

Meditation and the Metamorphosis of Childhood

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Received January 2026

Accepted for publication March 2026

Published May 2026

Abstract

Mindfulness meditation is inherently different for the adult than for the child. We explore this in relation to accessing inherent life force through the lens of Enki Education.

Keywords: *meditation, metamorphosis, child development*

- *The meditation master holds an open, if broken, heart even as bombs fall on his homeland.*
- *The yogi has only his breech-cloth and begging bowl, yet laughs with abandon.*
- *The toddler, undistracted by rushing traffic and wailing sirens, squats to watch ants as they carry their eggs about.*
- *The kindergartner shows determination as he struggles to master his two wheeler, bloody knees and all.*

What's the same here, and what's different? For the most part, different as they are, all four of these situations move us, awakening our hearts and our interest. Why? We believe it is because each of these people is fully present with himself and his world, no matter what is happening around him. As humans, we recognize this open-hearted presence as a state of wholeness and well-being; we feel a vital life-force flowing through no matter what the particular situation. We stop in wonder and appreciation because we connect to the inner wellbeing of each of these people through our very human resonance; it is a

feeling of unshakable truth that we cannot reason out, only sense and feel.

Vital life-force. Yogi or toddler – we are drawn to this experience because we recognize it. We all have some experience of connecting to a life-force that is fully non-dependent – in nature, in our chosen art or profession, watching a sunrise or a wave crash, in joy, in grief, in meeting the world anew as a tiny child. “Non-dependent” because it is not something we earn, it is not the result of some gift we are born with; it is inherent.

Inherent: not earned and therefore cannot be lost.

When we connect with this life-force or inherent vitality we are fully present; on some level, everyone around us feels it. For most of us, in adulthood it is a fleeting state. By good fortune, those of us who love working with children, being with children, are exposed to it often and are deeply nourished by this very connection or we could not go on in this demanding work year after year!

Cultivating this connection is the goal of all contemplative spiritual practices no matter the

method or religion. By definition that connection to life-force *is* contemplative spirituality. It is the lake from which the river of deep compassion and wisdom naturally springs. Supporting connection to this life-force is also the goal of Enki Education for both the adult and the child, because that connection to vital life-force is the source of true wellbeing. That is true for adult and child alike, but children are not just miniature adults. So, the question becomes: How can we cultivate this state in the child? As we will discuss below, though the goal for adult and child is the same, the paths diverge.

In Enki Education we have adult students, teachers, parents, and consultants who are long-time meditators with many decades of experience. Though they come from many traditions, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and secular traditions, we see a common ground: we all believe that for adults, especially those raising and working with children, some kind of structured mindfulness meditation practice is a central and critical tool in the process of experiencing our own inherent vitality. This cultivates the ability to release the inevitable catches or triggers that will arise in the reality of working with growing children (or anyone else!); it fine-tunes the natural human resonance that tells what is happening inside another and what is needed to help them forward. And it helps us cradle the bruises of our inevitable, and very human, falls. Critical. For adults, who are naturally seated in the mind, having a conscious, structured, and disciplined meditation practice anchors us in the stormiest of seas. Non-sectarian mindfulness meditation practices are a central part of the Enki Teacher Training and the Enki teacher's life. We have no question about its importance.

For the children, the goal is the same: accessing inherent vitality. But for children, the path is not

the same. The road to accessing their own inherent vitality is distinctly different.

Children are not just little adults and, because of the hard wired process of human development, they cannot access inherent vitality through structured meditation practices. They can follow our instructions and mimic our words and actions, but the deep well from which true wisdom and compassion flow, i.e., their inherent vitality, cannot be accessed with the same tools. Why?

Looking at the process of metamorphosis in other creatures can shed much light on the process children are undergoing. Take the butterfly. We know that once it is out of its "womb" (egg), it is first a caterpillar, then a chrysalis, and finally, a butterfly. But how much do we know about its nourishment at each stage? What nourishes a butterfly? The butterfly must feed on nectar; its biochemistry is built to digest and utilize nectar, and its anatomy is structured to retrieve this food from flowers. Great. We know what is needed for a butterfly. We also know that we want the caterpillar to grow into a beautiful and strong butterfly. Perfect. We know what to do: feed him nectar!

As you have likely guessed, this is not appropriate nutrition for the caterpillar! Even a small amount would both starve and poison him. Taking a little bit of the most powerful adult food does not help the caterpillar survive, let alone thrive! So then, let us think of pumping nectar into a chrysalis just as it is busy digesting the caterpillar, magically turning its own being into a soup from which a butterfly can emerge; the nectar so vital to a butterfly will be toxic to this process. We must look at the specific nature and needs of the caterpillar if we are to support healthy growth.

The enormity of differences in each stage of the butterfly's life make it very easy to see he cannot have the same nourishment at each stage. We can't see that on the outside of the child, but the

more deeply we come to know children, the more clear it is that the inner differences are no less seismic, and they too happen metamorphically.

Our focus in Enki is on how to, in effect, feed the caterpillar what it needs, provide what the chrysalis needs, and then offer the butterfly all the nectar it wants. So, we feel it is important that as teachers and parents we look deeply at the whys and wherefores' of any meditation *practice* in relation to: a) what we as adults are seeking in these practices, and b) the three very different stages of child development - early childhood, the elementary years, and high school. In that way we can relate to what is most alive in the child now. This gives him the acknowledgement and nourishment to jump forward under his own inner power.

On the other side, *our* pulling the child ahead, asking him to mimic adult methods, actually *undermines* the very connections we seek to strengthen. For this reason, in Enki we DO NOT recommend meditation practice for children under 12 or 13 years old.

We are aware that there are many who will argue with that perspective; those of us who are committed and longtime meditation practitioners had to work through these important arguments many times, but each time we come out more committed to meeting the children where they are. We are also aware that there are many examples of how the children become "grounded and centered" through formal meditation practices. Still, we maintain that this "grounded-ness" is not rooted in a deep connection with their own vitality, but is more the result of band-aiding a much deeper wound, band-aiding vs healing. In the hope that you will consider that possibility, we will detail our perspective below.

The human metamorphosis. Let us first look at the general human being. Body, Heart, and Mind are the terms we, in Enki Education, use to describe the three core capacities of the human, and in the course of child development, each has a time on center stage. Each of these capacities has its own means of learning, its own means of expressing, its own challenges, and its own wisdom. As adults, we are very familiar with the capacity of mind and the unique and amazing ways it functions - gathering, analyzing, reflecting. Also, many of us have also experienced a time when the body remembered something the mind could not – a tune we could not consciously remember but one our hands could pick out on an instrument, or the path to a destination we could walk or drive, but not describe. And often our hearts guide us in ways our minds cannot even fathom, i.e., we feel an unshakable knowing of a truth we cannot reason out or prove. Each capacity is very much its own vehicle, with its own driver and its own needs. *And* all three have to work together to fully experience the breadth and depth of life.

In brief: in the realm of the body, we find the ability to open to and absorb the world around us, judgment free. As William Blake sums it up, this is the ability to "see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower."(Blake et al., 1863)

In the realm of Heart, we are anchored in communication, connection, and relationships. This capacity includes all types of communication and connection, including all the arts, and the connection between our own body and mind.

In the realm of Mind, we draw deeply on analyzing, sequencing, logic, and reflection. Stepping back to reflect is the gift and the tool of the Mind capacity.

When all these are integrating, we see *free and flexible thinking that carries the openness of body and the warm wisdom of heart*. And that is the

goal of meditation practice no matter how old we are.

All people have all three capacities, at all times throughout our lives. However, in the course of child development, each capacity has a natural time of taking “center stage.” During this time, the specific capacity is heightened and it forms the container for all else. For example, it is clear that a two year old is thinking. *But* he thinks in a very different way from an adolescent; it is an active engaged noticing, and not the critical stepping back to prove a point- however absurd that point might seem!

The young child thinks with his whole body and all his senses. He must move and do in order to take in, digest, and express; this is his thinking. He absorbs his experience through his whole body. Movement and the senses form the container for his thinking and his feeling. So, the particular heightened capacity –in this case body – gives flavor and texture to the way the child will meet the world, as well as to how and what he can learn in a way that will nourish him deeply. Anything that pulls him away from this, or calls him to step back to reflect, is destructive to this integration. The Body capacity cannot be nourished by the stepping back required for reflection, analysis, comprehension, and by definition, nothing can be fully experienced in its own right if we are stepping back. When he steps back to analyze or even understand a concept, he steps out of his own experience and dis-integrates.

The elementary aged child has moved into the heart stage where imagination is the primary tool he uses to relate and connect – and his primary focus is on connection. Story and all the arts, teamwork and play, are the primary food for this experience of connection. This opens a new world of possibilities for him, but for these new possibilities to be nourishing, they must come to him through the heart. Again, when he steps back

to reflect and analyze, he steps out of the direct heart connection.

Each capacity needs to have its day in the limelight so it can fully take root. When each of these is well nourished in its time, there is a hard-wired movement towards integration.

So, in relation to meditation practice, we have to return again to focus on the goal: accessing our life-force or inherent vitality. In that context, it is important to look at what we are asking of the children. If we bring them to a consciousness of their own minds or even their own emotions, we are asking them to step back from their experience – by definition, the consciousness needed to reflect asks that. Until they are primarily seated in mind – about 12 or 13 years old – the structured practice itself requires a dis-integration. Yes, they may perform well and even seem to be calming and centering. But they are doing so through dis-integration; we are teaching them that dis-integration is the source of approval and connection. Yikes.

Meditation practice relies on being conscious of one’s own mind; therefore, it is impossible for meditation practice *not* to pull the child into an all too early consciousness that is dis-integrating.

So how do we meet the core goal of bringing the child into presence, into connection with their own inherent vitality? In Enki we focus first and foremost on the teacher’s ability to cultivate meditation in action, or presence. From there, we work in harmony with child development. With the little ones, we can focus on the things that support integration in the Body realm; then we are working with meditation in action. Certainly, this can include times of the child crawling into your lap while *you* meditate and the child rests in your process. But far more important is that you honor their process of absorption. So, when your toddlers squat silently over the worms wriggling out of the mud, their integration is strongly

supported by you stopping to be present in silence, not explaining worm life, but standing with them in the awe of life. When they are running and tumbling in the wind or mushing around the paints, we notice their absorption and create an inner space in ourselves to honor it. Truly, meditation in action.

When the children are seated in the Heart realm, their focus is on relationships, and all the arts, including story and nature, are their path to integration. When that is happening, we see them settle into a deep absorption and we have the privilege of witnessing meditation in action.

Certainly, by elementary school, children can be taught to sit still and focus on their breath, noticing their thoughts. It looks good to adults, but it is not integrating for the child. They may behave as though they are in control, but what is happening inside them? Are they performing for the adult? Shutting down because they are trapped? Finding a false calm so they get approval? If we cannot stop to honor them where they are, we are teaching them to dis-integrate – the opposite of meditation. If instead, we offer story, art, and activity in which they can explore the world non-conceptually, then we are offering meditation in action.

Both age groups can learn to integrate through breathing and yoga postures when these activities are coupled with poetry, song, or story, **AND** are offered without explanation or reflection. In an average Enki day, you will see this happening: being lions in a movement circle; breath control when playing the recorder or singing. Most importantly, this happens in the modeling the teachers do with their own breath as they listen to the children report a problem, or as they center themselves while the class settles for a story, or in their attention to a transition between activities. But none of these include commentary, explanation, warning, or reflection and concept, as

those will throw the children into their minds where, for a few years yet, integration cannot happen.

When we make this meditation-in-action the mainstay of our days (and no one can do it constantly!), we accomplish something far more critical than a moment's peace: we set the child's internal compass to seek this experience of connection to his own inherent vitality. It becomes his true-north and a tool to come back to his own wellbeing when things get rough.

So, for children under 12 or 13 formal meditation practice will be dis-integrating and not integrating – and conversely, it will therefore not really be meditation at all! Until a child is moving naturally into his mind as a central capacity, i.e., in early adolescence, we do not recommend formal meditation practice. In Enki, instead, the entire day is focused on cultivating meditation in action through the rhythms, environment, and activities we live and breathe. For us, the entire day, including and especially, every transition, is the entirety of the children's meditation.

The Exceptions:

There are certainly situations in which it is quite the uphill battle to cultivate integration through movement and the arts, i.e., the activities natural to the child's development. Children in high stress or ongoing trauma situations will likely need extra support to even touch on integration as their ground. They are often already locked in their nervous system's alarm patterns; sometimes these can open best through a more conscious meditation. This is like putting a feeding tube in a starving child or an IV in a dehydrated one – necessary in the moment – and wise – but not an ultimate road to health. Rather formal meditation in these situations, like the feeding tube, offer a needed bridge to taking in real nourishment. It is important to see this conscious work with breath

and self-awareness as “bridge-building” so that deeper integration can be fostered later.

One step at a time, we move the focus on to the body and breath, and not on reflection. One step at a time, conscious and explicit calming techniques can become story, movement, and art. Rather than mastering behaviors, we see the child relax back into the integration natural to his development, a little at a time.

When we let the formal, reflective practices become our “behavior tools,” it is comparable to having him live primarily on vitamins when he is not eating well. Yes, the vitamins give them a temporary quick fix and are sometimes a necessary savior, but let us not mistake that for real nourishment. Same here: some version of formal mindfulness may calm the child locked in high alarm for the moment, but, unless we keep our eye on the prize, it covers over the need for the calm of deep integration and that is our true goal. It is nature, story, the arts, and exploration through movement and imagination that will bring the children, right through the Jr High years, into a strong and stable connection with their inherent vitality. For the children, this is meditation in action. And it is why these are the central teaching tools of Enki Education.

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Author Bio

Beth Sutton, M.Ed., is the director and developer of Enki Education. Over her 57 years in education she has worked with alternative education, emergent curriculum, public schools, Waldorf classes, and homeschoolers. For the last 35 years she’s been developing and teaching in the Enki approach with both children and adults. Beth is the mother of three grown children and the grandmother of seven, four of whom she homeschooled for 10 years. Currently Beth leads Enki Education professional courses for teachers and parents. She is committed to helping students, young and old, open doorways to their inherent vitality.