

Bart van Melik

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

Week Three: “Learning to Pause in the Heat of the Moment”

October 16, 2017



I'd like to welcome you back to the third talk of this series on how we explore our family life. Our family life can be the cause of a lot of suffering, but [we can understand] the specific causes of this suffering. We've been using the four noble truths as a way to look at our experiences. In this particular talk, we'll look at the third [noble truth]. To sum up, the first is about suffering. The second is about the causes [of suffering]. The third is about freedom, or peace that we can experience when these causes are not operating. I'd just like to keep mentioning this. When you hear me use the word *family*, use it in a way that feels comfortable to you. It doesn't have to [refer to] people who you are blood-related to at all.

I'd like to start with a story that comes from the suttas. The suttas are ancient teachings that are handed down to us [from the Buddha]. This particular sutta is about a brave young woman. She's training to be a professional acrobat with an older acrobat master. Their skill is to balance themselves on bamboo poles together. The master, as they're getting ready, suggests: “You look after me, and I'll look after you.” What I found so powerful about this young woman, she goes “No. No master, that won't do. This is how I suggest we do it. I protect myself and my balance. Through that, I will protect you.”

When the Buddha found out about this, he praised the wisdom of this young woman. This whole sutta brings us back to ourselves. It starts with our own practice of awareness, awareness as a form of protection. If we're not aware and we're not seeing suffering, the causes of suffering, we're acting out of habit—or what the Buddha often called delusion.

When we're in this habit mode—especially with family—we start assuming the roles that we take in our family, or we assume other people should perform [their roles] in a [certain] way.

This reminds me of an instruction that my teacher Joseph Goldstein got from his teacher; it says very simply, “The *thought* of your mother is not *your mother*.” We so often get trapped in this whole idea of constructions, of thoughts, of ideas that we're not seeing clearly.

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A very powerful instruction is to come home to this kind awareness. Gregory Kramer [insight meditation teacher] taught me the word *pause*. I've been using it in so many daily situations. I've heard other people practicing it too. Let's say you are in the middle of getting all worked up in your family. What would it be like if you were to actually pause for a moment and remember this kind awareness that knows, "Oh there's a sense of aggravation here right now. I feel like I'm not being seen by this loved one right now."

It's all happening in a few seconds, but you're seeing the suffering and its causes. Quite often, there's what one could call an awareness, a release happening from just seeing it, especially when we start seeing it over and over and over again. It takes practice.

One of my favorite stories is of a student of mine, Carlos. At the time, he must have been 14 years old. Carlos was living in a group home. He said that he'd been practicing pause. One class he came to me and said, "Bart, Bart, Bart. It really works. Pause works." I said what happened? He said, "Well, my roommate took something that belonged to me. Immediately I was mad at him. My fist was clenched and I was actually about to hit him, but I paused. Guess what? It didn't work. I still wanted to hit him in the face. Then I told myself one more time, *pause*. It still didn't work." He said, "Then the last time I did it before I wanted to punch him in the face, the pause actually allowed me to think I'm going to get in trouble for this. You know what? I'm going to remove myself from this situation and talk to my staff person."

While he was speaking about it, his smile was unforgettable. I loved it when he said, "It really, really works." This to me is a testimonial that [mirrors what] I've been seeing for myself. One of the most powerful aspects of this whole practice, and what actually drew me to it, is this idea of "come and see for yourself." It's what happens when we really open up to the truth of suffering, to its causes, and start seeing moments of release.

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When there are these moments of release, especially in the realm of family, we start to see others in a different way. We start to see our own behavior in a different way—the fear and frustration. It might still be there, but we're not acting on it so much. There's a sense of ease.

This is from [Thai forest monk] Ajahn Chah. He's a very famous meditation teacher from Thailand who passed away a few years ago. He goes, “Usually when people encounter something disagreeable, they don't open to it.” When people are criticized, they may respond with, “Don't bother me. Why blame me?” This is a response to someone who has closed themselves off. Right there is the place to practice. When people criticize us, you should listen. Are they speaking the truth? You should be open and consider what they may say. Maybe there's a point to it.

When people point out our faults, we should feel grateful and stop. [We should] really start to improve ourselves, strive for improvement. This is how intelligent people practice. Some people can't accept criticism. Instead, they turn around and start arguing, instilling that habitual energy again. I love how Ajahn Chah talks about this. He says, “This is especially so when adults deal with children.” Actually, children may say some intelligent things sometimes, but if you happen to be their mother, father, caregiver, you can't give in to them. We're again locked into this identity, this role, of the parent who knows what's best for them.

“No,” I hear myself say, “No ice cream for you today.” This brings me to another key aspect that has to do with more peace within ourselves and family. That's our attitude. We can be very attentive to our family members, but how are we relating to them? Sometimes we might really try this practice of awareness, but there's still this subtle resistance or resentment. That too is part of our practice.

This practice allows you to be totally honest with yourself. Can you become aware that in the midst of an exchange, you're thinking, “I'm trying to be open here, but there's a trying with a

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specific agenda. They should act nicely now. I am still right. They're not asking me about so and so.” What's the attitude of that mind? This is so important to remind yourself of. Besides this pausing to check, is your mind kind and receptive?

[American poet] Maya Angelou says, “If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.” When we really know that we're having an open, receptive attitude in that particular moment, our awareness is crystal clear.

I'd like to go back now to the sutta that we started this third talk with—the one where the young woman said to her acrobat teacher, “I think it's better to first protect myself. Through that, I protect you.” Through this sutta, the Buddha also unpacked a little bit of what the teacher suggested. He said, “There is definitely great value in protecting others.” As a matter of fact, when we protect others, we also start to protect ourselves again. It's a loop. How do we protect others? When we are in an open space of mind, how can we protect others in our family?

The Buddha pointed out four heart qualities. He said through patience, especially with children or difficult family members, we can know that we are protecting them by trying to be patient. Practice it through non-harming and lovingkindness. The Buddha said, “You protect others and therefore yourself through caring for others.” Just reflect on it for yourself. It feels good when we're kind, when we're patient. What's actually happening in these moments when we are not driving habitual roles? When we are aware [of ourselves] we get in touch with an experience that you could call emptiness that is free of being selfish. From that space, from that peace, we can relate differently to the people around us and to our own experiences.

One example of that happened in a juvenile detention center that I go to once a week. I was teaching in front of a group of girls. One girl started talking about inspiration. That was the theme of our class. She says, “This person next to me is my biggest inspiration because she's my friend, but I actually see her more as a sister. What she's done for me is that she's found out I was

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incarcerated and she knew that I really, really needed a friend, a sister. Guess what she did? She too was involved in court, but she was in what you could call a non-secure sight. For some reason, she very deliberately got herself placed with me here, just to be with one another.”

As she was saying that, I could see her friend next to her smile. Everyone in the room was quiet. There was this deep sense of connection that was happening in that moment. When our hearts are not obstructed by the hunger to be seen a certain way, they become open. When there's that sense of openness, we can start the very healing practice of forgiveness. It doesn't mean that we have to forget or accept what was happened, but very deliberately, step by step, we can do this in our meditation. We can start to see if we can forgive someone—and maybe even ask their forgiveness—just in your own practice, not even saying it to them.

Then most importantly, see what it's like to offer that to yourself as well. Ask yourself for forgiveness for something you've done that wasn't skillful.

Forgiveness is the heart's capacity to release its grasp on the pains of the past and free itself to go on, as [Buddhist meditation teacher] Jack Kornfield says. As we take on this practice, step by step we start to see things in a fresh way. I love how John Legend sings about loving the perfect imperfections within our loved ones because then we start to open up and also start to see the goodness in them again, to see the goodness in ourselves.

A couple of weeks ago, I was co-teaching a retreat with my dear colleague Darrah Williams. We were reflecting on this whole matter and talking about difficult behavior. She mentioned something really powerful. She said it's so important to remember that what people are doing is, most of the time, the best that they can do. This is also true for our family members.

I remember my mom saying, “Family is for life.” She kept repeating that when our son was born as well. As [author] Alex Haley puts it, “In every conceivable manner, the family is a link to our past, and a bridge to our future.” It really starts with protecting ourselves. Through protecting

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ourselves, we protect others. Then as we start protecting others through these heart qualities, we protect ourselves again. Thank you.