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Bringing Up Buddhas:

How Mindfulness Can Impact the Next Generation

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Acknowledgments

Never been lonely

Never been lied to

Never had to scuffle in fear

Nothing denied to

Born at the instant

The church bells chime

And the whole world whispering

Born at the right time

- Paul Simon

I'm not sure if the church bells were chiming when I was born, but the unwavering support of my parents, Mori and Percy, has allowed me to pursue my passions, with nothing denied to. My mom also introduced me to Zen, a practice for which I am deeply grateful, and in which I have never been lied to. I am further indebted to my wife, Courtney, in whose presence I have never been lonely. Lastly, this work would not have been possible without the inspiration of my daughter Ciel, who was undoubtedly born at the right time.

Abstract

The following presents both a rationale paper and a creative thesis on the topic of how mindfulness can meaningfully impact the next generation. Given the daunting issues faced by Generation Alpha (those born after 2010), including climate change, social justice, and mental health, understanding how the tool of mindfulness can best support children, as well as inform the caretakers most influential to them such as parents and educators, is crucial.

The following rationale paper outlines how mindfulness can make an impact in the fields of parenting and education, as well as in addressing the pertinent issues mentioned above. In surveying the diverse research in the field of mindfulness, as well drawing upon and synthesizing work in adjacent fields such as psychology and neuroscience, it explains how a skill that trains practitioners to hone nonjudgmental, present moment attention can help shift priorities, foster connections, and come to terms with uncertainty.

The creative thesis presents the introduction and first chapter of a book manuscript. As a parent, educator, and Zen practitioner, I know firsthand how profound mindfulness practice can be, and how much “an orientation characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232) can aid caretakers and children alike. The introduction presents an overview of the themes an entire completed manuscript would provide, though due to page limitations only the first chapter on parenting is included within the scope of this project. Ultimately, the goal is for the reader to better understand how mindfulness can meaningfully impact the next generation, and to illustrate how that information can best be delivered in the form of a non-fiction book drawing upon personal experiences, interviews, and research.

Rationale Paper

Bringing Up Buddhas: How Mindfulness Can Impact the Next Generation

Generation Alpha includes all children born after 2010. It is a generation coming of age at a time marked by immense change, whether it is the warming planet, the urgent calls for social justice, or the profound fluidity surrounding personal identity. Taken together, these issues encompass what it means to live, to suffer, and to find one's place in the modern world. As a parent, educator, and mindfulness practitioner, I have often wondered where my students or my daughter could turn for meaningful support in confronting these challenges.

Mindfulness refers to the practice of training one's attention nonjudgmentally on the present moment (Wright, 2020). It is a practice that has garnered interest for its ability to support and nurture overall wellbeing in a number of different disciplines (Wright, 2020). Understanding the power and the limitations of mindfulness in addressing the most pressing contemporary issues will give this generation the best chance of utilizing this tool meaningfully.

As the current stewards of this generation, parents and teachers have an outsized role in educating children and providing them with the potential to approach these issues with wisdom and acceptance. In creating an operational definition for mindfulness, Bishop et al., noted that it is "an orientation characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance" (2004, p. 232). The cultivation of these traits in children, parents, and educators alike may provide the coming generation with a mindset that is intentional rather than reactive; an approach that is process-oriented rather than goal-directed; and the ability to remain open and adaptive to the unfolding present. Thus the following will examine the potential impact of mindfulness in the fields of parenting and education, as well as how this tool can help Generation Alpha address critical issues surrounding the environment, social justice, and mental health. By teaching

children how to meaningfully relate to the world, to one another, and to themselves, perhaps we can raise a generation of Buddhas.

Positionality

In March of 2019 my daughter was born. My wife and I quickly realized that we had created what might euphemistically be termed a “spirited” baby. She was headstrong from the start, and protested loudly if things weren’t going her way, which—compared to the comfort and satiation of the womb—they usually were not. My wife encountered someone at the playground early on who said, “Well, you know what they say: calm parents make calm babies.”

This statement seemed indicative of a larger societal assumption that children are forged in the kiln of the household. And prior to having a child I probably felt this way too. But my daughter quickly dispelled the notion that my own calmness or lack thereof was the deciding factor in her temperament. It was abundantly clear that she was her own person, and though I didn’t have much power over her actions, I could work on my own reactions and let go of the hope that she would be exactly what I expected. Calm parents don’t always make calm babies, but mindful parents might be able to find peace (or at least sanity) in the spaciousness that arises when they are able to let go of the limiting fantasies regarding the past and future. And within this peace (or sanity) children might do a better job finding their own way.

This isn’t to say that parents have no influence over their children. Rather such influence may be most skillfully exerted when the emphasis is on being fulfilled by what one has rather than frustrated by the lack of what one desires. As a Zen practitioner going on two decades, this was a familiar concept. Many of the lessons I’d learned from so much time spent in meditation grappling with the often confounding richness of reality were suddenly applicable in a whole

new arena. It was a connection I wished someone else had made, so that I could more readily transfer those skills to parenthood.

Prior to the birth of my daughter I scoured many of the usual suspects of parenting literature for clues about what to expect (when expecting). The most helpful book was Pamela Druckerman's *Bringing Up Bebe* (2012). Through a relatable narrative it explained how the French approach to parenting could provide a stable framework, clear expectations, and a more fulfilling overall experience for parent and child. Thus my thesis, as the title suggests, is an attempt to provide that same clarity for anyone at the crossroads of parenthood, mindfulness, and contemporary issues. As such, the thesis is geared towards helping parents understand how mindfulness can be helpful both for themselves and for their children. It will offer both explicit and implicit ways in which families can adopt a mindful approach, and explain how such an approach can address the issues facing Generation Alpha.

In addition, as an educator for over a decade, I have seen first hand how mindfulness can be successfully (and sometimes unsuccessfully) incorporated into schools. Outside of the home, teachers are often the most consistent caretakers of children. The scope of this work then, will also include how mindfulness can be impactful in the field of education. Despite parents being the primary audience for this work, educators will also find the material invaluable. The aim is not to suggest specific mindfulness programming for schools, but to look more generally at how mindfulness can support and shape the way students learn about and relate to the world at large. Schools are fertile ground for such learning to take place, and both parents and educators may be keen on understanding how the skill of mindfulness can foster a love of process rather than a hyperfocus on results. This reorientation toward process can impact an athlete preparing for a

game, a student preparing for a test, the faculty preparing for a meeting, the way a teacher designs a unit on health and wellness, or even the way casual interactions unfold in the hallway.

Through personal anecdotes, interviews with experts in the field of education, and research on existing mindfulness programs in schools, I will attempt to explicate why the tool of mindfulness can be so transformative within the halls of education. In addition, since those halls have often provided the subjects and spaces for so much research on mindfulness and adolescents, I will also look at what lessons and strategies from these studies can be adapted for the household.

My role as a parent and an educator will undoubtedly influence my thinking on this topic, however my aim is for that thinking to be informed and supported by the breadth of available research and recent studies on child development, psychology, neuroscience, education, and mindfulness.

Subtopic Selection

Generation Alpha is the most diverse generation ever, and one that already cares more about a wide range of issues than Millennials and Baby Boomers (Business Wire, 2019). Identifying the most important issues Generation Alpha may encounter is a subjective process. According to a poll of over 1000 members of Generation Alpha, the issues that they attributed the most importance to included keeping children safe at school, making sure everyone has enough food to eat, that boys and girls are treated fairly, and taking care of the environment (Business Wire, 2019). Certain issues, such as safety at school or food equality, may be better addressed through policy and increased public awareness. However mindfulness is not intended to resolve specific issues per se, but to help all people—policymakers, educators, parents,

children, and everyone in between—observe with calmness and clarity what makes them tick, because as we go so goes the world.

That said, there are certain issues that, for a combination of factors including urgency, prevalence, and personal accountability, lend themselves to a response that is as much about day-to-day and even moment-to-moment behavior as it is about policy. School safety may not depend on addressing the actions and habits of the many but of the few that might endanger schools through anomalous behavior (as well as on the policies that make harmful weapons widely available). However taking care of the environment is something that everyone can be accountable for, and hold institutions accountable for as well. Therefore I honed in on the three most pressing issues that also seemed to have the highest potential to be addressed through everyday actions at home and at school that could spark the necessary societal shifts. Observing what makes us tick can perhaps allow us to tick to a new rhythm given the proper tool, such as mindfulness.

Climate change may be the largest existential threat that Generation Alpha faces; inequality and discrimination may be the most imperative social hurdle; and mental health may be the most compelling individual quandary. Understanding how we can relate to our surroundings, to one another, and to ourselves with wisdom and compassion is a question mindfulness practitioners have been exploring for millenia, yet for the next generation these questions have reached a crescendo. Thus the topics of the environment, social justice, and mental health felt like the most urgent and the most salient ones to explore through the mindfulness lens.

Why Mindfulness?

The spiritual scaffolding and belief systems that have anchored humanity for millennia are evaporating (for better or worse), and the amount of Americans who say religion is important to them has consistently dropped with each generation since the Greatest Generation, as have feelings of spiritual peace and wellbeing (Pew Research Center, 2014). Meanwhile, despite feeling less religious and less at peace, younger Millennials (the youngest group surveyed in this poll) also expressed the greatest sense of wonder about the universe than any other generation (Pew Research Center, 2014), a feeling that is likely to persist among Generation Alpha. The picture being painted is one of the youth nurturing deep questions in the face of increasing uncertainty.

It might seem like children have many places to turn. There are qualified counselors, caring parents, highly educated health professionals, thoughtful teachers, and an abundance of curricular and extracurricular offerings designed to remedy countless anxieties, ills, and ailments. One might have a health and wellness program at school, take medication to address attentional deficit, see a therapist to discuss emotional trauma, or attend an afterschool art program aimed at reducing stress. When it comes to addressing symptoms, Western society excels (Schroën et al., 2014). But focusing so intently on symptoms can leave the web of conditions that give rise to those symptoms unaddressed (Schroën et al., 2014). Furthermore, it might ignore the fact that what we label “symptoms” could also just be the nature of reality. Anxiety may just be a natural response to uncertainty. A more holistic approach could provide a method for embracing the potentially profound experience of uncertainty rather than attempting to eliminate it.

Secular mindfulness emerged from Buddhist practices and teachings. Mindfulness practice presents a paradigm shift. “History weaves and bends and refuses to conform to prior expectations,” wrote Wright (2020, p. 214). “And Buddhist teachings relish this stark

unknowability of the future. They advise that coming to terms with the openness and unpredictability of life is a major part of wisdom.” It is the very openness that is inherent in mindfulness practice that might offer the next generation the most salient and sensible approach to the unknowable future. Specific solutions may be in short supply, but the practice of attending to the present moment may lead to wisdom in the face of unpredictability and meaningful action in the face of meaningless consumption, confusion, indolence, and inequity. Mindfulness can offer Generation Alpha a secular way to confront and even embrace these deep questions and critical issues.

Mindfulness and Parenting

The very notion of “parenting,” pointed out child development researcher Alison Gopnik, is a recent invention, appearing in America in 1958 and catching on in the 1970s (Gopnik, 2017). Rather than describe a relationship, it creates a verb, with the implication being that as a parent one must mold and shape one’s child into a stable adult. This undermines the degree to which the parent-child relationship is an unfolding process that need not have a defined goal. Sure all parents want success for their children, but the expectation that this outcome will only come to fruition through calculated intervention is a narrow and potentially limiting view. “Loving children doesn’t give them a destination; it gives them sustenance for the journey,” explained Gopnik (2017, p. 10).

One method for attuning to the process of child-rearing rather than focusing on the destination is mindful parenting. Wong et al. (2019), explained, “Mindful parenting is conceptualized as the practice of being present and aware in everyday interactions with children through paying attention without judgment as each moment unfolds” (para. 11). As any parent knows, remaining present to each unfolding moment can be a rollercoaster. But the goal isn’t

constant vigilance, it is to create a stable and supportive framework within which a child can explore. Siegel and Bryson likened this task to keeping a canoe floating peacefully down a river between the banks of chaos and rigidity. This may require a deft and playful touch. “One extreme is chaos, where there’s a total lack of control. The other extreme is rigidity, where there’s too much control, leading to a lack of flexibility and adaptability,” the authors wrote (2011, p. 11). Balance comes from navigating the middle path.

This becomes further evident when examining the classic notion of parenting styles as conceived of by psychologist and researcher Diana Baumrind. Baumrind determined that there were three essential styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive (a fourth style, uninvolved, was added by later researchers) (Dewar, 2018). Authoritative parents are sensitive and supportive, yet demanding, valuing independence; authoritarian parents are stern, requiring adherence to strictures; permissive parents are sensitive but overly lax; and uninvolved parents offer little guidance or support. Explained Dewar (2018), authoritativeness is “a more balanced approach in which parents expect kids to meet certain behavioral standards, but also encourage their children to think for themselves and to develop a sense of autonomy” (para. 27).

Given the mutual emphasis on balance between extremes, one might expect parents that practice mindfulness or employ mindful parenting techniques to display elements of authoritativeness. It turns out that there is a correlation between authoritative and mindful parents. In a survey study of 333 parents, self-compassion and mindfulness were positively associated with an authoritative style, and negatively correlated with permissive and authoritarian styles, as well as parenting stress (Gouveia et al., 2016). This suggests that mindfulness might lend itself to more adaptive and balanced parenting, though a more rigorous longitudinal study would be required to establish causality.

Building on Jon Kabat-Zinn's formulation of mindfulness, Duncan, et al. (2009), presented a model for mindful parenting: "(a) listening with full attention; (b) nonjudgmental acceptance of self and child; (c) emotional awareness of self and child; (d) self-regulation in the parenting relationship; and (e) compassion for self and child" (para. 13). In a study featuring 479 parent-adolescent dyads, in which the model of mindful parenting was assessed by both parents and their children on a scale developed by Duncan, Liu et al. (2021) found that mindful parenting had a significant and positive correlation with adolescent life satisfaction and was positively related to adolescent coping self-efficacy. It is interesting to note that none of the mindful parenting techniques listed above refer to explicit outcomes, and yet listening fully, being non-judgmental and emotionally aware, self-regulating, and displaying compassion led to a higher degree of adolescent satisfaction, an outcome any parent would be delighted to achieve.

There can be a great deal of external pressure on parents to shape the circumstances by which their child will excel. This yearning to control can backfire, leading to the kind of rigidity that is the antithesis of balance. Through mindfulness practice and mindful parenting techniques, parents can let go of the need to "parent," and instead be present and supportive to the confounding, humbling, and diverse experience that is raising children. "To be a parent—to care for a child—is to be part of a profound and unique human relationship," said Gopnik (2017, p. 9). Attending to this relationship with curiosity, openness, and acceptance is a crucial way to instill these same qualities and values in the next generation.

Mindfulness and Education

Educational initiatives often target specific outcomes. With over 50 million elementary and secondary students enrolled in US schools, quantitative measures are necessary to identify trends and implement large-scale change. Yet the unintended consequences of such initiatives

can dramatically influence school culture, resulting in a hyperfocus on tests and outcomes without much consideration for the process by which outcomes are attained. As Jon Kabat-Zinn noted, “Primary and secondary school teachers are becoming increasingly pressured to be even more outwardly focused, driven by ‘teaching to the test’ directive and culture that so dominates education at this time” (Rechtshaffen, 2014, p. xiv).

This style of learning, in which teachers supply specific knowledge to students, is called the banking model of education. As Friere (1970) explained, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p. 72). In the banking model, learning occurs through the rote work of receiving and memorizing information. Yet is this how students learn best?

Gopnik (2017) related a study in which children were shown an enticing toy that had multiple functions. For half of the participants the researcher activated a function and seemed surprised at what the toy could do. For the other half the researcher explained one of the toy’s functions before leaving the room. The children who’d seen the accidental activation were more likely to experiment and learn all of the toy’s functions, while the children who were told about one of the functions tended to just repeat that specific function. Gopnik summarized, “The children played with the toy longer, tried more different actions, and discovered more of the ‘hidden’ features when the experimenter squeaked the beeper accidentally than they did when she deliberately tried to teach them” (p. 174). In other words, when involved in a banking situation the children simply regurgitated the information that had been deposited. But when given the opportunity to explore, their innate curiosity led to discovery.

Mindfulness can be a way to support the natural wonder of children by emphasizing the process of learning rather than targeting specific outcomes. “At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know,” wrote Friere (1970, p. 90). Mindfulness is about the point of encounter if nothing else. As Sherretz noted while conducting case studies on three mindful educators (2011), “All three teachers observed the theme of a process orientation, as opposed to a response orientation that focuses on obtaining the correct answer, on numerous occasions” (p. 83). In doing so the teachers valued intention and fostered flexibility in their students. “Mindful teachers promote thinking dispositions that can be applied to different contexts instead of teaching skills that are only applicable to a particular test,” summarized Sherretz et al. (2011, p. 93). They don’t prioritize one skill but a mode of engagement that can be applied in varied circumstances, leading to a richer overall educational experience.

This diversity of application becomes evident when looking at the research on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). Flook et al. (2015) found that students who participated in a Kindness Curriculum training featuring mindfulness practice showed greater teacher-reported social competency than a control group, as well as higher year end grades. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that students who participated in a four-month SEL program that included mindfulness showed significant improvements in executive functioning, as well as self-reported wellbeing, and higher math grades (the only ones available for the purposes of the study) than control group students who received the regular curriculum on social responsibility. And Caballero et al. (2019) found a correlation between academic achievement and mindfulness in a survey of 2,000 middle school students.

This is just a small sampling of the benefits that research on mindfulness in education has uncovered, yet the lack of consistency across MBIs and the lack of a clear definition regarding mindfulness has invited skepticism. As Greenberg and Harris (2011) explained, “The diversity of practices that fall under the contemplative umbrella necessitates clear description of interventions in reports” (p. 2). Despite the need for further clarity and research regarding contemplative practices in education, the research suggests that what is occurring under this umbrella has been largely beneficial.

William James wrote, “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will...An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about” (1950, p. 463). It is in the practice of mindfulness that those directions can be found. As Rechtshaffen summarized, “Academic subjects are like different movies streamed out of a projector. Mindfulness is the process of examining the projector itself. Academic subjects use different parts of the mind, whereas mindfulness goes right to the source and studies the mind directly” (2014, p. 139). Becoming adept at training the projector on the task at hand with intention and wonder, rather than on how one wants the movie to end, is a lifelong skill, and one that can help educators and students alike enhance and enjoy the process of learning.

Mindfulness and Mental Health

The sociologist Liah Greenfeld shared an anecdote that is telling about the challenge emerging identity presents to adolescents. Greenfeld’s son dyed his hair a garish color, and she reacted in horror. In discussing his decision she pointed out that her son had not approved of her using dye to hide her gray hair. “You wished to pass for somebody you are not,” pointed out her

son, “while I am just trying to see who I am” (2005, p. 17-18). To her son, Greenfeld seemed to possess the fixed identity of an adult, an identity from which she could not stray, while he was still in the process of finding out what his identity was.

Greenfeld used this anecdote to describe why modern society, and Americans in particular, can struggle so much to formulate an identity, which she describes as a social map with a “You are here” sign highlighting one’s role in the world (2005, p. 13). For much of human history identity was defined through exterior forces, whether divine or political, and rigidly controlled by class and status. The feeling her son describes is probably not one that would have been expressed centuries, or even decades, ago. Yet in contemporary society, in which these determining forces and class divisions are more fluid, adolescents face an abundance of choice. “The natural limitations of human existence, however, are the only limitations life imposes on contemporary Americans. In comparison to other societies, our sphere of freedom, and choice, is greatly extended” (2005, p. 16).

The confusion surrounding identity formation may be exacerbated by the radically open-ended nature of modern American society, but looking at the biological origins of identity reveals the illusory nature of believing in a permanent self in the first place. At some point in human history it became advantageous to consider one’s self in relation to everything else. In *Buddha’s Brain*, Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius explained how one’s ability to conceive of a self “has been stitched into human DNA by reproductive advantages slowly accumulating across a hundred thousand generations” (2009, p. 215). A self is interested in stimulation, since this is what will allow it to find food and mates and propagate its genes, a useful mechanism when competition is fierce and resources scarce. These days many of us are fortunate to live in a time when resources are widely available, yet the stimulation seeking part of our brain has not

quieted. If anything, modern culture has evolved to take advantage of this evolutionary trait by inundating us with advertisements, bright lights, and addictive apps on mobile devices that are shaped to fit in our pockets. “Contemporary Western culture strains and sometimes overwhelms the brain with more information than it evolved to handle on a routine basis,” wrote Hanson and Mendius (2009, p. 181).

Taken together Greenfeld, Hanson, and Mendius portray a time of deep uncertainty for adolescents finding their place in the world. The social map that is supposed to say “You are here” is cluttered with the bright lights of social media and potentially limitless pathways and possibilities. Finding one’s self in that jumble is no doubt a fraught and challenging experience. 9.7% of American youth have severe major depression, and that number is trending up (Mental Health America, 2021). A recent mental health poll conducted by the Harvard Kennedy School found a 150 percent increase in depressive symptoms among young Americans compared to a CDC poll from 2019 (Burstein & Zhang, 2021). In my own experience as a teacher, mental health, identity issues, mindfulness, social emotional wellbeing, and other tools for coping have increasingly been the subjects of professional development sessions since I entered the field over a dozen years ago. The conversation has evolved from discussing how students learn best to discussing how to consider the wellbeing of students so that they are in the best headspace in which to learn.

Mindfulness can offer a map in the midst of this uncertainty. It is a map without a “You are here” sign, and that is perhaps its greatest advantage. In mindfulness practice, one gets to examine the concept of self and observe the flimsiness of its construction. Though this can be unsettling, with proper guidance and care, it can also be a reprieve, a practice in which the machinations of the ego are allowed to diminish just as presence and connection grow. This shift

has been reflected in studies examining the neural correlates of the self and the impact of meditation.

The brain's default mode network (DMN) consists of the brain regions that are most active in the brain when one is not engaged in a specific task. Brewer et al. (2011) found that the brain largely engages in mind-wandering and self-referential processing under these circumstances. Millière et al. (2018), explained, "These self-referential mental episodes constitute what may be called narrative self-consciousness, namely the complex sequences of self-centered thoughts, memories and imaginings that weave the narrative of our daily lives and shape our core self-related beliefs (Damasio, 1999; Gallagher, 2000; Schechtman, 2011)" (para. 19). One study found that people spend almost 50% of the time engaging in mind-wandering, and that this mind state is correlated with unhappiness (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). People spend a considerable amount of time working on the project of self despite the fact that it seems to be an unfulfilling project.

During meditation the key nodes of the DMN are quieted (Millière et al., 2018). The fact that meditation leads to decreased activity in the DMN suggests that it can interrupt the brain's tendency to reify the self. Time spent engaging in rumination is now devoted to the task of paying attention to the present moment. Granted there are varying forms of meditation, but Millière et al. (2018), explained that the goal of most of these practices is to increase awareness, disengage from distracting thoughts, and refocus attention back on the wider awareness of the present. "Once attention has been stabilized and the mind 'quieted' meditators can undergo prolonged conscious episodes entirely lacking in self-referential thoughts," explained Millière et al. (2018, para. 20). Brewer (2021) found that not only do these periods of relative openness correlate with decreased DMN activity, people almost universally prefer them to the closed states

of self-concern. The project of cultivating what he described as “a curious awareness of present-moment experience” (2021, p. 168) can actually be quite fulfilling.

The above suggests that during meditation adolescents can take a break from the unhealthy rumination that could accompany the burden of discovering one’s self. Noted Verni (2007), “Bringing mindful attention to bodily sensations and felt experience can facilitate the experience of the self as an unfolding, emerging process as opposed to a fixed entity that must be found, discovered, or manufactured” (para. 10). This can lead to an understanding that one need not settle on a defined self. “The experience and conceptualization of the self as a fluid, emerging process can have a profoundly positive impact on adolescents as they struggle to make sense of the changes occurring in their inner and outer worlds,” explained Verni (2007, para. 11).

Perhaps this is why outcomes for adolescent mindfulness-based interventions include such results as reduced anxiety (Crowley et al., 2018), increased emotional regulation (Deplus et al., 2016), and actions that are in accordance with one’s values (Warren et al., 2018).

Mindfulness can help mitigate the doubt and uncertainty that arise when one is coming of age by helping one attend nonjudgmentally to the fascinating process of growing up, reducing rumination, and nurturing an exploration that does not require a defined result. There is no hair color that truly defines you.

Mindfulness and the Environment

In the face of the looming calamity that is climate change it can be tempting to want to fix the problem by addressing the surface issues. This is a reactive approach that identifies the external culprits—carbon, consumption, capitalism—without asking what work might need to be done internally. Performing the necessary triage now is essential, and considering 100 fossil fuel companies account for 71% of global emissions since 1988 (Carbon Majors Report, 2017), these

external culprits must be addressed. But it is also essential to uncover the root of the behavior that has created this crisis and address the underlying cause. “Our task as humans in this warming decade and beyond is taking the science and using it as a lens to change not just our systems but also ourselves, from the inside out,” explained climate scientist Dr. Kimberly Nicholas. “By clarifying our values and shifting our mindsets and actions, we can start to change the world” (2021, p. 8). The kind of sea change that could stop sea temperatures from rising also needs to be sparked at the local level, within each individual and community.

Generation Alpha can be at the forefront of this change by being taught how to cultivate a deeper sense of care for their personal environment. Such small-scale care, it turns out, can have a large-scale impact. This is the primary theory of the broken-window hypothesis, named after an experiment conducted by Stanford researcher Philip Zombardo. In 1969 Zombardo left two identical cars in comparable neighborhoods in two different cities. One car was left in pristine condition, while Zombardo vandalized the other. The undamaged car remained untouched during the experiment, while the damaged one was stripped and destroyed. Based on this theory the New York Transit Authority removed graffiti from subway cars in the late 1980s and cracked down on petty crimes, two environmental changes that correlated with a precipitous drop in crime (Gladwell, 1996). Attending to surface level appearances had a dramatic effect on modifying behavior.

Arranging the environment in such a way as to promote the kinds of behaviors one seeks can be an essential step toward instilling harmonious values. This is evident in the concept of the “prepared environment,” a foundational Montessori principle. Montessori educator Holly Stoehr explained, “The prepared environment is a tool for helping with classroom management and self-regulation. If children are running across the room, rather than walking, it may be that the

arrangement of the furniture has created an open path that invites the running. It's easier to shift the physical environment rather than trying to change the student behavior" (H. Stoehr, personal communication, Dec. 7, 2020).

Thus Montessori classrooms are arranged in ways that prioritize order. Everything has a place, and students are naturally incentivized to clean up their work. Stoehr explained, "The order and organization of the environment is calming to all the senses; the predictability of knowing where to find what you need and being able to handle that independently is empowering" (H. Stoehr, personal communication, Dec. 7, 2020). The idea that one's personal actions can align with the values of the community could extend beyond the classroom, leading to an appreciation of harmony that informs the way students engage with the world. Cleanliness in the classroom context can instill a greater ability to care for other environments.

An ordered environment will also demand continuous effort to maintain the standards of cleanliness with which it began. Such an effort should not be considered a nuisance but an opportunity to cultivate clarity. As Standing wrote of Montessori classrooms (1957, p. 272), "In the case of the youngest children a great deal of their time is occupied simply in preserving this order in the environment—scrubbing, polishing, clearing out cupboards, tidying shelves, and so forth." In the context of mindfulness, maintaining order is not just an end in itself but an opportunity for practicing, for displaying inner clarity through outer cleanliness. As Shoukei Matsumoto, Buddhist monk and author of *A Monk's Guide to a Clean House and Mind*, explained (2018), "Buddhist monks also clean by themselves. This is because the cleaning practice is not a tool but a purpose in itself. Would you outsource your meditation practice to others?" (para. 10). This does not mean one's home should be turned into a Montessori

classroom or a monastery, but designing an ordered space and practicing upkeep of that space can go a long way towards cultivating awareness and attention to detail.

A further element of the prepared environment that can shape behavior is the inclusion of natural materials, plants, and animals—common features in a Montessori classroom. The use of organic materials is intentional. Such materials are sustainable, mimic what students might encounter out in nature, and they demand careful attention. “These materials encourage children to take care of their environment,” explained Montessori teacher Sue Sullivan (S. Sullivan, personal communication, Dec. 13, 2020). “Plants and animals require care. It’s peaceful to have live plants and it brings the outside in.”

Organic elements not only require care, they provide it as well. Researchers have studied biophilic design, in which natural elements are incorporated into an indoor environment. Yin et al. (2020) placed 100 research participants in one of four virtual environments featuring varying degrees of biophilic design and one non-biophilic space. They found that those in a biophilic environment had reduced physiological stress as suggested by measuring key physiological indicators, and less psychological anxiety on a questionnaire implemented directly following immersion in the environment. Other research has correlated being around plants with improved mood (Lee et al., 2015) and attention span (Kuo & Taylor, 2004).

The symbiotic relationship engendered by such living arrangements can help break down the barriers between self and nature, and culture and climate, by expanding one’s circle of compassion. “Studies show that direct, repeated experiences with local nature over time is how people, especially children, build a relationship with nature and a sense of place and feel a connection and responsibility as well as agency to protect nature,” explained Nicholas (2021, p. 50). Consistently engaging with organic materials, plants, and animals establishes a relationship

in which these phenomena are no longer “out there” in the wild, but part of the fabric of one’s world, and by preserving the local one’s attitude toward the global may shift.

Mindfulness can help further this shift by inspiring compassionate responses. Siegel explained that seeing the mind clearly, “Helps us dissolve the optical delusion of our separateness. We develop more compassion for ourselves and our loved ones, but we also widen our circle of compassion to include other aspects of the world beyond our immediate concerns” (2011, p. 260). Such clear seeing, both of one’s own mind and of the suffering of others, is necessary for making better choices as consumers and creating change as citizens. The earlier children are exposed to environments and practices that promote attention, compassion, and care, the greater the possibility that the root cause of suffering and environmental damage can be pulled.

Mindfulness and Social Justice

Concepts are shortcuts that allow our brains to function in a complex world. Hasenkamp (2014) described the process of learning to identify the letter *A*: particular neurons are activated when encountering the letter, and these neurons are reinforced each time an *A*-ish shape appears, resulting in the concept of *A* beginning to fit its varied appearances. This kind of conceptual functioning is essential to the human ability to seamlessly navigate reality without having to figure out what everything is and what it does (Hasenkamp, 2014). However shortcuts can have downsides. “We don’t see interdependence and impermanence, because we crystallize everything into discrete preformed patterns that seem stable over time,” explained Hasenkamp (2014, para. 15).

Though conceptual thinking is important in learning to make distinctions, it can be harmful when applied to people. Yet that is precisely what children do. Gopnik explained that

children tend to believe that categories are permanent, and that they come from the world instead of being generated by our minds (2017). This is known as “essentialist thinking,” and it can be useful when learning to distinguish between animals, for example. Dogs bark because that is an essential feature of dogness, whereas ducks quack. Yet the trouble arises when essentialist thinking is applied to the social world. Explained Gopnik, “When they are still quite young they treat categories such as gender, race, or even language the same way they treat categories such as duck or dog. They think social categories are innate, deep, and unchanging, too” (2017, p. 140).

Essentialist thinking may be useful in learning how to distinguish between concepts and things, but shortcuts can shortchange lived experience by not allowing one to see the richness of interdependence and impermanence. This is where mindfulness can be a valuable tool. From an ontological perspective, mindfulness is very much about learning to see richness, interdependence, and impermanence. Quacking may be an essential feature of ducks but there has never been a quack quite like this *quack*, and mindfulness can help one tune into the uniqueness of what is presenting itself moment-to-moment, rather than the concept it represents.

This can be true of the concepts we have about people as well as barks and quacks. By 2045 no single racial or ethnic group will make up a majority (Frey, 2018). Psychologist Claude Steele pointed out the challenges this might present for students:

We all have these social identities. All of them have negative stereotypes. It imposes a huge psychological burden on a person to function in an important situation where they could be seen in terms of one of these negative stereotypes. If you’re a member of such a group and you’re in school your progress is going to be affected by that (Bertelesen, 2016, 1:22:04).

Having a practice that allows students and teachers alike to see beyond stereotypes and biases is critical. The openness and acceptance that mindfulness practice engenders can help Generation Alpha be free of such psychological burdens.

Research on bias has already shown the efficacy of mindfulness in helping people to shed their biases. Kang et al. (2014) had research participants practice either lovingkindness meditation during a six week intervention, discuss lovingkindness as an idea, or join a waitlist control group. Those in the waitlist and discussion groups showed no significant change in implicit bias toward Blacks and homeless people (the two target groups for the study) while participants in the lovingkindness meditation group significantly decreased implicit bias. Social activist and mindfulness teacher Rhonda Magee noted, “Mindfulness practices actually do help in the fight against implicit bias and its capacity to cause explicit suffering in our lives. While they won’t end racism, mindfulness and other contemplative practices do support ways of being in the world that reflect less of the biases that each of us hold” (2015, para. 22).

Mindfulness practice can not only help people let go of damaging social constructs, it can shape the way they approach ethical decisions. Ruedy et al. (2010), found that mindfulness positively correlated with formalism, defined as a focus on principles over outcomes. As activist and Buddhist teacher Donald Rothberg explained, this can go against the grain of a culture focused on outcomes: “In contemporary Western societies, and particularly American society, there is clearly *a very strong social and cultural predisposition to outcomes*” (2006, p. 191). Over the course of two studies Ruedy et al. found that mindfulness “promotes greater ethical intentions and less ethical infractions” (2010, p. 81).

Mindfulness practice can also help activists learn how to effect change in a more sustainable way. Striving for change can be like any other form of striving, in which one

becomes focused on results. Rothberg characterized this mindset as such: “I want my protest to have an effect on other citizens and even on those in power, rather than have them ignore us. I intend my work to help bring about a new environmental law that will succeed, rather than fail” (Rothberg, 2006, p. 193). Yet the labor of an activist is often Sisyphean in nature, falling on deaf ears or unbending bureaucracies.

This is why, despite his long career as an activist, Rothberg advocated for a balanced approach to social change. “We can be active in ways that express our callings and our gifts and that respect our cycles of inner work and outer action,” wrote Rothberg (2006). “To honor such cycles in our lives means that sometimes we need times of refuge, reflection, and renewal, often for an extended period” (p. 206). To always be functioning at full throttle, committed to one’s work, is to potentially burnout or lose sight of the purpose with which one began in favor of the outcome one seeks. “There are practices, such as meditation, art, and immersion in the wilderness, to name a few, that shift the way we experience and understand ourselves, others, and the world,” wrote Rothberg (2006, p. 206). Not only do these activities offer a reprieve from the kind of rumination that often plagues our attention, they have the ability to further bolster our sense of connection with the world. “To come to know one’s calling requires at times a deep listening,” explained Rothberg (2006), “an ability to let go of distractions and busyness and focus on what might come in silence and stillness” (p. 208).

Bernie Glassman, Zen teacher and founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order, used the contemplative act of bearing witness to help fight for peace, resulting in meaningful change for so many. “When we bear witness to the unfolding of our daily lives, not shrinking from any situation that arises, we learn. We open to what is. And in that process, a healing arises” (Glassman, 1998, p. 37). Part of bearing witness involves a willingness to sit in the presence of

suffering. Zen teacher Jules Shuzen Harris explained, “When we analyze and judge a situation, we normally come to it with all of our ideas and habitual beliefs. We are only able to see it through the lens of our conditioned thinking” (Harris, 2020). In other words, we encounter suffering and, using our simulations and self-referential thought processing we immediately try and solve the problem, focused as we are on outcomes. On the contrary, “When we shift to the practice of bearing witness, we suspend our analytical thinking and move to a place of open awareness...To bear witness, we need to set aside the focus on our own reactions and enter a place of stillness and receptivity” (Harris, 2020). The result can be a much more expansive and empathetic act than the kind of action that arises from habitual mind. “Bearing witness invokes a sense of interconnectedness, of oneness, a direct realization of the wholeness of life,” wrote Harris (2020). “It enables us to see clearly the entire web of causes and conditions that create suffering, and to take effective action to improve people’s lives.”

Lastly, as Rothberg pointed out, the labor of an activist need not be limited to working for social change. The interconnectedness Harris mentioned suggests that anything one does can help shape the future, and so the more we can teach Generation Alpha to act from a place of stillness, the greater the chance that healing will arise. “What is most important,” explained Rothberg (2006), “is that we follow, in our own unique ways, the basic transformative principles and practices. What also is vital is that we be aware of the interpenetration of domains, of how the individual, relational, and collective aspects are present in whatever we are doing” (p. 208). In this sense, stillness can lay the groundwork for so much good, in the realm of social justice and beyond.

Prioritizing principles and intention through nonjudgmental, present moment awareness can help Generation Alpha pave a new path forward that is open and accepting rather than closed

and self-interested. At a time when “I can’t breathe” has become a rallying cry for oppressed minorities, it is imperative that children, adolescents, and their caretakers learn to let go of harmful shortcuts and undertake the work of confronting bias and cultivating compassion, breath-by-breath.

Conclusion

Generation Alpha is coming of age during a time of alarming upheaval, whether it is the outrage brought upon by oppression, the calamity that is climate change, or the magnitude of the mental health crisis. Mindfulness can help parents, educators, and children turn toward process, and the wisdom and compassion inherent in presence. Despite the immensity of these challenges, mindfulness can offer a way forward that isn’t about the end result but about the intention and awareness one brings to each moment. However the coming decades unfold, mindfulness can help this generation embrace the energy of this upheaval with openness, curiosity, and acceptance.

Parents and teachers are the conduits through which the tool of mindfulness can be passed on. Fostering the skill of mindfulness in educators and caretakers will have a profound impact on the way Generation Alpha forms their identities, approaches social justice, and attends to the environment. Barry Lopez wrote:

The quickest door to open in the woods for a child is the one that leads to the smallest room, by knowing the name each thing is called. The door that leads to the cathedral is marked by a hesitancy to speak at all, rather to encourage by example a sharpness of the senses. If one speaks it should only be to say, as well as one can, how wonderfully this all fits together, to indicate what a long, fierce peace can derive from this knowledge (2013, p. 150-1)

Generation Alpha cannot be given the answers, but hopefully, by cultivating a sharpness of the senses through the practice of mindfulness, they can be led to the door of the cathedral. Through widespread engagement in a practice that can only occur moment-to-moment, perhaps they will discover a long, fierce peace.

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Bringing Up Buddhas

How Mindfulness Can Impact The Next Generation



By Alex Tzelnic

Introduction

It is an experience so many have endured: the limited sleep, the immense joy, the grueling schedule, the repetition and routine, the moments of complete immersion, the endless chores, the total weariness along with the sense that one is experiencing something entirely unique and profound. Reading the entire canon of manuals and guides can help, but only to a degree. There is no way one can truly grasp what it is like without going through it one's self. I'm talking, of course, about a meditation retreat, an undertaking of radical presence.

Yet there are squealing little beings that tend to command one's attention in a surprisingly similar way. To be a parent and to be a mindfulness practitioner is to be thrust into the present moment with only your wits and your breath to save you, and your wits are constantly on the cusp of running out on the job. One might have an abundance of questions and a dearth of answers, and mastery, let alone basic proficiency, can feel frustratingly foreign. Yet the level of engagement required by children and mindfulness practice can also lead to the most fulfilling experiences of one's life. It can be difficult to reconcile the magic and the madness; the sense that one is doing it wrong with the sense that one is right where one is meant to be.

In a culture that prizes attainment and answers, we have lost sight of the fact that such reconciliation is not the point. As much as we yearn for simple solutions and step-by-step guides, the only way out is through. If we are not paying attention to the process, we may find ourselves looking back with they-grow-up-so-fast laments. Mindfulness, the practice of training one's attention nonjudgmentally on the present moment,¹ is about learning to approach each step with equanimity, curiosity, and compassion, no matter how joyful, boring, or excruciating—not about stepping unscathed to the other side.

¹ Dale Wright, *Buddhism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Secular mindfulness emerged from Buddhist practices and teachings. Mindfulness practice presents a paradigm shift for a culture steeped in quick fixes. “History weaves and bends and refuses to conform to prior expectations,” explained Buddhist scholar Dale Wright.² “Buddhist teachings relish this stark unknowability of the future. They advise that coming to terms with the openness and unpredictability of life is a major part of wisdom.” As any parent can attest to, the stark unknowability of the future is just about the only certainty that having a child brings.

In March of 2019 my daughter Ciel was born. My wife and I quickly realized that our new roommate was what might euphemistically be termed a “spirited” baby. She was stubborn from the start, and protested loudly if things weren’t going her way, which—compared to the comfort and satiation of the womb—they usually were not. My wife encountered someone at the playground early on who said, “Well, you know what they say: calm parents make calm babies.”

This statement is indicative of a larger societal assumption that children are forged in the kiln of the household. Prior to having a kid I probably felt this way too (early parenthood involves swallowing an uncomfortable portion of pre-parenthood judgments). But my daughter dispelled the notion that my own calmness or lack thereof was the deciding factor in her temperament. It was abundantly clear that she was her own person, and though I didn’t have much power over her actions, I could work on my own reactions and let go of the hope that she would conform to my expectations. Calm parents don’t always make calm babies, but mindful parents might be able to find peace (or at least sanity) in the spaciousness that arises when they are able to collapse the limiting walls of expectation. And within this peace (or sanity) children might actually do a better job of finding their own way.

² Ibid, 214.

This isn't to say that parents have no influence over their children. Rather such influence may be most skillfully exerted when the emphasis is on appreciating what one has rather than frustrated by the lack of what one desires. As a Zen practitioner going on two decades, this is an all too familiar concept. After all, the Second Noble Truth in Buddhism is that desire is the source of suffering. The writer Anne Lamott expressed this truth deftly in *Operating Instructions*, a journal of the first year after her son was born: "I want to learn to live in the now, I want to learn to breathe my way into it and hang out there more and more and experience life in all its richness and realness. But I want to do it later, like maybe sometime early next week. Right now I want a rush."³

During meditation one can watch the process of conjuring desires unfold in real time. It becomes clear that *the rush* is always fleeting but *the now* is—at the very least—reliably accessible. Giving more attention to the context of experience rather than the content is a 2500 year old method for quieting the cravings and turning up the curiosity. What if that curiosity were enough? What if we could let go of the desire for a rush in favor of the flow of present moment experience? Once I had a kid, many of the lessons I'd learned from so much time spent staring at a wall and grappling with the confounding richness of reality were suddenly applicable to the confounding bundle of reality in my arms. Ciel didn't need to change. Any friction in our budding relationship was primarily due to my own expectations and desires. Thankfully I had a method for recognizing and releasing them. It was a connection I wished had encountered prior to having a child, so that I could more readily transfer those skills to parenthood.

That is what I aim to do here, but also to go a step further. Because given the nature of the world right now, if mindfulness is merely a salve for overstressed parents, that is not enough. It is

³ Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, (Anchor Books, 1993), 173.

trendy to think of mindfulness as a panacea, an umbrella term for the awesome power of chilling out. But after the birth of my daughter I began to wonder how much the tool of mindfulness could help her navigate the big questions and address the pressing issues she and her generation will face. It felt crucial to understand both its possibilities and its limitations, so that it could be thoughtfully disseminated and not simply watered down enough to be palatable en masse.

When Ciel was three months old I applied to Lesley University's MA program in Mindfulness Studies in order to research this topic. In the prologue to *Bearing Witness*, Bernie Glassman, a Zen teacher and founder of the Zen Peacemakers Order, wrote, "This is a book of questions. More precisely, it's about living a questioning life, a life of unknowing."⁴ In that sense, this, too, might be considered a book of questions. It is about the power of the questioning spirit that mindfulness practice cultivates, and it is also an attempt to answer the question that has been with me for the first few years of Ciel's life: how can mindfulness practice meaningfully impact the next generation?



Generation Alpha includes all children born after 2010. It is a generation coming of age at a time marked by immense change, whether it is the warming planet, the urgent calls for social justice, or the profound fluidity surrounding personal identity. Taken together, these issues encompass what it means to live, to suffer, and to find one's place in the modern world. As a physical education teacher since 2008, working in schools that have ranged from toddler through 8th grade, I have spent a lot of time with Gen Alpha, and have been privy to so much of the insight, angst, and precociousness they possess.

⁴ Bernie Glassman, *Bearing Witness: A Zen Master's Lessons in Making Peace*, (Bell Tower, 1998), XIV.

Generation Alpha is the most diverse generation ever, and one that already cares more about a wide range of issues than Millennials and Baby Boomers.⁵ Identifying the most important issues Generation Alpha may encounter would require a crystal ball, yet a brief scan of the news provides some not-so-subtle clues. The world is burning, both literally and figuratively, with the fires from fossil fuels, the urgency of civil unrest, and an epidemic of anxiety, loneliness, and despair.⁶ Climate change may be the largest existential threat that Gen Alpha faces; inequality and discrimination may be the most imperative social hurdle; and mental health may be the most pressing individual plight. Understanding how we can relate to our surroundings, to one another, and to ourselves with wisdom and compassion is a question mindfulness practitioners have been asking for millennia, yet for the next generation these questions have reached a crescendo. Thus the topics of the environment, social justice, and mental health felt like the most urgent and the most salient ones to explore through the lens of mindfulness.

It is important to stress the secular nature of this lens. The following will refer to Buddhist principles, history, and philosophy, but mindfulness is strictly a secular tool, available to anyone and everyone willing to attend nonjudgmentally to the present moment, regardless of race, religion, or socioeconomic status. When I refer to bringing up Buddhas, I am referring to the grace and dignity in the face of existential and moral conundrums that the figure of the Buddha represents, not a generation of little robed monastics, as adorable (or dystopian) as that vision may be.

⁵ “Generation Alpha: New Study Shows How Being the Most Diverse Generation Yet Impacts Their Behaviors Now & in the Future,” *Business Wire*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20191209005093/en/>

⁶ Colleen Walsh, “Young Adults Hardest Hit by Loneliness During Pandemic,” *Harvard Gazette*, February 17, 2021, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/02/young-adults-teens-loneliness-mental-health-coronavirus-covid-pandemic/>

A secular approach is essential in large part because the spiritual scaffolding and belief systems that have anchored humanity for millennia are evaporating (for better or worse), and the amount of Americans who say religion is important to them has consistently dropped with each generation since the Greatest Generation, as have feelings of spiritual peace and wellbeing. Meanwhile, despite feeling less religious and less at peace, younger Millennials (the youngest group surveyed in this poll) also expressed the greatest sense of wonder about the universe than any other generation,⁷ a feeling that is likely to persist among Generation Alpha. The picture being painted is one of the youth nurturing deep questions in the face of increasing uncertainty.

Specific solutions may be in short supply, but the practice of attending to the present moment may lead to wisdom in the face of unpredictability and meaningful action in the face of meaningless consumption, confusion, indolence, and inequity. Mindfulness may offer Generation Alpha a secular way to confront and even embrace these deep questions and critical issues, stoking wonder and wisdom while steering clear of dogma and delusion. W.E.B. Du Bois once asked, “And all this life and love and strife and failure,—is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day?”⁸ The answer to that question hinges not on our hopes or belief systems but on what we do *right now*.



Education is a crucial piece of the secular mindfulness puzzle, for it is in school that so many of the values adults cherish are learned and reinforced. Early on in my teaching career I found out how readily classroom values could translate to worldly wisdom. One bright Fall day

⁷ “Religious Landscape Study,” *Pew Research Center*, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/generational-cohort/>

⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Penguin Books, 1989), 54.

in my first year at Cambridge Montessori School, a second grader named Sara called me over during recess.

“Paola and I are having an issue,” she explained. “Can you help me talk to her?”

“Sure,” I said, wondering what kind of mediation I might offer.

We found Paola and the girls sat down together on a nearby bench.

“So what’s going on?” I asked.

Sara turned to her friend and calmly laid out what had upset her and how she hoped Paola might change her behavior in the future, using the classic “I feel” statement that she had been taught in class (e.g. “I feel ___ when you ___ because ___. Would you be willing to ___?”). Paola listened calmly and then turned to me.

“Oh you don’t have to stand there Alex. We’ve got it.”

Stunned, I slowly backed away as the friends heard each other out, resolved their issue, and went back to playing. It was the most mature thing I’d ever seen kids do. Then it occurred to me it was perhaps the most mature thing I’d ever seen anyone do. Such conflict resolution skills are part of the Montessori peace curriculum, and though not all the students (or adults) were as adept as Sara and Paola at employing these skills, I saw traces of them constantly.

That moment between Sara and Paola was possible because both of them had learned a skill that they were able to employ when it counted. They brought intentionality and compassion to a conversation, remained present throughout, and emerged affirmed and affected. Clearly, in many ways we are already getting it right, and I do not mean to suggest that there is a mindful model of parenting and education that should replace our current models. Rather, I believe that mindfulness can support much of the impactful work that is already being done, while also revealing how we might benefit from pausing, stepping back, and in some cases doing less.

Mindfulness can also act as a clarifying lens, uncovering the assumptions or misunderstandings that may influence our thinking and underlying strategies, both as parents and as educators. Seeing clearly the boundless opportunities we have to choose heartfelt presence over habitual patterns can lead to deeper engagement with ourselves and others, as occurred with Sara and Paola.

Schools are fertile ground for such learning to take place, and the second chapter of this book will focus on education. It was in the 19th century that William James, the father of modern psychology, wrote, “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will...An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.”⁹ It is only in the 21st century that we are beginning to understand how to provide that education.



This is not a how-to book. It can be tempting, when faced with a question, to want to find the answer immediately. We are wired to do this after all, to solve for what is lacking, to fill in the gaps, and to achieve the goal. Yet when we do so we immediately encounter what Buddhists call *dukkha*: the suffering created by the thirst, craving, and desire that continue to arise no matter how many goals one achieves.

This is why Buddhists cultivate an appreciation for the gaps, the questions themselves, and the fundamental possibility of the present. There is a great tradition in Buddhism of not-knowing; of foregoing accepted truths for the wisdom of letting go. A story that highlights this perspective involves the Zen teacher Nan-in, who was visited by a college professor inquiring about the teachings. Nan-in served tea, and as he filled the professor’s cup, the

⁹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, (Dover Publications, 1950), 463.

professor blathered on about his own knowledge. So Nan-in kept pouring tea until it overflowed, leaving the professor aghast. “Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”¹⁰ Zen tradition advocates for a spirit of humility and a willingness to question rather than an attitude of certainty.

Children are experts at not-knowing. Think of the nested series of “whys” that accompany even the most basic inquiry. They come into the world with cups completely empty. Shunryu Suzuki famously stated, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”¹¹ Perhaps we should spend less time filling the cups of kids and more time celebrating their voluminous awe. This is what the writer and scientist Barry Lopez was alluding to when he wrote:

The quickest door to open in the woods for a child is the one that leads to the smallest room, by knowing the name each thing is called. The door that leads to the cathedral is marked by a hesitancy to speak at all, rather to encourage by example a sharpness of the senses. If one speaks it should only be to say, as well as one can, how wonderfully this all fits together, to indicate what a long, fierce peace can derive from this knowledge.¹²

Following in the great tradition of not-knowing, I will be the first to admit that this is an inquiry rather than a guidebook. There are excellent resources for understanding specific strategies related to implementing mindfulness in the fields of parenting, education, social justice, the environment, and mental health, many of which I’m indebted to in the pages that follow. However the following is intended to be an overarching exploration about what a cultural embrace of mindfulness can accomplish. I hope to make clear why, as a parent, educator, or

¹⁰ Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, (C.E. Tuttle Co., 1957).

¹¹ Shunryu Suzuki and Trudy Dixon, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, (Shambhala, 1973).

¹² Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground*, (Open Road Media, 2013), 150-1.

simply someone invested in the wellbeing of future generations and the planet on which they depend, you should care about mindfulness.

This exploration will touch on why parents should meditate; why teachers should embrace embodied activities; how a household can be designed to encourage presence; and why a focus on process rather than results can be so meaningful. It will examine why cultivating compassion is so important; why open attention can change the way we relate to one another; and why it is okay to not have the satisfying solution that we so crave. My goal is to encourage a sharpness of the senses and crack open the cathedral door, not to venture down the rabbit hole that leads to the smallest room.

Could mindfulness be a misguided approach? I suppose it's possible, though I tend to think the 2500 year history of wisdom and compassion is pretty compelling. Are there dangers or downsides to the large-scale application of this skill? Of course, but I think such dangers and downsides are largely part and parcel of being human, and that the upside far outweighs the downside. The truths that emerge when we pay attention to the present moment can be challenging to confront, but I think it is more dangerous not to do so, to let the status quo of internal craving and external consumption continue unchecked.

Mostly, I think of something my daughter has been saying lately. If she doesn't get the answer she wants she rebuts, "But I can *try*." It never fails to make me laugh, in large part due to the absurd optimism it suggests regarding the potential, say, to have chocolate chips for breakfast: "But I can *try*." To think that mindfulness can influence parenting and education to the extent that the climate crisis, social justice, and mental health issues can be resolved might be the existential equivalent of asking for chocolate chips for breakfast. But we can *try*. And in doing so, we just might raise a generation of Buddhas.

Mindfulness and Parenting

Suttas consist of teachings from the historical Buddha that were written down several hundred years after his death, around the 1st century BCE. One such teaching is known as the Sedaka Sutta, the “Bamboo Acrobat.” The story goes that prior to a performance, an acrobat explained to his assistant Medakathalika that while climbing atop the bamboo pole to stand on his shoulders, she should look out for him and he would look out for her, so that they could show off their craft and collect payment. But the assistant corrects the acrobat, telling him that he must look out for himself, and she for herself. The Buddha agreed, commenting:

Looking after oneself, one looks after others.

Looking after others, one looks after oneself.

And how does one look after others by looking after oneself?

By practicing (mindfulness), by developing (it), by doing (it) a lot.

And how does one look after oneself by looking after others?

By patience, by non-harming, by loving kindness, by caring (for others).

(Thus) looking after oneself, one looks after others.

and looking after others, one looks after oneself.¹³

I love the spunk of Medakathalika, the assistant who is unafraid of telling her boss how to operate, not least of which because she reminds me of Ciel, whose favorite new saying is, “I can do it myself.” Sometimes she really can, and it is only my assumption that she requires my help that stands in the way of her independence. Much of the time she does need my help, and deftly offering it while empowering her is the neverending challenge.

¹³ Trans. Andrew Olendzki, “Sedaka Sutta: The Bamboo Acrobat,” *Access to Insight*, 2005, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn47/sn47.019.olen.html>

One would be hard-pressed to find a better analogy for parenting than this sutta. We are tempted, like the acrobat, to look out for our children, to balance *for* them, even at the expense of our own balance and their own autonomy. But by looking out for ourselves, we provide a stable base from which they may learn to achieve a more lasting equilibrium. Moreover, like acrobatics, parenting is an act that is only enriched through our attention. It is a craft that can feel both perilous and joyful, involving the complete capacities of mind and body.

The specific tensions captured in this sutta are good starting points from which to examine mindfulness and parenting. In this chapter we will investigate how threading the needle between support and autonomy can be informed by the Buddhist concept of *the Middle Path*. And just as the acrobat has to focus on his own balance and not Medakathalika's, we will look at the importance of *modeling mindfulness*. In order to hone her craft Medakathalika will need time to explore, to fail, and to cultivate joy in her acrobatics, and so we'll also examine the value of *play* and the ways mindfulness can foster a love of process. Yet we can't just let Medakathalika flop around in the stratosphere with no support, so we'll also discover the benefits of what scientists call *scaffolds*. Ultimately, we'll come to understand how practicing (mindfulness), developing (it), and doing (it) a lot can really be the best way to look out for others, as well as how cultivating mindfulness in our homes and amongst our children will help create the conscientiousness by which all else may be looked after.

The Middle Path

When Ciel was born my wife and I were intent on getting her on a schedule. We had an app that could record everything from milk consumption to bowel movements to sleep cycles, and we hung on to the dim possibility that mapping out this information would somehow give us insight into what made this shrieking being we'd created tick. We obsessed over updating the

app, bickered when one of us forgot to, and spent far too much time Googling data points to see how our daughter stacked up. Yet when we lapsed in app usage, we were thrust into terrifying chaos. When *had* she actually woken up from her nap? And when *was* her last bottle? Knowing nothing about her day was just as disconcerting as knowing too much.

As is often the case, we found balance in compromise. We stopped recording every wet diaper and ounce of milk and stuck to the stuff that was useful to know, like how long her naps had been and when they occurred. Buddhism is known as the Middle Path, the moderate approach between the extremes of indulgence and asceticism. After some trial and error it seemed we had stumbled into a sensible approach between two unfruitful ways of parenting. We had found our own Middle Path (at least in regards to app usage).

It is no accident that we arrived at this happy medium. When examining contemporary expertise on parenting, one repeatedly finds this throughline of balance between extremes. To begin with, there are the styles of parenting, as outlined in the 1960s by psychologist and researcher Diana Baumrind. Baumrind determined that there were three essential styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive (a fourth style, uninvolved, was added later).¹⁴ Authoritative parents are sensitive and supportive, yet demanding, valuing independence; authoritarian parents are stern, requiring adherence to strictures; permissive parents are sensitive but overly lax; and uninvolved parents offer little guidance or support.¹⁵ These styles exist on a continuum so that parents may have greater or lesser qualities of sensitivity, sternness, and responsiveness. One might be authoritative in some circumstances and permissive in others, or authoritarian at times and uninvolved at other times. Ultimately, the styles are meant to provide a broad spectrum under which all parents fall.

¹⁴ Gwen Dewar, "Parenting Styles: An Evidence-Based Cross-Cultural Guide," *Parenting Science*, 2018, <https://www.parentingscience.com/parenting-styles.html>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Dr. Gwen Dewar, an expert on the evolution of parenting and creator of the website Parenting Science, noted, “The authoritative parenting style was first conceived as a kind of middle ground between permissiveness and authoritarianism.”¹⁶ Permissiveness, in comparison with the Middle Path, would equate to the extreme of indulgence, indicated by a lack of boundaries and an environment in which a child suffers from an abundance of choice. The extreme of asceticism, on the other hand, would equate to the stern and limiting approach of the authoritarian parent, in which the child has limited agency and choice. The authoritative parent, however, offers clear expectations along with sensitivity and responsiveness. Dewar explained that authoritativeness is “a more balanced approach in which parents expect kids to meet certain behavioral standards, but also encourage their children to think for themselves and to develop a sense of autonomy.”¹⁷

Another example of balance between extremes is found in *The Whole-Brain Child*, by Dan Siegel and Tina Bryson. A consistent theme in the book is the concepts of rigidity and chaos: “One extreme is chaos, where there’s a total lack of control. The other extreme is rigidity, where there’s too much control, leading to a lack of flexibility and adaptability.”¹⁸ In order to illustrate how to navigate these extremes, Siegel and Bryson offered the imagery of a canoe floating peacefully down a river. One bank of the river represents the extreme of rigidity. The other bank is the extreme of chaos. The trick is to flow between the banks as much as possible. “Much of our lives as adults can be seen as moving along these paths—sometimes in the harmony of the flow of well-being, but sometimes in chaos, in rigidity, or zigzagging back and forth between the two,” explained Siegel and Bryson.¹⁹ Learning to stay the course and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind*, (Random House, 2011), 11.

¹⁹ Ibid, 11-12.

recalibrate as needed is one of the most powerful skills we can pass on to our children, allowing them to find the balance and flow found in the middle of the river.

Our brains are perhaps the most significant factor in maintaining this balance, for it is in the brain that the impulses that drive behavior originate. Humans are hardwired to want. The brainstem, in concert with the limbic areas of the brain, forms the motivational systems that help us satisfy the most basic human needs, such as food and safety.²⁰ Without these systems continually scanning our environment for opportunity or threat, our species would not have survived and thrived to the extent that it has. As Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius stated in *Buddha's Brain*, "In order to pass on their genes, our animal ancestors had to choose correctly many times a day whether to approach something or avoid it."²¹ Thus we learn to either seek or avoid stimuli.

Humanity gained a critical edge in the optimization of seeking and avoidance behavior by developing the ability to consider one's self in relation to everything else. Hanson and Mendius explained how one's ability to conceive of a self "has been stitched into human DNA by reproductive advantages slowly accumulating across a hundred thousand generations."²² One of the primary mechanisms of the self is the ability to simulate experience internally, either by reflecting on past experiences to promote the wiring of successful behavior, or by anticipating future events in order to choose the approach most likely to protect one's self.²³

Unfortunately, our capacity to simulate our experience has far outstripped its usefulness in modern society, since locating the nearest food source or avoiding predators is not a common everyday concern. Yet reflecting on or anticipating our own experience is something the human

²⁰ Dan Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*, (Bantam Books, 2010).

²¹ Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius, *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom*, (New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 34.

²² *Ibid*, 215.

²³ *Ibid*

brain does exceptionally well. When one is not engaged in a specific task, an area of the brain known as the default mode network is active. This was serendipitously discovered when researchers noticed that participants in fMRI machines engaging in a passive task in order to establish a baseline for neural activity all displayed very similar brain states.²⁴ This network of brain regions seems to be most active when one is at rest, and is correlated with mind-wandering and self-referential processing.²⁵ As author Michael Pollan explained in *How to Change Your Mind*, “The default mode network appears to play a role in the creation of mental constructs or projections, the most important of which is the construct we call the self, or ego.”²⁶

A sense of self is a powerful evolutionary advantage, as well as a useful social construct. It would be difficult to maintain relationships, let alone order a cup of coffee, without having a perceived boundary between self and other (although without a cup of coffee that boundary is impossible for me to navigate anyway). But in a seminal study, Harvard researchers Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert found that people spend about 50% of the time mind-wandering, a hallmark of the DMN. They also correlated this state with greater unhappiness.²⁷ As usual, Anne Lamott summarized this habitual brain pattern memorably: “I noticed the other day that not only do I spend a lot of the time in the future with imaginary triumphs and catastrophes and boyfriends, or in the past with my memories, but I’m so crazy that sometimes I even go into the past and rehash things that turned out *well* yet *might* have turned out disastrously.”²⁸ Only, as everyone reading this probably just thought, Lamott is not so crazy

²⁴ Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, (Penguin, 2018).

²⁵ Judson Brewer, Patrick Worhunsky, Jeremy Gray, Yi-Yuan Tang, Jochen Weber, and Hedy Kober, H. “Meditation Experience is Associated With Differences in Default Mode Network Activity and Connectivity,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 108, no. 50 (2011): 20254–20259. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1112029108>

²⁶ Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 303.

²⁷ Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert, “A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind,” *Science* 330, no. 6006 (2010): 932-932.

²⁸ Lamott, *Operating Instructions*, 132.

but so human. Our ability to ruminate on the past and future helps us simulate experience, yet it also makes us obsessed with the project of the self and less aware of our immediate experience. When the DMN is online our attentional faculties are diminished, and vice versa.²⁹

This rings true in our lived experience. When was the last time you were completely present? It likely involved an embodied activity, like singing or skiing, or a moment of complete immersion in laughter or intense flavor. It is the senses that pull us from our reveries and thrust us back into the flow of life, where we were all along. Granted, this isn't always a welcome reemergence: I'd rather ruminate, say, than be stung by a bee. But a bee sting tends to obliterate any room for anxious rumination, as does a more preferable visceral experience like hiking, painting, or dancing. The DMN tends to correspond with a closed state, an echo chamber of ego, as opposed to the openness of the embodied and engaged individual.

As you can surmise simply by observing the Nature Channel-esque cavorting of kids, their brains do not display as much DMN activity. Anyone who has watched a baby fascinated by the balled fists that keep flying through its field of vision can grasp that the baby has no concept of who the fists belong to. It is an impulse machine, and researchers believe that the emerging structural connectivity of the DMN aligns with the development of self-related and social-cognitive functions.³⁰ I'll never forget lifting Ciel out of the bath when she was two, and her startled exclamation upon looking in the mirror: "I'm in my body!" It's no wonder that her ability to be manipulative in order to achieve desired ends also seemed to develop around this time, with pouty faces and Oscar-worthy fake cries. Once you realize you are in your body, you can use its faculties to try and get what you want.

²⁹ Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*.

³⁰ Kaustubh Supekar, Lucina Uddin, Katherine Prater, Hitha Amin, Michael Greicius, and Vinod Menon, "Development of Functional and Structural Connectivity Within the Default Mode Network in Young Children," *Neuroimage* 52, no. 1 (2010): 290-301.

Yet the consciousness of children, manipulation notwithstanding, remains more open and present than the consciousness of adults. Dr. Alison Gopnik, a leading developmental psychologist, distinguishes between the spotlight consciousness of adults and the lantern consciousness of children. Adults, utilizing the predictive efficiency afforded them by the DMN's constant simulations, are able to focus attention narrowly to achieve their goals. Children, on the other hand, attend to the present with a consciousness that illuminates a wide swath of their experience, including many of the details that adults ignore as insignificant.³¹ Children are less efficient and also less discerning, which can make them more creative and aware. In one study, Gopnik and her colleagues found that children tended to solve a puzzle that featured an unlikely solution faster than adults, precisely because they were open to exploring a wealth of options rather than being attached to a logical yet narrow predictive model.³²

This isn't to say that we shouldn't teach kids to hone their attention and develop spotlight consciousness. As anyone who has observed a toddler attempting to put on their shoes knows, an ability to focus and predict can go a long way towards actually accomplishing something (unless the goal is to end up a frustrated puddle of tears). Returning to the metaphor of the river presented by Siegel and Bryson, children sure do spend a lot of time parading mischievously on the bank of chaos. But as they grow into adolescents and then adults, society compels them to drift directly across the river to the bank of rigidity, in which narrow, self-directed thinking reigns supreme. They go from having very little DMN activity to having too much, from a lantern to a spotlight, without learning how to find the happy medium.

As Siegel and Bryson wrote, "If we want to prepare kids to participate as healthy individuals in a relationship, we need to create within them an *open, receptive* state, instead of a

³¹ Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*.

³² Alison Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, (Picador, 2017).

*closed, reactive one.*³³ Cultivating the skill of remaining open while at the same time nurturing the efficiency and self-awareness of the adult brain would seem to offer the best chance of walking (or canoeing) the Middle Path. Luckily there is a tool for that.

Modeling Mindfulness

I used to take chess lessons in Harvard Square from an eclectic grandmaster named Murray. He kept a Super Soaker on hand with which to squirt pigeons resting on the branches above to prevent them from defecating on the board. During the lessons my mom would browse the Spirituality section of a local bookstore, and there she encountered a text by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi, the abbot at the Zen Center of Ottawa. Moved by his words, she connected with him by mail and began to practice, eventually heading to Canada for her first retreat. The rest, as they say, is history. She has been devoted to the practice of Zen for most of my life.

As a kid I couldn't really understand why mom my would be gone for days on end in order to stare at a wall. But she came home with chocolate purchased at the Duty Free shop, and her absences began to seem about as natural as my dad's business trips. Adults, I grasped, had the occasional need to be elsewhere, for reasons that were, at best, boring. But as I began to face the uncertainty that can arise during one's teenage years, I too sought answers. In our culturally Jewish but rational-minded household, meditation seemed as plausible an approach as any. And as an athlete I appreciated that meditation required me to do something (despite that something being, in effect, nothing), and that any answers would have to be unearthed through my own efforts. I started to meditate, seeking in the stillness a method for navigating the increasingly perplexing world beyond the cushion.

As a teenager I might have bristled against the assertion that it was my mom's influence that led me to practice. But there is no doubt that this was the spark. I was steeped in practice, so

³³ Siegel and Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child*, 129

to speak, surrounded by books on Zen and living with someone who preferred to poke at my worldview with piercing questions rather than provide concrete answers. Though I rolled my eyes at these dinner table koans (“*Who* is it that really wants the salt?”), I watched as my mom, someone who is incredibly devoted to her family above all, continued to make the space for daily meditation and frequent retreats. What was so compelling about staring at a wall? My interest was piqued, and when my own cresting wave of questions began to crash, I had a method for maneuvering through the tumultuous surf. Zen practice was never presented as something I had to do. It was something that was available, a door that I could open at any time.

Telling our children to sit down and pay attention is probably about as useful as commanding them to eat their broccoli (“No, you eat it,” Ciel would say to me when encouraged to try various vegetable offerings, which seemed like a pretty fair response). The idea that we can shape our children through sheer will is indicative of the modern parenting mindset. The very notion of “parenting” is a recent invention, first appearing in America in the 1950s and catching on in the 1970s.³⁴ Rather than describe a relationship, it creates a verb, with the implication being that as a parent one must mold one’s child into a stable adult. This undermines the degree to which the parent-child relationship is an unfolding process, a dance rather than a destination. Sure all parents want success for their children, but the expectation that this outcome will only come to fruition through calculated intervention is a narrow and potentially limiting view.

A passage from the writer Valeria Luiselli’s novel *The Lost Children Archive* expresses this concept rather beautifully:

The only thing that parents can really give their children are little knowledges: this is how you cut your own nails, this is the temperature of a real hug, this is how you untangle knots in your hair, this is how I love you. And what children give their parents, in return,

³⁴ Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*.

is something less tangible but at the same time larger and more lasting, something like a drive to embrace life fully and understand it, on their behalf, so they can try to explain it to them, pass it down to them with acceptance and without rancor, but also with a certain rage and fierceness. Children force parents to go out looking for a specific pulse, a gaze, a rhythm, the right way of telling the story, knowing that stories don't fix anything or save anyone but maybe make the world more complex and more tolerable. And sometimes, just sometimes, more beautiful.³⁵

In other words, the job of a parent is to provide the framework, the gaze from which a child can learn to perceive the world, and to share the little knowledges that can make the turbulence exciting rather than frightening. But beyond that the relationship might in fact be unbalanced in the other directions: children provide an invitation to profundity, to a deeper exploration of life itself.

Thus the best way of passing on the tool of mindfulness may be to model it, to take on this drive to embrace life fully. As Siegel and Bryson explained, "As children develop, their brains 'mirror' their parent's brains...The parent's own growth and development, or lack of those, impact the child's brain."³⁶ This can be as obvious as my mom's devotion to Zen, or as subtle as an intention to put down your phone and play with your child. This doesn't mean one has to undertake the daunting task of being performatively present, like some all-knowing wunderparent. "Sam and I sit around and stare at each other," wrote Anne Lamott. "I call it putting on the Sam channel."³⁷ Such openness can be all that it takes to interrupt usual mind.

After all, contraction is what the mind, and specifically the DMN, tend towards. When our attention drifts, we tune out, contributing to the feeling that mind and body are separate, with

³⁵ Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2019), 185-6.

³⁶ Siegel and Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child*, xii

³⁷ Lamott, *Operating Instructions*, 36.

thoughts operating on the mental plane of existence and sensations on the physical plane. When we pay attention to the present moment, we become attuned to the co-arising of what Buddhists call the six modes of consciousness: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. “The first step in establishing mindfulness is to switch over to channel five, the stream of tactile bodily sensations, which serves to disrupt the tyranny of the thinking organ,” noted Andrew Olenzki.³⁸ As Lamott perceived, channel five could also be the channel we use to tune into our children. In doing so, we become grounded in the breath and sensation, aware of both the external and the internal, and able to recognize their dependent nature while in the company of our dependents.

Dr. Judson Brewer, the Director of Research and Innovation at Brown University’s Mindfulness Center, has found that even the feeling of being contracted correlates with DMN activation, while “a curious awareness of present-moment experience not only correlates with the feeling of openness/expansion but decreases activation in the same brain regions.”³⁹ When I spoke to Dr. Brewer, he summarized, “Open mental states feel better than those that close us.” When we are present and playful it is likely that this will cue our offspring to the possibility of this state as well. Cultivating mindfulness in oneself can lead to the mirror state of mindfulness in one’s child, while also being more fun.

There are other implicit ways of modeling mindfulness that can show kids the power of regulating one’s breath, or being intentional, or expressing gratitude. Dr. Christopher Willard is a psychologist and teacher at Harvard Medical School who has written a number of books on mindfulness for children and parents. His cheerful and youthful demeanor belies his depth of understanding as a family psychotherapist and parent to a six-year-old son and three-year-old

³⁸ Andrew Olenzki, “Keep it simple,” *Tricycle*, Summer 2014, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/keep-it-simple/>

³⁹ Judson Brewer, *Unwinding Anxiety: New Science Shows How to Break the Cycles of Worry and Fear to Heal Your Mind*, (Penguin Publishing Group, 2021), p. 168.

daughter. Willard mentioned that attaching the label of “mindfulness” to practice isn’t always necessary. Willard recalled driving somewhere with his son, who was utterly bored by the math he was learning in school, and calculating how fast they were going, how far they had to travel, and how long it might take to get there. It became a fun problem to solve. When Willard pointed out that they’d just done math, his son responded, “No, math is a worksheet.” The association with boredom and stasis was too strong to shake.

Rather than impose mindfulness practice on his kids, Willard often finds ways to model it. When playing soccer with his son, Willard might say, “If I take a few breaths I might actually kick it better,” before intentionally pausing, breathing, and then kicking. Or while hiking he might point out that the quieter they are when walking, the more animals they will hear, which can lead to walking like a ninja. During a meal they might talk about the many steps the food went through to arrive at the table and the many people that helped to get it to their plate. Weaving in whimsical moments of awareness creates an opportunity to live the practice rather than learn it. Such direct access and observation may actually be how kids learn best.

Alison Gopnik related a study in which children were shown an enticing toy that had multiple functions. For half of the participants the researcher activated a function and seemed surprised at what the toy could do. For the other half the researcher explained one of the toy’s functions before leaving the room. The children who’d seen the accidental activation were more likely to experiment and learn all of the toy’s functions, while the children who were told about one of the functions tended to just repeat that specific function. Gopnik summarized, “The children played with the toy longer, tried more different actions, and discovered more of the ‘hidden’ features when the experimenter squeaked the beeper accidentally than they did when she deliberately tried to teach them.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, 174.

Gopnik also related the work of Barbara Rogoff, a cross-cultural psychologist who performed an interesting study comparing Quiché Mayan Indian children to American ones. Quiché parents tend to slow down and exaggerate their actions when doing something so that their children can better observe and imitate. During the study kids aged 5-11 watched as an adult taught their sibling how to make an origami figure. The Quiché children who were used to attending to details were more adept at making the origami figure when their turn came than the American children who were used to being explicitly taught. Slowing down and modeling behavior can have a greater impact, it seems, than specifically teaching it. “Children actually learn more from the unconscious details of what caregivers do than from any of the conscious manipulations of parenting,” wrote Gopnik.⁴¹

Taking on the full commitment of a Buddhist practitioner is one way to model mindfulness (thanks mom), but it is definitely not the only way. There are many gateways to practice, many moments that can be made intentional, thoughtful, playful, and mindful by sheer dint of presence. Rather than attempting to consciously manipulate our kids or shove them into the pew, we might simply lead them to the door, as Barry Lopez suggested. The little knowledges we share can have a much more profound effect than any grand designs we could possibly hatch. One of the best arenas for cultivating mindfulness is the embodied and freeform activity known as “play.”

Play

One day at recess, Sasha, a spirited nine-year-old, theatrically exclaimed, “This Brontosaurus won’t stop!” As she sat on a rubber tube, a friend jumped up and down on it, and Sasha bucked back and forth, imagining herself riding on the back of a particularly unruly dinosaur.

⁴¹ Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, 90.

Immediately, I had a flash of nostalgia for such immersive play. As a kid, a swaying tube can be a Brontosaurus, and an afternoon at the playground can be the setting for an incredible narrative. Sasha wasn't just thinking about riding a dinosaur, she *was* riding one. Her imagination was in tune with her senses and she was fully engaged in the moment.

As I sat there I had a sense of real longing for such richness of experience. What a gift it is to be young, I thought, and to have the ability to be so enthralled by one's imagination. It echoed a moment from my own childhood, when I had just struck an imaginary baseball with an imaginary bat, and was watching the trajectory of my imaginary home run, when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a family friend watching me with similar bemusement and longing. She was touched; I was mortified.

Sitting on the bench reminiscing about the joys of being fully immersed, it didn't occur to me that in that moment I had the same opportunity; my breath was rising and falling, my feet were touching the ground, my eyes and ears were open to the sight of play and sound of laughter. Instead I was lost in a fantasy about how lucky kids are, spinning a narrative about childlike wonder. But rather than remaining open to possibility, adults, as we have seen, are often ruminating. And these ruminations are often about the laundry list of things that need to be done so that one day we will have the opportunity to sit back and relax, despite the fact that while doing just that we lapse into stirring the same old mental sludge. This is a habitual tendency that we transfer all too readily to our kids, modeling mind-fullness rather than mindfulness, in large part because our culture of attainment has us constantly scheming for an edge.

Children often become yet another container for these schemes. I used to think that it would take several years before my wife and I would get caught up in the parental comparison game, like maybe when arithmetic or athletics entered the picture, but the internet dispelled that

naive notion. In order to find quick answers to the multitude of mysteries that babies create for first time parents (e.g. “Is her belly-button supposed to look like that?”), after Ciel was born Courtney joined a local mom’s group on Facebook. This led to some helpful tips, connections, and used baby gear, as well as some horrifying humblebrags that she would read aloud to me at night like a passage from a salacious novel. Some parents simply couldn’t resist making incredible boasts that were poorly couched as innocent questions. “Is it weird that my daughter can count to 20 even though she is nine months old?” comes to mind. Or the mom who was allegedly at her wits end because her kid would *only* eat a dazzling array of vegetables.

We’re all conditioned by our circumstances (a truth known in Buddhism as dependent origination). Modern, industrialized culture tends to place a primacy on ends rather than means (which is precisely why recess—clearly a site of so many epiphanies—is too often cut short in school systems intent on teaching to the test). As the activist and Buddhist teacher Donald Rothberg wrote, “In contemporary Western societies, and particularly American society, there is clearly *a very strong social and cultural predisposition to outcomes.*”⁴² We value hard skills over soft skills, and prize production over process. We don’t humblebrag about how present our kids are but about how well they present. *Is it weird that my toddler is already potty trained?* It is if it came about through a regimen of potty training classes, manuals, and DVDs.

Amos Tversky, a cognitive and mathematical psychologist, once said, “You waste years by not being able to waste hours.”⁴³ Tversky was referring to creating the time for research by scaling back, but his sentiment might extend to the project of paying attention. It is, after all,

⁴² Donald Rothberg, *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World*, (Beacon Press, 2006), p. 191.

⁴³ Cass Sunstein, and Richard Thaler, “The Two Friends Who Changed How We Think About How We Think,” *The New Yorker*, December 7, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-two-friends-who-changed-how-we-think-about-how-we-think>

perhaps the most illuminating way of wasting hours. As pioneering mindfulness expert Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote, “Meditation is different from all other human activities. Although it takes a lot of work and energy of a certain kind, ultimately meditation is a non-doing. It has no goal other than for you to be yourself.”⁴⁴

Kids are naturally adept at wasting hours. After all, they work hard at play, a biological trait shared by all social animals with long childhoods, involved parents, and large brains. Alison Gopnik noted, “Play is what you do when you’re not trying to do anything. It’s an activity whose goal is not to have a goal.”⁴⁵ Yet through cultural attitudes, societal expectations, and educational institutions, kids grow into adults who learn not to waste hours but to maximize them. In *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, the German philosopher Josef Pieper warned that the world was drifting dangerously close to a state of “total work.” Pieper observed that the mounting frenetic pace of society was putting a primacy on production and efficiency at the expense of stillness and receptivity. It sounds like a story for our time, yet Pieper’s book was published in 1948, before the advent of the personal computer, internet, and smartphone. Observing our current pace, it’s not hard to imagine Pieper spinning (leisurely) in his grave.

With the world at one’s fingertips, it can be hard to focus on activities that don’t have obvious ends, such as leisure or play. Our economic system only inflames this sense of possibility. A 1929 report from a Herbert Hoover Committee on Recent Economic Changes stated, “The survey has proved conclusively what has long been held theoretically to be true, that wants are almost insatiable; that one want satisfied makes way for another.”⁴⁶ The committee’s conclusion is startlingly close to the Buddhist concept of *dukkha*. Many adults become

⁴⁴ Jon Kabat-Zinn, J. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, (Bantam, 2013), 26.

⁴⁵ Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, 149.

⁴⁶ David Levy, “No Time to Think: Reflections on Information Technology and Contemplative Scholarship,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 9, no. 4 (2007): 237-249

disillusioned after realizing years have been wasted in the self-serving project of chasing after desires, ends, outcomes, and results. They forget how to play.

Instead of over-programming our children, we might want to think about the benefits that leisure can provide. Gen Alpha has lost 12 weekly hours of unstructured time, despite a 2018 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics that emphasized the role of play in supporting social and emotional wellbeing and cognitive ability⁴⁷ (cue competitive parents humblebragging about how much *unstructured* time their kids get). Inherent in play is exploration and possibility. It is not a fixed state but a constantly evolving one with no natural conclusion. Inherent in most programming, whether it is swim lessons, piano, or a potty training regimen, is a goal.

In this sense play has much in common with mindfulness practice. Though many people come to practice with a specific goal—to be calmer, more energetic, wiser, more compassionate, enlightened!—one learns the hard way that embodied presence is actually more enriching than ego-driven goals, and begins to play in the field of awareness, what Andrew Olendzki termed “channel five.” Thus mindfulness practice is an excellent tool for slowing down and scaling back, forcing us to spend time each day accomplishing pretty much nothing. Think of it as play for adults. An activity, I might add, despite the incentivizing nature of this statement, which research has also shown improves social and emotional wellbeing and cognitive ability.^{48,49}

This isn't to suggest that mindfulness *is* play or vice versa. Given how many pursuits claim to offer the benefits of practice, these days it can be difficult to discern what *isn't*

⁴⁷ Michael Yogman, Andrew Garner, Jeffery Hutchinson, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, and Roberta Golinkoff, “The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children,” *Pediatrics* 142, no. 3 (2018).

⁴⁸ Alberto Chiesa, Raffaella Calati, and Alessandro Serretti, “Does Mindfulness Training Improve Cognitive Abilities? A Systematic Review of Neuropsychological Findings,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 31, no. 3 (2011): 449-464.

⁴⁹ Netta Weinstein, Kirk Brown, and Richard Ryan, “A Multi-Method Examination of the Effects of Mindfulness on Stress Attribution, Coping, and Emotional Well-Being,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 43, no. 3 (2009): 374-385.

mindfulness. Formal mindfulness practice, generally speaking, involves sitting still and paying attention. It teaches one to be open and aware in a setting that reduces distraction and with instructions that allow for clear intention and follow through. Learning this skill during formal practice makes it more likely that one will be able to open attention off the cushion, when riding the subway for example, or facilitating a staff meeting. The embodiment that results from play, however, is harder to access outside of the realm of play. One can't exactly transfer the radical presence from a perilous mountain biking descent to a staff meeting (unless one conducts said meeting on a mountain bike, which would make one the gnarliest boss ever), which is what makes the grounding that formal practice provides so invaluable.

That being said, there is tremendous value to the elements of play that do resemble practice, like the embodiment and presence it engenders. Creating unstructured opportunities for leisure can help orient families towards the joy of discovery and away from the drudgery of deadlines. It is these moments, full of richness and manifold sensations, that will lay the groundwork for mindfulness when the time comes.

Christopher Willard found this out by asking adults at workshops to recall their first experience of being mindful before they heard the word "mindfulness." Over the years he has noticed consistent themes to these responses. "No one's ever like, 'I was playing a video game by myself or scrolling on Facebook,'" said Willard. "It's often something sensory. Nature always comes up. Digging in the garden and smelling the soil; looking at the embers of the fire; hearing the sound of the rain during a lightning storm."

All of these moments, in which someone was able to connect through sensory awareness to the greater world around them, were not structured or goal-oriented. They occurred naturally and they often occurred in nature. (Researchers have found that walking in nature, like

meditation, actually interrupts the default mode network.⁵⁰ Another study found that a 90-minute nature walk reduced self-reported rumination compared to a similar walk in an urban environment).⁵¹ And these experiences taught many of the people that Willard has worked with that mindfulness is not something exotic or inaccessible. This is a recognition that can be nurtured and built upon, as long as we make the space for such experiences to occur.

Of course, in order to teach kids to slow down and waste time we have to carve out this time without expectation. “Contemporary middle-class parents may allow themselves license to play only if they are convinced that it is part of the work of parenting,” pointed out Alison Gopnik. “We have a knack for taking what are simple pleasures in other cultures, from food to walks to sex, and turning them into strenuous work projects.”⁵² If play involves a contemplative hour of sandbox construction, so be it, but it also might involve an hour of total sandbox destruction. We have to be willing to let go of the desire to direct play towards our vision of productivity. Sometimes destruction is the most productive thing a kid can do. This isn’t to say that we should let our kids run rampant. As we’re about to see, freedom is a wonderful thing, as long as it occurs within a clear framework.

Scaffolds

Before Ciel was born we met other local parents-to-be and decided to embark on a nannyshare together. We interviewed several candidates and one of them asked if there were certain parenting philosophies we were hoping to employ. One dad in our cohort, Brooks, blurted out something about “free-range parenting” and it became an ongoing joke. *Brooks, is the fact*

⁵⁰ Gretchen Reynolds, “Wow Walking in Nature Changes the Brain,” *NY Times*, July 22, 2015, https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/22/how-nature-changes-the-brain/?_r=1

⁵¹ Gregory Bratman, J. Paul Hamilton, Kevin Hahn, Gretchen Daily, and James Gross, “Nature Experience Reduces Rumination and Subgenual Prefrontal Cortex Activation,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 28 (2015): 8567-8572.

⁵² Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, 177

that your son is currently on top of the dining room table wielding a butter knife a free range parenting tactic? Prior to Brooks' blurt I'd only heard the term "free-range" in reference to livestock. Yet upon closer inspection free-range parenting has much in common with many other parenting styles that fall under the authoritative umbrella. It emphasizes independence that is earned, with no coddling or helicoptering. It is as much about freedom as it is about learning limits experientially.

Another approach that advocated for independence within boundaries was described in journalist Pamela Druckerman's book *Bringing Up Béb e*. Druckerman wrote about the French ideal of a *cadre*, which means frame, or framework. She explained, "Cadre means that kids have very firm limits—that's the frame—and that the parents strictly enforce those limits. But within those limits, the kids have a lot of freedom."⁵³ Once again, one sees balance between the extremes of rigidity and chaos, authoritarianism and permissiveness.

To illustrate the benefits of structure Alison Gopnik shared a study in which four-year-olds attempted to learn the concept of shape. One group was simply given a set of cards with shapes on them to play with; in the second group the experimenters playfully joined in, attempting to learn the "secrets of the shapes" and asking the children questions so that they might discern this secret; in the third group the experimenters used the cards to teach the kids about the shapes, without revealing anything more or less than the experimenters in the second group. When tasked with a sorting challenge a week later, the kids in the second group that featured guided play performed better than either of the other two groups. "Scientists used the word 'scaffolding' to describe this kind of interaction," wrote Gopnik. "The grown-up builds a scaffold, and the scaffold helps the child to build knowledge herself."⁵⁴ The first group had too

⁵³ Pamela Druckerman, *Bringing Up Béb e: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting*, (Penguin Press, 2014), 67-8.

⁵⁴ Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, 176.

much freedom, the third group had too little, but the second group benefited from an open-ended inquiry that was framed by an adult.

Why are scaffolds so useful? Understanding the boundaries of the river can help kids avoid the banks of chaos and rigidity. Skirting close to these banks can be instructive, but having chocolate chips everyday for breakfast is more of an invitation to cavities than capabilities. As the above study shows, a degree of autonomy within a framework can be empowering, in part because it puts the onus of discovery on the participant, creating an attentional demand that doesn't exist in an environment of total freedom or rote restrictions.

After a decade of practicing Zen I was faced with a challenge that drove home the stability that a scaffold provides. I used to practice whenever I could find the time, sometimes twice a day, and sometimes not for a couple of days. A teacher mentioned that in order to deepen my practice I needed to make the commitment to sit every day for thirty minutes (the scaffold, in this context, through which I was being offered the opportunity to build knowledge myself). This was a daunting commitment to make (and I didn't even have a kid yet!). What if I were spending the weekend engaging in the mindless shenanigans of a bachelor party? What if I had a busy weekday morning and then went out with colleagues after work and didn't have time to practice in the evening? What was the point of adhering to such a stringent commitment?

The monk calmly explained that out of the 17 or so waking hours of the day I was only being asked to set aside 30 minutes to practice. When I expressed my concern about potentially not having time to sit in the evening the monk laughed and pointed out that there are two ends of the day. Why not wake up earlier to sit when I needed to? In addition, my inclination to practice whenever I pleased resulted in me practicing solely when *I felt like it*. This meant that I might be in a state more amenable to sitting still, but that I wouldn't practice when I didn't feel like it and

thereby learn to work with those states as well. By sitting everyday I'd have to open to a wider range of experience. I would have to deal with *discomfort*.

As Michael Easter outlined in *The Comfort Crisis*, discomfort is not a common modern state. Humans live in tightly controlled environments in which most inconveniences have been eradicated. When the DMN comes online, that pesky simulator is constantly seeking comfort, as this state aligns with safety and self-preservation. So we have longer life spans but shorter health spans, riddled as the population is with physical woes and diseases of despair.⁵⁵ Easter related the work of Harvard psychologist David Leary, who has studied “problem creep.” Summarized Easter, “As we experience fewer problems we don’t become more satisfied, we just lower our threshold for what we consider a problem. We end up with the same number of troubles. Except our new problems are progressively more hollow.”⁵⁶

Scaffolds can be a way of providing intentional discomforts, and to many, mindfulness practice itself is one of these discomforts. One of the most frequent refrains I hear from people that tried and gave up on meditation was that they just couldn’t turn off their mind. Pete Kirchmer, the Director of mPEAK (Mindfulness Performance Enhancement, Awareness, and Knowledge), a program developed in concert with Olympic BMX coaches and neuroscience and mindfulness experts from UC San Diego, told me, “I’ve worked with the SEALs and we talk about how jumping out of airplanes and holding their breath in freezing water is easier and even preferable for them than sitting with themselves and their emotions in stillness and silence.” Yet the idea that one must turn off their mind in meditation is a common misconception. As Buddhist scholar Andrew Olendzki explained during a lecture, the point isn’t to turn the mind off but to fill it with the sensations of the present moment. Learning how to do this can be uncomfortable,

⁵⁵ Michael Easter, *The Comfort Crisis: Embrace Discomfort To Reclaim Your Wild, Happy, Healthy Self*, (Harmony/Rodale, 2021), 21.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

and that is precisely the point. We must open to how our mind actually is to learn that we can choose presence over habitual patterns. And we must do this not just when we feel like it but when it is the very last thing we feel like doing (cue 5:15 AM alarm).

What was striking about embarking upon my daily practice commitment was that it became evident how readily I could follow through once the commitment was in place. I could make the time, and in doing so established a pattern that was intentional rather than opportunistic. A 5:15 wake-up that once seemed untenable actually became preferable when Ciel was born and I savored the early morning hour to myself. While traveling I often found time to steal off to bathrooms or closets to do my sitting round if need be (even at bachelor parties). I sat in chairs, or stacks of pillows on hotel beds. And as an introvert who never realized how useful this solo time was for recharging, I relished this time to myself. Sometimes I wondered about the quality of guerrilla bathroom practice but such concerns were merely ways to distract myself from the fact that though excuses were many, practice was always possible. Sure I missed a day here and there over the years due to extenuating circumstances, but I sat on my wedding day, and not long after we brought Ciel home from the hospital I sat while she napped next to me, our breathing soft and aligned.

This Zen humblebrag is hopefully less a pat on the back and more a glimpse into the kind of discipline, healthy discomfort, and discovery that scaffolds can instill. I had a window in which to sit that renewed each day, yet it was up to me to carve out the time in which to do it, to build the knowledge myself. This commitment forced me to distinguish the logistical hurdles from the mental ones. There would always be reasons *not* to practice. But there would also always be opportunities to make the space for practice. Building those opportunities into my

routine helped shape my day and thereby my life. What I experienced was problem creep in reverse: possibility creep.

This is a lesson I learned as a fully grown adult, but it is one that is no less impactful for kids. This isn't to say one should force kids to sit through tortuous sessions of stillness, and thereby create a natural aversion to the mere mention of mindfulness. In addition to creating playful opportunities in which to engage mindfully with kids, Christopher Willard also recommended building moments of mindfulness into the family routine, thereby establishing a baseline of appropriate practices. This could be as simple as a gratitude at breakfast or three calming breaths before bed. "It feels less forced when we find ways to integrate it into the rhythm of the day," said Willard. "It's not like, 'Let's just try this mindfulness thing now.' It becomes part of the routine."

Having a clear structure and routine can also create the defined space in which children can thrive. Counterintuitively, such clarity can erase the need for constant discipline, though it can be discomfiting at first to allow for such autonomy. I distinctly remember starting out as a PE teacher and walking into the gym for class. Aside from my nominal role as the teacher and my piercing whistle blasts, what, exactly, gave me the authority? I was vastly outnumbered, and it was unclear to me why the students wouldn't just mutiny. How could I really stop them?

There can be a similar feeling as a parent. It can feel like a slippery slope at times. Give in to one tantrum and the balance of power suddenly shifts. The tantrums begin to arrive in clusters, and it seems the only way to stop them is to concede. It dawned on my wife and I that such concessions weren't necessarily for Ciel's sake but for our own: it was far easier (and quieter) to just give in to demands. The alternative seemed to be to rule with an iron fist, to never

surrender! But that would just create further discord, the home (or worse, the restaurant) becoming a battleground with far too much collateral damage.

In *The Whole-Brain Child*, Siegel and Bryson noted that the word discipline actually means “to teach” rather than “to punish.”⁵⁷ The point is not to exact control at all costs but to create the circumstances in which self-regulation can be learned. As the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki stated, “To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him.”⁵⁸ Suzuki’s suggestion is to offer more space, rather than to tighten control by shrinking what is permissible. He continued, “To ignore them is not good; that is the worst policy. The second worst is trying to control them. The best is to watch them, just to watch them, without trying to control them.”

Of course, when your kid has removed all of the marker caps and is sitting next to a perfectly white sofa, controlling them might not be such a bad idea. I once attended a reading by the author (and possible bodhisattva) George Saunders, who was talking about empathy. “Real empathy can be really fierce,” said Saunders. “If you see a baby crawling toward a light socket, you don’t go, *aww*, you grab that sucker by the diaper.” Yet as much as is safely (see: light socket) and sanely (see: white sofa) possible, allowing kids to feel out their own limits while providing a caring and watchful presence is the authoritative ideal. Control can actually arise through giving up the need to control, an experience that I slowly grasped as a teacher. It took several years to realize that students yearned for direction as well as for the freedom to explore within clear boundaries. Providing guidance but honoring their independence made control mostly a non-issue, with piercing whistle blasts replaced by pellucid parameters. As long as the expectations were understood, they would rise to the occasion, and if they crossed a line, like

⁵⁷ Siegel and Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child*, 139.

⁵⁸ Suzuki and Dixon, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, 19.

that baby crawling toward a light socket, I was there to remind them where it was. Some of my favorite PE classes unfolded with a brief explanation followed by a period of vigorous activity in which all I had to do was watch them frolic in their large, spacious meadow (or gymnasium).

Exploration, after all, is what kids are wired to do. A one-year-old, pointed out Alison Gopnik, has twice as many neural connections as an adult brain. As we have seen, the efficiency of the adult brain is an evolutionary advantage, but the lantern consciousness of the child also serves its purpose. “By giving an animal a protected early period, a period when its needs are met in a reliable, stable, and unconditional way, you can provide space for mess, variability, and exploration,” wrote Gopnik.⁵⁹ Try and remember that the next time you’re too late in preventing your toddler from redecorating the white sofa with glitter and glue.

Mindfulness practice can be a scaffold upon which parents can explore their own limits, and even their own discomfort. In a somewhat meta way, the intentionality that scheduling time for practice requires can be its own organizing principle, creating ad hoc structure where none previously existed. And weaving mindfulness into the day can help families create a routine based upon presence and gratitude, establishing a throughline of practice. Ultimately it is up to each parent to decide what parameters will lead to the safest and sanest environment in which autonomy can flourish and comfort zones can extend. One family’s free-range approach could be another family’s chaotic nightmare, while one family’s authoritative style might have the appearance of a fascist regime to a particularly open outsider. Yet as long as limits are clear and independence is honored, the scaffold required to build knowledge is in place, whether the ensuing exploration occurs on the meditation cushion or in the backyard.

It can be breathtaking to watch Ciel’s comfort zone extend. On a recent hike she refused to be carried down steep sections, so we cringed as she bounded over rocks and roots, shouting

⁵⁹ Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, 31.

“Red light!” when she reached our visual horizon, the limit that we’d established. Then we’d catch up to her, exhale, and watch as she careened confidently down the path again.

Connecting the Threads

During a family outing to a Korean restaurant last summer Ciel was a mess. She had skipped her afternoon nap, opting to instead roll around in her crib like she might somehow be able to burrow through the bottom of it to freedom. Then, of course, she fell asleep on the way to the restaurant, resulting in her waking upon arrival with the kind of bewildered crankiness that sends shivers down the parental spine. Keeping her engaged and in a non-screaming state throughout a multiple course dinner would be our challenge. I ordered sake *and* a beer.

Predictably, it was an erratic affair. She vacillated between moments of abject frustration when the dumplings were too hot and abject delight when they reached an edible temperature, and then swerved back to abject frustration again when the dumplings were gone. We chased her around the garden of the outdoor terrace, playing hide-and-seek in the bushes, but then endured a tantrum when it was time to return to the table. It was like defusing your favorite bomb. At one point my wife turned to me and said, “I feel like she’s not my child right now. She’s some psychopath. And she has no humanity.”

The audaciousness of this assertion soon had us doubled over with laughter. There was no love lost for our “spirited” daughter, rather Courtney’s comment brought to light the absurdity of our situation, and the perspective needed to laugh at what we could not control. It was a moment where Ciel needed a large, spacious meadow, but we were in the confines of a small restaurant with a live band. The best we could do was make that meadow our mindset.

This debacle of a dinner might not be the most dignified denouement to a chapter on mindfulness and parenting. But what I hope to make clear, as so many parents are well aware of,

is that the struggle is real. We need to normalize this struggle, and not create a sense of stigma surrounding it. That stigma arises when the focus is on what we are doing wrong as parents and what we need to do to fix our children in order to achieve the optimal outcomes as formulated by a goal-oriented and image-obsessed society.

Mindfulness lays bare the struggle and teaches us to let go of the impulse to fix everything. For it is this very desire that fills us with the dissatisfaction we are constantly running from. This is the paradox of both practice and parenting. By observing such desires with openness, curiosity, and nonjudgment, through giving them the space to arise and pass away, we learn to let go of them, even in the midst of a restaurant meltdown. Not because we wouldn't prefer a lovely meal with a perfectly behaved toddler, but because we are willing to accept reality rather than long for a fantasy.

The irony is that mindfulness does change us, just not in the ego-driven ways we imagined when we first set out to practice. It unravels the knots we've worked so hard to tie. It deconditions us. Instead of a more concrete sense of command over the world (and our kids), we may simply find ourselves awed and appreciative of the newfound spaciousness in which our lives continue to unfold. It makes parenting less of a task and more of a ride. It is a ride that can be intense, challenging, joyful, absurd, and the thrill of our lives. This sense of spaciousness, wonder, and appreciation for the moment may be the greatest gift we can give our children.

An embrace of mindfulness is an embrace of the *process* by which we are present with our kids and the potential for mindfulness practice to attune them to process as well. It is not an assurance that things will turn out well, or a benediction against the troubles that may befall them. It is an invitation to a way of engaging that foregoes assurances and benedictions for awareness and balance. Studies show that such an embrace can have lasting repercussions. In a

study featuring 479 parent-adolescent dyads, in which the level of mindful parenting was assessed by both parents and their children, researchers found that mindful parenting had a significant and positive correlation with adolescent life satisfaction and was positively related to adolescent coping self-efficacy.⁶⁰

If satisfaction and self-efficacy don't quite sound like the sea change that can address the most pressing of concerns, keep in mind that we have not yet turned our attention towards those issues. It is also worth keeping in mind that mindfulness practice, in many ways, is the long game. It has been around for two-and-a-half millennia and hopefully will help ensure that future generations persist two-and-a-half millennia from now; not because of ineffectual quick fixes that are layered like so many band-aids on an ailing population and planet, but because of a deeper shift towards an approach that can reshape our intentions and values. The above is meant to show how this shift can begin to take hold in ways both large and small, through momentary wakefulness as well as lengthier commitments; by learning to walk the Middle Path or just walk like a ninja; and by establishing a structure within which play, process, and exploration are prioritized. Whether or not Generation Alpha embraces mindfulness will inevitably be up to them. In the end we can only show our children the temperature of a real hug and how to untangle the knots in their hair. And hopefully through our example, our steady hand, and our caring embrace, our little acrobats will learn to balance with the grace and dignity of a Buddha.

⁶⁰ Zhenzhen Liu, Xiaomin Sun, Yarong Guo, and Shuting Yang, "Mindful Parenting is Positively Associated with Adolescents' Life Satisfaction: The mediating role of adolescents' coping self-efficacy," *Current Psychology*, (2021): 1-12.