



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 5,6 (6/2011)

Teaching Children How to Clear Their Minds

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Consider what thoughts sprout in your mind during a typical day. You spend some of our day thinking about what you are doing in the present moment, yet, you might be surprised how little time you actually devote to this. Some thoughts occur on purpose, using our conscious attention. For other thoughts, we do not decide to think them; they just live in our minds. We spend endless hours on these mind-wandering thoughts.

Our stream of consciousness is simply a flowing series of thoughts running through our minds. Many people's stream of consciousness takes the form of an internal monologue. Consider what form your stream of consciousness takes. Do you think in pictures or words? Do you think in more than one voice? What influences your thoughts? You might find the answers to these questions intriguing. On a recent Internet forum, participants answered these same questions. Most said they think in words as opposed to images or sounds. Most

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at <http://www.wisebrain.org/tools-and-skills/wise-brain-bulletin>.

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notice their internal monologues take the form of a debate or discussion with another voice or person. Their audience or discussion partner changes depending on what they are “speaking” about. Some explain that the content and even the syntax of their thoughts is affected by the last book they read.

A Child's Stream of Consciousness

Do children experience their stream of consciousness in this same way? In 1993, researchers at Stanford University brought children (one child at a time) into a room. One researcher asked an assistant to sit and wait on the other side of the room facing a blank wall. Then the researcher asked the child if the assistant in the chair “is having some thoughts and ideas or is her mind empty of thoughts and

ideas?” Ninety five percent of the three-year-olds responded that the researcher’s mind was empty of thoughts and ideas. Eighty percent of four-year-olds responded in this same way and forty-five percent of six- and seven-year-olds answered that the researcher’s mind was empty of thoughts and ideas. Five-year-olds did not happen to be part of their research pool. In comparison five percent of adults answered as these children did when they were brought through the same process.

The researchers conducting this study concluded that the children who said the researcher was empty of thoughts were simply not aware of their own stream of consciousness. Consequently they were not aware of the existence of the researcher’s stream of thoughts. I disagree with this conclusion.

In his book *The Biology of Belief*, Bruce Lipton writes two- to six-year-olds naturally experience a calm meditative state (called Theta). Seven- to eleven-year-olds experience a quiet, yet open state (called Alpha). On the other hand, adults experience an analytical state (called Beta). Based on this, one could conclude that many children have naturally quiet, empty minds, a state many adults try hard to attain through meditation.

If children already have naturally quiet minds should we teach them how to clear their minds? Based on my experience with children and the research available, I don't believe children, especially young children, need to spend a lot of time learning highly disciplined focused meditation. However, many other types of meditation are fun for children and offer many benefits. With that said, introducing children to meditations that involve focused attention is helpful in small doses so that when they want to clear their minds, they have the skills at their disposal.

In my book, *Sensational Meditation for Children*, I provide four meditations that help children clear their minds. One leads children to focus on their breathing,



another teaches children how to repeat a mantra, the third provides a progressive relaxation meditation to help them sleep, and the fourth guides children to let go of thoughts and emotions down a grounding cord.

What to Expect when Teaching Meditation to Children

As adults we may have difficulty accessing our inner mind to experience the images, sounds, and feelings that arise in meditation. This may be because society puts a premium on a certain kind of rational intelligence, at the cost of imagination and creativity. Children, on the other hand, are by nature imaginative, and happily use their inner and outer senses to explore their inner and outer worlds. I find in general that the children I teach are far more open to the practice than my adult students. They grasp far more easily that a feeling can have color for example.

Although a certain level of quiet is necessary for meditation, this level is



different for children. In fact, strict guidelines and discipline make it hard for children to meditate. Children do not require a dark, quiet room or a place free from distractions when they meditate. Children can easily jump into and out of meditation when something interrupts them. Much of this ability is due to their brainwave state: children naturally exist in a meditative state.

If a child opens his or her eyes and looks around during meditation, this is fine and you can simply encourage the child to place their hands over their eyes. Children might also speak aloud; this usually will not interfere with the flow of their meditation if kept to a minimum, even in a group setting. If the child asks questions during the meditation, softly reply. When he or she makes simple comments or observations, let it become a part of the experience.

Teaching Meditation in Schools

If you are considering discussing meditation with a schoolteacher or school administrator, remember that not everyone is entirely open to meditation.

Although many spiritual traditions practice some form of meditation, some people believe that it conflicts with their religious views, or they simply do not know enough about it to feel comfortable with it. If you use other terminology, however, such as creative visualization, guided visualization, concentration exercises, relaxation exercises, closed-eye processing, inner processing, or mindfulness skills, your audience may feel more at ease.

Grounding Cord Meditation for Children

The grounding cord meditation is a wonderful tool children can use to become still.

Close your eyes. You can put your hands over your eyes if you want to. Now take a deep in-breath. When you breathe back out, feel your body relaxing. We'll take two more breaths. Deep breath in, and relax your legs as you breathe out. Deep breath in, and relax your arms and neck as you breathe out.

Imagine a cord connected to your root chakra at the bottom of your tailbone. Then see this cord go down into the floor. This cord can look or feel like anything you choose. See this cord go down through the floor, into the ground underneath this building. See the cord continue through the ground all the way to the center of the planet. Feel this cord connect to the center of the planet. Now feel yourself attached to the center of the planet by your cord. Once you feel this connection, imagine particles of energy moving out from your head to your root chakra (at the bottom of your tailbone) and down the cord. You might see this energy as particles, or you might see pictures coming out of your head and going down the cord. If you see something in particular go down the cord, it does not mean it is bad. It's just a thought that you don't need right now, energy you don't need and are sending to the center of the earth.



See this energy drop all the way to the center of the planet. You might even hear the energy go down the cord. What does it sound like? Now see energy come from your hands and arms down through your stomach and down your cord. It travels to the center of the planet because you don't need it anymore. Now feel this energy move out from all the areas in your body. Listen to the energy move from your chest down to the center of the planet. See this energy come from your feet and legs and go down your grounding cord.

I'll give you a few moments to do this on your own. Let any unneeded energy fall down the cord. Notice how clear and clean you feel. (Pause.)

Now thank yourself for all the things you released. (Pause.) You can open your eyes whenever you are ready.

After Meditation Questions

1. What did your cord look like?
2. What did you see go down your cord? Did you hear it?
3. Did you feel anything in your body while you did this?
4. Do you feel different?
5. Do you think you could do this meditation on your own?

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Words of Wisdom

People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child -- our own two eyes. All is a miracle.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Two thoughts cannot coexist at the same time: if the clear light of mindfulness is present, there is no room for mental twilight.

Nyanaponika Thera

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.

Mahatma Gandhi

Observe the space between your thoughts, then observe the observer.

Hamilton Boudreaux

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

Lewis B. Smedes

The practice of mindfulness begins in the small, remote cave of your unconscious mind and blossoms with the sunlight of your conscious life, reaching far beyond the people and places you can see.

Earon Davis

You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.

Lewis B. Smedes

*The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice.
And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice there is nothing we can do to change
until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.*

R.D. Laing

People will do anything, no matter how absurd, to avoid facing their own soul.

Carl Gustav Jung

There is no love without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without love.

Bryant H. McGill

Your own self-realization is the greatest service you can render the world.

Ramana Maharshi

Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.

Paul Boese



The Path to True Forgiveness: The Child Who Was Not Seen

© Cynthia Rich, 2011

Most of us who practice Buddhism, or any of the world's religions, know that in the spiritual life forgiveness is highly valued. For example, a central Buddhist practice guides us to expand loving-kindness until it extends even to those we see as enemies. True forgiveness means loosening the bonds of hatred, resentment, blaming, and finding our way into a compassionate recognition of the nature of human suffering, those forces that drive others to cruelty, self-centeredness, abusiveness, coldness, violence. It allows us to live more in the present and less clinging to the past. It is key to healing ourselves and the world.

The Buddha understood well the importance of self-compassion, saying that nobody in the world is more deserving of compassion than ourselves. So the practice of loving-kindness wisely begins: May I be well and happy. What Buddhist psychology or even Western therapy do not sufficiently stress is how deep that self-compassion needs to reach, or that premature forgiveness, before we have extended profound loving kindness to ourselves, is a major obstacle to ending suffering.

True forgiveness means deepening our self compassion until we can end the suffering of the vulnerable child who lives within each of us.

None of us wants to revisit the terrible pain, shame, confusion of childhood, yet we need that courage if we are to provide that compassion, or if we are to truly forgive. Most serious offenses requiring forgiveness either have to do with childhood or with situations that (whether we know it or not) have in the present

moment triggered childhood pain or trauma. Eager for a shortcut on the path, too often we will settle for premature forgiveness.

Our hatred, resentment or blaming left from those early years are so painful to carry that many of us will be relieved to feel that we have at last forgiven and we can now move on. Our new sense of maturity becomes a source of pride: “I used to be angry at my parents, but now I see that my father was overworked and my mother suffered from depression”; “I used to blame my parents for my bad choices, but now I take self-responsibility”; “I used to dread seeing my brother at family get-togethers, but now what he says doesn’t bother me.”

Premature forgiveness can feel quite gratifying (Whew! At last I have transcended my childhood!). We do not realize that we have done forgiveness on the cheap, and there is a serious price we pay for that.

The price comes because the key to healing our wounds, to our ultimate mental or spiritual health, lies not, as many of us believe, in revealing our painful stories to



friends or therapists (“My father was an alcoholic and beat us something terrible”
“I was so ashamed that my mother thought I was stupid”) or as Buddhists, in
extending compassion to our present struggles and failings, and then moving on to
the understanding and compassion of forgiveness.

The key to true forgiveness lies in our having the courage to relive our child’s pain,
in its full intensity, in the presence of our adult self, so that we can know, as adults,
in a cellular way, how bad it was.

A central problem for the child who was wounded is that she was never seen in her
full pain by others. The adults in her life either ignored or minimized her suffering.

And so as adults we
also tend to minimize
our childhood pain:
“Well, when I hear
about the really
horrible abuse in other
families, I guess mine
wasn’t that terrible,”
or by premature
forgiveness, “Now I see
my brother was having
a hard time too.” In
our haste to be free, we
have never allowed our
adult self to re-enter
the child’s world as
the child experienced
it before she had any
tools to help her--
her total dependency
for her survival on
undependable or cruel



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or self-absorbed others, her terror not only when she was faced with a parent's rage but when she didn't know when the rage would appear or where it might lead, the piercing attacks upon her still unformed sense of self, her existential loneliness when

her parent was cold or indifferent to her feelings, her terrible self-blaming when her parent left or turned away. When, in our "maturity," we minimize the intensity of these experiences for a child, we prolong her pain. The child who was not seen in her misery and panic and isolation is still not seen.

The Child Who Was Not Seen lives inside of us, and until we have allowed her to express the full magnitude of her suffering and validated her ability to survive in the face of that, she will keep crying, raging, withdrawing, fussing, silently suffering within our adult selves. She will keep calling out until the single person in the world who can see her, who can truly appreciate what she went through--our adult self--has had the strength and compassion to be fully with her in her pain, to allow her to tell us from her little body and soul how very bad it was.

To forgive others who caused her pain before we have such knowledge of The Child Who Was Not Seen can cut us off from healing. We think we are healed, but we do not yet fully know our own stories. (It's rather like having read a synopsis of *King Lear* without having seen the play--we can recite what happened ["the king was left out in the storm by his cruel daughters"], but we don't feel its powerful meaning.) Without having taken in the full impact of what the devastation was for the child, we don't even know what it is we are forgiving.

With premature forgiveness, we allow our gaze to remain primarily fixed on the person who was cruel or neglecting in the past. While we move from childish anger, blaming, resentment ("You never showed any interest in me") to

understanding (“I see now that you were working so hard and worried about the finances”), our focus of attention remains the same. What gets passed over lightly--“It was really hard,” “I used to cry a lot at night”--is our Child Who Was Not Seen.

Those of us--and this is most of us--who have never fully appreciated our Child Who Was Not Seen do not realize that premature forgiveness only appears to allow us to transcend childhood and heal old wounds. The price we pay for premature forgiveness is that those wounds reemerge in our ordinary daily life.

The Child Who Was Not Seen has trouble sleeping. Anything that reminds her of some pain from her past will waken her. The adult will think that it is her present self who is reacting with extreme anxiety to an unpleasant boss or with anger to a partner who interrupts her or with rage at the car that pulls in front of her or with shame at her own clumsiness in a yoga class, and never guesses that The



Child Who Was Not Seen has been triggered and is calling out for someone to know how bad it was. Believing in our transcendence, we rarely or never connect the numerous kleshas of our daily life--the anxieties, fears, jealousies, longings, self-judgments and judgmentalism towards others--with the family story we have transcended. We believe that those feelings, though they may have their origin in childhood, are now just part of who we are, or part of life. We do not realize that The Child Who Was Not Seen has used this moment to, one more time, demand the attention she always deserved.

We do not realize that our everyday lives pay this heavy price for our having done forgiveness on the cheap, before we have done the more difficult and necessary work that could truly free us. We do not realize that our lives in the present could be infinitely lighter and sweeter if--unlike the adults of our childhood who had found our pain contemptible or frightening or unimportant--we could be a truly attentive parent to The Child Who Was Not Seen.



Most of us will turn from this task because we dread re•experiencing in its intensity the pain, shame, fear, confusion that we have worked to leave behind.

Some of us are repelled by the idea of “indulging in self-pity.” Self-pity is an emotion of childhood and carries with it the aura of that period. We much prefer to feel that we are taking “self-responsibility,” an attribute of adulthood. What The Child Who Was Not Seen requires is not pity but compassion. Self-pity was the child’s way of giving herself the compassion she did not find in her world. For its time and place it was a beautiful form of self-comfort. What she needs now is compassion from an adult who finally sees her, can bear to take in her pain, who appreciates and validates the feelings she was left alone with at the time.

If we have the stomach for true forgiveness, where do we begin? We begin by finding time and space to re-enter, however gingerly at first, the feeling world of our childhood. We don’t have to remember particular events. We can connect the tightness in our stomach when a friend doesn’t return an important phone call with that same bodily feeling as a child. We can connect, probably for the first time, our immense rage when a car swerves in front of us with the child’s anger that made her feel for an instant less impotent in an adult world where people could do what they wanted without thinking how it affected her. We can connect the fury when we are interrupted by our partner, not just by saying, “You know my father used to do that, you know how that makes me feel! How can you do that?” but by focussing less on the inconsiderate partner than on the child and her father and all that his interrupting represented to her about their relationship. We can connect the shame when we feel clumsy in yoga class with the shame of the little girl and with the people who made her feel she could never do anything right. Whenever at all possible, without missing a beat, we can zoom quickly from the distresses of

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

the present to the past, because those distresses are the Child Who Was Not Seen calling out to have her childhood pain validated. At the very least, whenever we feel distress, we can whisper to her: “Childhood.” She will know that we see her, even if we can’t spend a lot of time with her right now, and over many months of recognizing her when she appears, her rage, her self-pity, her grief, her anxiety, her self-judgment will grow less and less, as they will with any child who is fully attended to.

When we have assured The Child Who Was Not Seen that we are there for her, that we will not minimize her importance or punish her as adults did in the past, it will be safe enough for her feelings from childhood to sometimes flood back in waves.

We need to respond to her fully, giving her the space and loving attention she needs to express what she has held back for such a long time. We can of course



seek out a therapist to accompany us in this work, though we need to be sure that she will not settle for therapy lite-plus-forgiveness. A mind-body therapist is more likely to allow us to revisit our childhood at a deeper level.

Forgiveness, of course, is a blessed relief, a wonderful lightness of being, and the most sensible thing I heard or read about it--long before I was ready to forgive--was that we forgive in order to free ourselves, not to bestow a gift on the other person. Our unwillingness to forgive is not a moral failing. It is our Child Who Was Not Seen calling out to us that we have not fully seen her pain. She is unwilling to forgive because we have not observed the first step of the practice of loving kindness. So also our eagerness to embrace premature forgiveness is understandable--we long to be free without having to look our Child directly in her eyes, her heart.

It would be useful to do away entirely with the much misunderstood word “forgiveness” and instead speak of “healing old angers.” When we--the only one who really knows our child’s story--can heal those angers by our self-compassion, by listening closely to our anguished Child Who Was Not Seen as nobody did at the time, we can live with more adult wisdom in the present moment, and can find ourselves moving naturally, even effortlessly towards a larger compassion for the person who has wounded us, and towards our larger spiritual connection to all sentient and suffering beings.

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General Sites for Parents

Some recommendations from NurtureMom.com

Babble - Exploring the world of parenting on a daily basis with ruthless honesty, and with the humor and lyricism natural to the subject. www.babble.com.

BabyCenter – On getting pregnant, pregnancy and the stages of childhood, with community forums. www.babycenter.com

Brain Child – The magazine for thinking mothers. www.brainchildmag.com

Hip Mama - Website for the wise, deeply honest, saucy, iconoclastic magazine. www.hipmama.com

iVillage - Great collection of advice, message boards, and product info for just about every aspect of raising children. www.ivillage.com

Mindful Motherhood – Practical tools for staying sane during pregnancy and your child's first year. www.mindfulmotherhood.org

Momscape - General-purpose site with advice, community, product reviews, and lots more. www.momscape.com

Mothering Magazine - Fabulous information and nurturing support from the people who bring you the classic, “natural family living magazine”. www.mothering.com

Parenting – Home of Parenting and Baby Talk. Resources, recipes, blogs and shopping. www.parenting.com

ParentCenter - News, tips, activities, and features. Mother Nurture Recommends: www.parentcenter.com

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.