

SARAH NAPTHALI

Buddhism
for MOTHERS of
SCHOOLCHILDREN

FINDING CALM IN THE
CHAOS OF THE SCHOOL YEARS

From the best-selling author of
Buddhism for Mothers



Praise for *Buddhism for Mothers*

‘Buddhist practitioner Naphthali has written an eminently practical book that gives frazzled mothers useable advice and empathy . . . precisely because she is not a teacher and is in the midst of mothering, Naphthali offers the approachable and authentic perspective of a rank-and-file practitioner who lives the techniques and situations she writes about.’—*Publishers Weekly*

‘Naphthali’s book focuses on Buddhist practices that will help mothers become calmer and happier in themselves. Follow her advice and we all know what comes next—better parenting.’—*Sunday Telegraph*

‘Funny, uplifting, reassuring, real and wise. A truly “mothering” book for mothers . . .’—Stephanie Dowrick

‘This is an excellent, practical guide to everyday Buddhism, not just for mothers, but for everyone who has ever had a mother.’—Vicki Mackenzie, author of the best-selling *Why Buddhism?*

‘Buddhism for Mothers is an oasis of calm and tranquility in the otherwise chaotic existence that is motherhood.’—*Mind & Body*

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‘. . . approach the day-to-day “highs and lows” differently and more positively, and yes—even more calmly.’—Childbirth Education Association

Reviews from Amazon

‘I love this book. It brings such a calming sense of being just by picking it up.’—Kathleen

‘I love this book! I would recommend this book to anyone, Buddhist or not. I’m so glad someone is finally talking about how to deal with the stresses of motherhood in a realistic way without inducing guilt or fear. The author’s tone is both friendly and empathetic—just what we moms need. The book is empowering and has made a big difference in the way I parent and the way I view my life as a mom.’—T. M.-R.

‘The author is very honest and refreshing. On every page you get the sense that the author is a very real person who can relate to both the best and the stressed in us all.’—Suzanne

‘IF YOU’RE A MOM, BUY THIS BOOK! I am sceptical of anyone trying to preach an idea to me, and I do not claim to be Buddhist. I just LOVE this book. I checked it out from a local library, but am now purchasing it so I can always have it around. It not only approaches ways to be a calmer mom, but a calmer being in your daily encounter with the world. It has changed how I approach issues, big or small; it’s also inspired me to demonstrate the same zen-buddhist coping tools for my children; and it has helped me to stay in the present moment.’—Kristin

Praise for *Buddhism for Mothers with Young Children* (formerly titled *Buddhism for Mothers with Lingering Questions*)

‘Naphthali is a lovely writer. She skilfully weaves interviews with other parents into her own thoughts. As for guilt, Tibetans don’t even have a word for it, she writes.’—*Sydney Morning Herald*

‘If you liked her first book, *Buddhism for Mothers*, then you’ll adore this one. It’ll give you a new perspective on parenting and may even help you enjoy it more.’—*Sunday Telegraph*

‘This second book from Sarah Naphthali . . . had me repeatedly crying out “yes” . . . By being focused, open and more attentive to the present moment we can enjoy a calmer and happier journey through parenthood; a great companion book for mothers struggling to cope with their new role.’—*Perth Woman*

‘There is much here to learn; through Naphthali’s eyes, patience, reflection and calm become the vehicles to a deeper understanding of self, motherhood and family.’—*Junior*



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ALLEN&UNWIN

Other books by Sarah Naphthali

Buddhism for Mothers

Buddhism for Mothers of Young Children
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with Lingering Questions)

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preface

FEW SIGHTS ARE AS TOUCHING or as emotionally overwhelming as that of our child releasing our hand and walking off to the classroom on the first day of school. The pre-school years are over. Our responsibilities shift and we find ourselves beginners once more. Raising schoolchildren proves to be a radically different experience from tending our under-fives. Amateurs once again, we face a new stage of motherhood each time one of our children starts school.

These early school years are, for many of us, the golden years of parenting, the hard-earned window between demanding toddlerhood and unpredictable adolescence. Yet challenges still abound. Our children have varying capacities to adapt to the school system and their ability to fit in dictates the state of our mental health. Unlike the toddler years, we can at least reason with a school-aged child to a far greater extent, but in most cases teaching them to take responsibility for themselves calls for bottomless depths of patience.

The day our youngest starts school is one we may have fantasised about for years, yet many mothers find themselves grieving the end of a stage in parenthood. Sales of tissues mushroom as mothers everywhere

pat the tears they try to hide from their children. For many of us this milestone signifies a return to the workforce, an increase in working hours or a sudden pressure to decide what to do with the rest of our lives. Whether we feel like a traumatised empty-nester or a woman who finally has her life back, our sense of identity shifts: we do not feel like the same person we were a year ago. Our role has changed, as has our relationship with time: there are more hours in our week, or, if we increase our work hours, even less.

Personally, I shed not a tear when Alex, my younger son, started school, and I have never looked back for even a minute. Although my love for Alex and the delight I often feel in his company is beyond measure, I had played enough hours of hide-and-seek, had co-baked a sufficient number of cakes and had left no corner of the zoo unexplored. Maybe I was influenced by my experience with Alex's older brother Zac, but I harboured a preference for the company of school-aged children over the under-five set: Zac had been a challenging youngster but after starting school had blossomed into the most pleasant boy, notwithstanding occasional lapses. Zac had been so enthusiastic about his first year of school that I could not help but look forward to a similar experience for Alex. I was definitely ready.

The mother load eased significantly, yet new sources of stress arose. For school mothers, the deadlines in our lives multiply: school by nine, pick up by three, homework done by seven, bedtime by a reasonable hour, and we must arrive on time for sporting commitments and a host of other after-school activities. Fortunately, the teachings of the Buddha are highly relevant for managing stress, a topic I tackle in the first two chapters. Some Buddhist teachers even prefer to translate the Buddha's First Noble Truth, 'There is suffering', as, 'There is stress', arguing the latter captures a wider range of unsatisfactory experiences.

One of our greatest challenges as mothers of schoolchildren is managing time: fitting umpteen tasks into a limited period, living as potential slaves to our 'to do' list, and the gnawing sense of failure around how effectively we use our day. With children at school we might have looked forward to several additional hours in our week only to be amazed at how quickly they are swallowed up by new responsibilities. Our children may be at school yet we still careen through our day, never accomplishing all our goals.

Now more than ever, we find ourselves living a routine. We prepare children for school, we collect them of an afternoon and spend many hours on the responsibilities of the evening, which can start to feel the same, day after day. Some mothers complain of a sense of reliving the same day without end. While the security of a routine can feel comforting, at times it bores us witless and we grapple with restlessness and discontent. As we shall find in Chapter 3, Buddhist teachings offer fresh perspectives for perceiving our surroundings, and help us to look at some of the causes behind boredom and how we can eliminate them.

Other challenges we find ourselves fielding are the tricky questions our children hurl at us, sometimes at moments less than ideal for such discussions. Schoolchildren require answers about sex, death, God, government and human cruelty. Many of us need to revisit, rethink or at least clarify our viewpoints before we can present them for the perspective of a child. As modern parents discussing the heavy issues, we avoid seeing our children as empty vessels waiting to have all our views and opinions poured into them, and heed the Buddha's warnings against being attached to any of our views. A Buddhist approach, as presented in Chapter 4, allows us to share our values with our children while still empowering them to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions.

Significantly, with children at school, we belong to a new community. Unable to select the members of this collective, we are obliged to blend in as best we can. How we yearn, as human beings with our herd instinct, for a sense of belonging. While some of us are able to fulfil this need within the parent community, others among us, for all kinds of reasons, never will—or will need months, years even, to identify potential friends. All these new families in our lives may provide us with the priceless gifts of friendship, support and happy memories. Yet some of these relationships challenge us, presenting moral dilemmas as well as the need to compromise or establish boundaries. Chapter 5 provides some Buddhist perspectives on this fraught area.

Just as in the toddler years, feelings of guilt continue to haunt many mothers of schoolchildren. Am I a good enough mother? Do I give my children enough of my time? Am I missing some of their most important moments? Do I yell too much? Am I as good as my own mother was? Am I letting my children down in any way? Am I pleasing everybody? Doing everything well enough? All these questions are worth asking, ideally with a non-judgemental, inquiring attitude. Yet if they gnaw away at us, undermining our happiness on a daily basis without our ever resolving them, then we might need to look more deeply at what is going on. Several chapters will address this topic pervading the lives of most mothers.

One mother in particular, Camilla, will feature in this book. Camilla has two boys and a girl, aged twelve, ten and eight respectively. Camilla is passionate about the Buddha's teachings and loves nothing more than to retire to a quiet corner for a deep conversation about their potential. She speaks slowly and deliberately, punctuating many sentences with the words 'for *me*', as if to emphasise that she has learned what works for herself but never assumes she has an answer for the rest of humanity.

Yet what impressed me most about her practice was the number of success stories. Through practising what the Buddha taught she has managed to give up quite a string of behaviours that undermined her potential to be happy—smoking, gossiping and moping about past mistakes, to name a few. I had been dying to ask her if I could interview her for my last book but I was too shy. I could not bear the idea of her refusing and the ensuing awkwardness of seeing her every week at my Buddhist group. Finally, for this book I found the courage to ask her, albeit via email. And yes, she was initially reluctant, but fortunately she changed her mind, after talking to her mother.

I met Camilla at my Buddhist group, where she was the secretary of the committee. I found, whenever I spoke to her, she would say something that inspired me for days afterwards. In one of our conversations I was bewailing how much housework mothers need to do and she stumped me with, ‘Oh, I love housework—I just practise mindfulness.’ She wasn’t trying to make me feel inferior—she meant it. On another occasion Camilla told me, ‘I grew up in a wealthy household that was very unhappy so I have no need to chase money: I know from first-hand experience that it doesn’t make you happy.’

With a passion for philosophy and science, Camilla has begun to feel distinctly lukewarm about the prospect of continuing her profession of accountancy, especially given the number of hours it devours from her week. Camilla works four days a week and the children catch a bus after school to her work, from where she drives them home. On the home front, she has managed the small miracle of a happy, inspiring marriage, capable as she is of praising her husband, a carpenter, frequently and at length.

Having attended some Buddhist events with Camilla outside Sydney, I found opportunities for long conversations and I have come to know her rather well. I know, for example, that she would be mortified to think I might portray her as some kind of Buddhist

model for mothers and she would be at pains to convince everyone that she is a very ordinary mother with a great deal of spiritual work still ahead of her. If the truth be known, she has no faith whatsoever in the possibility of ever becoming fully enlightened. She just sees herself as benefitting from the journey towards that goal.

Camilla, like most mothers, has embarked on an exciting period of personal growth. As mothers of school-aged children we see ourselves going beyond what we ever thought we were capable of. We witness in ourselves extremes of anger that shock us, as much as we see more love in our hearts than we ever imagined could exist. Learning more about what we are capable of, and owning all of it, is the point from which we grow spiritually. Walking a spiritual path, we start to notice the potential for our self-confidence to come not from any limited concept of a self with its set strengths and weaknesses, but from a faith in our growing connection with our inner wisdom.

As with my past books, I have taken the unconventional approach of drawing on Buddhist teachings from all the main traditions: Zen, Tibetan and Theravada (the latter being practised in Sri Lanka and most of the countries of South-East Asia). Yet in practice, committed Buddhists choose a teacher, or several, from one of the main schools and settle there. This prevents them from endlessly skirting about the surface of Buddhism and allows them to go more deeply into their chosen practice. They see a risk in treating Buddhism like a spiritual supermarket for too long, where we follow all our whims and impulses, attracted to novelties and fleeing challenges.

One reason I draw from all the main schools is in order to help mothers decide which school most attracts them. Another reason is that almost all the books we find about Buddhism present the perspective of one tradition, so it is interesting to present the different perspectives in one place. That said, the core teachings of Buddhism are the same in every tradition. The differences lie more in *how* to

practise: the meditation techniques, the subtly different priorities, and the varying reliance on ritual.

Drawing from the experiences of my own family as I wrote this book, I did ask permission from my sons to share any potentially embarrassing stories and they have been generous with their permission. Zac was initially hesitant about one or two stories, but these feelings were nothing a new yo-yo couldn't fix. My husband Marek has always given me *carte blanche* to disclose whatever I wish about him. He does not mind what I write possibly because he does not—*cannot*—read my books, declaring matters spiritual 'not his thing'. Although I secretly pine for him to join me on the road to enlightenment, he is an engineer, I am a writer, and it is part of my spiritual practice to respect our differences without forcing him to recreate himself in my image.

I have not written a book telling mothers how to parent for I am sure that they know better than me what works in their unique situation—and books abound by authors more knowledgeable than myself about child-rearing. Most of the chapters in this book focus on the needs of the mother, recognising that when we are in good form we can only be wiser and more skilful mothers, and this benefits our children. How, as mothers of schoolchildren, can we bring our best selves to the task of mothering so that we are not at the mercy of daily frustrations, fears and anxieties? How can we rise above habitual reactions of irritability, stress and impatience? And what are the most reliable sources of contentment for us? These are the questions this book grapples with, by exploring teachings tested over two and a half millennia.

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CHAPTER 1

stress

MOTHERS OF SCHOOLCHILDREN CAN have a tense relationship with time and, in some cases, an obsessive attachment to using it efficiently. One of the greatest injuries one can commit against a mother is to waste her time. Any form of time-wasting feels painful and sees our stress levels soar: traffic, red lights, queues, a stalled computer, even a minute of idle conversation. It is worth being aware of our relationship with time, especially of the costs of being overly attached to using it efficiently. Does our relationship with time mean, for example, we have less time for connection with our children, family and friends? Does it affect our whole capacity to relax and be content, even when on holiday? How does it affect our general mood and attitude to others? Do we create more pressure on ourselves than there needs to be?

The Buddha did not sit down to meditate under the Bodhi tree intending to devise a list of stress-management techniques. He was far more ambitious than that for he was on a quest for nothing less than liberation from suffering. That said, mothers can lead quite stressful lives and practising Buddhist teachings offers a way to attack the stress at its various sources. To lead less stressful lives we need to create conditions of balance in our lifestyle, refusing to become perpetually driven, refusing to sacrifice our lives to the culture of busyness. We explore the topics of balance and the avoidance of extremes in the next chapter, but there are many other offerings from Buddhist teachings to help us reduce stress and this chapter presents a smorgasbord for you to choose from.

The first step in dealing with stress is in acknowledging that, despite all appearances, it comes not from 'out there' but from inside us, in our response. While we can work on changing or controlling our external conditions to some degree, the way to bring about a lasting reduction in stress is by working on how we habitually respond to the events of our lives. We can always put a temporary bandaid over a stress breakout—drink some alcohol, watch telly, pretend it's

not happening—or maybe we can look more deeply as a means to dropping our less helpful reactions.

BE WITH THE STRESS

One aspect I have noticed about my own experience of stress is aversion, a rejection of the stress I feel. I notice the presence of stress and instantly panic: *no, you can't be stressed, you must be calm, you must appear cool and laid-back*. I might then try to suppress or deny the stress. Or I am harsh on myself: I feel guilty for being stressed, or even angry at myself. Clearly, such a reaction to noticing stress only compounds it.

Yet a simple Buddhist approach is perfectly available to me. I can pause and slowly say, 'Stress is here now,' and leave it right there. I do not need to reject, suppress, deny, ignore or distract. I can simply *be with* the stress.

The Buddhist approach deals similarly with anger, sadness or restlessness. We can simply say, 'Anger is here now,' or 'Sadness is here now,' or 'Restlessness is here now,' and then be with it. This quality of *being* requires of us not only compassion but also curiosity. What is anger actually like? What is sadness, restlessness or stress actually like? How do they feel in my body? What does it feel like in my mind? How long does it last? Does it change in intensity? The answer to the last question, in every case, is *Yes*—of this we can be sure. None of these mind states are permanent, no matter how intense they feel at the time. They are only transitory mind phenomena which we do not need to believe or trust.

Importantly, we can be with our feelings of stress compassionately—that is, with some compassion towards ourselves—rather than adding our usual harsh judgements that try to dictate whether or not we should feel the way we do.

I once met a self-described ‘stress prone’ mother who told me that when she meditated she would sometimes say to herself, ‘Settle, Petal.’ While my first reaction was to laugh at her corniness, on reflection I understood the gentleness in her words, so motherly and nurturing. Such a level of compassion for self is worth cultivating, both during meditation and throughout times of stress. I apologised to the mother for laughing.

We try to cultivate curiosity towards our feelings of stress, asking ourselves, ‘What is going on here?’ Of course, when we are extremely stressed, we find that we don’t particularly *care* what is going on. We might feel so frustrated that we have no energy left to turn inward. Still, we can always reflect back later and ask, ‘What *was* going on then?’ Senior Buddhist teacher Christopher Titmuss even goes so far as to say that curiosity is the most important quality of all to bring to Buddhist practice.

NOT ADDING STUFF

For many years, Camilla found the morning routine of preparing three children for school extremely stressful. She started paying closer attention to her mind throughout this process and discovered fear and many thoughts:

If we are late then:

- I’ll feel like an incompetent mother.
- I’ll be seen by parents and teachers as a hopeless case.
- I will let down three teachers and three classes full of children.
- I will feel cranky about failing to achieve a simple task that millions of mothers around the world perform daily.

These thoughts also arose for her:

- My children don't even care if they are late. I am the only responsible person here.
- My children are purposely trying to provoke me.
- If we're late once it will happen every day.
- This rushing and battling happens every single day!

Camilla was able to ease up about the whole morning routine when she saw clearly how much drama she was adding. Laughing, she wonders why she ever expected her children to care about being late: 'They're kids! Do I really want them to behave like up-tight adults?' As a regular meditator committed to mindfulness—the practice of purposely 'remembering' the present—Camilla is impressively capable of seeing both what is happening as well as the possibility of letting go of any thoughts that lead to suffering and stress. Mornings are still hard work as she teaches her children to take more responsibility for the process, but these days she is no longer so stressed about them.

An invaluable question we can ask ourselves when we feel stressed is, 'What am I adding?' Everything we go through in life is made up of a pure experience plus all the things we tell ourselves about the experience. Buddhists strive to perceive the pure experience, free from biases, drama, clinging and our need for a positive self-image.

In *A Path for Parents*, mother of two schoolchildren Sara Burns describes how she brings Buddhist teachings to daily motherhood. In this case, to preparing dinner:

The Buddha suggested that two 'arrows' hit us every time something happens to us. The first is the event itself, the second is how we react to it . . . One example for me would be walking into the kitchen to cook, feeling tired and wishing someone else was there to produce a delicious meal and look after me . . . But on top of this I could unconsciously pile secondary arrows,