

Staying at Home, Dancing with the Universe

By Amaragita

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Talk given at Buddhafield Festival, 2006

Introduction

[Introducer speaking]

Ok, so this is Amaragita.

[Clapping]

[Amaragita speaking]

We'll just do it together, so it starts:

[Amaragita singing (Audience repeating)]

In, out (in, out)

Deep, slow (deep, slow)

Breathing in, I calm my body (breathing in, I calm my body)

Breathing out, I am smiling (breathing out, I am smiling)

How wonderful is now (how wonderful is now)

[Everyone singing]

In, out

Deep, slow

Breathing in, I calm my body

Breathing out, I am smiling

How wonderful is now

In, out

Deep, slow

Breathing in, I calm my body

Breathing out, I am smiling

How wonderful is now

[Amaragita speaking]

Just do a three breath meditation.

[Introducer speaking]

So this is Amaragita: songstress, wayfarer, mother – what else? Human being. “Stay at home, dance with the universe.” Amaragita.

[Clapping]

[Amaragita speaking]

Welcome, thank you for being here. So I just thought I'd share with you some questions and thoughts about parenting as a spiritual practice. But actually, just before we start, I thought I'd like to ask people – anyone who's got anything there – just to say (those of you who are parents) – what's a current challenge that you're in right now about being a parent?

[Audience members]

Exhaustion.

Time.
Making real contact with them.
Reducing scream time without pain.
Thirteen, I'm finding very difficult.

[Amaragita speaking]
Thirteen, what about thirteen?

[Audience members]
That age, I'm finding difficult; not a child anymore, just kind of in between.
Being present as you play with them. How to be present and play when you're thinking about 101 other things.

[Amaragita]
Anyone else? Current challenge?

[Audience members]
Tantrums.
I would say lack of connection of any kind – I've got a thirteen year old who is kind of... gone.
Making choices about what I want to do in my life that will affect her life – and the kind of anxiety about – if I do what I feel I want, my desires and things – will they be good for her?

[Amaragita talking]
So hopefully we can get round (I'm not going to give a very long talk) to some of these issues that people have raised, and just reflect and talk and see if we can give each other some pointers.

The false dichotomy between family life and spiritual life

I think the thing that I start with is, for me, quite a fundamental schism in my psyche about whether or not to have children. I started my spiritual practice 19 years ago and I never actually had a very strong sense of, 'I want to have children and get married and live happily ever after'. That just never was my dream, it just wasn't there. And there was a very, very strong aspect of me that was like, 'Absolutely not; I will not do that'. And I remember seeing somebody who was an Order Member who got pregnant once, and I then remember seeing her get pregnant again, and I remember this thought in my head was like, 'Oh my God! How could she?' There was this aspect of me that was just, 'Absolutely not! That is just not the way if you are true spiritual seeker'. And yet the older I got, as I went through life – as I was practising, going on more and more retreats – there was this little (I don't know quite what it was) aspect of my being that would just tug, 'Please can I have a baby? Please, can I please have one?' [And I'd reply] 'Don't be ridiculous, we're on a serious matter here. We're not going to trouble ourselves with that!' [And it would tug again] 'Please can I have one?! Please, just a little one!' And this voice just started getting stronger and stronger. And I remember once being at one of the retreat centres, at Tiratanaloka, just having this absolutely excruciating pain, where I really felt that there were these two aspects of my being that felt like they couldn't both coexist. And I was just crying my heart out, just crying and crying at the fact I couldn't have both. I felt like I just couldn't have both, and somehow that felt like a real obstacle to my spiritual path.

Then I read later on, someone said, 'If you were walking down a road and you came to a sign – and you knew that this was a vital signpost – on the one side it said, "Life, that way", and then it said, "That way is Enlightenment". Life. Enlightenment. And you're standing there; which are you going to choose?' Which are you going to choose, c'mon? And what was really interesting in this book I was reading, was that it was actually saying that *that* is the false dichotomy that a lot of

religious practice sets up; and actually it really isn't that. It really, really isn't that. (I was like this blubbling heap at the bottom of the signpost, all soggy and limp and not thinking I could go either way.)

It is very real, I don't think we can avoid that issue: that what is considered real, true spiritual practice takes place (our consideration of it takes place) in monasteries, on hills, in caves; it doesn't take place in the midst of family life. In my stereotyped idea of what a spiritual practitioner is, it's certainly not someone who's changing nappies (if I think about my archetypes of what that is). There is this very real tradition – the Buddha left his family, he went forth from his family, he said, 'No, in order to find the truth, this is what I need to do. I need to leave that, I need to go forth from that' – so we've got some pretty powerful images about what it is to be a true spiritual practitioner, a true dharma warrior; and there are not many images out there that encompass true spiritual Dharma practitioners with children.

Going beyond simply trying to find tranquillity; the thousand Dharma-doors in parenting

And yet we know that, in the lay life, it is possible to practice; people tell us that. (And we think, 'Yeah, you're just telling us that to be kind' [when they say] 'You can practice with children; it is possible... if you try very hard'.) And, I think, one of the first things when we look at practice – pretty much the first stage that you're trying to enter into – is tranquillity. In order to have access to our Buddha-nature – which is kind of buried (it's present, it's there, but it's buried underneath all of the conditioning) – one of the first prerequisites seems to be that we need tranquillity; so that all of that business – some of that fog, that ignorance that is there – begins to settle, begins to calm down. So, tranquillity, compassion and then insight. So, one of the things with the lay life, life with children – the first stumbling block – is tranquillity. Where do you get it? Certainly, in the first ten years, it's pretty hard to come by. So I think people just take one look at that, and you fail at the first hurdle. But they don't realise that beyond the tranquillity phase of the spiritual life – in terms of the compassion and in terms of the insight – there is a huge amount that can be drawn into.

So, I think one of the interesting things is that, we're in a time now where it is actually possible more and more. For lots of different reasons – historically and socially – how hard life used to be, domestically. Now we have a lot more time than in the past. I think there are different conditions now; there's more available for us to be able practise within our current conditions as householders, as lay people. One of the things I find intriguing about the universe and life is that there are so many different gateways in. So if you think about – like in alternative medicine – iridology. And apparently, the whole of the body, you can read it in an eye. (Then there's the foot; the whole body, you can look at it on your foot. And you can look at it in other places. In your ear, apparently, as well; all the different organs, you can locate them in your ear.) It's like, in any one part of your body, everything else lives. And it's the same – my intuitive sense is that, if you keep looking deeply enough into anything, everything is there – I think it's the same with parenting as a spiritual practice. There's a lot that can put you off it, on the surface; but if you keep looking, and you keep going deep enough, there are a thousand Dharma-doors in parenting, in the family life. If you can find the universe in a grain of sand, then surely you can find it in the whole of family life!

But it's hard. One of the main reasons that it's hard, is that part of practice is about trying to get a perspective – a big enough perspective – on ourselves. We just get bogged down in thinking that we're 'this' and that's all we are; we have this perspective. And actually, what spiritual practice is trying to get us to do, is to see our ourselves in a whole different perspective. And sometimes, what can keep us bogged down, is all the calls from the present; in family life, that's a hundredfold pace. So part of why we go away on retreat, why we go away, is because we're creating a gap in which we can see our habits, we can see who we're being; so we get this [bigger] perspective. And I think that's part of why lay life is not seen as providing conducive conditions, because it's harder to

create that perspective, harder to create that gap.

The Five Times a Day rule; building in regular reminders of the larger perspective; daily moments of retreat

One of the things I have been thinking about is the Islamic spiritual tradition, they're really not at all keen on the monastic tradition. There is no monastic tradition, in that sense of seeing that *the* place that spiritual life takes place is somewhere else, in the monasteries. And actually, if you're not going to have that space to go away, how do you practice? And the answer is: five times a day. If you are really serious about creating a bit of distance, a bit of perspective – in the midst of family life, in the midst of business – you get a call to prayer. And I think that's interesting as well – because it's almost like you need that, when you're really in the midst of being the world – you need someone to say, 'Hello! Earth calling! Whoever you are, come out of whatever you're in!' And I think that a lot of the spiritual life is about trying to get – trying to keep – a perspective of who we really are. So this thing of being called – of being interrupted – to remember, 'Ah, remember the blue sky'.

[Bells ring]

Perfect, let's do three breath meditations.

One of my friends did a course at an interfaith seminary, and they took on three months' practice of five different faiths. What was interesting was that, as a group, they all said (they all had to dedicate themselves to these different practices and these different faiths) that the most difficult one was the 'five times a day', stopping. That was actually what they found – of all the different things – the most challenging, the most difficult.

One of the ways I'm trying to develop practice is, as I've started calling it, 'five portions a day'. Not just fruit and vegetables! But five portions a day of *remembrance*. How can we, in a day, come back to the sense of broader awareness – the sense of spaciousness – the sense of what the bigger picture really is? Because I think, if you can get a big enough picture on anything, all of a sudden it doesn't seem so bad. It's like, 'Guess what, 13 is going to become 14 and then 15. Guess what? It's not long before something else happens'. If we have enough perspective, then the things that we're worried about – the things that we're concerned about, the things that we feel ourselves narrowing and contracting and tightening around – can begin to not seem so fraught.

Five times a day can easily be divided: waking up, mealtimes, and going to bed. There are three obvious possible places where we could – even if we just stop for three breaths meditation (So I'm trying to get five into this talk! See if we can get five in, in half an hour. Can we get five into a day? That's the practice). Other places: brushing teeth, shower. There was a period, when I had my second child, where I considered my shower as my retreat – 'I go on retreat every day, into the shower' – seriously, this was my retreat! One of the things that occurs, is that time really becomes totally different when you're a parent.

Self-transformation through parenting; the burning of kshanti; 'being with' challenges to our plan; transforming the world by sowing seeds in our children

Something I'm thinking of quite deeply as well is *kshanti*, which often gets translated as 'patience' or 'forbearance'; but if I could translate it in any way, I think I'd translate it as 'burning'. *Kshanti* is there in the Buddha's Enlightenment; in his willingness to stay with, and be with, and turn towards his experience of Mara – Mara's hordes of hatred and greed. He is willing (that, for me, is *the* image of the Buddha) just to stay with it: not turning away, not that he shouldn't be experiencing it, just being with it. And in that 'being with' – the way I see it is, if you can truly be with it – it's like

you're burning off those habit energies that are, at the moment, predominant in us. The more we can actually sit with and experience, without pushing away, just staying open to it – then something else is on the other side of that. So, what I'm called to do in parenting, is to surrender – to practice that just 'being with' all the ways in which 'this doesn't fit in with my plan!' – just sitting with that and letting go, and letting go. And, in that, we have this ability to observe ourselves, to be that awareness.

And one of the things I was also thinking of is that we can see our children as aspects of our mind. Like we're in a meditation and we're the broad awareness – the broad, loving, non-personal awareness – that is just witnessing all these other aspects of ourselves (wanting, clinging craving, hating, loving) all of those things that go on with our children – being able to sit back in that awareness and allowing them, just allowing. What happens then? It's not like you can predict – it's not like you're doing it in order to get a certain result – but you're sitting back and just allowing and seeing – what happens then? What happens now? I found that a really useful practice: 'what if that was the case, what if they just were aspects of our mind?'

So there's a lot in parenting, in which we can transform ourselves (as Shambhala warriors transforming ourselves). But what about transforming the world? Isn't staying at home (and parenting does involve a lot of staying at home) a cop out? How is that transforming the world? Obviously we can say, 'well if we transform ourselves, we transform the world', but we're also looking at something a little bit broader than that, some other way of moving out into the world. And partly I think, as practitioners, we are sowing seeds in our children. Two years ago my daughter was watching one of the plays [at Buddhafield] and Kerowyn (one of the children here) was the Buddha, and she sat like this [demonstrates]. And Mara's hordes came – my goodness! – with branches, with swords – they literally threw all kinds of things at her. And she just – she was extraordinary – she just sat there like this, throughout the whole thing. And I watched my daughter, who was then three, watching her – and she was just like this [demonstrates], watching Kerowyn being the Buddha, withstanding that – it went in very deeply with her. And then, just two months ago, we were at a different retreat (a parents and children retreat) and we were doing a play; and guess who wanted to be the Buddha? And guess who sat, like this, through – Mara's hordes weren't quite as horde-like as the ones previously – but the seed was in her, there was something in her. And, obviously, we just don't know (I'm sure my daughter's going to become an accountant in the City! We just don't know!) But I do believe that all these seeds that we're planting – as parents, with our children, practising with our children – I'm sure they're having an effect on the world.

What enlightened parenting has to offer; returning a sense of the sacred to children; exemplifying the spiritual life for a new generation

And I think, more and more – at the retreat I led recently at Vajrasana, there were a lot of women there who already had a very strong spiritual practice before becoming parents, and my sense is that there is a movement – we are trying to come to grips much more – with 'how do we do this?' There is more of a dialogue going on at the moment, within the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order [now known as the Triratna Buddhist Community], between mothers and Buddhists and parents. And I do feel it has something to offer, because I think there is a real void in current teaching of children at schools, there is a spiritual void. And yet children really have a sense of the sacred, they really have a sense of wonder and beauty; and there's very little going on for children to participate in to really get a feel for that, a glimpse of that. I think that providing these environments – just by having a shrine in your house, other children coming in and just seeing them (my little boy, one and a half, seeing something happening with him) – is putting something into the world, maybe not on a very obvious level, but I really do feel that it's bringing something in.

And when I go past (I live in Hackney) and see the children in the playgrounds, how they're being with each other, there's just so much harshness, so little sense of honouring something. Religion as a paradigm has lost its ability to move or call respect forward. But I think – what we're doing here – we're laying some tracks somewhere in our children, so that if perhaps they choose to take up spiritual practice, they've got something there that may allow them to go deeper in their lifetime than otherwise.

So one thing I've learnt a lot from: my daughter goes to a Steiner school, and I think I've learned a huge amount about how they do give children in sacred space; it's very wonderful. They rely a lot on rhythm, repetition, reverence and beauty. And I think – those are things that we also provide in our retreats and in our practice at home with our children – that does have a very strong effect. And obviously the most powerful effect that we have on our children is this – our own practice – taking our own practice seriously, and them seeing us loving it and being loving – because, as the saying goes, 'the spiritual life isn't taught, it's caught'. And I think that – in being mirrors or beacons in some sense for children – we are creating conditions for Shambhala warriors to arise more strongly in the world.

In, out,
Deep, slow,
Breathing in I calm my body,
Breathing out I am smiling
How wonderful is now

In, out,
Deep, slow,
Breathing in I calm my body,
Breathing out I am smiling
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