

Bart van Melik

Family Awareness: A Relational Path to Freedom in Family Life

Week Two: “Our Hunger to Be Seen by Others”

October 9, 2017



Hi, my name is Barth van Melik. Welcome to talk two in the series: *Family Awareness: A Relational Path to Freedom in Family Life*. In the first talk, we've explored the first noble truth in the realm of family. Specifically, we've been looking into how we sometimes take on roles with our family members or take on a certain identity that is constricting, that is not helpful at all. We do the same thing with family members sometimes. We attribute roles and certain ideas to them, too. We've talked about, for example, taking on the role of having to be the responsible father or mother or caregiver, or the successful child, and having to live up to those ideas. One thing that I see happening quite often, something very subtle and often not seen with awareness, is being “the organized householder.” I'll talk more about that later on.

In this particular talk, we're going to shift from this understanding that there is suffering and pain in life, to the causes [of the pain]. We [will] look at it from a relational point of view, because everything that we do in family life is relational.

The first step that we usually do in response to suffering is to “bounce off of it.” We start to look for a different experience. The Buddha identified this root response to our suffering in one word in Pali—the language in which his teachings were recorded—*tanha*. This particular word is often in English translated as craving. You might have heard it translated as “wanting” something. Personally, I really like a translation and interpretation that Gregory Kramer, one of my meditation teachers, uses. He calls it *hunger*. So we are finding ourselves in a situation that is unpleasant, that's painful. There's this hunger that comes up for things to be different that they are; or we want to be; continue the way they are, but they change; we want them to change anyway. There's a visceral feeling of wanting it to be different.

An interesting way to work with this particular hunger and see it in our life is to interpret it as the *hunger to be seen*. I've gotten that from Gregory, too, who has created interpersonal dharma meditation practice called “inside dialogue.” In this particular practice, you actually see how

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these hungers operate while you're with other people. So much of our practice is done individually, yet so much of our lives are relational. I really like this interpretation: the hunger to be, or to be seen, in a certain way is a cause for all the roles that we take on.

The image that helped me get understanding is this: Have you ever seen a person in their convertible with loud music on? They're cruising around and their eyes are kind of looking around, like, *am I seen? Is someone seeing me?* Perhaps [they want to be seen as] really cool. This is such a natural phenomenon. When I started to see one of the causes of suffering in this relational way—as the hunger to be seen—I started seeing it in the natural world too, where animals want to impress one another. *See me!*

What I find so beautiful about the Buddhist teachings are that they're about seeing the nature of things. Seeing the nature of suffering. Seeing the nature of the causes of suffering. Hunger to be seen could be one way for you to frame what happens within your family. It kind of touches on the roles that we assume. For example, [I sometimes feel like I] want to be seen as the organized householder. Every time we have visitors, I vacuum the whole apartment. I am strongly conditioned to be seen as someone who is organized. It's tiring in a way, and sometimes it's painful. This is a simple example of how we want to be seen.

In my family, specifically, [this pattern] comes into being when I'm cooking, for example. Or when I've cleaned the house and there weren't any visitors coming, but then all I see is some dirt on the living room floor. [Without] awareness, I really want to be helped, I want my wife to say, "I'll [clean] it up." Or when I've cooked, I really want a compliment, perhaps, "Oh, this was great." We're constantly longing to be seen in a certain way. It can be conditioned [over the course of] a long, long time with family members. Like my mom, she would always say, "Try to eat everything that people serve you, and finish your plate." I can still hear the words.

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Just the other day, when I was with other kids the same age as our son, 3 years old, there was one kid talking about broccoli, how much he loved it; and our son, Lugo said: "Eew. I hate broccoli." I could just feel that sense of "I want him to love broccoli." I want him to be seen as someone who tries new stuff. It's so ingrained in us. It all starts with this very simple tendency, this hunger to be seen in a very specific way. Although it's natural, and we all have this deep sense of longing and wanting to be seen, when it becomes habitual and constricting, it's not a healthy strategy. Because what we do then is we put our happiness and dependence on other people—[we care about] how they see and respond to us.

There's another side to this, too. So you have the hunger to be seen as a cause of suffering—the hunger to be or the hunger to become. The flip side [of this is] the hunger to be unseen. A very striking image is when I travel on the subway, and I have our 3-year-old boy with us, and people start saying to him, "Oh, cutie, how you doing?" He immediately does this. [Hides behind arm] And he'll sometimes go and peek and then do that again. Which to me is a beautiful image of this tendency, this hunger to not be seen in a certain way. Quite often, we're shy. It's something that we are maybe exposing of our self that we don't want to show; maybe a role that we feel vulnerable in. Quite often there is shame involved, and shame has this tendency to close us off when we're not aware of it; [it makes us want] to disappear.

Last week, I had a 16-year-old girl in one of my classes, and we were reflecting on family. She said, "I never want to be someone's wife. I never want to be a mother. I never want to have a family. I don't want to be seen that way because of everything that happened to me through my family." The most extreme form of this is suicide, when the hunger to be unseen gets so strong that we want to vanish. We just don't want to exist anymore.

I remember teaching a retreat. I was talking about these causes of suffering in this particular relational way as the hungers to be seen and unseen. There was one participant, and he heard it,

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and he said, "This is so helpful for me to know that the Buddha had already pointed out this particular tendency. He pointed it out for us so many years ago, 2,600 years. And my family has had four suicides already. I, too, feel that tendency to not be or be seen so strong in myself quite often. But now that I have a framework that allows me to go: *Oh, here it is again.* [This] gives me more room. Gives me more courage to continue living."

Guess what, our family members hunger too. They, too, have this whole process, this natural process happening [in them] again and again. They, too, long to be seen in a certain way, and [long for] your appreciation. They, too, have moments when there is shame, when they really don't want to be seen, but you see it, and probably they know you're seeing it.

Now what's really beautiful about starting to look at our experience in this way—through this lens of these relational hungers—is that we start to see that [these hungers] are not just within us. They are happening everywhere around us. We touch on a more universal aspect of the teachings of the Buddha when we start to see that whatever we experience is of an impersonal nature. We start to see that our hungers, even the roles that we think we have to perform or assume, are not who we really are. The more we [are able to see this] over and over again—the suffering of the role or its cause—[the more space we will have].

Again, in this space, we can develop a kind awareness that [helps us note]: "It's like this right now." Then there's something that goes beyond all this. I just recently found [a quote from a] Rumi poem that I'd just like to share with you to close this second talk:

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

Thank you.