

# The Baby Minder's Preliminary and Purification Practice

In Part II of Julia Graves' musings on motherhood as a path to realization, she presents the art of diaper-changing and other baby-minding chores.

**T**hey say that, per child, one has to change an average of 6000 diapers. When people have asked why I do not have children, I used to jokingly say that [as a nanny] I had already changed 6000 diapers on other people's children! In standard preliminary practice, it takes about one second to say a mantra that will count for one out of the recommended 100,000 recitations. When you calculate that changing a diaper can take anywhere up to five minutes, depending on the mess, 6000 changes becomes a very big preliminary. It's the excrement purification practice.

Contemplate: "Just as this sentient being is stuck in excrement, so do all sentient beings, out of their ignorance, get themselves into nasty situations. Just as I am pulling this sentient being out of this mess, so will I free all sentient beings from the dregs of ignorance, negative karma, suffering, etc. Just as I am establishing this sentient being in happiness (of fresh, clean clothes), so will I establish all sentient beings in the bliss of nirvana."

Using our imagination, we can further contemplate: "Just as I have saved my baby from rolling off the changing table, I will save all sentient beings from falling into the lower realms. Just as I have prevented my two-year-old from running in front of a car, I will prevent all sentient beings from being harmed by their *kleshas*.<sup>1</sup> Just as I am giving medicine now, I will offer medicine against the three poisons to all sentient beings. Just as I am pushing my child on the swings, so will I push all sentient beings into the higher realms ..." The possibilities are endless, and the point is to find something in that moment that inspires you, that can give you a spark of humor, that captivates your mind, leading it away from negativity.

## Keeping your vows

For those who are worried about finding the time for formal practice, the nice thing about parenting is that you are

presented with constant opportunities to practice vows you may have taken as a Buddhist. Of course, motivation and the state of mind of the practitioner must always be considered, but then we can rejoice: "By my driving the kids to school, I am fulfilling my Bodhisattva vow to help others. I am thus getting closer to buddhahood. By my cooking for the family, I am practicing my vow to fulfill the needs of all beings. By my taking them to the doctor's, I am not missing out on Dharma practice time. I am actually practicing my vow to help all beings who are sick. How fortunate I am! And this started since the first prenatal check-up! How incredible! I have *actually* practiced protecting the lives of others, not just talked about it! Wow! I will dedicate this merit right now!"

## Taming minds

We can also teach the Dharma to our children, not only by being a good example, but through the stories of the great saints. "Mommy, tell me a story!" "Did you ever hear of Milarepa? No? Guess what, he could fly!" All the stories of life and liberation of the great saints of the past are considered to be fit children's stories in Tibet. Why not? They are full of excitement and magic, and the story of Shakyamuni Buddha works for ages four and older.

In struggling with all of the endless challenges children bring along – from the frog in the toilet to the teenage pregnancy – you can also think: "This is how it must be for the gurus. They teach us so patiently. They repeat themselves over and over again. And instead of putting into practice what they told us to do for our own good, we seem to just go around and do the opposite – lie, cheat, slander our Dharma siblings, criticize others without end, try to get away with not paying our bills ... How I feel about my child now, this is how they must feel about us childish beings. They say that bodhisattvas must perfect patience and joyous effort. If I want to be a bodhisattva and thus become a guru in the future, I should not despair and feel that I wasted my efforts with my child who didn't turn out so perfectly, who

<sup>1</sup> *Klesha* is a Sanskrit word meaning "afflictive emotion." For example, anger, greed, jealousy, or attachment. The word in Tibetan is *nyon mong*.

"Thanks, Mom, for saving me from rolling off the changing table – and saving all sentient beings from falling into the lower realms."

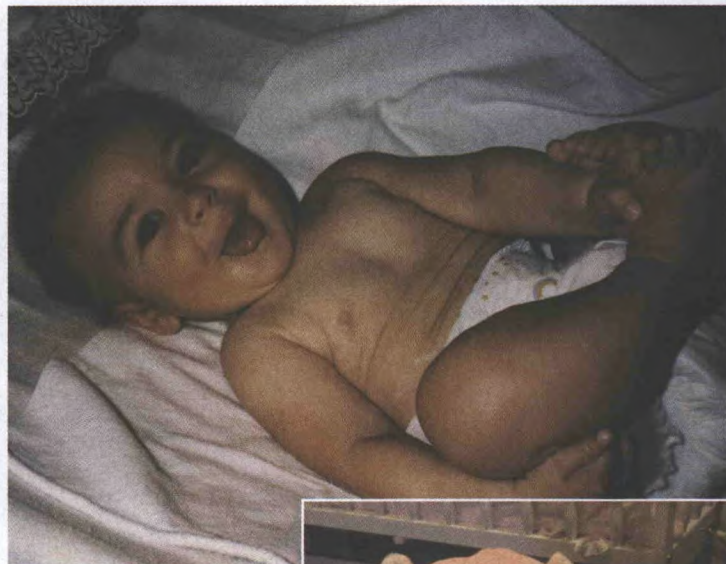
may, in fact, be harming other beings. This is how the Great Ones feel about us childish beings. Our actions appear to them just like this. "How great is their kindness and compassion. May I be like them. May my compassion and patience also be limitless."

As Pabongka Rinpoche said, just repeating the words of the Dharma cannot help much, meditating on the channels and the winds cannot help much, even reciting mantras cannot benefit greatly – but renunciation, bodhichitta, and right view can definitely benefit. The Kadampa masters used to say that the true Dharma practice is to give up this life, to practice true renunciation. Unwanted pregnancy? Your life's plan of being a yogini in a cave ruined? Wow! Excellent opportunity to practice the *real* Dharma, to give up this life! On top of that, not to waste it, but to be able to make it the profound practice of rendering service to others! Being a parent can be a big teaching in renunciation. It will most definitely show you every single one of your tendencies toward self-grasping if you are aware. And right view? There are endless opportunities to meditate on the three spheres of yourself, the child, and the action as empty. As a good Dharma friend commented: "I have the greatest insights into Mahamudra on the playground!"

## Challenges

Finding the time and quiet to meditate can be a real challenge. Your child grabs your face, pressing her nose against yours while you are trying to sit and meditate, and shouts, "Mommy, mommy!" What to do? We can't even get one session! But I don't think Ribur Rinpoche got any time to sit for formal sessions while being tortured in Chinese prison, either. Let's take his example and work with what we have: He had the cruelest treatment imaginable, which is the most potent of all situations to actualize bodhichitta. And that he did.

So why not take our meditation visualizations and use them creatively? As we run the water for a baby bath, we can visualize our guru, the buddhas, and all sentient beings appearing in deity form, nectar light rays pouring forth from our palms into the water; we can make visualizations as we



prepare food or medicine, or simply stroke the feverish forehead of our child. The possibilities are only as limited as your imagination.

The bottom line is that I think the realizations we get from our practice do not depend on a formal sitting-down practice as much as on how much awareness and creativity we can bring to each of our actions. And in not always practicing formally, parents have the hidden consolation of less ego-gratification and aggrandizement (wow, I am so great! I finished so-and-so many of this-and-that, I am hot stuff!). Instead, they are humble, "secret" practitioners. ☸



"Meditation? Later, mommy, my diaper needs changing."

*Julia Graves lives in France and is currently on retreat. She offers these thoughts as a former nanny, kindergarten teacher, psychotherapist, and naturopathic doctor working predominantly with mothers and children. She says: "May this be of benefit for all sentient beings. All the errors in these musings are entirely mine."*