

## **Buddhist Parenting** *by Karunagita*

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*Talk given at the Buddhafield Festival, Devon 2006*

**Kavyasiddhi:** 'Dharma Warriors' — how do you become a warrior? What weapons do you have? What tools do you use? What areas are you working in? What's your battle ground? We've got a series of battle grounds that we work in; a series of areas that we're engaged in — we engage at work, we engage in our families, we engage walking down the street, we engage with the planet as a whole — so we've got a series of symposia, talks from different perspectives on each day. It just means different people giving their perspectives. So, if you stay for the whole morning, you get a bigger perspective!

Today's area for the 'Dharma Warriors' is 'Parenting'. It is an area that I am guessing most of you are familiar with, definitely as a child, and probably as a parent! So, you have found yourself in this area — what do you do? How do you practice? What is the best way? Karunagita has got a book coming out in the autumn: 'Growing as a Parent — What Buddhism Has To Offer' — fantastic! — so she's going to be talking about that...

**Karunagita:** Ok, thank you very much indeed.

I just want to start by saying a bit about how I came to be standing here, really — and going back in time to when my first child was born, which was 1994. By then I had already been around the FWBO, going to retreats and meditating, for about four years, and it was a big part of my life and a real priority for me. I didn't call myself a Buddhist — it took me a very, very long time to start referring to myself as a Buddhist — but it was really important in my life.

And then when I had my first child, for the next two and a half years I managed to carry on doing that. I carved out space from life as a working mother — you know — whenever my baby went to sleep I went straight to meditate, and when he was about 18 months old I went back on retreat. It felt like I was very fixed on doing this: 'I need to keep on doing this; I need to keep meditating; I need to keep going on retreat; I need to keep up as much as possible with my spiritual life as it was before I had children.'

But then I had another baby after about two and a quarter years, and once I sort of surfaced from that... I realised it just wasn't possible!... [LAUGHTER] ...you know — there wasn't that time; there wasn't the 'baby goes down for the nap, I can meditate; baby goes to play-group, I can meditate,' — because one [baby] went, but the other was still there, and awake! — and, you know, wanting to play.

Before [the second baby] was born, I would do this, 'OK, I can meditate, because he's in this space' — but quite often something would happen: he would wake up early, he wouldn't sleep, it wouldn't work out the way I had planned it all. And then I'd get quite frustrated and quite resentful. I was quite focused, and if it didn't work that way I would get quite twitchy,

or if I'd missed my meditation I was quite irritable... and it was all a bit tentative.

And anyway, once Ella was born that all fell apart. I couldn't do it any more; it didn't work anyway. And I went through this quite brief phase of: 'Argh!' — you know — 'what *do* you do?'

And then this thought came up — you know, when these thoughts come up from somewhere in your body rather than your mind!... [LAUGHTER] ... it was like, 'well, I can't step out and go and do Buddhism any more... I'll just have to bring Buddhism into my life!'

At the time it felt like just this sense of resignation: 'Oh, no, I can't do that any more, so I'm going to have to do it differently.' But actually, what started then (nearly ten years ago) was a journey of exploration that hasn't by any means *culminated* in writing this book and giving this talk, but is very much ongoing. But it certainly has brought me to this point, and it's been quite a journey.

Throughout that journey, that whole process of writing has helped me to clarify and confirm and feel much more positive about the context of being a parent, and also about trying to have a spiritual life, to develop spiritually.

But throughout that exploration the whole question has been: 'Well, *how?* *How* do you do it?' — you know. It's very much a practical thing: 'I know it's possible, but *how?* I know it's quite easy, but *how?*'

And so, as part of that exploration, I volunteered to do a book for Windhorse, which is coming out in the autumn. And during the process of that, I have interviewed a lot of Buddhist parents — about 25 or so — quite a few of whom (or some of whom) are in this room, and many others are somewhere else wandering around in this festival!

What I did was I interviewed lots of people — and I also, obviously, have been trying to DO this [Buddhist parenting], in practice, for years — and then drew all of that information together into separate themes, which form the chapters of the book. And what I have decided to do today is just pick out three of those themes to talk about — because seven is far too many to have all in one go.

Within each of those themes, it is very much about all of them being opportunities; they are all opportunities to develop spiritually in the context of being a parent, and most of them also have with them their own sort of pitfalls, you know — there are also pitfalls.

So throughout this process of exploration, it's about, 'well, *how* can we make the most of all the opportunities that are actually there — and embrace those and enjoy them and benefit from them — without spending *too* much time so deep in the pitfalls that you can't see beyond the surface?'

So I have chosen three areas from the book to talk about today...

## Growing In Love

The first of them is about 'love' — about love and about letting go, and those two things taken together — because love and letting go are so much part of being a parent, and when we talk about spiritual growth and spiritual life, what we are talking about is growth in wisdom and in compassion — in love — so love obviously is fundamental to the spiritual life.

Love is one of the great gifts that is sort of handed on a plate, if you like, by becoming a parent. In fact, the Buddha draws on the idea of parental love — mother love — in a very famous sutta...

*'Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, it is that much love that we are aspiring to feel for all people, for the whole of the universe, all of the time.'*

...It is unconditional love. What parenting gives us is an insight into what it actually *means* to love unconditionally.

One of the fathers that I interviewed for the book (who I've actually never met, so he may even be here — it was on the phone!) — one of the things he said in the interview was: 'Well, my life began when my son was born.'

And I said: 'How do you mean? What began?' — and he paused for a minute, and then he said: 'My heart'... he just felt like his heart had suddenly opened and really engaged with life for the first time when his son was born.

It is that love, that strength of love — unconditional love — that is the natural order of things. That is what we are capable of feeling for all beings, for all of creation, for everything around us, all of the time. And actually being able to feel that, in response to our children, just gives us — even if it's momentarily... I mean, it's not something we live all the time, year in, year out, as parents, but even if it's just flashes at times — that gives us an insight into what we are actually capable of feeling all the time.

So one of the things I emphasise is just to accept that as a gift — it's a gift of heart-opening — and really embrace that, and use it, and draw on it.

Also — if we are living our lives in the context that we are on a spiritual journey, we're on a spiritual path, we're looking to develop spiritually — you are feeling that love in the context of, 'this is what I am *aspiring* to feel'. So you don't see it as, 'this is *just* my mother-child (or father-child) bond.' It's like: 'This is love — this is what I am aspiring to feel for *everybody*, all the time.'

And you can just take moments, sometimes, to reflect on that.

Obviously, it comes with a pitfall — you know — one of the pitfalls is, 'it's all so threatening out there, and I love this being so much,' you can sort of close down into a little family unit, trying to seal off everybody else, because it's all so threatening...

So, it's about making the most of the opportunities, really. And it's *not* about, 'we'll instantly radiate love to everybody, just because we're parents!' — if that was true, the world would be a really different place, because so many of us *are* parents. But, you know, maybe you will suddenly notice you're getting a bit more tolerant, a bit kinder every so often, with people that irritate.

Linked to love very closely, one of the things that Buddhism teaches us is that we cause our own unhappiness so much of the time by trying to hold onto, and hold fixed, things that *aren't* fixed; things that we can't own. We can't own anyone, we can't own anything, we can't hold onto them, we can't expect them to be ours or to stay the same for ever. You can't hold anything fixed as it flows past. And that's what we try and do so much if we love somebody — you know — it's a natural, human, conditioned tendency, to want to hold on.

But actually everybody changes, all the time, and I think again one of the great gifts of being a parent is that we live that reality so much of the time — because you see your children change before your eyes! They change and grow — maybe not from day to day — but if I haven't seen my children for a week or two weeks, which I quite regularly don't because I'm separate from their father, then they seem to change just in that time.

So we are living that reality that we love them hugely and unconditionally and yet we can't hold them fixed; we can't hold onto them.

It's like loving with an open hand. From the moment they can walk, they're walking off down this field away from us to things that are more interesting, or whatever; they're constantly moving away, almost from the time that they have motion.

So it's a constant sense of loving and letting go.

I want to read out a bit that I've put in the book about this 'letting go' because I think it is something that is very, very important. It's just a reflection I had when cleaning out the toy cupboard... which is probably something that those of you who are parents *will* do every so often...

Anyway...

*'Periodically, Ella and I tackle the toy cupboard. We make piles of what she and her brother have grown out of and take them to the local charity shop, relegate them to the bin, or pass them on to other people. It's a process we enjoy together — harmonious teamwork, spiced with nostalgia, and rolled with a satisfactory outcome: a clear space, a job well done, and some forgotten games rescued from the depths to happily occupy the following hours.'*

*And one morning I did this alone — Ella wasn't there, and the Buddhist Centre needed a lot of toys.*

*So without Ella there, I found myself lingering over these toys, wanting to keep them just a bit*

*longer in case one or both of my children were to again experience joy in building a brightly coloured house and garden of Duplo blocks.*

*Remembering my delight at witnessing that co-operative and creative play, my satisfaction that all was as it should be, it was easier to drop a couple of macho robots into the bag (the contrast highlighting to me my own expectations of how children SHOULD play). I left the pirates and their ship, in the unlikely event that Jay would want them once more in the imaginary games he still plays in the bath (Or was it me that was not ready to let them go?).'*

...So, more than anything, that sort of periodic process epitomises for me this thing of 'letting go'. At each stage of my children's life, it's like with each clear-out of the toy cupboard you are having to let go of different phases. Somehow the baby toys are easier to let go of, but at the stage my children are at now — which is ten and twelve — it's like soon there won't be a toy cupboard to clear at all! And it contains games that challenge *me*, rather than train-sets and Lego.

So, what I wrote here was:

*'In my heart I feel a mixture of sadness, excitement, delight and pride as I watch them grow into themselves, but it is the sadness that is most present as I decide that I will, after all, take the big box of Duplo blocks to the Buddhist Centre.'*

So that is one of the great areas of opportunity for us as parents: this mixture of unconditional love — that we can feel an insight into our capacity to feel love — combined with this need to keep letting go, and do it with our hands open.

And there is something very powerful about just living that reality, day in, day out.

### **Growing In Awareness**

The second area of the three areas I want to pick out and talk about today is about 'awareness', because awareness is fundamental, certainly within Buddhism but also within spiritual life, within spiritual development — including awareness of *ourselves*, both in terms of how we are in the moment, and also *knowing* ourselves — what makes us tick; what presses our buttons; what makes us react.

This is an area that I find really exciting because there is something so powerful in just knowing about what presses our buttons. It gives us a bit more space; it gives us a bit more choice — you know — that moment when you can think, 'ah — yes, I know, this is something I react to.' It just gives us that little gap to be able to choose to react slightly differently, at least at times.

I think that this, again, is another great gift of children. I mean, children are the perfect mirror... you know... I stopped swearing the moment my children started talking!... [LAUGHTER] ...that's the most simple level. Whatever we say comes back again; what we do comes back again.

And it's not only swearing... I mean, Ella went through a lovely stage recently where she would kiss me on the forehead, which is something I very much associated with a 'parent-to-child' sort of thing — but it was just something I did to *her*, so she would do it to *me*. And greet me with, 'Good morning, gorgeous!' — which obviously, again, I did to her... [LAUGHTER]...

So there is that very immediate level of a mirror, that is happening all the time. But also there is a deeper level, of just being able to know our own buttons... And I think again that is another area where having children is very powerful.

Throughout writing this book I have been thinking: am I writing 'Growing as a Parent — What Buddhism Has To Offer' or am I writing, 'Growing as a Buddhist — What Parenting Has To Offer'? — and I think it's obviously a bit of both.

And I think this is an area very much in which *parenting* has something to offer, in terms of our own growth, because we are pushed to react in a much broader spectrum of emotions than we might be otherwise. You know: I can go out in the world in all sorts of ways, and I'm — you know — I'm mature, I'm calm, I'm reasonable! But actually, there are moments with my children where I'm *not*! And I have been pushed to react both in terms of real delight, joy, pride, excitement, but also at the other end of the spectrum, in absolute rage.

One of the things particularly, when my son was small, was tantrums and wilful destruction. You know — he would have a tantrum and he'd be throwing things, to actually destroy them. And every time, I reacted, and I would be absolutely furious with him; and it always got much much worse.

And then I remember there was one moment during it, when he did this, and it was one of those moments where you have awareness — you know — awareness came in as if from the outside and said: 'This is the sort of thing you react to... and you know what's going to happen when you react!'

And there was something about that awareness that just gave me that moment of space, to be able to stop and think, 'Yeah!' — you know — and just say, 'Ok... when you've finished... I am going to go away now and shut the door, and when you've finished I am going to make you pick up everything,' — and just go away and shut the door.

There was something *in* this awareness. Actually, I found my main experience was humiliation. I could then see this four-year-old or three-year-old being who was wilfully doing this — he was making me do it. When he knew that button worked, he was pressing that button to get a reaction. And that was quite a humiliating thought — you know — but it was that awareness that helped me then shift how I reacted to that... and he gave up quite quickly — he's a very bright child! As soon as I stopped reacting, he gave it up too.

So there is this thing where — you know — it's awareness of our own tendencies: 'I know I do that'. And also awareness of — you know — what do we draw on when we're parents?

Without awareness, the tendency is either you just repeat what your parents did, or you do the complete opposite because you didn't like it. So again, there is awareness that needs to come in, in terms of being able to do something, to find our own path with that.

I also think there is something extremely galvanising about this idea that children do copy us; they do learn by imitating us. I have found that very galvanising, that reality, in terms of at one point having this image of myself huddled over a computer, working too hard, feeling stressed, reacting because of that [stress] — and thinking: 'Is this what I want for my children really? Do I want them to be 40 years old and doing this to themselves? No, I don't!' And that is the biggest incentive I can find in myself to want to change things as well.

Obviously, awareness is such a huge, huge area, and very rich — it is an area that I find completely magical, this fact that when you *do* have awareness, things *do* start to shift. It's not like you have to actively do something different, or actively remember all the time. Things *do* shift once you become aware of them. So I do find that quite magical.

Just as an aside, quickly, within that... I think one of the things that, again, I love about Buddhism is the teachings on kindness, and also forgiveness. Because if we are going to embrace parenting as an opportunity to know ourselves fully, in the heights and in the depths — in the depths of the rage, the frustration, the irritation — then we also need kindness, and we also need forgiveness.

And Buddhism has wonderful teachings on how we can actually recognise, acknowledge, sit with, feel remorseful, when we've done things we don't like... but then *let them go* — forgive ourselves and just let it go — rather than feel guilt or beat ourselves up. '...Ok, that didn't work that time; why didn't it? How does that feel? What effect did it have?' — and then being able to *let that go*. So it's not about avoiding it, but nor is it about guilt.

### **Growing In Wisdom**

So that is love and awareness... and the third area I want to talk about today is about growth in 'wisdom' — wisdom and insight.

Fundamental to all teachings in Buddhism is that everything arises in dependence on certain conditions, and when those conditions are no longer there, it ceases. Everything is inter-related; nothing comes into being completely separately. And because of that, everything is constantly changing; nothing is staying the same.

And we can say that — you can sort of say that — and you think: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah. I can see that. That's absolutely true. No problem with that.'

But yet that is not necessarily how we respond to life — with that sort of sense that everything changes, nothing stays the same. And it is *because* we respond to life as if it was more solid ground under our feet, more fixed, more dependable — *that* is why — you know — *that* is what causes us pain.

And I think, again, that parenting offers a huge gift of opportunity within this, to just see the reality of life as it is, and to see things changing. For example, I talked already about how children grow up — so we are watching them change day by day — but there are a couple of other areas I wanted to pick out in this...

One of them is about the reality of being in touch with death. It's not an easy subject that one even necessarily wants to reflect on, but I think there is a real truth that being a parent means that you do stay more constantly in touch with the reality of death, because you *fear* it all the time; so it's more constant. It's not like you hear with some people — you know — if somebody dies who is close to them, there is this sense of amazement because they haven't sort of thought that would happen. I think as a parent we *do* hold that reality [of death] much closer. We have all had instances where there is far too narrow a dividing line between... you know... a child holding your hand by the side of a road, and... you know... the 'what if' scenarios go through our minds. Even if there is nothing actually dangerous, our minds can conjure up fears out of the depths.

And again, I think there's so much of these opportunities in parenting. It is not *that*, per se, that helps us, but it's what we *do* with it. And if we are on a spiritual path, the question is, 'how do we use that reality to reflect more on the preciousness and the transience of human life — not just our child's life, but obviously our own life, and the lives of other people around us?'

So, basically, it's embracing the fact that we are more in touch with the reality.

And another one linked to this, also, is this thing of letting go of being in control, which is a big area that a lot of people talked to me about in interviews as well.

The reality is that we can't control everything — you can't set it all up nice and easy in life — but actually, sometimes, *before* we have children it almost feels as if we can! You can set things up a certain way in terms of work, friends, how you use your time; find a routine that sort of works for you. You can have this illusion, if you like, for a while, that 'that's OK, I can control it all, it's safe, I can live with this.'

But I think as parents we can't. That illusion becomes so quickly shattered. You know — you can't sleep through the night just because you want to, or because you've set it up that way, or whatever.

One of the instances I was reflecting on when I was writing this bit was about Ella, my daughter, when she first learned to cycle. She was quite late learning to cycle, and just going out for a cycle ride with her (we live in London)... just going on quiet roads, and I'm very close just behind her, and she's cycling along... and I *hate* it! I can't *bear* it — you know — because I don't know what is going to happen! I have to trust her to brake; I have to trust the traffic to do what it's supposed to do. There are so many things that it feels like I can't control. I don't want to stop her doing it, because I don't want her to be frightened — I don't want to spend my whole lifetime saying, 'Oh, do be careful, darling!', because she'll get all frightened. I don't want her to get that from me.



So, it is just having to *keep cycling*, with this sense of 'I can't control this situation — I can't hold it — it is not completely predictable.'

And I think, again, it's the fact of just being on a spiritual path, and just actually smiling at myself, and thinking, 'at some level this is good for me!' — you know — to be letting go of that ego that wants to organise and control everything. I'm in this situation; I'm having to live that reality that I can't [control everything].

## **Conclusion**

Linked to that, I think one of the key things that has helped me the whole time with reflecting on parenting and how do you do it in the context of being a Buddhist — that I just want to close with — is that I've had the line of a song in me, since I was on retreat in January actually... I don't know if any of you are the same age as me?... there was this dreadful song that went, 'it's not what you do, it's the way that you do it; that's what gets you there!' — or something like that!

[AUDIENCE MEMBER: '...Gets results. Bananarama. 1983.']

**KARUNAGITA:** ...Thank you very much! ..Wow, that's an incredible MC-ing!...

[LAUGHTER] ...Ok, so I've had a Bananarama song-line in my head since January... [MORE LAUGHTER] ...and I think that's what's key for me is: 'It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it.'

So, whether we are raising children, whether we are out in the world, whether we are stopping traffic in protest, whether we are being a dentist... whatever we are doing in our lives, in terms of spiritual life, it is not actually *what* we are doing, it's *how* we are doing it — *how* we are embracing those opportunities, in terms of embracing the heart opening, and the love, holding our hands open, letting go, letting be... as we do that — whether it is embracing the opportunities that come with our children mirroring back to us, and that awareness... whether it is embracing the opportunities for wisdom and insight as we see everything change and we're unable to hold it fixed and control it... and many other ways as well.

So: 'It's not what you do — it's the way that you do it!'

Thank you very much.