MINDFUL PARENTING

Mindful parenting is a craft which can be developed and practiced the same way we develop our daily sitting practice. The more we are able to notice and let go of our own discomfort and impulsive reactivity by bringing our focus back to our breath, the more we develop SAMADHI (=concentration) PASSADHI (=tranquility) and UPEKKHA (=equanimity), which are 3 of the 7 AWAKENING FACTORS

**In a nutshell, the goal (3rd noble truth) is to respond to a child’s behavior with patience, kindness and compassion. These three are elements of Right Intention, within the 4th noble truth.**

**The four noble truths briefly:**
**- 1st : The truth of Suffering (Dukkha)**
*Dukkha is to be understood (1) as a condition of the mind and not a self, (2) as changeable, due to Anicca (impermanence), (3) dealt with effectively, through letting go of the craving and clinging that creates dukkha.*

**- 2nd: The source of Dukkha (or distress and confusion) is Craving and Clinging.**
*There is the attachment to the three kinds of desire: (1) desire for sense pleasure (kamha tanha), (2) desire to become (bhava tanha), (3) desire to get rid of (vibhava tanha)*.

**- 3rd: The cessation of suffering through breaking the cycle of craving and clinging**
*Dukkha can be ended by letting go of Craving and Clinging. This is Right Effort within the Noble Eightfold Path.*

**- 4th: The noble eightfold path**
*This is the path leading to the confinement of Tanha and Dukkha.*

So when we go back to what I mentioned before, that ***“the goal is to respond to a child’s behavior with patience, kindness and compassion”***, THIS would be the 3rd noble truth. In order to get there though, we have to understand the first and the second noble truth first.

So let’s talk about Dukkha and see how it is relevant to our parenting experience.

**Dukkha** is part of the **three characteristics of existence**, which are
- Anicca (impermanence)
- Dukkha (suffering)
- Anatta (absence of an enduring and autonomous self)

**There are three types of Dukkha**
(1) **Dukkha- Dukkha:** This is physical suffering.
Our typical response would be aversion, however when one is mindful, there is physical discomfort, but no aversion (mental discomfort) present.

(2) **Viparinama- Dukkha:** “frustration of disappearing happiness”;
pleasant or happy experiences may cease due to the nature of impermanence, dukkha based on the fact that there is no lasting happiness
An example would be the “This is not supposed to be this way”. In regards to parenting it means the behavior does not match the expectation we have.

(3) **Sankhara- Dukkha:** This is the distress and confusion created by karmic influences – memories and previous reactions to similar situations. Sankhara can be understood as a distorted belief. For example children should always behave and parents are always in control. So having this expectation IS Sankhara Dukkha.

**So when it comes to mindful parenting, Dukkha (1st) is to be understood in order to arrive at the 3rd one. In order to get to the 3rd noble truth we have to learn how to manage the characteristics of our personality.**

**Here is how karma operates and how we can cultivate Samadhi (Concentration) Passadhi (Tranquility)**

***Let’s imagine there is a loud noise and something flying through the room.***

1. There is a visual and auditory stimulus happening
**\*Split second\***

2. The mind creates meaning because karma kicks in which are based on our past experiences. *“My children are arguing.” Is the story the mind comes up with.*
There is an unpleasant feeling, a surge of impulsive reactivity based on the hard wired instinct to react to the threat we experience.

Now, our **mindfulness practice** allows us to (1) be aware of the arising urgency and (2) allows us to let go of the impulse to react which (3) then results in a more accurate response. This is Karma too, but this does not produce Dukkha.
The result is **WHOLESOME KARMA** and its repetition leads to Joy or Piti (awakening factor). We **respond** with **kindness, compassion and patience**. This then becomes **VIPAKA**, or stored Karma. We keep practicing this to turn it into our new normal.
*VIPAKA: There is wholesome and unwholesome stored Karma. Vipaka also means the ability to be mindful and renounce impulsive reactivity.*

On the other side, whenever we are **not mindful** and give in to the urge to respond, this is Karma too, but this produces Dukkha.

**Here is an example to illustrate the above:**
1. My child is doing something what he or she is not **supposed** to do (example: turning the light switch on and off). This is Viparanama Dukkha *“It is not supposed to be this way.”*

2. What happens next is **crucial** and it happens in a **split** **second**:

**Option A.:** UN-mindful way would be to give into the Craving and Clinging which is the cause of Dukkha. Giving into the belief, that the child should act different and the parent- desired behavior will be enforced based on prior experiences (conditioning) with parenting tools that may not be appropriate to the situation. Examples may be snapping at the child, threatening to take away privileges like TV or a toy, remove the child from the spot. Any chosen path here results in more Discomfort and Resistance for both, parent and child. **We create unwholesome Karma and it produces Dukkha.**

**Option B.:** hopefully the mindfulness practice reached a level of maturity that the parent is able to notice what is happening.
There may be the urge to raise the voice, there may be tension in the body, and ultimately the parent may even raise the voice. Mindfulness helps though to recognize the belief he or she is attached to which may be that the child should respond in a more adult way. As it gets noticed that the response/ reaction causes discomfort to parent and child, the parent may choose to PAUSE and practice not feeding the anger in order to break the cycle. By bringing the attention back to the breath the parent may be able to anchor him/herself and redirect their response.
In the case that feelings got hurt, one can still opt for “damage control” by mentalizing what happened and act as a role model even in challenging times.

**Here is how parenting may look like the majority of the time:**

**(Parenting in a non-mindful way)** Our moment to moment actions are more **reactive** than responsive. The majority of our actions are driven by our own **KARMA** *(cetana, intention; cause and effect; KARMA creates DUKKHA)* **DUKKHA** *(feelings, mental formations (sankhara) and our need to satisfy our own discomfort)*, rather than **LOVE, COMPASSION and PATIENCE**. 🡪It is important to point out that our actions will be a reflection of our past, the way we were raised and the things we experienced.

As an example, a specific event (for example whining because the child can’t have another cookie or toy) may act as a **trigger**, that instead of choosing to pause, observe and respond, we will be overwhelmed and act out by getting loud, ridiculing the child or event or punish by taking away privileges. **Why**? 🡪Because we don’t know any better. This is called **IGNORANCE** (Avijja).
Our default mode of reaction is based on our past experiences (=what we experienced ourselves). It is engrained in us and if we do not observe and question our actions, we will pass on our own experienced suffering to the next generation.

So how do we do that? How do we change these patterns and how do we become a more mindful parent?

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SELF CARE IS A CRUCIAL PART OF MINDFUL PARENTING:**

For a long time I thought that mindful parenting means to basically ignore my own needs and only be there for my children. It took me some time – as well as a good chunk of dukkha – to understand that mindful parenting includes the setting of boundaries.

There are two types of boundaries
**(1) Intrapersonal boundaries:** boundaries I set for myself in order to practice self-care (ex.: commitment to daily sitting practice)  **(2) Interpersonal boundaries:** boundaries I set and keep with other people to keep intrapersonal boundaries
Effective intrapersonal boundaries lead to effective interpersonal boundaries.
**Modeling this behavior is crucial for two reasons:**
First, it’s for the sake of the parent’s physical and mental health **(self-care)** and second, to **model to the developing child the concept of respecting other people’s boundaries and how to exercise self-care**.

Often times when we read literature or listen to podcasts, it may sound or feel like parenting is a ***“set of strategies one has to learn in order to know what to “do” with/to the child to address the behavior”***

**Mindful parenting is a combination of addressing our own discomfort in order to be able to address our child’s discomfort in an appropriate and loving way.**

When we parent our child in a mindful way, we intentionally choose to address our own wounds and start to heal. **Loving-kindness, patience, equanimity and a deep sense of joy are some of the traits we encounter and embrace on our journey.**

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The Dalai Lama was once asked if Joy is the ultimate means for world peace.
Hear his response:
“Joyfulness is helping others, you get more satisfaction to build happy society, peaceful society. Firstly peaceful family. In order to create peaceful family, firstly individual person himself herself should create inner peace, joyfulness. Then share with family members. Then through that way, one family, 10 family 100 family that will bring change or bring happier society or community. Then eventually national level, then humanity’s level. Seven billion human beings, we all have the same desire, same right to achieve happy life.”
Mission : Joy – Finding Happiness in Troubled Times (Archbishop Desmond Tutu and HH The Dalai Lama), on Netflix

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In the past couple of years and since my spiritual practice started fusing together with motherhood, I questioned myself multiple times if I am “doing it right”. If the way I choose to parent will have a positive long lasting effect on my children. Even if doubt is one of the big player in the “game of parenting”, I would like to give you an example of how my spiritual practice impacts my children’s behavior.
Here is a very recent example on how my 7 year old son controlled his impulsive reactivity and was able to describe it in his own words.

As my boys were playing together, a loud “ouch!” caught my attention and my immediate impulse was to “intervene and separate them to avoid further pain. Usually an “ouch” is followed by some sort of REACTION like yelling, pushing, blaming, naming,… so I expected something. However, as I was “waiting” (intrapersonal boundary) for something to happen (which was a split second) the only REACTION I noticed was a frozen older one and a quiet younger one with a lowered head. What felt like an eternity were probably seconds, so I decided to simply ask “What happened?”

*This “What happened?” is an example of “mentalizing”, which means using words to help him understand his emotions and behaviors.*

As my older son explained that he got hit on the head by a toy from the younger one, I knew it was probably unintentional, so I said “I think it was not on purpose” and I invited the younger sibling to apologize, which he did. And the boys kept playing.
I was “shocked”. Moments later I said to my older son “I am very proud of you”. Usually I say “You must be very proud of yourself”, one strategy I learned in one of the parenting books I read. His response was “I wanted to hit him back, but I didn’t”. Pure joy overcame me so I decided to push further and said “this was a great example of self-control and how you were able to control your impulse”. Yes, he is seven years old, but he understood. Even if he doesn’t understand all the words I use, I’ve developed the habit to frame these special moments and put them into words. Then he said “So, can I get a sweet treat now because I did the right thing?” I had to laugh. There is my seven year old boy.

Here is an example where my inability of impulse control escalated the situation with my younger son.
Every day my younger son and I pick up big brother from school. USUALLY he naps, but somehow he stopped. The nap was “MY TIME” to do “MY STUFF” and have peace and quiet. There is the expectation of how things are supposed to be which was not met (=Viparinama Dukkha) and there was a story “This is usually my time, and he doesn’t stop talking, is throwing his toys on the floor and is trying to open the door…” = Sankhara Dukkha. Additionally, I already felt tense because of a general sense of discomfort I didn’t want to have =Viparinama Dukkha

As I was trying to ignore my son’s behavior (I knew asking him to stop wouldn’t help, he’s 3, so it’s always a hit or miss) I started to feel more tense and decided to ask him to please stop. Well, his answer was sticking out his tongue and simply saying no. My attempt to explain why this behavior was inappropriate and we could both do better was met with more resistance from his side.
There was a split second where REACTION happened and I snapped at him saying “If you don’t stop there is no TV for you,… fill in the blank” Then I turned into a toddler. I noticed immediately how I went down the rabbit hole and he started crying.
Internally I was trying to justify the threat of taking away something he likes but I knew at that point that I could’ve done better. So I felt guilt. He said “Sorry…” and I responded “just don’t do it again” He said “ok” and I apologized too. He said “it’s ok” I said “No, it’s not, I could’ve done better”. At that point I knew laughing is the best remedy for both of us so goofiness took over and peace was restored.

Even if there are multiple occasions throughout the day when I simply “mess up”, **damage control** is still possible. One of the most valuable lessons I learned from my spiritual practice is practicing loving kindness towards myself. Being compassionate and patient with my practice as well as my own parenting milestones.

Another very powerful tool is **honesty**. Acknowledging when I made a mistake, apologize if necessary and explain my (re)actions. This provides a very valuable lesson to my children. They not only learn that their mom is human too, they learn that EVERYONE makes mistakes and that it’s ok and important to acknowledge it and apologize.

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List of books I can recommend:

Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. & Tina Payne Bryson, PH.D. – No- Drama Discipline
Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. & Tina Payne Bryson, PH.D. – The Whole- Brain Child
Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. & Tina Payne Bryson, PH.D. – The Yes Brain
Alfie Kohn – Unconditional Parenting
Kim John Payne, M.ED. – Simplicity Parenting