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Family as Sangha

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Abstract: This is a brief talk presented by the author at the Fifth International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak, held in Hanoi, Vietnam on May 15, 2008. The main points covered are: 1) guidelines on practicing mindfulness as a family including children; 2) dealing with strong emotions and death in the family context; and 3) considering the nuclear family and local sangha within the greater context of the mahasangha and asking for help from spiritual friends.

My late husband and I had the great good fortune to be practitioners before our children were born and before my husband became ill with cancer when our children were 4 and 7 years old. Our children are also practitioners, and we had spent time as a family at Deer Park Monastery, a retreat center in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh in Southern California, offering among other things family retreats where parents and children come together to practice mindful walking, mindful eating, reciting the precepts, letting go of past regrets and beginning anew, deep listening, loving speech, hiking and enjoying each other's true presence. We had integrated these practices into our daily home life as well.

I would like to share how our family faced the many challenges when my husband of 15 years became ill and suffered a painful death three years ago. The main points I would like to cover in this brief talk are as follows: 1) guidelines on practicing as a family including children; 2) dealing with strong emotions and death in the family context; and 3) considering the nuclear family and local sangha within the greater context of the mahasangha and asking for help from spiritual friends.

I

Children are wonderful practitioners and our family practices together and we learn from each other. My children are my teachers. They teach me patience, releasing anger and worry, and help me to grow. I love their freshness and how they see the world with many fewer preconceived ideas and much curiosity. They are often more in the present moment than I, and also I learn from them how to let go of things. They seem to move much more fluidly from tears to laughter, worry to joy, than I do.

It is also important to mention that our root religion is Judaism and that through my mindfulness practice, I have connected very deeply with my Jewish roots. I am raising my children with both Buddhism and Judaism. They attend Sunday school, Hebrew school, and the monastery. As a result of this openness, they view all religions as inherently beautiful, with much to offer. I was recently delighted when I overheard my daughter telling her friend, "I am half Jewish, half Christian, and half Buddhist."

In our family, we also practice mindful consumption, the fifth precept of mindfulness

Karen Hilsberg, Ph.D., was a presenter at the Fifth International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak, held in Hanoi, Vietnam, May 2008.

training in order to enhance our well-being and prevent future suffering. We do not watch any TV in our home, and I do not permit my children to play violent videogames, see violent movies, or go on the internet, though almost all of their friends do. I do not want our unwholesome seed watered by these toxins. We eat our meals together as a family, and eat a vegetarian diet in our home (though my son enjoys some things like chicken nuggets and bacon at school or when we eat out). We recite the Five Contemplations before each meal and try to enjoy eating as a peaceful, quite and nurturing time of our day together, smiling, breathing, and enjoying our food and each other, nourishing body, mind and spirit.

The last practice I'd like to share is the practice of Beginning Anew. For example, when my children inadvertently hurt or annoy one another, as is common in all families, I urge them to use loving speech to share their experience, to use deep listening to hear and understand the experience of the other, and then to do their best to resolve it with each other by asking, "How can I help you?" The most common answer I hear from them is, "Please don't do that again," to which the other usually replies, "I'll try not to." I also practice this with them when I become hurt or annoyed or when I have hurt their feelings with my insensitivity or thoughtlessness. I think it is important for them to hear me admit that I make mistakes and would like to learn how to do better as a mom and as a person.

II

The practice was incredibly helpful when my husband was dying of pancreatic cancer. We practiced the 7th of the 14 Mindfulness Trainings or Bodhisattva Vows: Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment. Even in the face of death, we could enjoy simple pleasures like walking to the corner store for ice cream, knowing that we were all alive together, breathing together, enjoying mindful meals together, listening to music together, practicing deep relaxation together, doing

arts and crafts together, playing games, offering each other massages and hugging meditation, and even crying all together.

We also wrote and illustrated some little story books for our children about how our family was changing and staying the same to help us to all affirm that even though Bruce was dying, we were still a family and would always love each other. Each book described what was happening at that point in time, how confusing it was, how mixed up our feelings were, our wondering questions, as well as the many things that remained the same such as our family and home, our meals together, my children's school, our sangha, friends and extended family, and many of our daily routines like feeding the cat, brushing teeth, etc.

III

Lastly, I would like to offer a few reflections on the role of the family and local sangha in the context of the larger sangha or mahasangha. The spiritual support that our family received from our local sangha, spiritual friends, teachers and the Deer Park and Plum Village sanghas was profoundly moving and helpful. Our teachers and friends met with us in person, wrote us letters, sent cards, prayed for us, and spent time in our home keeping us company and helping with so many of the daily care giving, childcare, and housekeeping routines.

The most valuable lesson that I learned at that time was that part of my spiritual practice involves asking for and receiving help. Just as in the time of the Buddha, when the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis went on alms rounds, the receiver and the giver inter-are. They depend on each other and both benefit from the interactions. I learned that to give is beautiful and to receive is beautiful.

I learned that in asking for help, I offered my friends and family opportunities to share their hearts with us, which was a very deep lesson for me.