

Father and Son Reunion
Inquiring Mind Fall, 2004
James Baraz with Shoshana Alexander

When I first saw the photo of him as an infant, it was enclosed in a Christmas card with a note: “Hi. My name is Anthony. I’m your son.” To a 23-year-old who barely knew who he was, this was not good news. His mom and I had had a casual relationship, as we used to call it in those heady days of the late sixties when the guiding principle was having fun, getting high and living for the moment. Did she want me to step in and be a full-time dad? A baby wasn’t part of my plan, and besides, I had my doubts.

A few days later I received an unexpected visit as mother and infant showed up at my door. I could feel how tiny and fragile he was as I held him. Not knowing what else to do, I’d said I needed a few moments alone with him. As I sat there holding this beautiful, brown-skinned baby, our eyes met. In that instant, I knew it was true—I felt as if I were holding myself. As Anthony and I gazed at each other, his eyes innocent and filled with wonder, I could feel myself falling in love. If I held this baby, my son, for another thirty seconds, there would be no turning back. Suddenly an image of what my life could become flashed before me filtered through the lens of fear—arguments, demands, my parents’ reaction. Dread seized me and shook me out of my reverie.

I walked into the next room with Anthony, put him in his mother’s arms and told her, “I can’t do this!” Like a match to dry tinder, her annoyance ignited my confusion and fear. As we began shouting at each other, Anthony started to wail. The spell was broken. She bundled the baby up and walked out the door. Confused and terrified, I was unable to take Tony into my life. It was a decision that would haunt me over the years, arising from time to time as a mysterious void in my heart.

A few years after I first held Tony, I discovered the spiritual path. The last thing I wanted to listen to, however, was the truth of that niggling voice inside reminding me that something wasn't quite right. I was working to open my heart, to develop kindness and compassion, but a significant part of my life seemed incongruent with these values.

Healing from painful memories of shame and guilt is possible through dharma practice, particularly through the power of loving-kindness. After fifteen years of vipassana practice, I attended my first metta retreat; there I came face to face with what at first seemed a bottomless pit of unwise, unkind unconsciousness and harmful actions I had done. Intensive loving-kindness practice is a kind of purification process in which mental states that get in the way of cultivating a loving heart come to the surface. For fourteen hours a day, we would repeat the phrases of the traditional practice. "May I be happy. May I be peaceful..." I would start a meditation session wishing happiness for myself and all beings, begin to feel my heart opening, and then suddenly I'd find myself thrown back years to something I had done that in some way had harmed another. Some of the memories from my younger years made me wince with shame. No matter how much immediate gratification I may have derived at the time, now, as the memories came up, my body would shudder with guilt and sadness.

When such painful memories are held with wise compassion and equanimity, they begin to dissipate and lose their power over us. Compassion is a tender understanding of the confused mind state that would knowingly cause someone to suffer. As a wise mother understands the confusion of her angrily acting out child, we can understand in hindsight our own confusion. What that child really needs is to be understood and held in love while acknowledging the awareness of regret or sorrow at having caused the suffering.

When we can begin to do this for ourselves, the pain underneath the unskillful behavior is seen and can begin to transform.

As I stayed with the painful truth in an honest and kind way, I began to heal. In an effort to defend against the truth, the price I had paid was disconnection from the very love and compassion I yearned for. Being that authentic and vulnerable during the metta practice was the start of transforming all those painful memories. As I allowed the images and feelings to arise within me, without pushing them away or trying to deny them, I found them diminishing, and in their place was a gradually opening heart.

Just as unexpected as that Christmas card 29 years earlier was the phone call that came for me one hot August day five years ago. A woman's voice asked if I had ever known the girlfriend of so many years before. After a silence, I quietly answered, "Yes." Then she asked if it was possible that I might have fathered a child with her. The blood rushed to my head while at the same time everything seemed to go numb. "Yes," I replied, "it's possible." My mind flooded with different scenarios. *He was in trouble and was turning to me for help. He was looking for financial support that I was unable to give. He was a drug dealer and would make sure I paid for my actions.* In the midst of my fears and concerns, I could almost feel the woman on the other end of the line begin to smile. "Oh, if that's so, you are very lucky," I heard her say. "Tony is one of the most wonderful human beings I've ever met."

A mix of emotions surged through me—gratitude, relief, curiosity, fear, guilt, excitement. I told this woman, a friend of Tony's contacting me on his behalf, to have him call me as soon as he was ready. When I got off the phone I knew in the stillness of that August afternoon that my life was about to dramatically change. Within a few hours I

received his call. Those first moments we were both tentative but soon we made arrangements for him to visit.

I sometimes wonder how this second meeting would have gone if it hadn't been for all of my years of mindfulness and loving-kindness practice along with just plain growing up. When I met Tony at the airport motel, I beheld a young man who, once again, I intuitively knew as my son. Along with the story of our first meeting, I told him how lucky I felt that he had found me, that I was grateful to have a second chance and that I would understand if meeting me brought up great anger and hurt. I expressed the hope that in time he could learn to forgive me and we could be close.

Tony told me that he had been ready to let me know how hurt and angry he'd been, but seeing who I was actually made it harder. Instead of the uncaring and insensitive father who betrayed him, before him stood someone he could admire, and with whom he could feel an easy, natural connection. We shared tears as he showed me pictures that traced his life through the years we hadn't had together. When the DNA test Tony requested confirmed our biological connection, we joyfully embraced the process of getting to know each other as father and son. I welcomed him into my family, introducing him to my wife Jane and our then 12-year old son, Adam.

Four months after this reunion, when Tony was visiting from his home in L.A., I invited him to come to the weekly meditation group I lead in Berkeley. From the stage at the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, I watched him and Adam quietly take their places in the back of the crowded meditation hall. My heart swelled with wonder and joy as I beheld my son Tony's dark face and broad shoulders squeezed next to my son Adam's pale complexion and adolescent body. There, surrounded by statues of Buddhas and

Bodhisattvas, I told our story to the stunned group of meditators. I expressed my hope that, at some point, Tony could truly forgive my confusion and let me completely into his heart.

Everyone turned in surprise when I invited Tony to come up to the front so I could introduce him to the group. As he and I sat there together before my community, the room shimmered with raw emotion and love. Suddenly Tony burst into tears. Hugging me, he said through his sobs, “I forgive you Dad.” Those words were a balm that could begin to heal my twenty-nine year old wound.

I shudder to think of what I almost lost because of a decision based in fear and confusion. My mom and I have walked down the aisle as part of Tony’s wedding procession. He has changed his last name to mine. He has blessed me with a stunning granddaughter, Jordan Rose Baraz. He turns to me when he needs someone to talk to who will understand. I am filled with gratitude at the blessing of getting a second chance, and for the blessings of dharma practice that enabled me to take it.

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