

“How It Sounds When We Live It: Dharma Conversations in the Family Program”

Parenting As Dharma Practice Series

We sit in an intimate circle of zafus and chairs around a center altar filled with glowing candles, sage, and sacred objects. After a blessed period of relaxation and meditation, this group of parents explores relevant dharma topics and practices in their family lives, sharing laughter, tears, and support together in community. The following conversation was held around sharing about death with our children.

“How do I talk to my three year old about death?” a mother asks. “His grandmother’s dog died recently, and my son still thinks the dog went to another place to visit. How old should kids be before we tell them about death?”

“My four year old’s pre-school teacher told my daughter that when people die they go to heaven,” another mother described. “I’m not sure what to say to her about heaven.”

“I think in each of our families we will feel appropriate saying different things about death at different ages for our children,” I respond. “What the Buddhadharma points to for me as a step-parent and family practice teacher is for me to reflect deeply and regularly about my own relationship to death. The more understanding, acceptance, and fearlessness I personally feel around death and dying, the more I am able to bring in these qualities in the ongoing dialogs I have with children about this subject. I don’t have all the answers, but I am able to create a sense of safety and OKness around a subject that in our culture is deeply connected with fear and a lack of understanding.”

Monthly Family Dharma Series

Walking into a Monthly Family Dharma Class held at Fairfax Community Church, one sees families sitting together passing a Talking Stick in Council Practice, sharing song and ritual together, and delighting in the western-style dharma of stories from authors like Dr. Seuss. Smiles, laughter, hugs and chattering voices abound in these classes, where we accept and welcome a wonderful diversity of family configurations and spiritual traditions. In class recently, we spoke together about mindfulness of emotion in the body.

“Where do you feel Fear in your body?” I ask a Family Class.

“I am on the cheerleading team and we had a meet and before the performance I was nervous and my stomach hurt really badly,” a ten-year old girl described. “My coach said I was probably just scared, and as soon as I started the performance the pain went away,” she explained.

“Did the pain come back afterwards?” I questioned her.

“No,” she answered with a smile.

“That’s the Signal”, I explained to the group of families between the ages of 9 years old to adult. “Our bodies give us the signal of what we are feeling in present moment time. Our minds may be too busy to know how we are feeling, but our bodies know. They don’t lie to us.” I look across a sea of nodding heads. “We need to use our mindfulness to discover what our body’s signals mean. So for you, your body’s signal for fear is in your stomach,” I say to the girl.

These are a couple of the many important conversations about dharma practice in families currently occurring in the new events the Family Program began offering in Fall 2003- Parenting as Dharma Practice Six-Week Series and Two Sessions of the Monthly Family Dharma Six-Month Series. The Family Program is happily discovering that the two new events are cultivating a wonderful depth of committed community connections and family practice. In these events, one can witness the reality of the maturation of practice in families, and experience the joy of the teachings and community.

The Family Program is overjoyed to be able to offer a continuation of both new events in Spring 2004. The next series of both the Parenting as Dharma Practice and the Monthly Family Dharma Series will begin in April 2004.

Much heartfelt gratitude to all those who support and practice in the Family Program- the Family Council, the Teen Council, the volunteers, and of course, the families.

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