



HOUSTON CHRONICLE ARCHIVES

Paper: Houston Chronicle**Date:** Sat 07/21/2007**Section:** Religion**Page:** 1**Edition:** 2 STAR**ZEN MOTHER / Mom, priest, author juggles multiple roles / Zen Buddhist says principles are practical, not just philosophical**

By BARBARA KARKABI

Staff

MOTHERHOOD is a spiritual practice, a club you can't leave and a crash course in wisdom, says a Zen Buddhist priest who is also a mother - two roles that rarely coincide.

But the combination works for former Houstonian Karen Maezen Miller, who became a priest three years after her daughter was born. She is the author of *Momma Zen: Walking the Crooked Path of Motherhood*. The book, based on her own experience and Buddhist practice, shares the struggles and joys of motherhood in an unconventional but comforting way.

Miller writes that she is "alternately amused and annoyed" by the use of the word Zen to describe everything from fashion to furniture. "Zen is not like anything else. Zen is the direct realization, the incomparable experience of what is. Zen is motherhood. And you already know that motherhood is not like anything else."

Written at first to help herself with the sleepless nights and changes associated with becoming a mother at 42, her book, she says, is like life - arbitrary and out of sequence.

"Part of the structure of a book is that it has a beginning and end, but life is not like that. It's not so sequential or orderly," Miller says. "I think the most important thing I want people to glean from the book is encouragement - that you are not alone. Along with that feeling of isolation is the sense of inadequacy: 'I can't do this,' or 'I'm no good at it.' Let yourself off the hook; something good might come out of it."

A former businesswoman who ran her own public-relations firm, Miller began studying Zen Buddhism in Los Angeles under the late Taizan Maezumi Roshi, one of the first Japanese masters to bring Zen to the West. She was in her 30s, still living in Houston and had just come out of a bad relationship.

Becoming a Zen Buddhist, she writes, "brought me back into full possession of my life."

Zen practitioners, her book says, "do what Buddha did, sit quietly still, to see what Buddha saw - the truth of our existence - and thereby end confusion, discontent, pain and suffering. It sounds simple, and it is. It is just not easy."

A few years later, Miller met her future husband while on vacation in Florence, Italy. After marrying, she moved to Los Angeles, where they now live in a house surrounded by a 90-year-old Japanese garden. Gardening, she says, has become part of her Zen practice.

Then she was surprised - and delighted - by motherhood. Her daughter Georgia, soon to be 8, was born prematurely and there were many bumps in the road, including an unsuccessful attempt at breast-feeding. There were days of exhaustion and depression.

Miller was convinced that most mothers she observed had figured out the whole parenting thing while she had not. But those thoughts, she found, come from an ego-driven mind.

"My Buddhist practice tells me that the mind having those thoughts is the same ego-driven mind that is so judgmental," Miller says. "Whether I am judging myself or someone else, judgment is judgment. The last person I forgive is myself; that's why I keep on practicing."

Whenever the "I'm no good as a mother" feelings began to overwhelm her, Miller would turn to her Buddhist studies. Give it up, move on, her teacher would tell her - get over the fact that you didn't breast-feed long enough or have been to McDonald's too many times or your child didn't get into the "right" school.

The lesson of "letting go," she says, begins from the moment a child is born. And it is one mothers continue to learn over and over again.

Miller began writing down her thoughts about motherhood more formally when her daughter was 18 months old. That was just after her own mother had died. She was not yet a priest.

"When I first started writing, I wasn't writing with an intent to articulate any Buddhist lessons," she says. "I didn't think it was appropriate. It was only when I started writing, and with the encouragement of others, that I was emboldened to clearly make the connection. ... What I had found was that a shockingly difficult ordeal was full of spirituality."

Many mothers have told Miller they feel like her words came straight from their heads and their own lives. That response delights Miller and validates both her Zen practice and her belief in the universal experience of motherhood.

"My teacher would tell me that 'the Buddha is still perfecting his practice.' This is just what we do over and over again. One thing I think is interesting, even though I'm removed from the experience of babyhood, as I look at things I say: 'Oh my God, the lessons keep returning.' "

Mothers also learn from their children, says Miller, who became a Zen Buddhist priest when Georgia was 3 and was learning how to swim. As she watched her daughter overcome her fears about swimming, Miller made her own decision.

"I was inspired by her bravery," she says. "I had told myself that as a wife and mother I couldn't possibly become a Zen priest. But why not? That's a question I wish I had asked myself more often."

Now, her daughter will look up and ask Miller when she is going to the Hazy Moon Zen Center for an overnight retreat (Miller is a dharma holder and meditation instructor there). Georgia accepts her mother's time away without question.

"The time I sit on a cushion and meditate is the time that prepares me for life off the cushion," Miller says.

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DISTRESSED? THESE STEPS MAY HELP CALM YOU

Karen Maezen Miller offers practical advice for mothers from a Zen perspective.

Smile, even when you don't feel like it. "Really practice smiling. At first you might have to force it a little, but smiling really is transformation."

Sing to your baby or play music. "It's impossible to feel dreary thoughts when you are singing about happy thoughts. Singing is really a meditative activity, you breath in and out and your mind is empty. It's mutual, what soothes your child soothes you."

Walking is also meditative. "I began to understand that it is not an accident when you see mothers walking maniacally around the neighborhood. It's harder in Houston when it's so hot, but walking and going takes you out of the stew pot in your head."

Learn how to meditate and carve out five minutes of your day.

Calm down and observe yourself. "The practice of observing yourself is the essence of spiritual practice. Observe your own behavior and thought patterns, your racing, crazy life. You will begin to see how much you add to your own distress and others'."

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WHAT IS ZEN?

Zen is a Japanese word for a Chinese word for a Sanskrit word that means meditation, says Karen Maezen Miller, a Zen Buddhist priest at the Hazy Moon Zen Center of Los Angeles. Other explanations from her book:

In Zen practice, meditation is "the way."

Zen Buddhism means "the way of the Buddha."

The way of the Buddha "is exactly what you see in the image of Buddha ... a human being sitting still."

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