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**Planned
Parenting:
How to Make Having
Children Meaningful**

While chanting the following request to Avalokiteshvara during the 100 Million Mani Retreat in Institut Vajra Yogini, Lavaur, France, in May 2009, Kyabje Zopa Rinpoche was inspired by the words “father and mother sentient beings” to give a talk on the need for parents to make a long-term plan for raising their children.

Please quickly free me and all mother and father sentient beings
Of the six realms from the ocean of cyclic existence.
Please enable the profound and extensive peerless
Bodhichitta to quickly grow in our mindstreams.

We Are All One Big Family

You should recite this prayer while thinking that you and all the numberless hell beings, pretas, animals, human beings, asuras, and suras, are all one big family. In fact, it is actually true that you are one family because everyone has been your mother, not just one time, but numberless times from beginningless rebirths. And when they were your mother, they gave you numberless kindnesses. They gave you a body numberless times, not just a human body but also the bodies of all the different kinds of animals, pretas, and so forth. They did this each time you were born from a womb. But even considering just the times you were born with a human body, each and every sentient being has given birth to you numberless times, such that even the present numberless hell beings have been a human mother to you numberless times. After giving birth to you, they treated you with kindness. And all this is from beginningless rebirths. As your mother they protected your life from hundreds of dangers every day, including when you were born as a human being. From beginningless rebirths, they have given you an education numberless times, including when they gave birth to you as a human being numberless times. When as a human being they were your mothers, they bore so many hardships for your well-being and also created so much negative karma for the sake of your happiness. All this is from beginningless rebirths. Each sentient being – each hell being, each preta, each animal, each human being, each asura, and each sura – has done this for you. Now expand this thought to include

when you were born to them as an animal; for example, think about how many insects, flies, and worms your mother killed in order to feed you when you were born as a bird.

Your Child Is a Sentient Being

All these mothers of old protected you, bore so many hardships for you, and created so much negative karma for you. It is truly unbelievable. Can you even begin to imagine their kindness? In fact, almost every single action of theirs was negative karma because it was done out of attachment. For this reason I advise people that the way to take care of a child is to think of him or her simply as a sentient being, rather than as “*my* child.” At the beginning of a sadhana, a meditation, or a practice, when you generate bodhichitta toward all sentient beings, you should think that your child is one of those sentient beings. Likewise, when you dedicate your merits to achieve enlightenment for sentient beings, you should think that your child is one of those sentient beings.

You should have the same motivation to take care of your child as you would any other sentient being. Your child is a sentient being from whom you have received every happiness experienced from beginningless rebirths, from whom you receive all your present happiness, and from whom you will receive every single happiness, not just one, of all your future lives. Your child is also a sentient being from whom you receive liberation from samsara, and from whom you receive the realizations of the whole entire path up to enlightenment. With that recognition, with that understanding, think of your child as being the most precious and kindest being in your life. Of course, it is the same for all other sentient beings, exactly the same, but you have a particular karmic connection with the one who is your child, and therefore have a particularly strong responsibility to take care of him or her. However, you should do so with the consideration that he or she is a sentient being.

In short, when you do a sadhana or begin a practice and generate the motivation of bodhichitta wishing to attain enlightenment for all sentient beings, keep in mind that your child is one of those sentient beings. In this way you will have a totally different attitude toward him or her. You will not have the slightest negative attitude. The destructive thought of the eight worldly concerns will not be there, whereas the incredibly good thought of cherishing a sentient being will be there. If, on the other hand, you do have the thought of the eight worldly concerns, then if your son, for example, treats you well you will take care of him, whereas if he goes against your wishes your attitude will change and you might end up abandoning him, even to the point of leaving him to die.

With Bodhichitta Your Child Becomes the Most Precious Being in Your Life

If you have bodhichitta, you will feel that your child is the most precious, the kindest, being in your life. In general, this is the case for all sentient beings, but you should keep in mind that your child is one of those sentient beings. By doing so, you will take care of him or her with a healthy, positive mind, rather than with negative emotional thoughts and the pain of attachment. Consider your child to be the most precious, kindest being, and remember that you are responsible for take caring of him or her. Rejoice in this thinking: “How wonderful it is that my life is beneficial, that I am able to take care of at least one sentient being. How wonderful it is that my limbs can be useful for looking after one sentient being, to bring happiness to even just one sentient being. How wonderful this is.” Rejoice in this way. With bodhichitta, you can rejoice in a positive way. I don’t know whether this is possible with attachment, but with bodhichitta your rejoicing definitely becomes positive and pure.

When you encounter difficulties — when your child does not listen to you, when you cannot control him, when you have a job and many things to do, and you become disappointed and parenting becomes very difficult for you — then it is good to rejoice thinking: “My life is

beneficial for at least one sentient being; my limbs are beneficial for the happiness of this one sentient being.” If you can rejoice like this, there will be no difficulties in your mind or in your heart. With this positive wish to help your child, the thought of being annoyed at or exhausted by your child will not arise.

Bodhichitta Is the Best Attitude

Of course, you should have exactly the same attitude if you work in an old folks home, or if you are paid to look after children. This is the best attitude to have when doing your job. In this way, because of your bodhichitta motivation and the thought that those you are caring for are so kind and precious, everything that you do, every hardship that you undergo, every single service that you do to take care of others, becomes purification. It purifies the negative karma that you have been collecting from beginningless rebirths. It becomes a great purification and a great means to collect extensive merit. It becomes an incredible practice. In this way, your service to others will include the practice of all six perfections or paramitas: charity, morality, patience, perseverance, concentration, and wisdom. Here wisdom refers specifically to the understanding that the I, the action, and the child are empty, that they exist only as merely labeled by mind.

In short, the motivation for going to work to take care of old people or to take care of children should be exactly the same as the motivation you have for taking care of your own child. You should think: “This person is the most precious one, the very kindest one.” Then whatever service you do, whatever hardships you bear, all of it will become an unbelievable means of purifying the negative karma you have collected from beginningless rebirths, as well as an unbelievable means of collecting extensive merits. Everything you do will become a cause for you to attain enlightenment. Everything you do to take care of your child will become a quick path to enlightenment because with bodhichitta you collect extensive merit. It is recounted that even though Buddha Maitreya generated compassion and bodhichitta much earlier than Buddha Shakyamuni, Buddha Shakyamuni actually became

enlightened first because his compassion was much stronger than Maitreya's compassion. Due to his compassion, Buddha Shakyamuni was able to collect much more extensive merit and purify far greater negative karma accumulated in the past. For example, when in one life as brothers they came across a family of five tigers dying of starvation, Maitreya did not offer his body to them whereas Buddha Shakyamuni did. This is why Buddha Shakyamuni became enlightened before Maitreya. It is the same for you in that if you are able to generate strong compassion for your child and, instead of being driven by attachment, practice the Dharma, your child will give you enlightenment. Similarly, if you are working in an old folks home, you will receive enlightenment from that old lady or that old man. The same is true of taking care of an animal; it becomes a quick way to achieve enlightenment.

We See Having Children as Blissful

In brief, we need to learn how to take care of children. Whether you are a mother or father, or even if you are not a parent but are involved in taking care of a child, the attitude is the very same: you should take that child as your main object of meditation. That person with whom parents spend so many years of their life is a very important object of meditation. By saying this, I am not suggesting that everyone make children! My point is that if you are going to make children, you should be really careful. Before making a child, you yourself should receive some education about how to make a child's life most beneficial. Of course, each child has its own particular karma so there is no guarantee that he or she will do everything you say. However, as parents you have much influence over your child because normally a child spends a lot of time with its parents. Because of this, parents have a huge responsibility in terms of what the child will grow up to be. But the problem is that people usually don't think about this. They don't plan what they will do with that new life after giving birth to it. They think of having a child as being only bliss, a total dream, without one single problem.

We Also See Relationships as Blissful

It is exactly the same for marriage in that you think: "If I can be with him or her, then that's it. That is all I need in life." You never think of there being problems. You just see a life filled with beauty and bliss. You never think of problems, but instead think only of bliss: "If I could only live with this person, I could say good-bye to the rest of the world, even it were to be destroyed by fire." It is very, very interesting to examine how the mind thinks, how attachment thinks, to examine the particular "trip" that attachment takes you on. Your attachment sees only beauty, only bliss. That person is the most beautiful, fantastic, and best thing in your life. Even before you meet that particular person, you have the hope to meet him or her and you imagine how it would be to be together with that person. You make up a whole series of stories, creating a visualization or dream of how it will be. You think only about all the nice things that will happen. At this point you don't need to actually spend any money, whereas afterward, in order to meet that person, some people are willing to spend thousands, or hundreds of thousands, or even millions of dollars to meet that person and then give billions and zillions of gifts to make the relationship happen.

At the beginning of the relationship there is excitement, you meet each other more and more often and come to think: "If we could only live together that would be fantastic." Then you either get married or begin to live together. When I was a child in Solo Khumbu, I remember attending some weddings of benefactors. The celebration, during which the groom's family received the bride from her family, would go on for several days. The tradition there is that marriages are arranged by the parents, perhaps similar to how it is done in Chinese families, although the son might also be consulted. For several days the wedding guests dance around a pillar playing cymbals, drinking a lot of alcoholic drinks made from rice and barley, and eating a lot of food. In the meantime, the wedding party sits to one side without dancing, as if they were performing a puja! Although the bride is all dressed up, I noticed that in many cases she would keep her face down and seemed to be crying all day long. I imagined that this was because she was so sad to leave her

home as she had had no choice in the matter, the marriage having been decided for her by her parents.

So, then it finally happens, you manage to succeed in living together. But now you begin to really see the other person. Before you would just meet each other for an hour or two here and there, perhaps in a park or at a restaurant to have a meal together. Initially you were very attracted to each other, but now you begin to really see the other person. One day, two days, three days, four days pass, and gradually anger starts to come when the other person behaves in a way that you don't like. You begin to notice many different things, including the unpleasant smell of his or her body and his or her excrement. Gradually you come to see many mistakes. You begin to see the selfish mind of the other person, that he or she doesn't want to do what you want, but wants to do what he or she wants. It starts from there and gradually increases more and more.

At the beginning, there weren't any problems, only bliss. You were completely absorbed in bliss. Now that bliss is like a cloud or a rainbow disappearing from the sky; first there is just a trace left and then it is completely gone. As the days pass, there are more and more problems. Later, your greatest wish is expressed in the thought: "When can I become free from this person?"! Your way of thinking has become completely opposite to what you thought at the beginning, completely opposite. Now what you are praying for every day, what you are wishing for from the bottom of your heart, is to become free from this person. That becomes the most important thing for your happiness. Day and night, while you are out at work and when you return home, you think: "When am I going to be free?" Life becomes filled with tears and misery. You look for a way to make this happen, and as a result there is more and more fighting. While physically you still live together, your life is spent in fighting and quarrelling. You blame each other saying "You did this. You did that." Eventually either you leave or the other person leaves. Then, the very best thing becomes to never ever meet that person again! Whereas before the best thing imaginable was

to meet the person, now the best thing, the happiest thing in your life, is to never again meet that person.

One time when I was staying in Singapore, an Indian family came to visit me. The parents couldn't wait for their daughter to get married and so they asked me to pray for that to happen. I advised them to be careful, to take their time, not to rush, but I didn't go into details as I have here. They had no idea what they were saying; they were speaking as if they were completely hallucinating. For them, that their daughter was going to get married was the biggest thing in their life, the most important thing in their life. This is because they had no idea what happens after that, that it is not always sun-shining bliss. So the parents, and not only the couple, never actually think about what will happen in the future. Even though you hear about or see so many problems, you still don't think about what will come later on. However, at one point there will be many problems. If one of the couple is wealthy, you also begin to fight over material things. There are so many problems. When the experience starts to become negative, you see more and more problems and at the same time your attachment diminishes more and more until all the excitement is gone. But even while that is happening, while that first relationship is still ending, you begin another relationship with someone else. Before the first one is completely finished, you start another one, thinking: "This person loves me more than that person." You do exactly the same as before. You start another book: "This person is fantastic; he or she loves only me. If I can be with this person, there will be no problems, only bliss. No darkness, only sun-shining happiness." Then the same story starts all over again. But when you start to live together, once again it is the same. Gradually the other person learns more about who you are, and you also begin to see problems that you did not notice before. You find more and more mistakes in each other, and more and more lose interest in each other. So once again it is the same. Then again you find someone else and think: "This person loves me so much more than that person."

Using a Relationship to Practice Dharma

It tends to happen that when you have a child, all the focus goes to the child. Whereas before the focus was on each other, once a child is born all the focus goes to him or her, and then you easily feel that the other person doesn't love you any more. Then the problems start, the mind becomes unhappy. Because of this, it is important to use a relationship, your being together with someone, for your Dharma practice. This is basically the same as what I said earlier about the way to take care of a child — to make sure that it becomes your Dharma practice and that there is nothing worldly involved in it. In particular, that it become the cause of enlightenment, given that the motivation is bodhichitta, cherishing that other sentient being, serving and dedicating your life to him or her, in the same way as you are supposed to do for all sentient beings.

So you should also use a relationship as a means to practice Dharma. You can use it to practice morality by, for example, taking the five lay vows and abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from telling lies, and abstaining from having sex with someone who is the partner of someone else. In addition to the many moralities that you can practice, you can also engage in the practice of charity, the practice of patience, and the practice of perseverance, as well as concentration and wisdom. You can use the relationship to practice the six paramitas in the same way as I mentioned in relation to your child. In particular, you can use a relationship to learn patience from the other person, taking him or her as your teacher of the paramita of patience. If you can do that, it means that the person you are living with is giving you enlightenment. You use the relationship to practice Dharma. If you are able to use your life to practice Dharma, it becomes a very healthy life. Just as when taking care of a child, an old person, or your parents, likewise in a relationship you should see yourself as a servant and the other person — that other sentient being — as your boss. You see yourself as a servant serving that sentient being, freeing him or her from suffering and causing him or her to experience happiness. This is the attitude of a bodhisattva towards sentient beings.

They consider themselves to be a servant serving sentient beings, and see sentient beings as their lord.

In short, a relationship is exactly as I mentioned in the case of a child. From that person you have received every happiness that you have experienced from beginningless rebirths. Just that kindness is unimaginable, but, on top of that, you also receive all your future happiness from that person. In addition, you receive liberation from every suffering, which is even much more precious. Then, you also receive enlightenment from that person, so he or she is the most precious, most dear, person in your entire life. You can also think that that person has been your mother many times and at that time has shown you so many different types of kindness. By thinking of the extensive kindness you have received from that person, you will come to see yourself as his or her servant. In this way, your living together becomes Dharma. Everything you do in that relationship is done to achieve enlightenment for sentient beings. With the attitude that the other person is the most precious and most kind, while you are his or her servant, your every single action becomes a means of collecting extensive merit. Because it is done with bodhichitta, you collect limitless skies of merit. Due to the thought to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, you think “I am going to offer service to this person, this most precious sentient being.” Everyday you collect limitless skies of merit and also purify the defilements that you have collected from beginningless rebirths. As a result, your life has so much hope in that you constantly create the cause for the biggest success — enlightenment — for all sentient beings. This motivation is better than that of the hearer and solitary realizers in that, even though they have achieved the path of accumulation, the preparatory path, and even the right-seeing path, their motivation remains that of achieving their own liberation. Since they have no thought to benefit all sentient beings, your motivation is much more fortunate than that of even these meditators who have achieved high spiritual paths. Those people are living their lives only for the sake of their own happiness, for the sake of their own liberation from samsara.

Taking Karma into Account

Of course, past karma also has to be taken into account. Remembering this, you keep in mind that not everything you expect to happen will happen because things go according to past karma, your own and the other person's. You should remember that everyday. That is very helpful. When you remember karma, there is not much suffering for your mind or in your life. When you relate events to karma thinking, "This is my karma" and "This is his or her karma," the problem does not even become a problem because you accept the situation. Because it doesn't bother you, there is peace in your heart. If, on the other hand, you don't think of and don't accept this fact, there will be mountains of problems in your life. You will feel like you are being crushed under mountains of problems. However, this is due to your mental projections; it is your faulty way of thinking that makes you feel like that.

If you remember karma, then even if one day that person leaves you, there will be no problem at all. You will respect the decision of that person through remembering how dear, precious, and kind he or she has been due to being the source of all your past happiness. Since there is no clinging attachment, if the person wants to leave you, you will offer that person whatever is best for him or her. If the relationship begins with the thought of the other person's kindness, then the end will also be good. If it ends with that thought, there will be happiness. If, on the contrary, the motivation at the beginning is mistaken, then at the end, when separation occurs, there will be huge suffering, such that you may even think of committing suicide.

If you can think in the way that I have explained here, you will be able to enjoy life. You will find satisfaction and fulfillment, and have a happy life. You will experience inner happiness and peace. If not, your heart will always be empty. No matter how much external excitement there is, how many things are happening around you, your heart will always be empty. In fact, this experience is common in life in the West as well as in samsara in general. In short, your life will be filled with misery.

The Importance of Planning

When people first start a business, they initially come up with a plan as to how to make it the most profitable business possible. Although this is usually done only for their own benefit, if possible it would be good to also think of benefiting others, that is, to think to make it beneficial for the world and for other sentient beings. However, it is quite rare that the motivation for setting up a business is to benefit others; generally it is only to make it profitable for oneself.

When you bring a child into the world, you should also make plan because he or she is much more important than a business. When you pray, do formal spiritual practices, or even just chant one mala of OM MANI PADME HUM, you do it for the benefit of *all* sentient beings. For example, when you do a session of retreat you do it for everybody, for every sentient being: for the numberless hell beings, numberless pretas, numberless animals, numberless human beings, numberless asuras, numberless suras, and numberless intermediate state beings. If you do those activities for every single insect, then it goes without saying that if you have a child you must make a plan as to how to make his or her life most beneficial. Although among numberless sentient beings, he or she is just one sentient being, you have a specific responsibility for his or her life. Because of this, you must make a comprehensive plan regarding how to make his or her life the most beneficial possible and to avoid it becoming the cause of suffering for himself or herself, for the family, for the surrounding people, for the country, for the whole world. At the very least you need a plan to prevent his or her life from being overwhelmed by suffering. Creating a child is therefore not an easy matter at all. Instead, as a parent, you have a HUGE responsibility, an unbelievably big responsibility. You are not only responsible for his or her happiness, but are also for what will help your child at the time of his or her death. You need to think about that. It is not enough to just think of providing your child with sense pleasures and physical comforts every day; the most important thing is to make a plan for the time of his or her death. The most crucial time of life is the time of death. Because of this, that which helps and is the

most beneficial at the time of death, becomes the most important thing in life.

In short, you need a good parenting plan, that is, a healthy, positive motivation for bringing up your child that is based on a good heart, rather than on attachment. Even though your karma and your child's karma are not the same, how a child's life turns out depends greatly on its parents. The parents' character and their attitude toward life — their having a good heart, their living their life to benefit others, and their doing good things to benefit others in their daily life — greatly increase the potential for the child to develop in a positive way. The parents' attitude becomes an incredible help and support enabling the child to grow up with a healthy, positive, Dharma mind. This is a mind that does not cause harm to himself or herself, to other sentient beings, including animals, and to the world, the country, the neighbors, and the family. Not only that, such a mind will bring so much happiness to sentient beings, to the world, the country, the neighbors, and the family. As the child learns from what the parents do, he or she receives a positive, beneficial influence, not a harmful influence. Then when that child has its own children, he or she will pass on that education — to live life in a way that is beneficial for others and to have a good heart. Your children will be an example for their children, that is, for your grandchildren, whereby the message that is passed down from generation to generation will be a good one. The most important thing is a good heart, as then there will be unbelievable benefit. You will do good things every day and that education will be passed on from parents to children. Because of this, parents can be of incredible benefit; they can help to transmit from generation to generation the attitude of a good heart, non-violence toward others, and the importance of being beneficial to others. If you do that, it will bring so much happiness to sentient beings from life to life, in this world, in your country, for your neighbors, and for your family. In your family life there will be much happiness and peace. Life will become very yummy.

The Sixteen Guidelines

In the FPMT we now have a project for secular education based on Buddhist principles called Essential Education. Long ago in the past, the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo made a set of Dharma rules for the whole of Tibet in order to ensure that everyone's life would be filled with goodness and that it not become a source of harm to others, but only a source of peace and happiness. These guidelines were meant to help people achieve a healthy mind, then from a healthy mind to have a healthy body, and thereby to lead a meaningful life and to create less negative karma and more good karma daily. Essential Education has created a book based on the Sixteen Dharmas of King Songtsen Gampo called *Sixteen Guidelines for Life*. Seven of these sixteen qualities are a particularly important foundation to use in the education of children as they are the very basic qualities that they need to develop.

Seven Qualities in Which to Educate Children

Kindness and Delight

The first quality is kindness. Children should be encouraged in the practice of kindness day and night, not just with their fellow human beings, including their enemies, but also with animals. The second quality that they should be taught is that of delighting or rejoicing when good things happen to others. If someone else has found a new companion, a beautiful house, or a new car, or his job or business is going well, and so forth, it is important to feel happy and rejoice thinking: "How wonderful it is that the person has this." This doesn't mean that you want that thing for yourself, but that you think how wonderful it is that another sentient being has found happiness. Delighting in others' good fortune keeps the mind happy and at peace. It brings about a healthy mind and a life that is full of ups, rather than downs. It is one of the best Dharma practices, meditations, and psychologies.

These two attitudes, kindness and rejoicing, can be taught to children without the need for you to explain, and without the need for them to

believe, that they are creating good karma. This is because even without telling them that, they still create good karma. In reality when they practice kindness and rejoicing, because they create good karma, it will bring success and happiness in their life. From one act of kindness or one act of rejoicing, they will have success and happiness, not only in this life, but for hundreds of thousands of lifetimes because karma has the characteristic of expanding over time. This is the case for both positive karma which brings the good result of happiness, and for negative karma which brings the bad result of suffering. In either case the result expands — from one small karma, or one small action, results are experienced for hundreds of thousands of lifetimes. Therefore, even if it is not appropriate to explain karma to children in a public school setting, for example, in reality they will still create good karma with each act of kindness and rejoicing and it will bring thousands of successes even in this very life. For example, if they practice kindness, their mind will always be happy and healthy. Likewise, a rejoicing mind is a happy mind. When the mind is happy, the body becomes healthy, and even the chances of heart attack and other illnesses that come from anger and selfishness are greatly reduced. In fact, researchers have seen that angry people have far more likelihood than people who are more patient of having a heart attack or stroke. I once read an article in a Delhi newspaper by a doctor in which he said that in his experience heart attacks are caused by talking badly about other people. I think there is a lot to be learned from what this doctor said in that if you put a negative label on a life situation, then it will appear negative. If you see your life or another person's situation in a negative light, it will make you unhappy. It will disturb your mind. And in the long term this will result in high blood pressure that can eventually lead to a heart attack.

In short, your children have to create karma from their own side in order to experience happiness and success. Just as a beggar on the street is not nourished by someone eating delicious food in an expensive restaurant, likewise your child will not experience happiness as a result of the good karma created by its parents.

Patience

The third quality is patience. Patience, the opposite of anger, stops your child from harming himself or herself, and keeps this child from harming numberless sentient beings as well. It therefore stops your child from creating an unbelievable amount of negative karma. To stop harming himself or herself and others, including animals, and instead practice patience has the positive effect in future lives of continuing to be patient and to not harm others. Thus, not only in this life, but from life to life your child will bring happiness, not only to this world, but to the sentient beings of different worlds. All this comes from the positive imprints of practicing patience left on the mind in this life. In addition, even in this life he or she will bring peace and happiness to your family, to the neighbors, and to the entire world. It has happened many times in the history of the world that people in powerful positions did not practice patience and instead killed many people, including children. Practicing and training the mind in patience now will help your child avoid becoming angry and be more patient even in future lives. Thus, the effect continues into future lives, whereby he or she will have ever more patience and be ever more careful to refrain from harming sentient beings. As a result, what sentient beings will receive from your child is first peace and then enlightenment.

Contentment

The next important quality that children need to develop is contentment. There is an enormous need for contentment and satisfaction, given that the problem of so many young people is a lack of this quality; because they lack contentment, they get involved in drugs and become unable to live a normal life, never mind their being unable to practice Dharma. Having entered into the vicious cycle of addiction to alcohol and drugs, they become unable to hold down a job, and eventually totally destroy their entire life. Their life becomes completely submersed in problems for years and years, it is as though they are sinking in quicksand, unable to get out. By practicing contentment on the other hand, their life will be protected from bad

habits that would ruin and waste their life, such that they can't do anything useful for others and instead cause a lot of trouble for them.

In fact, many problems occur in the world as a result of a lack of contentment. Even wealthy people, millionaires and billionaires, end up in prison after having been found to have embezzled funds that in reality they have no need for. Contentment is therefore very important for our mental peace.

Forgiveness

When someone harms you or disrespects you, the best response is forgiveness. Forgiveness is extremely important. If you are able to forgive others, it will bring peace in your heart and in the heart of the other person. There will be peace in your mind and in your life. Then, one by one, you will be able to bring peace to the rest of the people in the world, including your own family. If, on the other hand, you are unable to bring peace to the world, the purpose of your human life will be lost.

One time in the United States I saw an interview on TV with a mother whose daughter had been kidnapped, raped, and killed by a man, I don't think she was a Buddhist, but when she was interviewed she said that she didn't want that man to be killed; instead she forgave him. That attitude is so amazing. Although she did not seem to be a Buddhist, she had an unbelievably good heart. Another time a man who had been shot six times was interviewed, and he too said that he did not want to kill the man who had shot him. He too was not a Buddhist, but still he was so kind and had such an incredibly good heart.

Humility

Then, when you do something that harms another person — for example, you insult someone or get angry with someone — you should immediately apologize for your mistake. That will bring peace in your own heart as well as in the heart of that person and he or she will not hold a grudge against you. Whereas with forgiveness you yourself do not hold a grudge against others, with humility the other person does

not hold a grudge against you. This is one way that you can make a significant contribution to world peace.

Courage

The last of these seven qualities that are particularly essential for children is courage. Many people have the tendency to think, "I am hopeless," whereby they put themselves down. It's as if they had no potential, as if they had no good qualities. With courage your child can build up the mental fortitude that is needed to develop the qualities that will enable him or her to lead others to happiness.

One way to develop courage is think that with the eight freedoms and ten richnesses of a precious human rebirth, we can achieve the three great meanings (creating the causes for the happiness of future lives, liberation from samsara, and full enlightenment), not just in this life but again and again. Thinking in this way gives the courage needed to engage in the practice of a spiritual path in this very life. Courage is so important in the West where there are so many people who are depressed, who think that their life is meaningless, and who even end up committing suicide.

The reason why I am promoting these particular qualities for children is that they can be used as a basis for educating them. These guidelines give a clear idea of how to bring up children so that instead of a child harming himself or herself and his or her family, he or she will be able from life to life to bring benefit to the world, to the surrounding people, and to his or her family. Other people will receive unbelievable benefit and happiness from the person who puts these guidelines into practice. That person will be able to do so many good things for others.

Parents Have an Enormous Responsibility

Because parents spend so much time with their child, they have incredible influence on him or her. However, even though the outcome has much to do with the parents, since the child still has his or her own individual karma, it doesn't mean that the child will do everything that

the parents say. The child may in fact not listen to his or her parents. Or because of strong karma from past lives, the child's life may turn out to be something completely different from the education that he or she has received. In spite of this, parents need to take responsibility to help their children and need to have a clear idea about how to educate them. If they don't have a clear idea about how to direct a child's life in a positive way, then the child's future will not be clear. In that case their having become parents will be a great loss. While many good things could have happened to the child, because the parents did not have a clear idea about parenting, the child's whole life can turn into one of suffering and problems.

Parenting Made Worthwhile

The conclusion is that even if a child can simply develop the first of these seven qualities, kindness, with everyone he or she meets, the effect on other people will be amazing. Each time that the child does something positive, then however much the parents suffered for that child, it will all become worthwhile. For nine months the mother carried the child in her womb, bearing all sorts of difficulties. Then after the child was born, the parents worked so hard to make money to build or buy a house. Long before that, the parents themselves went from kindergarten to primary school and then on to college in order to get an education that would enable them to find a job and make enough money to buy a house for their future children. They spend so many years sacrificing their life for their child before and after it is born. Just living with a child brings so much exhaustion, tiredness, worry, and fears, but now, whatever difficult times the parents went through in the past, it all becomes worthwhile. Therefore, my conclusion is that if a child is brought up with a clear plan for his or her life to be beneficial to sentient beings (or at least to this world, the country, the neighbors, the surrounding people, and the family), due to which he or she practiced a good heart and refrained from harming others, or even just practiced the first guideline, kindness, then each time the child does this, however many years the parents spent worrying and suffering, it all becomes worthwhile.

There is an expression: “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Likewise, if once a day a child practices the good heart or does one act of kindness, this will keep difficulties away for the parents. All the unbelievable sufferings, worries, and fears that they experienced for that child will become worthwhile and the parents will be able to rejoice. They will see the results of the efforts that they made to educate their child. So you must do that, otherwise parenting will not become Dharma; it will be done out of total attachment and have nothing to do with Dharma. After your child is born, there will be so much suffering, worry, and fear, so much exhaustion and hard work, and in the end the child won’t have a good life. There won’t be any contentment; life will become an experience of unbelievable suffering. Likewise, for the child there will be much suffering; his or her life will become only suffering. Everything will be very difficult and there will be no contentment. Besides the child’s own problems, there will be so much suffering for the parents and the entire family, so much extra worry and fear concerning the child. Your entire life will pass in nothing but suffering and then death will happen. This is how things go in samsara.

Make a Good Plan

The point here is that if you choose the particular style of life that includes having children, you must have a good plan as to how you can make it beneficial for the world and for all sentient beings. Even if all sixteen guidelines cannot be practiced, at least you should try to educate your children in as many of them as possible. Then as parents you need to practice them yourselves in order to set an example for your children. In this way, your children will learn from you and will put these qualities into practice.

In short, there are so many unbelievable ways that you can make your child’s life meaningful such that he or she at least does not cause harm to himself or herself and, if possible, also brings happiness and benefit to other sentient beings, to the world. Since as Buddhist parents there is so much that you can do to help your children, it would be a great

pity, extremely sad, and very strange if you do not teach your children what you yourself have found faith in and have discovered to be so beneficial for your own life. It is a fact that children spend most of their daily life with their parents. When I was in Columbia, I was asked to give a public talk about the situation in that country. Although in the end it didn't happen, what I planned to talk about was the importance of providing in the public schools an education in the good heart in order to reduce the violence in that country. I asked some people there whether children spend more time with their school teachers or with their parents, and I was told that they spend the majority of their time with their parents. If that is the case, then parents can really exert an enormous influence on their children. For this reason rearing a child is an unbelievably big responsibility.

How as Buddhist Parents to Help Your Children Collect Merit

I have a distant relative whose husband is a teacher in very good Catholic school in Darjeeling. As was once usual for wealthy families, they have a monk living with them who is responsible for cleaning the shrine room, setting up offerings, saying prayers, and doing pujas. Every morning after their children have washed and dressed and are ready to go to school, they go together to the family shrine room, which is very beautiful, and do three prostrations in front of the altar. I don't remember whether they also do prayers, but each of the children lights a butter lamp and then they go off to school. Likewise, if your children were to do even a few prostrations to many beautiful statues every day before going to school, it would be of incredible benefit to them. Even doing just one prostration is of unbelievable benefit. Depending on the number of atoms that the body covers when one prostrates oneself on the ground, one creates the karma to be reborn as a wheel-turning king that many times. Therefore, one prostration creates inconceivable merits; it is just amazing. So if there are many holy objects on the altar and your child does even just three prostrations to them, can you imagine how many merits he or she creates? If there is one statue on the altar, he or she creates one cause of enlightenment; if there are a

thousand statues, he or she creates a thousand causes of enlightenment. This gives so much hope in that it creates the cause for success in this and future lives, as well as the causes for liberation and enlightenment. Thus, the benefit of even one prostration is unbelievable.

So you have an incredible opportunity to help your children. In this way not only are you helping them in terms of this life, but you are helping them create the causes to experience happiness in life after life. In addition, you are bringing them closer to liberation and enlightenment. Isn't that just amazing? I have used the benefits of doing just one prostration as an example but there are other things you can teach your children. For example, I think that it is very important for each child to have his or her own statue, perhaps of Tara or Chenrezig, and for you to also have many pictures and statues of deities in your home. Every morning your child should offer a candy or a biscuit to all those pictures and statues. He or she can put one biscuit on a nice plate and at least say OM AH HUM, blessing it into oceans of nectar and then offering it. Then you make prayers together such as: "By these merits, may I never cause harm to any sentient beings and may I give all sentient beings every happiness up to enlightenment as quickly as possible." Or: "By this merit, may I, as a buddha, be able to liberate numberless sentient beings from suffering and bring them to enlightenment as quickly as possible." By doing this not only do they collect extensive, immeasurable merits by making an offering, but if they dedicate their merits at the end in this way, the virtue created will become extremely powerful.

Without Merit There Is No Happiness

On the other hand, how can you expect your children to have a happy life without their creating good karma from their own side? It is impossible. Without merit, without good karma, how can they achieve happiness and success in their life? It is impossible. No matter how many university degrees they have, there is no guarantee that they will find a job, especially these days. On the other hand, there are many

people who live a happy and satisfied life without having a university degree and without even knowing English. Therefore, what your children need is a skillful means to create merit, whereby they will come to have every success in life, including finding a job.

I have given you some examples but there are many things that a Buddhist family can do to help their children. I have already mentioned the sixteen qualities, and among them the seven qualities in particular that should be taught to children. In addition, if parents pray for their children the prayers become very powerful due to the strong karmic connection. Likewise, if children pray for their parents the prayers will be very successful. However, at the same time as praying for them, you should also skillfully guide your children to do many small practices in daily life that create merits, such as making charity to other sentient beings – animals, insects, and so forth.

When I suggest that parents pray for their children every day, I don't mean to pray for them to have success in their exams! That is a very tiny prayer; it does not create the causes to have happiness in life after life, nor does it create the causes for liberation and enlightenment. However, you can pray for their long life, for them to be healthy, for all their wishes to succeed in accordance with the Dharma, and for them to not cause harm to themselves and others. In particular, it is good to pray for them to achieve all the qualities of Tara, the Medicine Buddha, and Manjushri, to be able to do perfect work for sentient beings, and to liberate them from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and bring them to enlightenment. For example, this prayer is short but it includes all the realizations: "May they achieve the same qualities as Tara (or Chenrezig, or Manjushri, or Lama Tsongkhapa) in this very lifetime and do perfect work for all sentient beings, liberating them from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and bringing them to enlightenment as quickly as possible." Another possibility is the prayer in relation to Lama Tsongkhapa: "In all my lives, through the victorious one, Lama Tsong Khapa, acting in person as the Mahayana guru, may I never turn aside

for even an instant from the excellent path praised by the victorious ones.”

I normally say the following prayer when I meet people and then I chant the mantras that purify the heaviest negative karmas — the karmas “without break” — that cause them to be reborn in the lowest hell. I pray that when Maitreya Buddha comes that person may become his foremost disciple, receive teachings directly from him, and attain enlightenment in that very lifetime. Then I recite the mantras for that person never to be reborn in the lower realms, and say the prayer of Tara Chittamani: “By correctly devoting myself in thought and action to the virtuous spiritual friend from whom I receive all the collections of goodness, and then by training my mind in the path that pleases all the buddhas, may I achieve peerless enlightenment.” You too can pray to Tara together with your child in the same way that you yourself normally make prayers. I am just giving you some ideas and then you can elaborate on them. In fact, there are many, many things that you can do to educate your child and to make it meaningful that he or she had the good fortune to be born in a Buddhist family.

Even the animals, the dogs, cats, and so forth, that are in the care of Buddhists should be given a very special life. By “special” I don’t mean special food or special clothing; I mean that you should chant to them the powerful mantras that purify heavy negative karmas in order for them to never again be reborn in the lower realms and to be able to achieve enlightenment. You should also recite lam-rim prayers to them. In brief, you should chant mantras to your pets or animals every day. In addition, if you have a stupa you should take your animals around it. Otherwise, set up different levels of stands on a table on which you can place tsa-tsas, statues, small stupas, and so forth and take your animals around it. This purifies the negative karma that they have collected over many eons. Because of the four dharmakaya mantras contained inside the stupas, even just going around the stupas one time purifies the negative karma that would have caused them to be reborn in the eight hot hells. So if you take them around stupas and statues

containing these mantras, they get unbelievable, amazing benefits. According to how many times you take them around, that much of their negative karma gets purified. In addition, by their hearing mantras their negative karma also gets purified. It also doesn't matter that they don't understand the words of prayers; just hearing them creates the causes for liberation and for them to be reborn in the higher realms.

Therefore, regarding the cats and other animals that you keep as pets for your own happiness, it would be a great pity if you were not to benefit them given that whether or not they gain a higher rebirth, meet the Dharma and a virtuous friend, and achieve liberation and enlightenment is in your hands. Some years ago Roger thought that it would be good to keep a dog in my house in Aptos, and so the word went out. One woman from Vajrapani Center brought us a dog that she had saved from being "put to sleep" by injection. Then, since we now had a dog, I thought that it was necessary to build a stupa for it to circumambulate. In fact my idea was that everyday someone would carry the dog around the stupa. The stupa that was built turned out well, although it is not a normal Tibetan stupa in that inside it there are many statues. The people living in the house — and especially Annette, who was my cook for five years — tried to take turns to bring the dog around it took it around the stupa from time to time. Then, when I was there and had to get some exercise for my diabetes, I would take the dog with me as I walked around the stupa. By doing this, it received a lot of benefit in the end. Then, when the dog died, its body was kept there and after three days I did the practice of transferring the consciousness (*powa*) and, like human beings, sperm was released and blood came from its nose. It was in a very peaceful state, and so, although I didn't check, I think there was great hope for its good rebirth.

So if you must help even animals to have a special life given that they are in Buddhist hands, there is no question that you need to do this for your children. Of course, there is no guarantee that you will succeed in helping them because, as I mentioned before, each child has his or her

own individual karma as a result of which you will succeed with some children and not with others. But either way, as a Buddhist you have the responsibility to give them some special benefit; otherwise to be born in a Buddhist family becomes the same as being born in a non-Buddhist family. Therefore, it is important to do this rather than allowing your children to behave in any way they like and end up wandering aimlessly among the sentient beings of the six realms. Even though as teenagers they may come under the influence of their friends and thereby experience a change in the direction of their lives, at least when they are young they should learn some Dharma practices, recite some mantras, and so on. In this way, even if they do not continue when they are older, all the merit that they collected with you while they were young will cause them to meet the Dharma in their future lives and it will bring them the result of happiness. In short, given that it is not easy to help them when they grow up and come under the influence of other people and don't want to listen to their parents anymore, you should try to benefit them as much as possible while they are still children.

I just want to mention that while some Buddhist parents may be trying to set an example for their children and trying to explain the Dharma to them, I see that many parents do not do this. Instead, particularly in the United States, they let their children do whatever they want. This is a pity because when they are young, before they grow up and move out, there are so many opportunities to help them collect merit and plant the seeds of enlightenment. It is natural that some children will turn out good when they grow up and as teenagers will have more discipline and be content, whereas others, because of the influence of the world and their friends, will become totally opposite to the Dharma and come to have a totally different lifestyle from what their parents hoped they would have. For this reason, not to make use of the opportunity to plant the seeds of good habits while they are young would be very unfortunate. By this I am not implying that you should force your children to completely follow your lifestyle; rather I just want to emphasize that it is important to help your children abandon the causes

of suffering and create the causes of happiness, not only for this life's happiness, but for the happiness of their future lives, for liberation from samsara, and for full enlightenment.

Extracted from teachings given by Kyabje Zopa Rinpoche on May 15th and 23rd, 2009 during the 100 Million Mani Retreat at Institut Vajra Yogini, Lavour, France.
Transcribed, compiled, and edited by Joan Nicell. Final edit by Jon Landaw

May Kyabje Zopa Rinpoche have a long life and may all his wishes be fulfilled.