

## Parenting with an Open Heart by Anita Stoll, LCSW, RYT

“Open your heart before you open your mouth.” This is what my meditation teacher says to me when I ask how I can be a better mother. He is referring to a particular meditation practice that involves bringing awareness and breath to the heart center. He is also referring to the understanding that by accessing the energy of the heart, we cultivate more compassion and lovingkindness towards ourselves and others. When we lead from the heart in relationship to others, we are more likely to foster understanding, closeness, and connection. By focusing on the qualities of the heart, we attune to our highest selves. This is the highest goal of a yoga practice, to align with our true nature. By learning to focus inside ourselves, we can gain access to inner resources that will support us and our children on the parenting journey.

When my daughter was an infant, I frequently felt fatigued and irritable. I turned to my yoga practice so many times. While there was no time or energy for the vigorous asana practice I once enjoyed, there was important quiet time to turn inside. My practice became more internal. I followed my breath. I repeated mantra silently. I practiced being in the moment while my baby nursed, noticing every detail of her face and body, as well as my own internal state. I sang beautiful sanskrit chants to calm myself and her when she cried. I visualized us both

happy and free. I drank in the beauty of precious moments, and practiced staying present during the stressful moments.

Of course, that was not all. There were plenty of times when I simply could not access my inner resources and resorted to old patterns, indulging in self-pity or self criticism, spending countless moments in the past and future instead of the present moment, panicking at every little sound in the house that might awaken my "finally" sleeping baby, feeling guilty about my endless imperfections as a mother, looking for someone to blame. Eventually, I always returned to my breath, the mantra, the true self. It can be a long trip back to connecting with my true self, although I have always found it to be a worthwhile journey.

As an older baby and young toddler, before words, my daughter's feelings could blast forth in forceful tantrums. Whenever I thought I could not do it another moment (that is, stay present, without becoming violent or losing my mind!), I would take her to my meditation room. Often, this simple act changed everything. We both relaxed. Her crying eased. Sometimes, I sang mantras. Other times I simply held her, or allowed her to touch the sacred objects I used for my meditations. Now, at age 2 1/2 she has begun to ask for these comforts when she is in distress. "Mama, meditation room! Sing!" According to the yogic tradition, these "self-soothing" tools are vehicles to help us experience our true nature. Within the human heart lies a reservoir of unlimited creativity, joy and bliss.

In recent years, the field of neuroscience has found that some meditative practices actually change the human brain, increasing activity in the left prefrontal cortex, an area that is responsible for positive emotions such as love and compassion.

When I lose my temper or disconnect in some other way, my practice leads me to the needed repair of my relationship with my child and with myself. I can deepen my breath as long as needed to feel an internal shift. I can repeat a mantra to interrupt my mind's stories of woe or despair. I can make a choice to accept things the way they are, even when I don't like them. I can ask for help. I can forgive myself. I can open my heart before I open my mouth. There are countless ways to reconnect with the qualities of the heart. There are countless opportunities to practice as a parent.