

## **Finding Joy in Family Life Cynthia and Gustavo Bulgach, with 3-month-old Catalina Rose.**

*In 1998, the Year of Victory of the People for the New Century, the SGI-USA will focus on three major areas: supporting members' quests for happiness, nurturing youth and strengthening families. In the following conversation, Gustavo and Cynthia Bulgach discuss their work, marriage, parenting and the influence of their Buddhist practice in creating a harmonious family life. Gustavo is a musician, composer and music teacher, Cynthia is a producer of commercials. Living Buddhism correspondent Kathleen Slattery visited the couple and their 3-month-old baby girl, Catalina Rose, at their new home in Venice, California.*

**Cynthia:** It was New Year's Day, 1994, when we met.

**Gustavo:** I had started chanting two weeks before. One of my music students told me that if I wanted to change my life, I should chant and give this practice a try. So I did, and after thirteen days, I met Cynthia. I was playing in a band performing for the New Year's Day meeting, and she was helping with the sound system.

I'm always open for whatever is going to happen. You know, when you go to a meeting the first time, you hear about benefits, but you never realize the benefits are always there. It's up to you to have the life-condition high enough to see the benefits in front of your eyes and to be able to grasp them. So, a little slap in my face was Cynthia. "Open your eyes! I'm here!"

It was the way she cares about people that struck me, the way she in particular cared about me. I was new in town. I had been living here about a year. I had moved from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to New York, then back to Argentina and then here to Los Angeles. American culture is so different from Argentinian culture, and that makes it a big challenge for people who are immigrants to fit into a new society. Especially in L.A. or in New York—it's a big collage of different cultures.

**Cynthia:** While I participated in young women's division activities for ten years, I was trying to find a guy. It's really important to me to do kosen-rufu and do altruistic things, but I always found myself with people who didn't have the same values, or, whenever there was a conflict, we would reach a deadlock. I just couldn't find that right situation where we could be side by side, looking toward the future.

When Gustavo and I met, I was a young women's headquarters leader and we were holding monthly self-esteem meetings, which were so awesome. We had so many breakthroughs through our daimoku and dialogues. I remember distinctly one day when I had this catharsis, where I finally got the message in "On Attaining Buddhahood"—that you have to love yourself totally—we have Buddhahood inside us. It sunk in that the reason why my relationships weren't working was because I had to love myself 100 percent first; that was the bottom line. I had to accept myself as I am, stop picking on myself; that if I'm not perfectly thin or perfectly this or that, just get over it and realize I am a true Buddha, period.

When I had that kind of deep change in my heart, I met Gustavo two or three weeks later. I realize I had to go through all those years of chanting and unfulfilling relationships to get to the point where I could see his value, his heart, his great qualities—and see that his whole being is so much more important than money, color, creed, religion, etc.

I think one reason why our relationship is so good, too, is that we started out as friends for a couple of months, hanging out, hiking. There was always a group of people, and we would just talk and laugh; we respected each other before there were any kind of romantic notions. That really helped us to have a solid foundation.

I remember when we were first seeing each other, I was sick. I had finished working on a huge project, and I was really tired. Gustavo said, “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.” And I thought, what a concept! A guy taking care of me! I’m usually the caretaker, I’m usually the one who’s making everything happen. Someone else actually can take care of me!

**Gustavo:** I ran over there to make sure she was fine. It wasn’t a big deal for me, but it seemed like it was for her.

**Cynthia:** He’s really nurturing, and that was such an eye-opener for me, to find a guy who is like me, someone who actually cares about other people, cares about the world. That to me was a really big reason why we’re together, plus the fact that we laugh together so much.

We got married in Argentina nine months after we met. Then we had a Buddhist wedding four months later in L.A. We had people flying in from Argentina, England, Detroit, Oregon, San Francisco, San Diego, Mexico, Arizona, Florida and New York to attend the wedding.

Last Christmas Gustavo said, “Maybe this year we could think about having a baby.” One week later, I conceived.

**Gustavo:** She brought the confidence to the family. I was completely in shock when she called me from Miami and said: “Guess what? I’m pregnant!”

**Cynthia:** I was in Miami shooting a commercial.

**Gustavo:** I was so scared that I said I have to take a shower. I realized that I had the phone in my hand when I was in the shower. Then she said, “Everything’s going to be fine.” And it is fine. It’s great!

**Cynthia:** My life is pretty close to what I was hoping it would be like, even better. Just having a family is an amazing experience, but I wasn’t really mentally prepared for having such a commitment and responsibility. I really was dragging my heels about starting a family. I waited until I was 35 to have a baby. That’s pretty old in some parts of the world (laughs). I thought that my youth would be gone if I had a baby, and it’s just the opposite. Being around Catalina makes me see things through a baby’s eyes. It’s kind of like you start over with a kid.

**Gustavo:** I think people start a family because they want to share part of their lives. My vision of family is that we might have all these plans in the present, but we also have a bright future, and we have to be aware of that.

**Cynthia:** Yeah, you were also inspired by Catalina, because you composed a beautiful song for her, a saxophone solo, kind of jazzy.

**Gustavo:** I play the saxophone and also arrange and compose. Since I'm deeply involved in music, it's a great feeling to get inspired.

I always want to create value. I'm trying to grasp all of these different benefits—money, my family. Money is welcome because it means that what I'm doing is fine. I can pay the bills, I can support my family. If I didn't make any money playing music, I would do something else. I'm really clear about that. I'm not a dreamer, like, I want to do music and that's it.

**Cynthia:** As a producer, I do commercials and music videos, though I've worked on a few feature films.

Since May 1997, I've been able to do every single job out of my house, which is unusual, because for the most part, I would have to go work in the production office. It's my baby's good fortune because I can be breastfeeding when I need to and take care of her instead of having some other person do it. That would have been such a dilemma for me. I used to wonder how am I going to be a career person and still take a year or two off? So far, we're fortunate we've been able to incorporate both.

I'm home a lot, but when I have to be out on the set, Gustavo's with her. Even when we're both here, we share in caring for the baby equally. It's not like: "She's dirty, you take her. You change the baby." I'm still feeding Catalina a couple of times in the middle of the night. If she needs to be changed, Gustavo will do it. He really helps so much. He doesn't feel like the baby is "the woman's job."

**Gustavo:** Well, before the baby was born, my priority was music. Now it's the baby. It's fun to be with her. Sometimes I play concerts for her, and if she cries, that means I'm not playing that well! I love to be with her.

**Cynthia:** We do things together, but Gustavo's got to go off and do his own things at night sometimes. Now that we have a baby I rarely go to his gigs. I have my own friends that he doesn't necessarily hang out with, and we go and do our hikes or walks. We manage to have time together, but we both travel a lot. Even while I was pregnant I did a job in Spain producing a music video, and I was gone for three weeks. Then Gustavo might be gone for a couple of weeks on tour.

**Gustavo:** We stay united because we want to be with each other.

**Cynthia:** We talk every day on the phone. Even when we're in town, we talk at

least a couple of times. I think it's consideration for the other person's schedule and feelings and opinions.

**Gustavo:** We know exactly who the other person is, what we each want. If I wanted to go out of town for nine months, I could, but that's not what I want to do.

**Cynthia:** If that were to happen, he would consult me first. We would talk about it and figure out a way so that I would be able to go on the road with him. That's how we maintain our individuality. I'm not the type of person who will stop doing what I love to do because someone else is in my life. We respect each other's growth and individual journey.

Gustavo is totally supportive of me. A lot of people get married and want to change the other person—it doesn't work that way. I knew exactly what I was getting when I got him, and I want him to be happy with what he does. It's really important for us to keep going on our separate paths—him as a musician, me as a producer—and not compromise. We should continue on with our personal dreams. Why compromise? To live a life of regret? No thanks! I think that's really important, not to get so codependent that your every move has to be with the other person.

**Gustavo:** Sometimes we have the same point of view, sometimes not. We say, OK, we have to spend time talking about what we have here. So we chant first, then we talk about it.

**Cynthia:** Every morning we get up and we chant together; that is the foundation, first and foremost. The baby is usually with us. When there's conflict, I feel free enough and accepted by Gustavo that I can say, "You know, this is a fear I'm having." I can talk to him, and even if we don't agree in the beginning, he invariably will go and chant about the situation on his own. He usually comes back to me and says, "Well, this is what I think," or, "This is how we can solve that," or, "Here's a solution," or, "I still think I'm right." We can move on, and I can do the same for him.

My parents were divorced when I was 11 and it was really hard. My whole life changed. I was able to see my dad a lot, even though I lived with my mom and my brother and sister. Then my mother remarried and we had a stepbrother and two stepsisters, so I've always had an extended family. To this day that's what a family is for me, because Gustavo and I have so many close friends whom we see every day, or four or five times a week. Our family includes our friends, and people in the SGI because our immediately family members live in Argentina, Oregon and Detroit. I feel with Gustavo, that we won't be breaking up, so I am really confident about Catalina's future.

**Gustavo:** I love to challenge myself; for example, I ride my bicycle a couple times a week to Soka University in Calabasas, and back, about a fifty-mile round trip, even if I feel weak or if the weather is bad. I'm committed, I have to go. There is no

other way. I mean, there is no way for me to give up in the middle of the road, or to call Cynthia and say, "Come pick me up." When you have these weak attitudes, you start breaking up with your partner, when you start thinking...

**Cynthia:** That there is a way out.

**Gustavo:** Yeah. This is not a choice for us. We are not even thinking about breaking up, because this is not a choice.

**Cynthia:** It's not an option. As far as the family is concerned, it's about taking responsibility. I mean, we both know that we have to take responsibility for the problems that come up. It's not like we blame the other person. Instead, we talk about it, and then we really make sure that we take responsibility for our part in that conflict.

**Gustavo:** It's not about who's guilty, it's about how we can move forward.

**Cynthia:** Taking responsibility is a basic principle in Buddhism. I feel the reason why most people are unhappy is because they can't find the joy in the moment, or feel appreciation for what they do have. Instead they feel sad about what they don't have. Whenever it gets hard, I chant to have appreciation for the struggle itself. It's not like, "I have a problem, yippee!" But somehow it is the key to taking the next step in my faith. So I welcome whatever's happening.

**Gustavo:** We always struggle—everybody, every day, is in some kind of struggle. When you train yourself to live with that fact and feel joy for your little successes, I feel that's when you add to your life instead of subtracting. You learn to appreciate what you have. I appreciate what I have now. Neither I nor Cynthia come from a rich family. We really appreciate what we have.

**Cynthia:** Going through all my struggles until now—learning how to take care of other people—is directly related to taking care of my family. By having young women's division members to take care of, to make sure they knew the schedule and that they were getting benefits in their lives—has had an impact on me being able to take care of my home, my husband, my baby.

Catalina has brought so much fortune to our family. She is such an individual already, so determined, with a will of iron. I don't feel an ownership thing. I just feel like we're here to get her going in the right direction, to really give her support and love, but not to make decisions for her. Obviously, we're going to raise her as a Buddhist, and hopefully she'll practice; if she doesn't, that's her choice. She'll know the values that we have.

**Gustavo:** The only thing we can teach her is...

**Cynthia:** Discipline and values.

**Gustavo:** Discipline and values. Discipline is one of the highest values you can ever show people. You can't tell them, you have to show them. I think every family is unique. Follow your heart—just do it. You're never going to be wrong if you trust yourself. □

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