

# Motherhood as a path to realization

How to be a serious Dharma Practitioner and a Mommy at the same time

By Julia Graves

Listening to my Dharma sisters crying about how their life as practitioners will come to an end once they become pregnant inspires me to share what I think of as the *great precious human rebirth in a female body*.

I'm not a mother myself, but I draw my ideas from years of work – first as a medical student in a labor ward, then a nanny, a kindergarten teacher, and a children's group leader, and later as a psychotherapist and naturopathic doctor working predominantly with children and mothers.

Mahayana Buddhism is all about serving others. It is about turning obstacles into opportunities, about giving up attachment. Having been up all night looking after children fighting to catch a breath, or standing there waiting for them to finally drop their poo into the potty for the first time (*yeah!*); having watched them take their first step, and utter their first word – all the challenges and boredom, as well as the joys – I see no contradiction in mothers being serious Dharma practitioners.

It saddens me to hear that many of my Dharma sisters feel excluded from the ranks of serious practitioners once they have a baby, and I know of many stories of mothers who have felt bringing their children to teachings was unwelcome. I remember finding one of my Dharma sisters outside the temple during a teaching following a highest yoga tantra initiation. There she was, with her newborn at her breast, in tears of frustration. "Now I just took this initiation and can't be in there with you others because he is



crying. And no-one else has the right to vomit into my bra...!" Oh motherhood! Surely, taking a highest yoga tantra initiation for the first time within a week of delivery is not the easiest way to approach things. They might find their formal practice is more restricted, admittedly, but mothers can continue to excel as true "secret" practitioners!

## Historical and cultural considerations

Although I have never seen an account of the female rebirth being inferior to the male in the Tantric context, many female practitioners have a story to tell of reading or receiving teachings where a female rebirth was presented as inferior. Pabongka Rinpoche, in his famous lam-rim text *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, for example, advises the [monk] practitioners to meditate repeatedly on the inferiority of the female rebirth and the female body, with the declared aim of generating a strong aversion to a female rebirth, and to enhance the chances of being reborn as a monk.<sup>1</sup>

I have never seen a convincing argument as to *why* the female rebirth is *inherently* inferior. The reason given is that women have historically not been free to study and practice the Dharma in any depth, and much of this prejudice continues to this day. There are examples of serious female practitioners in the teachings, but these are few and far between. This reasoning also does not apply to women practitioners in open Western societies. In my culture, the limitation I hear voiced most often from women practitioners struggling with motherhood is feeling excluded from the possibility of doing long retreats.

In the same manner as many of the great yogis and yoginis who achieved realizations while leading incredibly busy lives in high positions in the Dharma hierarchy, mother practitioners can make every moment of their waking life into a powerful "child-rearing retreat." Of course, most of the great treatises and commentaries were written by monks *for monks*. The examples of practice may not exactly apply to the modern Western mom: "When walking up the steps to

the temple, imagine you are leading all sentient beings up with you. Imagine that when you close the temple door, you are closing the door to the lower realms for all beings." Most Western mothers don't walk around Buddhist temples much. So we need to be creative, and the more creative, the more effective our practice will become. "When going up the escalator at the shopping center, I am taking all beings to the higher realms. When I am closing the front door, I am closing the door to the lower realms for all beings. When I am putting my child into the car seat, I am installing all beings firmly in the Great Vehicle."

## Living in a female body

Despite the prejudice against a female rebirth that does crop up in the teachings, it has always struck me (maybe due to my medical training), how much this female body seems to be molded into existence by very bodhisattva-like karmic forces: it is ready for an average of 30 to 40 years per life to, at any given moment, be the very thing out of which another precious human rebirth emerges. This is after having nurtured that being for nine months, giving of its own blood and flesh for its sustenance, and bearing incredible discomfort and pain up to the moment of birth. Then, much as a bodhisattva happily and without regret rips out his or her eyeball to hand it to another being, the mother is overjoyed and thinks it normal to have her body ripped open in childbirth. She forgets that she is dripping with blood, just wanting to hold the newborn and comfort it. I have met many women who lost their uterus due to giving birth, and not one of them felt that if only she had not had the child, she could have kept her body intact.

While hassling with ovarian cysts and menstrual pain, think: "This is part of my service to all sentient beings in order that they may have the possibility of achieving a precious human rebirth. May all sentient beings achieve a precious human rebirth, right now." You can use such problems for *tong-len* practice: "May I take upon myself all the suffering of all women in the world who have menstrual cramps, labor pain, miscarriages, who die in childbirth, etc." Whenever I think of women happily taking on a pregnancy though they risk death in childbirth, I feel strongly reminded of the bold bodhisattvas of ancient times. Rejoice!

It does not end at childbirth, however. This is often followed by months or years of breastfeeding – the giving of one's own body so that others may be fed – and later the carrying around of an increasingly heavier child (or children). And this does not come easy; it often leaves the

<sup>1</sup> Pabongka Rinpoche, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, trans. Sermei Khensur Lobsang Tharchin with Artemus B. Engle, Mahayana Sutra and Tantra Press: v. 2, p. 270. In the section, "Contemplating a specific teaching on karma and its results: How to pursue the cause of the maturation qualities," eight qualities are listed. The seventh quality is listed as: "The cause for becoming a male include the following: to prefer having a male body; to feel disaffection for the female state – viewing the female body as having disadvantages and developing aversion for the female state with thoughts such as, "I hope I never take a female rebirth"; to reverse the attitude of women who look favorably upon the condition of having a female body; and to recite the names of great Bodhisattvas, as in the verse: I make obeisance respectfully to Jñānottara, Prabhaketu, as well as Pranidhanamati, Shantendra, and Mañjugosha. In addition, we should avoid speaking badly of holy beings and try to rescue beings who are about to be castrated."

mother depleted, not to mention the pain from inflamed breasts, etc.: “May I give my body that all beings of all realms may quench their thirst; by breastfeeding my baby, may all beings’ thirst for the Dharma be quenched. As I give my breast milk to this baby, I visualize breastfeeding all mother sentient beings, returning their kindness. By bearing the pain of the baby sucking my milk, may I return the kindness of all my past mothers.”

The possibilities for bodhisattva deeds, bodhichitta meditations, etc., appear to be countless when one takes the form of a pregnant woman or the mother of an infant. The advantage is obvious: Other practitioners can only imagine being a mother and the love she may feel, while as a mother, these feelings often arise spontaneously within you. Remember that one of the measures for Great Compassion is having love for all beings the way that a mother loves her only child!

### Training in Bodhichitta and Lo-jong

The phrase “like the love of a mother for her only child” appears in the context of bodhichitta and lo-jong trainings, two invaluable Dharma practices. When my mother Dharma sisters worry that “I can’t do serious Dharma practice anymore,” they are forgetting the amazing opportunity they’ve given themselves to practice bodhichitta and lo-jong. Whenever you meet others, when you interact with them, try to imagine that they are your child, and treat them the way you would treat your own special child. In the “loving kindness of the Seven Point Cause and Result” training, we project the fondness we have for our kind mother onto all beings; why not project the tender love we have for our child onto them instead?

Lo-jong practice thrives on obstacles for the fast attainment of realizations – this child in my face that’s preventing my formal practice should be the fastest cause for attainments, if I can apply mind training! Why? Because it gives me such rich and ample opportunity to smash the ego, to go beyond self-grasping. Others don’t dare to constantly grab for the most delicious piece of food off your plate, walk right across your belly, stick their fingers into your eyes, and scream hysterically all night, but a child will. Here is so much opportunity to let go of the moment, of the ego kicking in, hurling: “I’m going to kick you back!” If we could consciously rejoice each time we gave up that nice piece of fruit that we wanted to eat ourselves that our toddler is now chewing on, how much merit! Imagine if we could dedicate each time we cleaned food that went everywhere on the table and onto our clothes: “By my happily wiping this off, may I quickly achieve the perfection of

patience, as well as equanimity, and perfect Buddhahood, and lead all beings, as well as my baby, to Buddhahood ...”

Maybe it is due to her having taken a female form and having been a mother – and due to the opportunity that presents for developing bodhichitta and cutting self-cherishing – that Machig Labdron developed Chöd practice, considered by some to be the fastest system to cutting self-cherishing and actualizing bodhichitta (Chöd means ‘cut’ in Tibetan; spelled gCod in some references). This was the only Tibetan practice lineage to develop outside of India, and although at first it aroused the suspicion of the Indian pandits, they soon found it to be genuine and pure. In the beginning of Chöd practice, one invokes the memory of Shakyamuni Buddha feeding himself to the hungry tigress in a past life as one of his great bodhisattva deeds. I think a woman headed for a complicated birth and caesarian section with the knowledge she might die, while solely concerned that her baby might live, is not far from that. [For advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche about Chöd, see page 34.]

### Equanimity and seeing all beings as my mother

The qualities of equanimity and “seeing all beings as my mother” are the first two steps in the training of bodhichitta, and being a parent affords ample opportunity to develop them. With the child as the basis for contemplation, you can contemplate how sentient beings of all realms have been your child before, and cultivate the memory of how you felt about them, just as you feel about your child now – the same love, worry, care, and sense of responsibility. Maybe you’re just as enervated after this contemplation, but you’re still willing to hang in there. Anything you do to help your child, you can dedicate this to all beings of all realms at the same time. In this way, the merit becomes immeasurably great for each time you offer food, drink, or help to your child. You can also take all the times that parenthood is pushing you to the end of your wits, and think: “All beings have been my mother. They have been just as challenged in being *my* mother. They suffered just as hard, they were just as despaired, but they did not give up. They continued to be my mother. They continued to try so hard. How incredibly kind. Just as much as I am now willing to give all, try all, and suffer on, so have they. They had these same motherly feelings. They were just like me now. And just as I feel that now my child should be grateful to me, so did they feel that I should return their kindness.” This contemplation leads to a third step, called “Repaying all mothers’ kindness.” Like this, you can use your experience as a mother to practice all the steps of generating bodhichitta in everyday life.

The lesson of equanimity in parenting we don't want to hear about is to think that this glorious little baby of ours, destined to become president of the country, could actually get sent home from school at age sixteen high on heroin, or could beat its father's head against the wall at eighteen in a fit of rage. This is the lesson of equalizing our precious honey with the enemy, and also a reality check. I have observed that the wondrous and innocent dreams of "new-born parents" for their angelic little darling don't always turn out to hold true when the time comes for that darling to grow up. If you think my examples are outrageous, I have come across them all amongst my friends, and all of them were into spirituality. Cute as the baby is, it might not turn into a nice person. This is not just the fault of the parents, but also due to the force of karma: Machig Labdron, one of Tibet's greatest yoginis and the mother of three, surely didn't feel she was a lousy practitioner when her oldest son turned out to be a thief. Her two younger children, however, became her lineage holders.<sup>2</sup> ☸



*Julia Graves lives in France. She is a long-time Dharma practitioner who studied in Dharamsala for three years at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, a non-sectarian monastery. When she complained to Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche that monastic studies were not helping her to develop bodhichitta, rather that the students were becoming more competitive with increasingly aggrandized egos, he chuckled and said: "You don't develop bodhichitta from doing monastic studies. You do it in your own private time."*

Next issue: Integrating tantra, calm abiding – and diaper changing.

<sup>2</sup> There are different stories about Gyalwa Dondrup's [Machig's eldest son] spirituality. At the very least, he was not as interested in Dharma practice as her younger two children. A footnote in *Machig's Complete Explanation* by Sarah Harding (p.305) says: "Khenpo Tsultrim (1995, 19) tells the story of Gyalwa Dondrup eating the meat of a cow that had become sick when he was butchering it. Instead of offering him her sympathy, Machig apparently went around the countryside spreading his reputation as a thief and butcher. The resulting sadness drove him to the Dharma."

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