

## **Buddha Mom: The Path of Mindful Mothering**

Jacqueline Kramer  
New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2003

### **Reviewed by Marybeth White**

Jacqueline Kramer's *Buddha Mom: The Path of Mindful Mothering* explores the author's journey into motherhood as a Buddhist practitioner. As a feminist mother and doctoral student of Buddhist tradition, I appreciate Jacqueline Kramer's insight that motherhood is not an obstacle on the path to enlightenment; rather, mothering is a path in itself. This proposal flies in the face of thousands of years of Buddhist practice, which depicts the life of a householder and its inherent attachments as the realm of *samsara*, or rebirth, far from that of *nirvana*, or enlightenment. Doctrinally, there is support for the notion that the life of the laity offers opportunities to work toward enlightenment, such as the Buddha's founding of four groups of practitioners, including laymen and laywomen. Indeed, some recent Buddhist scholarship has focused on the spiritual growth potential inherent in relationships (Gross, Nhat Hanh, Welwood, for example). Kramer took the five Buddhist lay precepts in 1991 under the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. While she remains rooted in Buddhist tradition, she adds a new perspective on Buddhist parenting.

Kramer dedicates her book to her mother, Rose, which sets the stage for the discussion that follows. The author does not dwell simply on her own experience as a mother, but places her experience within the context of her extended family and childhood memories of being mothered. The subtitle, *The Path of Mindful Mothering*, suggests Kramer's larger project, which is to validate the path of mothering as a legitimate form of Buddhist practice. Her book is divided into two sections. The shorter of the two, "Setting Foot on the Path," describes the author's entry into motherhood. The second section, "The Practice on the Path," explores areas of the author's life such as that of a householder, becoming a homemaker, and embracing service. Kramer also explores the "karmic patterns" of her personal relationships with family members and the importance of balancing self-love with unconditional love.

This book is not an instruction manual on "how to be a good Buddha mom," however. Rather, it dwells on the uniqueness of all relationships and the continuous work toward burning off karmic patterns of habitual relations. Useful sections of the book include the author's personal reflections and candid descriptions of her struggles to parent her teenaged daughter. Unfortunately, these sections are not in abundance.

Kramer articulates different Buddhist conceptions of love. The chapter "Unconditional Love" deals specifically with these differing forms of love. The

author explains her understanding of the Buddha's discernment between four types of love: *metta*, or loving-kindness; *karuna*, or compassion; *mudita*, or sympathetic happiness; and *upekkha*, or loving with equanimity. These typologies of love fall under the rubric of the Greek notion of *agape*, or affectionate, non-sexual love. The Greek notion of *eros*, or erotic, passionate love is also found in Buddhist teachings as a fifth type of love. This section addresses the nuances between these ways of loving and the mental states that can impair one's ability to offer each type of love. The author offers personal anecdotes demonstrating parenting skills that can kindle rather than stifle relationships with one's children.

The path of mindful parenting is one that Kramer feels parents should undertake, as it is the "higher" choice that leads to growth. Her use of terminology such as "sacrifice" and "higher choice" promotes her idea of mindful parenting as a spiritual journey. She states carefully that the choice to stay at home with one's children while they are young is entirely in the hands of women. To stay at home, however, is a "choice" for an elite few who can depend financially on a spouse. Moreover, when one parent "stays at home," the result is uneven childcare arrangements in a two-parent household. Clearly, Kramer's book is addressed to women of a traditional mindset. The chapter entitled "Mothering," for example, opens with a quote from the Dalai Lama that addresses the importance of a child's successful development and that child's dependence on a *mother's* love. Throughout her book, Kramer elevates mindful mothering to a spiritual path but she does not offer this path to fathers; in fact, the responsibility of fathers in raising their children is not mentioned.

The aspects of the book that cause this feminist mother concern are found in the potentially explosive concepts of "homemaking" and "motherhood," which are not unpacked in such a way as to expose their constructed nature. Although she advocates self-love, for example, Kramer draws a direct connection between mothers and service when she states that "women come to service naturally" (113). In addition, Kramer assigns specific roles to mothers and fathers during the time of childbirth and early parenting. She requires that fathers take a supportive role while mothers develop their capacities as primary care providers. Kramer draws implicit generalizations about the roles of mothers and fathers and suggests that mothers are able to naturally arrive at the "correct" way to nurture by turning their attention inward. Yet, she herself acknowledges a lack of "naturalness" when she finds that mothering does not come as easily as she had assumed it would.

From a Buddhist scholarly perspective, the validation of a Buddhist householder's life, especially that of a parent who is constantly dealing with issues of attachment, Kramer's book provides fresh insight into the possibility of enlightenment through the mindful relationship between parent and child. From a feminist perspective, however, Kramer's albeit mindful glorification of the sacrifice and service of motherhood is cause for concern.