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EAT YOUR VEGGIES

by David M. Valadez

As parents, my wife and I have to make decisions for our children. Like all parents, we try to balance our decisions with wisdom and compassion, all the while making them according to the maturity level of the child. In the end, we try to promote things that are positive in nature while we attempt to limit or restrict those things that may be neutral or negative in nature. Like all parents, we try to do this for intellectual matters, nutritional matters, emotional matters, physical matters, spiritual matters, etc.

For example, when our children were too young to have any sense of awareness, any sense of their own mortality, or any sense of how some events can be irreversible, when we had to walk through a parking lot for example, we carried them in our arms. We did not give them a choice, in light of their maturity level, to walk alone in parking lots or even to walk by our side while holding our hands. As they have matured, as they have gained a sense of awareness, a sense of their own mortality, and a sense of the irreversibility of some events, they have gone from holding our hands while walking beside us, to holding on to us while walking beside us, to walking near us as we cross through parking lots.

Through such actions, we, like all parents, seek to do what is best for our children. In doing so, depending upon what all is involved, and depending upon the child's capacity to be self-responsible in regards to what might be involved, sometimes we make "executive decisions." That is to say, sometimes we offer no choices to our children, making our decisions regardless of their preferences or desires. At those times, we postpone the responsibility of choice to a later date of greater maturity in the child.

Another example: Right now, my children prefer what I would consider by my standards to be a limited diet. Let me take my son for example. He is four years old. As a more experienced human being, I know that the quality of one's diet is directly proportional to the quality of one's overall health. My son, at four, does not know this. He does not know of diabetes, of heart failure, of osteoporosis, of vitamin deficiencies, of irritable bowel syndrome, of stress intolerance, etc. He only knows that vegetables do not taste as good as ice cream.

With compassion, I can acknowledge my son's desire for ice cream. I can even acknowledge his personal distaste for vegetables. However, because I know what I know, I know that there is no wisdom in allowing my son's lack of experience to dictate what his diet should and/or should not consist of. In fact, because of what I know, I also know that there is a greater compassion in caring for my son in ways he is not ready to or willing to care for himself. This means, sometimes, the greater compassion lies on the opposite side of his desire, his preferences, and/or things that taste good to him.

Thus, my son says, "I want to eat ice cream." I say, "Son, eat your vegetables." My son says, "I only like ice cream." I say, "What does that have to do with anything? We are not talking about what we like. If we were, why stop at food? I like Ferraris and vacations in paradise; you like trips to Disneyland and toys on Christmas. Eat your vegetables." Thinking on things a bit and sensing my resolve, my son says, "Okay," and then he eats his vegetables. After dinner, I say, "Why don't we go ask your mom and your sister if they would like for us to take them to the ice cream parlor?" He smiles, eyes bright. Wisdom and compassion. On some days, my son does not want to do Aikido. He would rather stay home and play video games. As a more experienced human being, I know that we are not just made up of the physical. I know we are of the spirit. I know that our overall wellness is directly related to how much or how little we cultivate our spirit. My son does not know of this. He does not know of the sufferings of pride, fear, and ignorance. He does not know how he can and will torture himself and others, even the ones he loves, by these things. He does not know of the burdens of egocentricism -- of how destructive such energy is. He does not understand that he can gain the whole of the material world and still feel empty, still be plagued by depression, still be plagued by anxiety and anger, and by a lack of center. My son only knows that if he goes to the dojo he cannot stay home and play video games.

Thus, my son says, "I want to stay home and play video games." I say, "Son, you are going to practice your Aikido." My son says, "I only like video games." I say, "What does that have to do with anything? We are not talking about what we like. If we were, why stop at video games? I like Ferraris and vacations in paradise; you like trips to Disneyland and toys on Christmas. You are going to practice your Aikido." Thinking on things a bit and sensing my resolve, my son says, "Okay," and he prepares to leave for the dojo. After practice, on the drive home, I say, "Why don't we ask your mom and your sister if they think they can beat us in Mario Soccer -- let's challenge them to a match tonight before bed!" He smiles, eyes bright. Wisdom and compassion.

Through such interactions, I hope, our parenting will have planted in our children the seeds of one of the most invaluable lessons a seeker of the Way can learn: The cultivation of the self is as dependent upon our desires as it is upon our capacity to detach from them. There is a doing of what must be done involved in the fulfillment of the Self, and our capacity at that doing is directly related, in part, to our ability to maintain wisdom in the face of our whims and fancies. My wife and I do not expect our children to get this now, but we expect them to have a fighting chance to understand it one day. This is how we give them a fighting chance.