

## Fall 2004: Compassion and Wisdom

*QUESTION I am having great difficulty practicing tolerance and compassion towards my mother, who has had mental health problems since I was ten. She is in her mid-fifties and last year when my father died, we sold our house and moved in to care for her. (I have a husband, an eight-year-old son and a sixteen-month-old baby.) I get frustrated because my mother has no concept of baby safety and feeds him food she has been asked not to. My eight-year-old can't cope with having to keep correcting his grandma, and his marks are going downhill. He's now seeing a child therapist! My time for meditation is almost nonexistent. I am trying to practice dharma in daily life but every day I wind up in bed feeling my good intentions have gone out the window. How can I get through this with a Buddhist view?*

**NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY:** It might be helpful to keep in mind that there is a difference between our actions and our inner experiences of mental states. You may feel that you are not as kind as you aspire to be. However, the situation that you describe is not an easy one. It may be useful to notice that despite your inner experiences of frustration and intolerance, you are surely doing the best you can. If your intention is to act and speak as kindly as possible, you will be cultivating kindness, even though you may be feeling the opposite way.

As you know, an aspect of practice is learning how to care for all beings, including yourself. Although you feel that you are failing to meet the standards you hold for relating to your mother, please remember that your standards are mind-made. The gap between how we should be and how we actually are can be painful. The healing of this gap comes about not through condemning or condoning our thoughts and emotions, but through accepting them.

Acceptance allows us to relax and look more deeply; this in turn can help us to see options we may have been too tense to notice before. When our minds are relaxed and present, we can respond more attentively to what is being asked of us in the moment.

Meditation has everything to do with working with the conditions we find ourselves in. This is easy to say and difficult to do. In taking speech as a practice, it may be helpful to notice whether you are speaking unnecessarily (which would deplete much-needed energy for everything else that you have to do). Consider whether you are trying to explain things that your mother can't understand because of her mental fragility.

As the conditions in our lives change, it is usually necessary to examine and refine our definition of what it means to meditate. Sometimes, because of the demands upon us, we're not able to spend as much time in formal practice. Instead of relying on your zafu, can you stop for a few moments from time to time throughout the day and observe your breathing? These moments can be very powerful. Try not to dismiss them as unimportant. Also, be sure to try to practice while lying in bed before going

to sleep at night. Replacing thoughts of worry with thoughts of loving-kindness is a very wonderful way to practice.