidays because we never stopped to look deeply and inquiringly as a sketcher would? Many a backpacker just clicks their camera a few hundred times and arrives home to claim she 'did' Europe. Fortunately, as Buddhism teaches us, we need not travel the world to discover our capacity for wonder and awe for we are surrounded by the wonderful and the awe-inspiring in any given moment.

As with the non-judging Zen approach, Ruskin challenged his students to find the beauty in ordinary experience. He speaks, for example, of how the wise man is capable of noticing a bundle of parsley hanging over the edge of a butter-woman's basket.

Subhana decided to make a practice of such clear seeing and says:

> After ten years of meditating with my eyes shut, I decided it was time to bring awareness to the act of seeing. This is a legitimate Buddhist practice known as purifying a sense door. Sight is one of the six sense doors in Buddhism which include the five senses plus consciousness. Some people choose to do listening practice where they bring awareness to all they hear but like most people I am visually oriented. I find that colour, shape and form evoke quite conditioned responses in me. I practised clear seeing in meditation by concentrating on my breath but with open eyes, spreading my

awareness to my field of vision and I tried to carry this awareness over to everything my eyes perceived throughout my day.

I started this practice of clear seeing with the aim of reminding myself of my interconnectedness or oneness with other people and objects. The practice exposed the duality in my thinking, the habit of seeing myself as the subject 'here' viewing an object 'out there', overlooking the essential oneness and interdependence. First I observed my labelling of objects, the identification, and then the reaction according to whether it was pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. It was a chance to become less caught by visual objects, and experience less attachment and aversion towards objects including the appearance of people.

Acknowledge the mind/body connection

Meditating, drawing, writing—none of these can work to their full potential if we have neglected our bodily needs. In the words of the Buddha, 'To keep our body in good health is a duty, otherwise we shall not be able to keep the mind strong and clear.' After his enlightenment, this is what he told the five ascetics with whom he had once lived. He was explaining the Middle Way, in this case the path between palatial excess and the ascetics' denial of their bodily needs through fasting. Neither fasting nor feasting were helpful on a spiritual quest. Only after telling the ascetics to look after their health for the sake of their minds did the Buddha teach the Four Noble Truths.

As mothers, we have learnt, in most cases the hard way, the importance of rest, sleep, a healthy diet and sufficient exercise. Through his words to the ascetics, the Buddha taught that we cannot afford to leave our bodies behind when we embark on a spiritual path. Our bodies need to come along with us. Despite this, it is a common trap

of spiritual life to neglect the basic needs of the body. Jack Kornfield in *A Path with Heart* writes:

> After ten years of focusing on emotional work and the development of the heart, I realized I had neglected my body…I discovered that I had *used* my body rather than inhabiting it…Without mindfully attending to our bodies, we may become so busy in our daily lives that we lose touch with a sense of appropriate diet, movement, and physical enjoyment.

We tend to see the spiritual and the physical as two separate compartments of our lives. Yet it is so difficult to practise spiritual virtues such as patience when we are short on sleep. It is easier to be generous when we have energy. Easier to be peaceful when we nourish ourselves with good food. Easier to be calm when our bodies are alive with those feel-good endorphins released during exercise. Easier to see humour when our bodies are comfortable abodes. Exercise, almost magically, endows us with a sense of perspective on our problems, providing an effective means to lengthen a short fuse. It allows us to return to our problems refreshed, even questioning what we were ever so tense about.

Our thoughts and moods are highly linked to how we treat our bodies. We are all at our best when we have exercised, slept well and eaten nutritious food. I know that I am particularly sensitive to these factors and that when I neglect my health I am more likely to be irritable and snap at the children. More than a teaspoon of caffeine a day gives me the shakes and insomnia. Junk food makes me lethargic. I need daily physical activity, whether it is a few yoga stretches or a quick walk, or I'm bouncing off the walls with restlessness. My body is relatively 'high maintenance' but at least its sensitivity allows me to see clearly the link between my moods and how I treat my body.

Subhana has always been keenly aware of the need for a holistic approach to her practice. She has taught yoga in the past but these days uses a combination of jogging, walking, weights, aerobics and even 'Jam Aerobics'. She describes the latter as choreographed aerobics which uses moves from hip-hop, funk and Latin American dancing. Finding herself among a small minority of older women in this class, she laughs and claims it has the additional spiritual benefit of forcing her to drop her ego.

Many women who struggle in their relationship with food find it helps to bring mindfulness to their eating patterns. With awareness, they have seen what lies behind mindless eating. They find that certain thoughts or emotions send them to the pantry or the corner shop, as surely as guilt follows binge. Often they find a feeling of emptiness, a void within, that seeking happiness from the outside world cannot fill. Some come to recognise this feeling of dissatisfaction as a spiritual hunger.

For many, the turning point comes when they stop seeing their diet as a means to thinness and start to see it as a means for peace with themselves. Food is, after all, a source of nourishment and joy and wise eating can be part of a spiritual practice. Most of us stop paying attention to the festival of changing tastes and textures after only one mindful bite. Yet if we can practise being present to all the sensations of eating throughout more of the meal, we begin to transform a compulsive relationship with food into an enjoyable one. Many a Buddhist pauses to remember that our access to such a wide variety of food is a cause for gratitude towards the squillions of workers involved in the process. A reminder of our interdependency, every meal is sacred. Perhaps we could take some of our meals more slowly.

Melanie expressed her relief over coming to a dietary turning point:

> The strict, authoritarian laws which I used to enforce on myself about what, and how much, I could eat seemed to divide my personality into two: a bossy parent and her naughty child. In retrospect I can see that the naughty child usually ended up winning. These days I settle for moderation in my eating—I eat well, make space for the occasional treat—and put my energy into being at peace with myself. I have found compassion and gentleness towards myself are far easier to live with than the inner diet tyrant I used to put up with.

Kim also found that compassion was essential to moving past self-defeating obsessions with body image:

> Why can't we accept our bodies? This past weekend, it was extremely hot and humid, and two of my friends would not swim at my house because they were ashamed to put on a bathing suit. I've struggled since my teens with body issues but the heat yesterday was so overwhelming, I couldn't imagine anything preventing anybody from getting in the water.
>
> What kind of culture creates a situation where wonderful, kind, accomplished, wise women feel this level of hatred against their own bodies? One of my friends used the words, 'I disgust myself'. I remember that feeling. It is only in the past few months that I have started to accept my body—and I'll be thirty-eight years old soon! I'm still not totally there. I'm just more accepting than I used to be. The edge of the hatred is gone. In retrospect it seems a ridiculous waste that I spent a large part of my adult life hungry and wasting my mental energy thinking about food.
>
> How different the world would be if people loved themselves. My Zen practice has helped more than anything else has. Acceptance

is an important part of this path. We accept thoughts and feelings as they come and go. We don't judge—or at least, we notice any judgements and let them go. We see that we are more than readings on a scale or wrinkles on a face. We accept and love ourselves. I wish this for myself and everyone.

Be kind to yourself

As our spiritual teachers, young children do a fine job of modelling self-acceptance for their self-doubting mothers, as Kim discovered:

Every night as I put my kids to sleep I whisper something in their ear. Usually it is something like, 'I love you so much', or, 'I am so lucky to have you'. Sometimes I tell them, 'You are perfect, absolutely perfect.' Last night I said this to my daughter, and she said matter-of-factly, 'I know.' She knows she is perfect. I stopped, stilled by this realisation. The way she said it, not vainly or sarcastically, but as though she fully understands that she is complete, lacking nothing, exactly as she is. She understands a fundamental truth of existence. A truth that I am working hard on understanding for myself.

It is hard for a number of reasons, the main one being my Christian background. It is deeply ingrained in me that human beings are fundamentally sinful, flawed and in need of redemption. But Buddhism teaches a different view of human nature. I think it will involve a complete shift for me. When I saw my daughter acknowledge her utter completeness, her beautiful perfection, it seemed to be the way it should be for all of us.

I remember asking a younger Zac, 'Why are you so beautiful?', to which he answered, 'I just am.' Years later, Alex's reply to the same question was, 'I'm not beautiful, I'm handsome.' I started asking other children and never heard an answer that even came close to denying their own beauty. Answers included, 'Because I'm Aidan', 'Because I put gel in my hair this morning' and even, 'I was born like this'. My favourite answer came from a small boy with two older brothers: 'Because of my mother.' He walked over to hug her leg and added, 'She's my best boy.'

It may, at first, seem like an odd question, but it can be worthwhile asking: What is my general attitude to myself? Am I a good friend? Compassionate, forgiving, patient? In a society where most mothers are in the habit of punishing themselves with negative self-judgements, addicted to feeling guilty, I suspect we would all run a mile from any 'friend' who treated us the way we treat ourselves.

One reason to be kind to ourselves is that it improves our relationships. Just as the Earth that produces our crops needs care and attention before it can give, only when we ourselves are psychologically nourished can we give to others with a generous heart. We have all noticed that those who are not comfortable with themselves are more likely to treat others poorly. Workplace bullies, compulsive criticisers and back-stabbers—these people do not feel secure in themselves. They may exhibit a false pride or smugness on the surface, but their lack of compassion for their own inner world, usually in the form of denial, is likely to be a significant cause of their mistreatment of others. The Buddha said that if we truly loved ourselves, we would never harm another. For in harming another, we diminish who we are.

Interestingly, in teaching loving kindness meditation, the Buddha instructs us to start with ourselves before generating feelings of kindness for all living beings. As women accustomed to practising guilt, the

idea of cultivating love and affection for ourselves, of easing up on our usual demands, seems self-indulgent, unjustified and completely foreign. But the Buddha said, 'If you search throughout the entire universe, you won't find anyone more deserving of love and affection than yourself.'

Trust yourself

If we have paid deep attention to our children, we are well-equipped to follow our own instincts when we make decisions about them. We might ask questions such as how much television to allow them, whether to buy a PlayStation, what their diet should include, how many after-school activities they do, how hard to push them, when to explain the birds and the bees—all the answers can come from our own inner wisdom shaped from hours of close attention to our children. We still do the research and engage in discussions, but the final decision needs to come from our own sense of what is wise. Many Westerners are attracted to Buddhism for the way it honours the judgement of the individual. As the Buddha said, do not merely follow dogma but rather, 'know yourselves what things are praised by the wise and lead to benefit and happiness'.

With shelves groaning under the weight of all the parenting books in today's bookshops, modern mothers might find it hard to imagine that a mere generation ago most mothers knew of only one parenting book: *Dr Spock's Baby and Child Care*. At close to a thousand pages, and covering birth through to adolescence, this 'bible' effectively had the whole market to itself from its publication in 1945 and throughout almost two decades. These days the number of books telling us how to raise our children suggests a crisis of confidence in our own abilities.

For the first time in history, we are turning to so-called experts to tell us how to mother.

If a parenting book is a tool for reflection and a source of fresh ideas, then this is not a problem; but if we slavishly obey the experts and ignore our own instincts, then we might have retrenched the best expert alive today on what is best for our own children. Dr Spock sounds so respectful when he says:

> The most important thing I have to say is that you should not take too literally what is said in this book. Every child is different, every parent is different… Remember that you are more familiar with your child's temperament and patterns than I could ever be.

After this is stated in the introduction, the first chapter begins with the heading 'Trust yourself' and then the words, 'You know more than you think you do.'

Once we have made our various decisions about what is best for our children, we avoid clinging to our viewpoints, or using them to identify ourselves or separate ourselves from other mothers. If our views morph into attachments, then they only add to the *dukkha*, to the stress in our lives. If our views become rigid stand-points, then we might overlook any need to adjust them for changing circumstances. We might also overlook our mistakes if we become attached to views that seem to justify them.

I have noticed in myself a tendency to check what other mothers are doing when it comes to making decisions. When doing this, I am barely aware of my assumption that if everybody else is doing something then it must be okay. But taking our cues from the world outside us is not necessarily in our children's interests. We always need to question the movements taking place in society at large to check whether they reflect what we believe to be best for our children. After all, our

society touts values that we might not want our children to share, such as the overvaluing of wealth, achievement, youth, fame and beauty. It is often worth doing the exact opposite to what the rest of the world seems to be doing.

As well as helping us to make wise decisions, paying attention to our children is also a source of joy. Many women agree that the most satisfying moments in motherhood are when we watch our children sleep. It is a chance to feel peaceful in their presence, to feel gratitude and to enjoy their beauty. Busy as we all are, it is easy to fall into the trap of only interacting with our children when they need us to. But when we allow ourselves to simply watch their play, have a chat with them, or take on their perspective for a few moments, we find that the pleasure we feel late at night watching them sleep is available to us at many times throughout the day.

What we can do

- Motivate yourself to meditate by studying the many benefits.
- Experiment with Zen writing where you silence the voice of your inner critic and connect with your inner voice.
- Try drawing, regardless of whether you have a 'gift' for it, as a way to practise looking deeply and becoming one with other objects.
- Remember that taking care of the health of your body is an important part of a spiritual practice.
- Pay attention to the experience of eating after that first mindful bite.
- Pause to feel gratitude for all the people responsible for bringing this food into your life.
- Recognise any inner battle over your diet and try compassion and gentleness.
- Learn from young children as they model self-acceptance.
- Realise that only if you are kind to yourself can you be fully kind to others.
- Know that if you have been paying close attention to your child, you are equipped to make decisions using your own instincts.

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conclusion

At times, writing this book—doing the research, reading Kim's journal, speaking to mothers—I have realised that it is all words. I can see the risk of taking refuge in the world of language, communication and ideas, only to miss the point. A Buddhist practice is a path, something you *do* rather than something you continuously discuss and read about.

Books and talks are helpful but can also become a distraction or even a substitute for mindful, compassionate living. As the Buddha said, the teachings are a raft we use to navigate our way to another shore. On arrival, we dispense with the raft. We avoid attachment, the cause of suffering, even attachment to Buddhist teachings.

A metaphor we often hear in Buddhism is that the teachings are merely 'the finger pointing at the moon'. To be truly awake is in fact beyond words, language and teachings. These can only point the way to the truth, and we should never mistake them for the actual truth. Since I am not a Buddhist teacher myself, and since in this book I mix teachings from all three traditions (hardly the done thing in Buddhism), I feel that the words I write are, effectively, the finger pointing at the finger pointing at the moon. While a book can be a

useful introduction to Buddhist teachings, those who seek a deeper practice need to find a teacher, or, as in my case, several, or a spiritual community where they can learn about the wordless side of the Buddha's message.

It is a little mischievous of me to call my books 'Buddhism for mothers' in that the teachings of the Buddha do not amount to an 'ism'. They are not about beliefs we need to adopt. The Buddha taught that our own lives provide the raw material for our spiritual journey, that we should make up our own minds about each teaching and not rely on an external God, religion or philosophy to do the work for us. The Buddhist challenge is to turn our attention inwards onto our own experiences instead of relying on some external authority to deliver the answers. Ultimately, we look to our own lives, using mindful awareness, not to books, experts or even meditation techniques.

Meditation is the ideal way to turn our attention inwards. On this point, I was not able to continue my early morning meditation sits for more than a fortnight but I did manage to squeeze more sittings into my week—daily, in a good week. I asked my local doctor whether I was doomed to be groggy and useless in the mornings for the rest of my life. He answered that he used to have the same problem but after doing shift work in hospitals he learnt, from necessity, to be awake from the moment he awoke. It was a matter of breaking a habit of the body and re-training. Maybe next year when both the boys are at the same school five days a week, I will again attempt the early morning sit.

Until then, I will continue meditating, attending my Buddhist group, and trying to apply Buddhist principles to my life with a view to becoming who I truly am. As a lay Buddhist living outside a monastery, there will be days when I neglect my practice, times when I harbour doubts about my capacity to practise, and moments when I question the practice itself. I can see, however, my commitment to

practice increasing over time, as progress becomes clearer. My growing confidence in the path is slowly extinguishing moments of doubt.

The sheer logic of a Buddhist practice will always bring me home: I may as well show up for my life in the present moment rather than drift off in thoughts of the past and future; I may as well cultivate compassion for everyone I meet rather than surrender to pettiness or anger; I will be happier with a heart that is open and loving than one contracted and exclusive. Why live as a perpetual slave to my ego, my false contruction of the self, when peace, calm and joy are so available?

appendix 1: the teaching on emptiness

When we are angry, or when we dislike somebody, we develop tunnel vision and perceive only the narrowest slice of reality. We wholeheartedly believe in our false vision. Yet the stories we create, the projections we inflict, come from a lack of understanding of the way things truly are. The difficulties we experience are due to our own minds. If we can change our minds, we lose many of our problems. One of the reasons our minds create so much trouble is that we perceive our life in very concrete, rigid terms. We see people, including our family members and our own selves, as solid, separate and coherent. We see objects, those we desire and those we avoid, in a way that we never think to question.

Based on these false assumptions, we pursue a kind of happiness that does not exist and our vain efforts lead us directly into *dukkha*. Sitting under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha realised what Buddhists call the 'Perfection of Wisdom', or the deep understanding that all phenomena, including ourselves, are empty. Emptiness is the ultimate nature of reality—but despite this, it is very difficult to understand on a deep, life-changing level.

Emptiness does not mean that phenomena do not exist, for they clearly do. Rather, they do not exist in the way we think they do, as separate, enduring objects. According to the Buddha, no phenomena is this concrete and reliable because all objects lack the fantasised views we direct their way. All matter lacks a self, an essence (some Buddhists say all objects lack a *self-nature* or *inherent existence)*. Since we see everything through a haze of delusions—such as our clinging to a self and all our attachments to support this self—everything we gaze upon is a mirage, an illusion. This being the case, Buddhists aim to develop their understanding that no person or object or situation is worth craving.

Our perception of objects is completely dependent on our minds. Objects do not exist 'from their own side'. Other people might see an object in a completely different way to you, bringing their own false projections. Think back to the projections we made onto former boyfriends, cars, jobs, homes or even some of our clothes, CDs and homewares. The boyfriend would answer a range of physical and emotional needs, the car would bring us mobility and independence, the job would bring us respect, the home meant security. We pasted our beliefs onto all these objects. Different people might have pasted different beliefs depending on their minds.

We are usually blind to the way objects depend on our own minds, but we also fail to see the way they are dependent on a stream of causes and conditions. The Buddha taught that no object or person can exist without its causes. Nothing can exist in a vacuum. A human would die instantly if all conditions for life suddenly disappeared. All things depend on other things and all human beings rely on other human beings—not least their parents and ancestors.

So, to summarise the teaching so far: All phenomena depend on our mental projections and on their causes. They do not exist as the solid, separate objects or people we usually perceive. But they also

depend on their parts. Remove a leg from a table and it is no longer a table. Remove the steering wheel from a car and neither the steering wheel, nor the remaining parts, are the car. In the same way, no part of our body could be called 'the body'. Our arm is not our body. Our head is not our body. Therefore, if no body part can be our body, then neither can the whole collection of these parts be our body.

In *A Heart as Wide as the World*, Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg shares an example of how perceiving the component parts of an experience gives us a clearer understanding of what is. She managed to overcome a fear of the considerable physical pain she experienced during meditation:

> Rather than viewing [the pain] as a monolithic entity taking over 'my' body, I saw the pain as a kaleidoscopic world of ever-shifting sensations: tingling, tightness, heat, throbbing, and a thousand other qualities of sensation. These were what I had been lumping together and calling 'pain'. By seeing these component parts—all in essence coreless and ephemeral—I finally learned to explore the texture of pain rather than feeling crushed by it.

Sharon goes on to explain that we can also see the component parts of emotional pain and, in so doing, reduce our fear of it as a solid 'thing'. Dejection, for example, is in fact 'some moments of anger, some of mourning, some of sadness, and some of hopelessness', each of these components changing form and passing away. Such an understanding puts us into a radical new relationship with our emotional states.

With even a partial understanding of the emptiness of all phenomena, a Buddhist is aware that words, or any names we use to designate an object, or a person, are only *conventions* and cannot capture the true

nature of an object—only its appearance to our mind. Language is a convenience that helps us to communicate. The names, or designations, we use for phenomena are useful concepts but they hide the Ultimate Truth. In the same way, spiritual teachings are merely a mass of words and cannot represent the Truth itself for the Truth is beyond words. Buddhist teachers like to remind us that the teachings are 'the finger pointing at the moon and not the moon itself'.

The first few times we hear this teaching about Emptiness it is likely to slip straight out of our minds as we revert to our habitual, expedient ways of perceiving our world. We need to find our own way to remind ourselves of this truth so that we can start to live it. Mindful of the Emptiness of all phenomena, even those new to Buddhist teachings can start to take the stories of their life less to heart. Nothing is as it at first seems.

Acknowledging that our interpretations of events, and our reactions to them, will inevitably have little to do with the ultimate nature of those events, we can question our own intensity. In the same way we can begin to question the solidity of all the objects of our attachments—is anything really worth clinging to when it is only a projection of our mind, which does not exist on its own and is only really a collection of parts? In fact, we would do well to question all day long, bringing a spirit of curiosity and inquiry to every aspect of our lives. Never accepting our interpretations at face value.

The realisation of *Emptiness* and, in particular, the Emptiness of the self, are the realisations to end all attachments. The teaching is complex and there are plenty of aspects that I have not covered here. It is also important to realise that an intellectual understanding of the teaching is nothing compared to the deep insight which arises from high levels of concentration in meditation.

appendix 2: stopovers on the way to peace

Extract from 'Stopovers on the way to Peace' by Sharon Verghis, published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 January 2002.

STOPOVERS ON THE WAY TO PEACE

If I had one year to live: Subhana Barzaghi

Subhana Barzaghi spoke to Sharon Verghis

The noise of the aircraft that flew over the Sydney Zen Centre seems unable to disturb the rare quality of stillness that emanates from Subhana Barzaghi. The mother of two is spiritual director of the centre, a role combining therapist, teacher and bereavement counsellor. One course she gives is called 'If I Had Six Months To Live'.

So it's not surprising to find that her own life is guided by an eternal truism: embracing death sets you free. Buddhism, a faith she embraced as a 19-year-old after being raised as a devout Christian, is

not coy about articulating this link, she says. Freedom has come, too, from swapping concepts of original sin and a judgemental God with original goodness and forgiveness. 'The Christian God is a judgemental one. Buddhism believes we are all pure from the beginning.'

Barzaghi was raised in Brisbane but left as soon as she could, taking the well-trodden path in search of spiritual enlightenment to India. She ended up in Tibet, where she spent two weeks at the Kopan monastery in contemplation of just one thing—the meaning of death.

'That was very challenging,' she says dryly. 'But the lamas do that because it encourages you to live every moment of life as if it was your last moment. Contemplating death . . . creates liberation and the desire to live your life to its fullest potential.'

Cloaked in newfound serenity, Barzaghi had a chance to put these lessons into practice soon after leaving the monastery. On her flight back to India, high above the Himalayas, her plane plunged into a cloud bank, becoming suddenly a frail tin can buffeted by storms. 'As we flew, the fear of death came up very strongly,' she recounts. 'Then the plane broke through the clouds and suddenly the vast plains of India appeared. I felt exhilarated because I had faced death, lived the last moment of my life, and now I was going to live after all. It helped to appease that fear. Even now, years later, I still feel no fear.'

She has since sought experiences to strip death of its intellectual face, make it primal and real. She describes a pivotal moment: asking a boatman to take her to the burning ghats of the Ganges every sunrise, forcing herself to confront its acrid reality and visceral stink. 'It was a hard practice to see burning bodies, to watch women wailing with grief. It's the harsh, stark face of death. But I would go back totally in love with life, cleansed and joyful rather than depressed.'

Another experience closer to home delivered a more prosaic message that death needs to be liberated from the bureaucrats. While at Bodhi Farm, a bush utopia she created 20 years ago outside Lismore, Barzaghi

took up a fight with the local council to be allowed to bury a close friend, Sylvia, in an open-coffin funeral on the farm. Although it was not legally permissible, she won, but only after much heartache, conducting a simple ceremony around the handmade coffin decorated with roses and mandalas.

The whole situation said a lot about how we view death, she says. It is sanitised, made separate and sterile, assigned to the care of the funeral industry and masked by the formalities of burial rites. 'In many ways, death seems to be covered over with a white sheet… perhaps because of fear of death, of what it means, because it does challenge some basic perceptions of life. Generally, Western culture does not do death well.'

Barzaghi teaches classes on how to handle grief, attended by hospice workers, doctors, chaplains, nurses, social workers and people who need to exorcise their feelings of deep bereavement. In line with Buddhist tradition, she advises some to spend time with the dying and terminally ill. Her concept of an afterlife is as structurally clean as a Zen temple. 'We are all totally unique and everything ends with us.' It offers as much comfort to her as the Christian promise of eternal life may do for others.

Having made a business of understanding death, Barzaghi is prepared to embrace life. [If she had six months to live] she would return, she says, to Bodh Gaya in northern India, the spiritual heartland of Buddhism where she first encountered the faith, also a site of 'a magic stillness' where she had a profound awakening of the heart. She would also go to Australia's Central Desert and Uluru, a deeply spiritual place that has touched a deep chord in her, and spend more time with her children and loved ones. But, in effect, there would be no major shifts or searching. Why? 'I am at peace with my life,' she says simply.

Most others, though, do not wish to go quietly into the night. The desire to make a grand statement, end life with a flourish, is

almost instinctive, forming a common thread in the answers of the people she talks to at the centre.

'About 90 per cent of them say they would resign from their job, and most want to spend time with family. Then there are those who say they would jump off a plane or do something similarly adventurous. Others say they would make special gifts, stories and histories that they could give to loved ones.'

Ultimately, she says, what matters is not the 'small distractions', the fluctuations of the stock market or office politics, but how you answer a trinity of questions: have you loved well, have you lived life and have you sought, in some form, to understand the meaning of God.

'These are underlying questions we all seem to be struggling with, in all cultures and all societies. If you can answer "Yes, I did love well, I did live life", then you die with peace and ease, I believe.'

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