

Using the Brain's Biology to Become Humanistic Parents: History is Not Destiny *

By Roxanne Rae, L.C.S.W., B.C.D.

This is the second in an occasional series of articles introducing parents to some of the research on the brain, the mind, and human relationships represented by a new perspective that is being called "interpersonal neurobiology." The series introduction appeared in the October 2003 issue of Living Buddhism.

It is common to wonder what kind of parent we will become. Even before seriously contemplating having our own children, it is not unusual to have anxious thoughts about fulfilling the important role of parenting. For those of us who had difficult experiences growing up, such as being victims of childhood abuse, having a substance abusing parent, or having lived in a home filled with domestic violence, our anxieties about our ability to parent competently may be much greater than average. As a child of an alcohol-abusing parent, I seriously doubted I could ever gain the patience and compassion that raising a child requires.

A fundamental tenet of Nichiren's Buddhism is hope. SGI President Ikeda states: "Faith is inextinguishable hope. The practice of faith is a struggle to realize our desires. The basis of this practice is prayer. Through prayer, hope turns into confidence. This spirit of confidence unfolds in three thousand ways, finally resulting in the attainment of our hopes."¹ As Greg Martin points out: "The Daishonin clearly states that, before employing another strategy, we should employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra, earnestly chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo in front of the Gohonzon. Of course this does not mean that we should *only* employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra."² This strategy of the Lotus Sutra is a foundation to develop such qualities as wisdom, patience, and compassion on which to base our actions.

"[W]hen we are with our children we should concern ourselves with taking care of them."³ In other words, as parents who practice Nichiren Buddhism, we are free to draw upon knowledge from recent scientific research, such as that in the fields of neurobiology and infant attachment. With the concrete results of researchers, anyone can create a better life for themselves and their children, but, as practitioners, we can actively use this new knowledge based on a foundation of the deep wisdom we draw from our Buddha consciousness. By doing so, even if we've felt damaged and doubtful, we can realize our desire to nurture our children and ourselves. We can become more humanistic parents. We no longer need to view hope as just a philosophical concept to help us feel better about our negative karma.

The fields of neurobiology and infant attachment are shedding light on how people grow and change throughout their life spans. According to Allan Schore, Ph.D., assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA's David Geffen School of Medicine: "The infant brain is designed to be molded by the environment it encounters."⁴ Human growth is not genetically encoded. Our brains need certain experiences for healthy development.

One facet of interpersonal neurobiology is attachment theory, which focuses on how relationships shape the ways our brains work. Results of attachment research help us explain our ability to change as parents. We bring to our parenting the culmination of all our past experiences. When we do not completely synthesize our own historical events, old, negative behavior patterns may be triggered and persist. We may react with overly strong emotions to the situation in front of us. We may also be impulsive or sense a flood of feeling in our bodies so strong that we can't think objectively or clearly about our responses. When this happens to parents, their children are negatively impacted.

In their book, *Parenting from the Inside Out*, Daniel Siegel, M.D. and Mary Hartzell, M.Ed., pose an important question: "Why do past events continue to influence our present perceptions and shape how we construct the future?"⁵ Studies about memory provide illumination. Siegel and Hartzell state: "Brain structure shapes brain function. In turn, brain function creates the mind. Although genetic information also determines fundamental aspects of brain anatomy, *our experiences* [emphasis added] are what create the

unique connections and mold the basic structure of each individual's brain. In this manner, our experiences directly shape the structure of the brain and thus create the mind that defines who we are."⁶ In other words, first our experiences directly shape our physical brain; then we define who we are based on how our brain is structured; therefore, we respond to our environment based on who we are, and our environment responds to us in kind, further shaping our brain.

Nichiren Buddhists recognize this reciprocity as the concept of "the oneness of life and its environment." As President Ikeda writes, "The environment and the living body are seemingly separate phenomena that mutually influence each other, yet both are in essence embodiments of the ultimate reality of life."⁷ Attachment research supports this oneness principle. In Buddhism, the oneness of self and environment has always indicated that we are not victims of our past and, through research in interpersonal neurobiology, concrete evidence is now mounting that we "influence our environment from the inside out."⁸

Current attachment research is important to us as Buddhist parents for two major reasons. First, this research helps us understand that we can change ourselves and our interactions despite our past experiences. Second, using attachment research and our own Buddhist wisdom, we can create improved emotional experiences for our children. Again, according to Siegel and Hartzell, "It is never too late to create positive changes in a child's life."⁹

Parents who practice Nichiren Buddhism know that hope is not enough. Courage, determination, and the effort to take action are also requirements for change. Based on our daily practice, we can utilize resources to support our efforts to change. Such resources may include self-help books and groups, therapy, parenting classes, and wise models of humane parenting we can observe in our environment. If we are determined to advance our skills, ability, and humaneness as parents, we will choose the correct resources we need to become better parents. The wisdom we gain from our practice stems from the depth of our determination.

*This is a slightly revised version of an article that was published in: *Living Buddhism, Vol. 8, No. 8 (July 2004), pp10-11.*

Resources:

1. Ikeda, Daisaku. *Faith Into Action*. Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 1999, p. 126-27.
2. Martin, Greg, "The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra," *World Tribune*, October 17, 2003, p.7.
3. Ibid.
4. Schore, Allan, "The Right Hemisphere is Dominant in Clinical Work: Implications of Recent Neuroscience for Psychotherapists." Address to conference, "New Developments in Attachment Theory: Application to Clinical Practice," UCLA Extension and Lifespan Learning Institute, March 9, 2003.
5. Siegel, Daniel and Hartzell, Mary. *Parenting from the Inside Out*, New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher Putnam, 2003, p. 22.
6. Ibid.
7. Ikeda, Daisaku. *Unlocking the mysteries of Birth and Death...and Everything in Between* (Santa Monica: Middle Way Press), 2003, P. 30.
8. Ibid., p. 31.
9. Siegel and Hartzell, loc. cit.