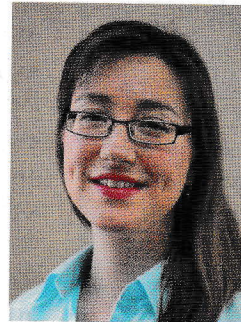
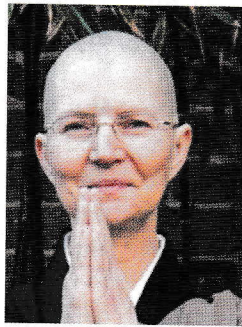


# ASK THE TEACHERS



**KONIN CARDENAS** is the guiding teacher in residence at Empty Hand Zen Center in New Rochelle, New York

**MR. GOLDFIELD** is cofounder of Wisdom Sun in San Francisco and a longtime student and translator of Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche

**SUMI LOUNDON KIM** is a minister with Buddhist Families of Durham in North Carolina

**Q** I'm a longtime practitioner, but now that I have children, I'm struggling with the notion of nonattachment. How do I reconcile nonattachment with the deep connection I have with my kids—and with my concerns for their well-being and safety?

**KONIN CARDENAS:** Practicing with non-attachment means remembering that all things and all people are constantly changing. In the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, Shakyamuni Buddha recounted that he was concerned that it would be too hard to teach what he had discovered because “beings take delight in attachment. It is hard for beings to see this truth, namely, specific conditionality, dependent origination.” Thus, nonattachment means living in accord with the fact that this body and mind momentarily arise dependent on myriad conditions. It doesn't mean lacking in human emotion; it means not clinging to any one way of seeing or responding to a conditioned, changing world.

Therefore, it is related to *upaya*, a skillful response to the way things truly are in this moment. For example, one way that nonattachment might show up in how you raise your children is that you give them lots of room to explore their own expression. You might recognize that they are not always going to behave one way or another, just as you, as a parent, are not always going to behave one


way or another. Keeping that in mind, you might try not to label them “the studious kid” or “the lazy kid” but instead respond to the way they are actually behaving. This is offering a skillful response in the moment; this is supporting their well-being by showing them that their choices matter while allowing them room to grow.

Ultimately, these two aspects of your life—nonattachment and deep connection—are compatible. Since people and things do not arise independently or permanently, they must be connected, even as they are changing. In fact, even to say that they are connected may be misleading, because it might be taken to mean that there are two separate things. In Zen there is the saying, “Not one, not two.” That is, you and your kids are all part of the great ocean of being. Yet each of you is also a unique event, like a single wave on the ocean. You are inseparable, even though you are individuals. Thus, your well-being and their well-being are completely intertwined, interrelated. Seen from that perspective, the heart connection that you feel is natural, and so is the wish to keep them safe. It is in accord with some of the most basic Buddhist teachings. In fact,

(LEFT-RIGHT) WASHELLE ANDRE, CLAUDINE GOSSETT, KIM WINTON




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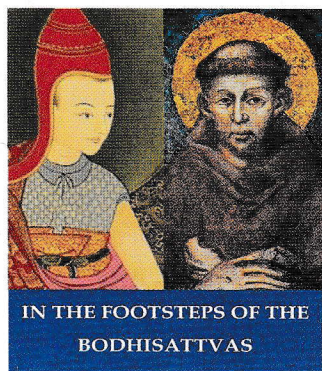
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I would go so far as to say that you should be cautious about any teaching that discourages you from having feelings—those feelings can be an appropriate response to what is happening in your life.

Having experienced this wish for your kids' safety and well-being, you could begin extending that to other people in recognition that they are also connected to you. You could begin to think about ways that you benefit from others' well-being and consciously begin to include their well-being in your plans and activities. This is the bodhisattva path, turning your personal interests to work for the benefit of all.

**ARI GOLDFIELD:** I am very familiar with the feeling of struggle you describe. It is so easy for me to feel anxious about my three-year-old son Oliver's present and (especially) future well-being and safety. When I feel that kind of worry welling up within me, there is one simple meditation I do that invariably has a profound effect on me—I remind myself, "My child is going to die."

Recalling this most basic, clear, unavoidable truth immediately connects parents with what Chögyam Trungpa called "the genuine heart of sadness" in possibly a more powerful way than any other imaginable. Anxiety dissolves into groundedness and the sweetest mixture of sorrow, longing, and love. The unbearable painfulness of the thought of our children's death compels us to go much deeper into our psyche than the superficial appearances of our children's existence and nonexistence, of their presence or their absence. We drop down into the space of our ultimate connection with our children, which transcends the appearances of meeting and parting and is therefore invulnerable to whatever appearances may manifest.

In Buddhism, there are actually different kinds of nonattachment. Having children is a wonderful invitation to explore some of them—for example, nonattachment to freedom from intense emotional experiences. As my own teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso,

often says, "Just as surfers prefer big waves, yogis and yoginis prefer big kleshas (disturbing emotions)!" As we know, having a child is a guarantee of emotional experiences the likes of which we have never had before. But as the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* teach, the kleshas are perfectly pure. How can we realize this truth if we resist the kleshas? If instead we practice opening to them and inviting them to be accepted within an expanse of loving awareness, we can actually experience our emotions' underlying purity.

We are also invited to abandon our attachment to what it means to be a meditator. When Oliver was an infant, I was often frustrated by my sleep deprivation and the frequent loss of my morning meditation time when I had to attend to him instead. A wise friend gave me excellent counsel: she suggested I meditate by simply feeling into the sensation of my feet touching the earth every time I had to go to Oliver's room when he cried. This taught me how important it was to savor the tiny moments of peace—the flashes of relaxing into simplicity in the shower, on the bus, wherever I could find them.

Finally, for us parents who are not the birth mother, during at least the first two years of a child's life, we are compelled to give up our attachment to having the attention and love of our spouse and even to feeling included within the family unit. The mother-child dyad is just that close, that strong. We love our spouse and child and long to participate in the amazing intimacy we see occurring before us, and yet we are so often excluded from it by both parties! This is unintentional on their part; it happens for completely normal and natural reasons. But even so, we are often left feeling so painfully on our own. I cannot imagine any practitioner in an isolated cave feeling more lonely. What a powerful call to us to meditate on self-love and self-acceptance and to seek out and connect with the unfindable, inexpressible, inconceivable true nature of our lonely mind—our most intimate partner of all.



When I feel worry about my son welling up within me, there is one simple meditation that I do—I remind myself, “My child is going to die.”

—Ari Goldfield

**SUMI LOUNDON KIM:** The heart of this humdinger question is that the word “attachment” means one thing in the context of parenting and another in the context of Buddhist teachings. The association of the word “attachment” with parenting has its origins in the phrase “attachment parenting,” a theory of child-rearing developed by pediatrician William Sears in the 1980s. In parenting, attachment is thought to provide a foundational sense of safety and security, giving a child the courage to explore and thus learn essential facts about their world. Your concern for your children’s well-being and safety comes from a healthy, natural bonding derived from empathy, care, and love—none of which are against dharma.

In the Buddhist world, attachment is understood as a mental factor, a psychological pattern that is a mega-cause of suffering. However, the neutral sense of the English word “attachment” doesn’t convey the potency and misery of what Buddhists mean by it. Buddhist texts use the Sanskrit word *trsna*, an English-language cognate of which is the word “thirst.” “Thirst” accurately conveys the sense of need that characterizes this mental state. We are thirsty for sense gratification, thirsty for experiences. Other translations of this kind of attachment are “clinging,” “craving,” and “desire.” Although it doesn’t sound human to say, “Don’t be attached to your children,” it *does* sound right to say, “Don’t cling to them.” (We even disapprove of overly clingy parents.)

Nonetheless, the Buddhist notion of attachment, as *craving*, can teach us something about parenting pitfalls. Since we can crave just about anything, it’s possible to develop a sticky clinginess to our own children. For example, we might crave their demonstrations of affection, respect, or loyalty. We can

become attached to our children behaving or performing a particular way, believing that our child should be a good soccer player, academically successful, polite to others, and so on, because we are worried about our own public image, self-worth, unresolved issues, or value as a “good” parent. This kind of attachment is primarily self-centered, serving our own needs. As many of us know from experience, staking our happiness on a child fulfilling our expectations invariably results in suffering. (Although I’m quite certain that the moment my children stop leaving dirty socks around the house, my life will be perfect.) In the final analysis of this type of clingy attachment, it’s not so much that we are directly attached to our children as we are attached to our misconception of what will bring us happiness.

The parenting notion of attachment as *bonding* can also teach us something about parenting potential. In fact, the Buddha himself urges us to create the “bonds of fellowship,” as taught in the *Sangaha Sutta*. Through generosity, kind words, beneficial help, and consistency in the face of changing conditions, he said, parents sustain a favorable, respectful relationship with their children. In other words, parenting *is* dharma practice. Far from trying to detach ourselves from our children, our relationship with our children is an amazing ground on which we can practice attunement, the gift of creating safety, generosity, aid, and unconditional love. This in turn develops our capacity to feel the same bonds of fellowship for the children of others—and for others as once-children. In the end, we are called to discover the bonds of fellowship we have with all beings. **BD**

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