

Bart van Melik

*Family Awareness: A Relational Path to Freedom in Family Life*

Week One: "Reflecting on Family Roles and Expectations"

October 2, 2017



My name is Bart van Melik, and I'd love to take you on a journey to reflect on family in this Tricycle dharma talk series. We'll use a key teaching of the Buddha, the four noble truths, to shine a light on all the experiences that we can have when we are part of a family. The first talk in this four-part series is on family awareness.

But even before I say anything else, I just want to start by bringing in my mom. Just before filming this, she texted me, saying, "Good luck." She says, "You know, I can miss you, you know," she tells my sister and my dad and I, but what she also sometimes says is, "Sometimes, I can just put you behind the wallpaper." I see her saying that in Dutch. What's very poignant right now is that ever since about a decade ago, my wife, who moved to New York from Holland, probably wants to glue me behind the wallpaper more often.

For most of us, family is one of our most important social structures. In this talk, I want to take you on a journey to explore family life by drawing on the specific teachings of the Buddha called the four noble truths. You've probably heard of them. The most succinct way of describing them is to say that there is suffering, stress, and pain in life, but these have causes. There's an end to all of this; there is peace that we can feel in our living, and there are causes to that as well.

So now, as you're sitting in front of a screen or holding a phone, just take a moment reflect: What does family mean to you? I've been asking this question to a lot of communities that I teach meditation to, and I've heard myself recently saying that, for me, when I think of family, it's really about devotion. It's about connection. Ever since my wife and I were blessed with the birth of our 3-year-old son, Lou, family has been about love. Especially in the beginning, people would ask me, "How's the baby?" and I constantly heard myself saying, "I love him more every day."

This could be one way of relating to family—it feels like a safe haven to you. Recently I was offering a class in a juvenile detention center where I go weekly to speak about family. I asked the same question: What does family mean to you? What was so beautiful—there was one guy

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who just pulled up his T-shirt a little bit, and it said, "Family One." Family first. And he said, "Nuff said." I remember another girl when I was teaching an all-girls class in the same facility who said, "This came to mind. When you're happy with your family, you're happy with yourself." This could be one way that you experience family.

We'll talk soon about an actual definition for the meaning of "family," but I love how Iyanla Vanzant [author of *Peace from Broken Pieces*] puts it. She says, "Family's supposed to be our safe haven, but very often it's the place where we find the deepest heartache." This could also be your experience of family.

Another group of young people that I teach weekly is a group in residential treatment. Most of the times they're in the residential treatment center because it's not working out with their family. I remember half of the group—we were about 12—said, "Family right now doesn't mean that much to me. It means a lot of pain."

There was one girl from that group who asked me, "Bart, did you see my video on TV recently?" I said, "No, what was it about?" She said, "Every Sunday, on a local New York news channel, kids who need foster homes can introduce themselves." She said, "It went really well. I wasn't afraid speaking in front of a camera. It worked beautifully. But," she said, "no one responded to my video." And I just remembered—I can even feel it right now as I'm bringing that whole scene back to mind—the sense of deep pain that she was feeling. Every cell in me wanted to scream to her, "I'll take you home."

Please know that in these talks, when we reflect on our family, use it in the broadest way that works for you.

[The fantasy author] Jim Butcher has said, "I don't care about whose DNA has recombined with whose. When everything goes to hell, the people who stand behind you without flinching—they are your family." I had an experience of that when I came to New York a decade ago with my wife. We had a friend, Gil, who said, "Why don't you just stay in my apartment? I have an extra

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room so you can get settled and see from there if you can find your own space." That process took five years. So for five years, we were living with Gil and another of his dear friends that he considered his son. We ended up becoming a family. I don't call Gil a friend anymore, actually. We refer to him as our New York father and our son calls him Uncle Gil.

I see that a lot when I work with young people that I work with in New York. When we reflect on, for example, friendship, a lot of them say, "When someone becomes a real, *real* friend, we refer to them more often as a sister or a brother."

Now let's turn to the first noble truth and see if we can use it to look at our experiences within our family. This first noble truth talks about *dukkha* [suffering]. "Dukkha" is a term in the Pali language in which the Buddhist teaching were recorded, and it means suffering. It also means pain, physical pain, mental pain, and dissatisfaction. When the Buddha unpacked it, he started with some very concrete things. He said birth, aging, sickness, and death are part of this first noble truth called dukkha. It doesn't take a lot for us to sit with that and go, "Yeah. This is part of life that's hard. It's difficult."

Buddha also talked about being separated from the beloved, as it is sometimes translated, as an experience of suffering. I just have to think of family members back home that I don't see often. I have a dear friend, Anna Marie, who passed away about five years ago in her mid-thirties, leaving behind two children and a young husband. I was recently spending some time in a hospice where I was told by a staff person that some people who are at the end of their life can actually bear witness to being separated from their loved ones. They're ready to die, but they wait. Some people actually have the ability to wait before they die just to be with their loved ones.

The Buddha also talked about dukkha being associating with the "unbeloved," as it is sometimes archaically translated. This happens so often in family when we are with family members whose

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behavior is different and challenging. The thing is, family knows us so well. Most of the time they see everything, so they know how to push our buttons.

I really love how Jack Kornfield, a meditation teacher, calls family one of the final frontiers of spiritual development. It's been said that even when spiritual leaders come home and be with their family, it's not that easy.

I'd like to take out one key element of this broad definition of dukkha, and that is birth. Having witnessed a childbirth through my wife and son, I know that physical birth is hard. But dukkha can also talk about mental birth. What the Buddha was talking about is that so often we slowly and habitually take on roles that we have with other people, especially with family. You can think in terms of having the role of the stepchild or the child. You're assuming the role of the caregiver or parent, nephew, uncle, you name it.

These roles are necessary for us to navigate our lives, but so often we start to identify with them and add things to it. The mind is so good at constructing things on top of things. Then, the daughter might all of a sudden become the responsible daughter, who has to live up to this role of always doing the right thing, or being the successful son. Then, there is this image or role that one takes on, thinking, *I have to achieve, and I have to look good in front of my family*. Not only do we take these roles on, we also assume them with other people. You might have someone in your family, or someone that you call family, who's always complaining. You see them through this lens when they are complaining. Or, for example, I have a brother-in-law, and he could make a rocket out of a meditation bowl; he's very handy. Often, it's almost taken for granted that he will be the one we turn to when we need something to fix. We start to see people more and more in a rigid way within these roles. They can become conditioned over years, even through generations.

I was recently teaching a mindful families class, and it was great. We had children, parents, and caregivers all together meditating, doing mindful drawing. Then at the end, when we were doing

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our sit, there was one father who was sitting [improperly] but then he would correct his son's posture. I was probably suggesting something to let the spine be upright, but even as I kept giving instructions, I could still see the father constantly paying attention to how his son was doing it. So, I thought, maybe I should just suggest to the whole group: What would it be like if you just paid attention to yourself? No need to pay attention to anyone else.

I could see his body softening a little bit. The shoulders came down, and then after our practice, we reflected on how it was and it was beautiful. He mentioned that he saw a very, very strong pattern that all of a sudden became much clearer to him. He said, "I take on this role of needing to correct my son, my children." He said that while he was meditating he not only felt a sense of release, but he also noticed that his dad did the same thing. It can be very subtle, like maybe being the caregiver who has a hard time crying in front of their children, and how that might have been conditioned by previous caregivers.

So let me ask you right now, just as a reflection: What roles do you take on in your own family? What roles are expected from you? The Buddha really encourages us to see the suffering element in adopting roles, because they become rigid. Most of the times we act out of habit when we're in these roles or see our loved ones in these roles. We constantly look for confirmation that we are right, thinking, *This is just my complaining family member again.*

This first noble truth is about understanding the nature of our suffering. From there, we can dive into specific elements. For this series, I invite you to see when you are taking on a specific role with your loved ones. It's constantly happening around us. And when you do, notice that there's some sense of space in the actual seeing of it, because when we get to see it, it could be the doorway into a different relationship. We start to perhaps be more kind in that moment and go, "Huh, here it is again." I take on the role for myself, for example, as the worrying one. When my wife and young child have to do something together, I say, "Oh, will we get there on time?"

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See it again. See how the role has an effect on your family members. Then we can start to open to more compassion, and perhaps, step by step, we can forgive both others and ourselves.