



dalai mama

A busy mother learns to get her mind off the to-do list
and into the here and now of raising kids.

BY CATHERINE NEWMAN



At a red light recently, I got to witness, from my car, the very incarnation of earthly bliss: a dog—a gigantic, shaggy mutt—rolling on his back in a snowbank, his head thrown back in joy, the tongue lolling from his doggy smile while snow flew up in a delirious cloud around him. Such a splendid spectacle! My heart filled with delight. And yet there on the curb was the dog's oblivious owner, facing the other direction. The man spoke into a cell phone and tugged crossly on the dog's leash, waiting to move ahead, waiting to be somewhere else.

I experienced the full, smug weight of my disapproval—"That poor fool!"—until it occurred to me that dozens of strangers every day might watch me with my children and feel the same way about *me*. They might catch me scanning the aisles for cheaper Oaties while my rosy 2-year-old smiles up at me—unseen—from the shopping cart, her eyes on my face like moonbeams. Or they might notice me checking my watch while my 5-year-old son stops to look up at the twilight sky and snowflakes fall around him, as glorious as a flock of tiny angels. They might see me doing the mental equivalent of channel surfing while life, as beautiful ►►

**MINDING
THE KIDS**
Catherine (above, with Ben, 5, and Birdy, 2) has been trying to follow the Zen-style parenting advice of authors Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn: to be more aware of every moment with your kids. "Children embody what is best in life," they write in *Everyday Blessings*. "They live in the present moment. They are part of its exquisite bloom."

and riveting as anything a person could ever hope to find, spreads itself out around me.

Jon Kabat-Zinn would have parents like me put down the remote control and refocus on *this* miraculous show, the one that's on now and always—to notice, as he puts it, that “the utterly ordinary is utterly extraordinary.” Kabat-Zinn is a researcher in the Eastern concept of a mind-body connection and founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School; he's a kind of East-West mixer, working to integrate meditation practices into more prevailing lifestyles and health care. It's true that much of Kabat-Zinn's thinking is distilled from Zen Buddhism, but don't worry—he's not sitting peacefully on a mountaintop in his saffron robes while you scrub mashed banana from your pajamas. He's a parent too, of three kids no less, and his years of experience working in society's mainstream have helped him distill deep, centuries-old spiritual philosophy into a deceptively simple premise: Pay attention to this moment, now.

Everyday Blessings?

I initially encountered Kabat-Zinn's work when my first child was a month old and a friend gave me *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*, the book he co-wrote with his wife, Myla. I was a good candidate for it—groovy enough to try prenatal yoga and shop smugly for

organic peaches and suspect that cable TV was not actually improving the quality of our lives—but when I opened to a random page and saw words such as “inner growth,” “stillness,” and “non-judgmental awareness,” I rolled my eyes and closed the book. I had a baby to feed and change every 11 seconds, for heaven's sake, a wildly pooping and often hysterical baby. The best I could do was add meditation to my “When Pigs Fly” to-do list, along with postpartum yoga and flaxseed-oil capsules. And showering, for that matter. A great idea, meditation, I didn't doubt it. But really.

Two weeks later, however, I was stuck in the glide rocker underneath the kind of napping baby who can sleep only in your lap and only while you imitate a seated mannequin, and I picked up the book again—simply because I could reach it from my chair. And so I read about the Kabat-Zinns' idea that if we were to actually pay attention to our lives as they unfold, “perhaps we would hold our moments differently. Perhaps they would not slip by so unnoticed, so unused, so filled up by us with busyness or diversions.” Had you been standing nearby, you might have heard the click inside my head. I wondered if perhaps I'd been attending to this baby without actually paying attention. I suspected, suddenly, that I had.

I looked down at my sleeping baby—at his seashell of an ear, his pink and pouting lips, the pale whorl of hair on the crown of his head—



and my eyes filled with tears. All my life I had been waiting for this, this little being. And yet here he was and already I was missing it somehow, preoccupied instead with the frantic tedium of our lives. I loved the baby, of course, but I couldn't help feeling like I was waiting for something, even though I couldn't have told you what it was. I had mastered a number of skills in my life—to be smart, capable, efficient—but it turned out that being still wasn't one of them. Even with a newborn, I found myself constantly in motion: toward a different moment, a different place, a different experience. I realized I'd been nursing Ben while I flipped through the One Step Ahead catalog or talked on the phone; I held him in my lap and checked my e-mail; I changed his diaper and listened for the sound of the spin cycle clanking to a stop. I put the book down again, and I sat with my son on my lap. I watched his eyelashes flutter and I breathed in the milky smell of him. I just breathed him in.

Mommy-Style Zen

This is what the Kabat-Zinns mean by “mindfulness”: “The point is just to be aware of this moment as you are experiencing it.” So I didn't need to become some kind of bodhisattva after all! I didn't need that half hour of quiet I was never going to get. In fact, this sliver of the Zen meditation pie turns out to be quite the

opposite. It's not about making special time. It's about making your entire life special time.

Which is, of course, fairly easy with a newborn asleep in your lap like a kitten. And significantly harder with a crying newborn. Or one who's getting peeled from a soaked romper, a soaked onesie, and a soaked diaper, poop everywhere, as if the baby is impersonating an urban sewage spill. And so diaper changing is where I—as spiritual as a Diet Coke—decided to begin my practice of mindfulness. In the spirit of “Happiness is the journey, not the destination,” I tried to quit approaching the diaper change as a task to get done with and start approaching it as an opportunity to pay attention. On the outside, nothing looked different: It didn't take any longer, I smiled at the baby as I had always done, and I still said “Yikes!” (or some such) when pee arced out of him up into the mobile and my hair. But when I gave up diaper changing as a means to a dry baby and took it up as an experience all its own, albeit a damp and wiggly experience, well, it started to be time that I cherished. I breathed deeply and looked into the baby's eyes; I felt unhurried, peaceful, and connected.

And thus I was completely enlightened! Well, maybe not completely. Those persistent dark patches sure do like to hang around, don't they? Five years and another child later, I'm still struggling to be more mindful. And the stakes ►►



All my life I had been waiting for this, this little being. And yet here he was and already I was missing it somehow, preoccupied instead with the frantic tedium of our lives.

When people say, “Kids are so Zen,” this is what they mean: the way they appreciate every tiny miracle of the here and now. And, ironically, it’s this very quality that tends to drive parents crazy.



are high: When I’m less distracted, less hurried, less inclined to sigh or snap, it’s not only me who’s happier, but my children too. As the Kabat-Zinns remind us, “Love is expressed in how we pass the bread, or how we say good morning, and not just in the big trip to Disney World.” I am constantly reinventing myself—my forever-fledgling Zen self—as one challenge gives way to another. There is no *after* the winter, I tell myself. There is no after the kids fighting about the sippy cup with the dolphins on it. There is no after the flu. “Forget somewhere over the rainbow,” I imagine the Kabat-Zinns saying. This here is the pot of gold. This now.

No Time Like the Present

One of Zen’s most revered teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk and author of Buddhist classics such as *Peace Is Every Step*, offers a different strategy for mindfulness. For Zen monks, the ringing of the temple bells is a reminder “to come back to the present moment.” Nhat Hanh would have us hear an imaginary bell of mindfulness in all our moments, including—or especially—the most challenging ones. The next time you find yourself stuck at a red light or in a traffic jam, he advocates, don’t fight it or flip anybody the bird (my image, not his). Simply remember to be where you are, breathe deeply, and smile. (“Simply”!) And so when I recently found myself at the doctor’s office with my sick

5-year-old, I tried to stop worrying about missed work, the coughing teenager with the crusty rash who was leaning against my chair, and the too-hot child in my lap.

“This is a bell of mindfulness,” I thought—a blessing in disguise. And so we read *The Cat in the Hat* and talked about the snow-laced tree branches we could see out the window (“like skeletons”), and I felt the luck of knowing this child, of being with him, sick or no. A bell of mindfulness. (Of course, moments later when he barfed into the hood of my jacket, it was like a gong of mindfulness going off right by my ear and leaving me deaf for a week. But still.)

And I had to listen for that bell again, as we were leaving an hour later, when my child stopped at the edge of the parking lot to watch snowmelt trickle into a drain. When people say, “Kids are so Zen,” this is what they mean: the way they appreciate every tiny miracle of the here and now. And, ironically, it’s this very quality that tends to drive parents crazy, even wannabe Zen parents like me—the way kids stop to play in the sand on the path even as you’re trying to herd them to the beach itself. But where was I rushing to now? As I stood outside the doctor’s office, I had to wonder. There was lunch to be made, sure. My jacket to put in the washing machine. The words “strep throat complications” to Google. But really, what was going to be better than this winter sun, the tinkling sound of the water, Ben’s smile as he squatted over the drain to listen? If you



can't lick 'em, join 'em. I squatted down next to him, felt the wind in my face, and remembered to smile. And maybe it wasn't very Zen of me, but I felt pretty pleased with myself.

Am I always this successful? Um, no. Like any meaningful practice, mindfulness takes patience and energy, and I am not always patient or energetic. Believe me, my mind has been only as inclined to get into shape as the rest of my postpartum self. So I still tend to space out playing Hi Ho! Cherry-O, or when two dozen stuffed animals are marrying in the Moonie-style weddings my children favor. When the kids spill milk or glue, I sometimes snap at them instead of taking a deep breath and showing them how to clean it up. I feel panic-stricken during the chaos of the dinner hour, when one child cries for help in the bathroom ("The toilet paper is wound around my shoe!") while the other crawls around under the table eating old beans and the pasta boils over and the phone rings. So many bells of mindfulness—a veritable cacophony of mindfulness, and who can even think straight?

Heaven on Earth!

In these moments, when I am stressed out or stretched thin or when my very last button has been pushed, awareness can feel like yet another demand on my strained multitasker, even though I know better. Life unfolds only one moment at a time, whether or not you're paying careful attention. And, as the Kabat-Zinns

remind us, "Such moments count. They add up to a childhood, and a life."

Modern life might tend to encourage the secular version of a pie-in-the-sky mentality—you'll be happier, it promises, on the weekend or in a bigger house or at the mall or after you retire—but what the Kabat-Zinns are advocating is heaven on earth. When we become aware of this, "Might it not suggest how precious the time we do share together with our children is, and how to hold our essentially fleeting moments with them in awareness? Might it not influence how we hug and kiss our children, and say good-night to them, and watch them sleep, and wake them in the morning?"

Last night I lay in bed with my children as they were falling asleep, and I stopped making lists in my head. I stopped fretting about money and work. I stopped wishing the kids would fall asleep already so I could be somewhere else, doing something else.

Instead I noticed the dark crescents of their eyelashes. I watched as the moonlight turned their cheeks to white apricots. And I felt my heart swell with joy and gratitude. It was utterly ordinary. And utterly extraordinary. It was an everyday blessing. ●

While working on this piece, Catherine Newman was overheard saying to her kids, "I can't right now, I'm thinking about mindfulness," before she was seen slapping her forehead and bending down to pay attention. She is the author of the memoir *Waiting for Birdy*.

A Good Read:

BEGINNER'S
MINDFULNESS

FOR YOU:

The Parent's Tao Te Ching, by William C. Martin (Avalon Publishing Group). Easy-to-digest nuggets of ancient inspiration—parenting by being present, not just teaching lessons.

FOR YOUR KIDS:

The Hermit and the Well, by Thich Nhat Hanh (Plum Blossom Books). This humble story by a monk and poet conveys the true spirit of mindfulness.

FOR YOUR EARS:

Guided Mindfulness Meditation, by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Sounds True audio). Hands too full for a book? Try this four-CD presentation by the co-author of *Everyday Blessings*.