



SHARING BUDDHISM WITH CHILDREN

By Jacqueline Kramer

Both monastics and lay teachers, out of the fullness of their hearts, have a sincere interest in seeing the Buddha's teachings thrive in the West. We sit in the question, what brings people to the path? How do we open up the way for the next generation? Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote about how he felt the first urging to set foot on the noble path at the sight of a well-practiced monk. While interviewing Tsultrim Allione, she told me that what drew her to Buddhism fresh out of high school was a trip to India where she saw Tibetan refugees bright and joyful despite having lost everything.

Passing on the true spirit of Buddhism is more than an offering of wise information. It is a transmission of consciousness. Children are particularly sensitive to the consciousness of those around them. They sense our authenticity and heartfelt kindness. With this in mind, this article, rather than emphasizing lesson plans and specific teaching materials, is more interested in speaking to the heart of what really communicates the spirit of the dhamma and in sharing some communication skills that may enable us to enter teaching situations with confidence.

The hope is that this will be of support to parents, monastics, or anyone else wanting to share Buddhism with children.

Not only did the Buddha leave instructions on awakening and living in the world in an awakened state, he also gave us examples of how to teach. In the forty-five years that he traveled around India after his enlightenment, he skillfully applied his teachings to many different situations and many different populations. We can follow the Buddha's example as we prepare to bring his teachings to the children of the West.

The Buddha met people at their level of spiritual maturity and developed an explanation of his teachings from there. An example of this can be found in the Sigalovada Sutta. In that sutta, the Buddha comes upon a man quickly praying in the four directions, as was the Hindu custom at the time. He saw the man, Sigala, going through the motions of the ritual but missing the opportunity for a deeper experience. Deftly, the Buddha took the form of ritual Sigala was engaged in, praying in the four directions, and turned it into a teaching opportunity by applying principles regarding relationships between

child and parent and other primary relationships, to the four directions. This is one of many examples of superb teaching approaches taken by the Buddha that has been passed down to us in the suttas.

A great teacher, whether they teach math, tennis, religion or any other subject, is a catalyst for the student's shift in consciousness or change in their perspective of the world and their place in the world. No lesson plan or teaching system alone can ever be as powerful as our own wisdom, compassion, and vulnerability. This is good news. We can trust our own natural goodness and sincerity to do the work for us. If a teacher is genuinely kind, knows how to listen deeply, really likes the people she is teaching, and has authentic experience of the subject matter, she simply needs to remain open to the teachings moving through her. Teaching is a transmission, whether we are teaching adults or children, the subject matter is only the context. We listen, let go of boundaries and defenses, open our hearts, and trust ourselves.

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Another aspect of bringing the Buddha's teachings into a new culture is being knowledgeable about that culture's beliefs and values. We can piggyback on the wisdom that is already present. This is what the Buddha did when he came upon Sigala praying in the four directions. He took what was already there, a Hindu form of prayer, and built on that. In the West, we find Christianity and Judaism as well as a great respect for science and business. American values and perspectives are informed by the Abrahamic religions, by Descartes, Newton and other philosophers and scientists who were interested in observable phenomena. The more familiar we are with the beliefs and customs of these systems, the more we can use the metaphors of the culture. It's also helpful to check our own heart to see if we have any prejudices regarding these religions and philosophical systems.

Many westerners who are teaching Buddhism came to Buddhism from either a Christian or a Jewish background. Many of us came to Buddhism because we found something lacking in our religion of origin. It's important to heal any rift within ourselves so that we can be respectful of the culture in which we are introducing the Buddha's teachings. By observing the culture's traditions from a respectful stance, we are then able

to build the Buddha's teachings onto the already existing structure. We can take customs such as Christmas, Passover, fasting rituals, grieving rituals and such, and add Buddhist wisdom to that template just as the Buddha added the wisdom he wished to transmit to the Hindu culture of his time. We come to children with respect for their ancestors and an understanding of their worldview. With an open heart and listening awareness, we speak the native language using metaphors that are most pertinent to the children we are teaching. From that foundation we can try out many time-tested teaching modalities.

Whether gathering by an outdoor fire pit or curling up on a sofa in a candle lit room, children have listened, wide eyed with wonder, to stories told and retold. Whether over a simple meal of rice and beans or a sumptuous feast of turkey, candied yams and apple pie, prayers of gratitude have been spoken before partaking of the fruits of the Earth. Teaching values to our children is as old as human history. Although each culture may have different values and unique ways of instilling these values in their children, there are some themes that pop up over and over again throughout history in cultures near and far. We can plug into these methods as we bring the Buddha's teachings to Western children. I'd like to share the perspective on a few classic teaching modalities developed by the Hearth Foundation, a non-profit organization I founded five years ago to support the spiritual growth of mothers and families.

Story telling

Reading to children and telling stories is one of the most delightful ways to open up discussions and impart wisdom. Anytime is a good time to read a book to a child. In a Sunday school setting, it is helpful to pair the dharma talk given to the adults with a book that addresses the same subject matter, or at least something similar, for the children. This way when the children ask their parents questions regarding the issues brought up in Sunday school, the parents have also had some time to think about the subject. It puts the parents and children in the same stream. There is no need to limit our choice of books to those that are strictly Buddhist. If there is a good book on the golden rule written from a Christian perspective which accords with the lesson being taught, there is value in using it. There are many wonderful children's books available. Hearth is compiling a list of children's books at www.hearth-foundation.org. A few books we like are listed at the end of this article.

Arts and crafts

One of the key ways children and adults learn is through their hands and their eyes. I was at a painting workshop recently where we painted all day. When I drove home in the late afternoon, everything looked like a symphony of beautiful lines. Art puts us in alignment with our senses and brings us to a state of greater awareness. While the children's hands are busy, there are many opportunities for conversation, laughter,

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and, most importantly, presence. There are an infinite amount of potential art projects and many books on the subject. You do not need to be an artist to foster an artistic experience. Creating specific projects is beyond the scope of this article, but I would like to offer some thoughts regarding ways to approach an art activity.

- Children are naturally creative and don't need much to get going. It is not necessary to know a lot about art or have special art materials. Even just paper, colors, and a simple idea to start with can bring interesting results.

- We are not about the business of creating Picassos. The best thing a teacher can do is put aside any advice or judgments about the child's artwork. Every line, every smudge, is beautiful. All are expressions of thushness.

- Sometimes it's fun to color things in. Buddhnet (www.buddhanet.net) has some black and white drawings of the Buddha's life that can be downloaded and colored in. There are other Buddhist study materials for children at that site as well.

Nature adventures

Being in nature with children offers many opportunities for sharing the dharma. In Hearth's Shrine Room series, we invite the moms to take a walk with their children and find flowers and/or other objects to place on the family altar. This exercise gets the family out into their neighborhood and spending time with each other. As they walk, they are alert to their surroundings, the season, and the unique beauty of their area. A walk in the neighborhood with an eye to the native life forms and seasons brings children into contact with the Earth and its gifts. A little garden can teach children many important life lessons. Lessons, such as how the discipline of watering a plant each day, bears wonderful results. Observing the ecosystem reveals the interrelatedness of all of life. These are just a couple of the many lessons growing plants offers. If garden space is not available, some planter boxes or flower pots work fine. Birds, insects, and animals all offer opportunities to teach about life and awareness. A teacher, whether in the city or the country, can follow nature as she leads the instruction.

Meal sharing

Two key Buddhist values are generosity and gratitude. These are values Buddhism shares with the other wisdom traditions and so these values create a natural bridge between the cultures. Meal sharing, whether it be a celebration, a family dinner, or snack time at Sunday school, is a time to appreciate the fruits of the Earth. A teacher can help the children remember that what they are eating came from the Earth and bring

presence and gratitude for that which sustains us. One classic exercise in awareness is to give each child a raisin. Ask the child to put the raisin in their mouth and close their eyes. The facilitator guides the group in being present as they explore the taste and texture of the raisin. This exercise brings greater awareness in the moment and a deeper appreciation of the Earth's bounty and our inter-connectedness. The teacher can talk about how the raisin, or other fruit or vegetable, came to us. Starting with the seed in the Central Valley, farm workers tilling the soil, watering, growing, harvesting, picking, washing, transporting, packaging, buying and so on until it reaches the child's mouth. You can get as detailed as you like with this. Wendy Johnson of Green Gulch Farm does a great job with this exercise. You may wish to read her work. This exercise teaches so much about the unique quality of each simple raisin and the interconnection of all things as well as being a mindfulness meditation.

Guided meditation

Even though children may not be ready to meditate on their own, they are able to follow guided meditations at an early age. Each guided meditation can be created anew, keeping in mind how long the children's attention span is and what images they would be most receptive to. These guided meditations can be on a theme such as loving kindness or ease or they can be a simple instruction on feeling what is in this present moment. If you would like some ideas of specific guided meditations, there are a couple of recommended books at the end of this article. A wonderful meditation is offered in the book *Moody Cow Meditates* by Kerry MacLean. In it, the grandson comes to his meditating grandfather after a very bad day. The grandfather sprinkles glitter into a clear cup of water and asks his grandson to sit and watch the glitter until it settles down. This helps settle the boys mind. At the end of the book are instructions on what materials to use for this meditation.

Being in the present moment

Finally, transmitting Buddhism is not really about teaching anything. We create an atmosphere in which children can be present and discover the answers for themselves. When Siddhartha was a young boy, his parents brought him to the annual spring plowing festival. While the adults were enjoying the ceremony in the field, young Siddhartha sat on a blanket underneath a Rose Apple tree, enjoying the sounds and sights all around him. He was safe, he was comfortable, and in that place of ease, he fell into a quiet, bright, empty, expansive state. Years later, after exerting much effort, studying many

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teachings, and engaging in many meditation techniques, Siddhartha once again found himself sitting under a tree. While under the Bodhi tree, Siddhartha resolved to not move until he had found the path out of suffering. Harkening back to his experience as a young boy under the Rose Apple tree, Siddhartha let go of meditation technique, let go of trying, and with full presence in the moment resolved to not rise from where he was sitting until he had found what he was looking for. That night the Buddha became enlightened. As teachers of Buddhism, we listen for that Rose Apple tree moment in our children and when we find it, we acknowledge and celebrate it. Children are naturally adept at being in the present moment. Perhaps our most important activity as teachers of Buddhism to children is honoring and validating their innate awareness. Teaching children is easier than you think. Be yourself, be present, everything else is commentary.

Some books we like:

Picture books:

I Once Was a Monkey, stories of the Buddha told by Jeanne M. Lee. Stories about kindness, thinking clearly before acting, endurance and patience.

Buddhist Tales, retold by Sherab Chodzin and Alexandra Kohn. A book of classic Buddhist tales, such as the Angulimala tale and The Living Kuan Yin. Taken from several Asian cultures. Good, short stories to read to children.

The Three Questions, based on a story by Leo Tolstoy, written and illustrated by Jon J Muth. A wonderful lesson on mindfulness.

Becoming Buddha—the Story of Siddhartha, by Whitney Stewart and Sally Rippin. Some simple stories of the Buddha with nice pictures.

Zen Shorts, by Jon J Muth. 3 Zen koans in children's story form with delightful pictures

Little Stone Buddha, by K.T. Hao, illustrated by Guiliano Ferri. A story about kindness and service.

Tenzin's Deer—a Tibetan Tale, by Barbara Soros, illustrated by Danuta Mayer. A story about the power of compassion,

dreams, healing, loving deeply and letting go.

Samsara Dog, by Helen Manos. About the cycle of rebirth and nibbana. Good for teaching Buddhist perspective on death and rebirth.

Books kids can read (or you can read them to the child) and books for teens:

Prince Siddhartha—the Story of Buddha, by Jonathan Landaw and Janet Brooke. The best book I know of on the life of the Buddha for children. It can be read to younger children or read by elementary school children.

Kindness—a Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents, collected and adapted by Sarah Conover, illustrated by Valerie Wahl. A read aloud anthology of Jataka tales and stories from the great Buddhist traditions. (See the Book Review department for a review of this book.)

Wide Awake—a Buddhist Guide for Teens, by Diana Winston. Introduces meditation, karma, enlightenment, metta, the four noble truths and other basic Buddhist tenets to teens.

Dharma Punx, by Noah Levine. A spiritual autobiography of how Buddhist practice helped a troubled teen turn it around. For older teens.

Teaching meditation:

Moody Cow Meditates, by Kerry MacLean. A picture book on helping young children use meditation to settle their minds.

Baby Buddhas—a Guide for Teaching Meditation to Children, by Lisa Desmond. A number of different meditation techniques designed for children.

Starbright—Meditations for Children, by Maureen Garth. Though not strictly Buddhist, these meditations can be helpful for younger children.

There are many more books on Buddhism and spiritual principles for children. I hope this list will help get things started for you.

Jacqueline Kramer, author of Buddha Mom—the Path of Mindful Mothering, has been practicing meditation and studying Buddhism for over 40 years and is director of The Hearth Foundation which shares Buddhist wisdom and practices with mothers around the world. www.hearth-foundation.org. She lives in Sonoma with her daughter and granddaughter.

