

# ZEN AND THE ART OF PARENTING

by anna getty

fear and insecurity can make the idea of being a parent intimidating, but there is unparalleled joy and fulfillment awaiting those who take the plunge



Parenthood is perhaps the longest, most perilous, wondrous, terrifying, ecstatic journey available to us as human beings. It introduces us to a love stronger than anything we have ever imagined, a love so overwhelming that it is at times shocking while simultaneously pushing us to our full capacity for patience, tolerance, courage, wisdom and perseverance. Parenthood tests and challenges every preconception we hold about the world around us, and our place in it. Parents' eyes see the world entirely different from the way they saw it before becoming the custodians of a miraculous, utterly dependent, little ball of life. Priorities change dramatically. Things that were once of paramount importance become trivial and our lives begin to revolve around things to which we previously paid only passing attention. We suddenly cease to be the center of our own world and shift our focus to the children, for whom we are now entirely responsible. Along with these great shifts and extremes also come some of the most profound moments of stillness and serenity that we will ever experience: the quiet moments when a parent and infant stare into each other's eyes, cementing their lifelong connection; the soft constancy of a child's breathing while in a deep sleep; the utterly unself-conscious act of a child's surrender in the safe embrace of a loving parent. All of these drops, curves and loops are the gifts and blessings we gain as we ride the roller coaster of parenthood.

For most people who have not yet experienced it, the thought of becoming a parent inspires a combination of trepidation and exhilaration. There are so many idealized images that come to mind about the joys of raising a child, many of them similar to those mentioned above. However, there are also many fears that accompany those images. They can range from concerns about repeating the same mistakes as our own parents to fears about the world into which we are bringing our future children. Perhaps the greatest obstacle that must be overcome in order to be a successful and happy parent is letting go of the expectation of perfection. Our society strives for perfection and in many cases it demands it, even when it is artificial. One need only open one of the many fashion magazines that line our newsstands or follow the media's coverage of politics in order to see the extent to which we prize images that are blemish-free, figuratively or otherwise. This unachievable standard can cause parents to place unrealistic expectations on

themselves and result in a lot of stress, pressure and strain. In essence, successful parenting boils down to our ability to manage our expectations, both those we place on ourselves and those we place on our children.

After an argument with my mother when I was a teenager, I remember saying to myself, "I hate my mom. She is the worst mom in the world and I never want to have children because I don't ever want to be like her." I wanted her to be what, at the time, I thought the perfect mom should be. I wanted freshly baked cookies, consistent P.T.A. participation and pancakes in the morning. I had an image and an expectation of what a mom was supposed to be and, in its infinite wisdom and perhaps humor, the universe gave me someone quite different from my high, if unrealistic, standard of parental perfection. My mom was a free-spirited hippie who had little interest in raising her children conventionally, or even

sanely for that matter. My mom would schlep my brother and me to late-night Hollywood parties where we would often wake up in guest bedrooms buried under mounds of jackets. At those times I often imagined my friends being tucked in, read to and rocked to sleep in their pink bedrooms with lace trim and smiling...*normal* parents. "It was the '70s," she says now, "back then we did things differently." For a long time I was mad at my mom for depriving me of what I thought was the conventional family life I should have been entitled to. But now that I'm a mom myself, I have come to learn the singular, pivotal lesson that all parents eventually learn: parents do the best they can with the tools they have. I realize now that despite her inability to fulfill my expectations about who I thought she should be, my mom was doing the best she could. As parents we are always doing

the best we can, even when we do things that in retrospect, we wish we had done differently. Just as we don't give birth to fully formed, mature adults, we as parents inevitably grow, learn and evolve right alongside our children.

Now that I have the benefit of seeing my childhood in retrospect, I look back fondly and with compassion on my upbringing and wouldn't change it. I have come to realize that my mom did a great job as a parent because everything she did made me who I am now, and I love the woman, wife and mother I have become. I am grateful for everything I learned from her about parenting. Some of those lessons have come from the aspects of my mom that I

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want to emulate, while in some cases I use her as an example of what I don't want to do. Either way, the most important thing is that I know I am not the perfect mom; there is no such thing. I have managed to let go of the expectation that I must be perfect and that with one mistake I could risk ruining my child's life. I have realized, as my daughter will someday have to, that when we become adults, we become responsible for our own lives, choices and futures. We can either choose to live as victims, placing blame and excusing ourselves from creating rich and meaningful lives on the basis of our parents' mistakes, or we can accept the past with gratefulness for its lessons, learn from it and create the present and future we want. My parents gave me the best of what they had to offer me, and they are no longer accountable for who I am and the life I choose to live now. Sometimes I hear things come out of my mouth that startlingly remind me of my mother and after I cringe, I remind myself to embrace all the parts of me that have come from her, just as I hope one day my daughter will embrace those aspects of me that she will undoubtedly inherit, and choose to learn from them as well. The relationship between a parent and a child can be like a dance. We move in tandem through the steps, pushing a little here, pulling a little there. Sometimes it is smooth and effortless, and sometimes we step on each other's toes. Children are not accessories; they are simultaneously our teachers and our students.

Having children is not for everybody, and that's just plain okay. Sometimes I wonder what my life would have looked like had I chosen not to have children. But I do have a child and I've learned to have compassion for my mother now that I have been in the trenches. She was not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but she did her best.

She was a young single mom, on a tight budget, ill-equipped to deal with two children. I have compassion for her now as I myself deal with the day-to-day adventures of parenting. And I am blessed; I have chosen to be with a very loving and present man who has turned out to be a wonderful dad. The day my daughter was born I looked into my mother's eyes and the rift of judgment I had carried melted away.

It seems logical that if you've managed to let go of the baggage associated with your own upbringing, and let go of the unrealistic expectations that culture has spoon fed you, it would seem as though you have overcome the biggest obstacles to being a good parent. This isn't necessarily so. Like most first-time parents, my

husband and I had no idea what we were in for when we decided to bring a new life into the world. Sure, I had baby-sat as a teenager and considered myself quite comfortable around babies and small children. Yet in those first few days of parenthood, there is nothing like peering down at your newborn child knowing that you are responsible for her as long as you live and breathe. There is no ultimate guide or class that can adequately prepare us for the upheaval of raising a child. I had very grand ideas before my daughter was born about the kind of conscious Zen yoga mom I would be. Those ideas did not include a plan for how I would rationalize with a toddler foaming at the mouth because I gave her the Cinderella fork instead of the Dora the Explorer fork. That was just not part of the fantasy. Also absent from the fantasy were the fatigue and irritability that resulted from countless nights of interrupted sleep, engorged breasts, a complete loss of concern for fashion sense or style of any kind and a level of intimacy with

my husband that could be described as acquaintance-like at best. However, all of the exhaustion, fatigue and discomfort melt away when my child wraps her little arms around my neck and tells me that she loves me. That is where the most profound beauty of being a parent is found. That deep and unfathomable love that is incomparable to anything else I have known can renew me when I feel empty, restore me when I feel hopeless and spur me on when I despair.

There may be thousands of books on parenting, but nothing quite prepares you for the fierce karma that is being a parent. There is no such thing as a black-and-white definition of what is right and what is wrong. We all wish that our children came with their own unique manual, but within each one of us lies the wisdom to know instinctively what is best for our children. All

that is required is that we slow down, listen and apply our own unique touch like a salve to the needs and wants of our children. It is challenging sometimes to surrender to what in reality are the simplicities of raising children; both men and women today play so many roles and have so much to do. The age of technology has complicated things for the family unit. We want it all and we want to do it all.

As a mother I sometimes get frustrated; I mean really, really frustrated. I might be trying to get things done and my daughter is relentlessly clamoring for attention. Her tantrum might appear to be an inconvenience, or even an attack, on me. I've had to learn that it is okay to get frustrated or angry, ready to jump off a tall

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building at any moment. Yet we can always use these moments to move more deeply into a place of loving, calmness and centeredness, at once taking responsibility for our choices and moving into our heart centers, then showing our children that we can communicate in peaceful, kind and loving ways. Wherever our parents stopped short, let us move away from that unconscious place and into a place of conscious parenting. I am still waiting for a book entitled *Zen and the Art of Parenting* to make it's way to the nearest Barnes & Noble, but in the meantime, the simple tools that we cultivate in practices like yoga, breathwork, meditation, cultivating presence, awareness, patience and spirit, transferring them to our parenting is a good way to keep control when that warm hug and "I love you" aren't available. Sometimes it is just about breathing, staying calm and being okay with doing the best you can in that moment. Are we having children "primarily in order to gratify our own hunger," as psychologist Robert Firestone writes? Or are we stepping into the role of parent in order to learn, heal, share, grow and ultimately uplift another soul as well as our own? The answer to that question can profoundly affect the course of both the parents and children's lives.

Having a child is not for the meek, and there are some people who choose not to become parents. Many of these people say it is because they can better serve themselves and the community without stepping into the role of parent, others simply do not want the responsibility, and then again others give birth to other things like art, music, a life of service or a career. Then there are those who do not want to contribute to the overpopulation of the planet. All of these choices are to be respected because they represent knowledge and awareness of personal limits, and the strength to stand up to social standards that might pressure us to follow a conventional, yet personally inappropriate path.

Nowadays, the conventional path is becoming less and less defined as the roles of both men and women shift and become more fluid. Many of the parental concerns that used to apply only to women now apply to both genders. But there is still something different about being a father than being a mother, regardless of whether one is a stay-at-home dad or a classic nine to five. I asked my husband how he felt about being a dad. He answered, "Nothing takes a man out of his head and into his heart more than having a baby." For him the challenges of being a parent are displaced by his willingness to do them. As a man who works from home, he has almost become an at-home father. His schedule allows him to spend

sporadic moments with our child throughout the day. He has taken on more of an active role as a dad than the generation of men to which his father belonged, who generally left the house in the morning, returned at dinnertime and bonded with the children at meals, on the weekends and on family vacations. Dads nowadays have taken on more of a traditionally feminine and active parenting role, whereas many moms are out in the workforce taking on more of a traditionally masculine role. What my husband and I have come to realize is that we both must be open to taking on the other's roles from time to time, or else there will be an imbalance that can only lead to tension or resentment of each other and our child. We must say yes to everything, because objection is when we begin to suffer as humans and as parents, blaming our children or our partners for the dissatisfaction we think we are experiencing

in our lives. In the Resources for Infant Educators philosophy of childrearing, they encourage the caregiver to slow down. By slowing down, we can begin to sense the subtleties that the great work of parenting requires. We begin to understand ourselves more as we learn to understand our children.

As my mother watches me being a mom, she sometimes goes through periods of guilt when she cries about the mother she was to me when I was a child. With the compassion that I've learned to cultivate, I encourage her to forgive herself. As parents, we must learn to forgive ourselves. These little creatures called our children have the ability to press buttons we didn't even know we had. We are driven to the edges of our emotional, physical, mental and spiritual limits every day from the time they come into our lives. The

only way to withstand that intensity of emotion is to surrender ourselves as we nurture them from saplings into full-grown trees. We must forgive our parents for their mistakes and use their weaknesses to make ourselves, and our children, stronger. We must remember that everything we love about ourselves began with the gifts that our parents gave to us. We must accept responsibility for our actions and the choices we make as our children's parents, knowing that we are giving them our best, acting in their best interest and that we cannot control their destinies. Since the birth of my child, I have allowed myself to go to great depths of vulnerability, fear, joy, anger, despair and love. And for this, I am grateful. The teacher, the child in my life, that has chosen me to birth and raise her, is the mirror into my soul.

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