

Bart van Melik

Family Awareness: A Relational Path to Freedom in Family Life

Week Four: "Entering the Path as a Family"

October 23, 2017



Welcome to the fourth and final talk of this series where we reflect on family. If you were to meet the Buddha on an elevator and you asked him to give an elevator pitch of his teachings, he would probably say, and he said this numerous times, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." We have been unpacking this particular teaching throughout this whole series. In this last talk, we'll talk about the path that leads to freedom, within families in particular. He called this path the eightfold path, and it constantly asks you this question: "What lifestyle leads to a sense of freedom, to the release of habitual suffering?"

What lifestyle supports moments when we see that we're greedy, but then we release it? What lifestyle supports the moment when we see we're aversive, and then there's this release? Sometimes that could be through meditation and sometimes that could be through being together in a group of people in a community. Sometimes it happens through poetry. I'd just like to share this one example that just snapped me out of a moment of feeling stuck. It's from [poet] Mary Oliver. It's called "A House, or A Million Dollars."

*People do it,
some out of desperation
others out of greed.*

They steal.

*The very powerful and clever
might steal a whole house,
or a million dollars.*

It's been done.

But what does it matter?

Love is the one thing the heart craves

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*and love is the one thing
you can't steal.*

I really hope that through these talks and your own practice and being in community, that you've seen how when we are really attentive in a respectful, caring way with family members, we're manifesting love. Loving attention is a manifestation of love. Even when I say it, I can feel it. When I'm in that place, [it affects those around me]. I've been seeing this happen when my mindfulness is more externally focused. Others feel it, too.

Being present with kindness might be a way that we can be with our family members. You don't have to go Buddhist on your family members or dear ones. I can confess, I have tried it. I've tried to be the wise and kind meditator. Even when I was stepping into the role of teacher, I could see that [attempt to identify the self] being active. I could see the hunger to be seen in that way, very specifically with my wife and Gil, the man that we [call] our New York father. I see them in the kitchen. I try to say something wise or smart or talk about meditation. I could just see Gil look at my wife, Chantal, and go, “We don't need that meditation, do we, Chantal?”

In the third talk, we talked about our attitude. Can we really be open, even when our family members are pointing out something difficult about us or their behavior is difficult? It also shows up in how much care we have in, for example, planning time with them. Are we just as careful in planning time with our family members as we are in planning time for our work? Can we really listen deeply to what they're saying and how they express themselves in a fresh way, without that agenda? They're going to push our buttons. They know us so well, and so there's a lot of room for practice. Just think—the Buddha had family, too. There must have been a lot of family dukkha [suffering] drama there. Just picture him being this young man. His wife just had a child, and then he leaves them to go onto this quest. Just feel the intensity of that for a moment.

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There's a book that a dear friend and colleague, Janet Surrey, wrote on the Buddha's wife, where she took on that reflection. What's it like to be left behind? What's really powerful is, there are moments that you can find in the sutras where the Buddha is actually relating to his son. One sutra is about wise speech. Wise speech is one of the elements of the eightfold path or freedom. I recently found out that in this particular sutra that I will unpack with you, the commentaries say that the son was only 7 years old. Imagine the Buddha talking to his 7-year-old son Rahula. He talks about how we can reflect on our speech. Basically, what he instructs his son (but also us) is to check [to see if what] we are about to speak is harmful for you, harmful for others, or both. Just think about what that particular teaching would do for the world—if we would take on this practice, knowing our intentions just before we speak.

Then he suggested: when you feel like it's an unkind, harmful [speech], let it go. If it's kind and beneficial, speak. Then, while we're speaking, remembering awareness, ask again: *What I'm saying right now, is it harmful for myself, for another, or for us both?* If that's the case, stop. Release it. If it's wholesome and skillful, continue. The last part of this great practice is to reflect backwards. [This is for] moments when we're having some time to ourselves and can practice meditation in bed. All of a sudden, a conversation comes up again. Ask: *How was I in that particular conversation? Was it harmful for either myself, the other, or both?* I think a major element of this path that leads to more peace within community and family is reflection. Awareness alone is not enough. We also need moments where we bring our intelligence into this and reflect.

One practice that I want to share with you that's been so beneficial for me is called insight dialogue. This particular practice came about when teacher Gregory Kramer, who co-created it, noticed that there's a gap between our formal meditation practice, which is usually just by ourselves, and daily living where we're constantly interacting with people. He came up with an

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interpersonal meditation practice. In this practice, you're not only learning to be aware while you listen and speak with others, you also get a chance to reflect. You get, for example, the opportunity to reflect on how the hungers to be seen operate within your family. Then, when you're in the community reflecting on this, [you can] see how the teachings of the Buddha are unfolding in your life. I highly recommend doing communal practice as a way to keep training yourself to be more peaceful with dear ones.

I am grateful that I see more and more people on many, many different levels and institutions opening up to the benefits of these practices. I've been mentioning in these talks quite a bit how much inspiration I get from teaching young folks, very specifically the people who are incarcerated in the South Bronx. It was really a very powerful moment when the Deputy Mayor of New York City actually came and saw what we did. I remember him sharing that there was a moment of a different energy in the room. That was really appreciated.

This is really about learning how you can be a part of community. Just last week, I got this email from a young woman who said, “I think family evolves. If you ask me who my family is, the specific people I immediately think of as my family changes, has changed from year to year, maybe even week to week. I think that just as the people we call ‘family’ evolve, so too does our view of what family means.” When we reflect, especially in a community, we open ourselves to more wisdom, to more compassion. I love how Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh talks about seeing things with sangha eyes. You're not only seeing things through your own lens of awareness. When you share this [awareness] with other people, you see even more. One of the most beautiful things that he said is that if a new Buddha might arise again to point the way in the future, it might be in the form of a community.

As a way to get onto this path, I'd like to share the work by Sumi Loundon Kim [author and Buddhist chaplain at Duke University]. Sumi has created a family-centered curriculum of

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mindfulness, meditation, and Buddhist teachings. It's called *Sitting Together*. It's three books and is such a practical and amazing way to create community, especially for people with young children. It's particularly helpful when, as a parent, you are thinking about what spiritual suggestions you want to give to your kids. What a great way to practice together with families and children. This work could be of great benefit for you to enter this path as a community or as a family.

It's OK if your family members are not into it. I'm remembering that sutta talking about self-protection coming first [*Sedaka Sutta*]. I was recently teaching a retreat when one of the participants said, “I really want my family to do this. I hear you talk about mindful family programs, and then I suggest at the dinner table to my two sons and my husband, ‘Let's eat mindfully.’ All three of them roll their eyes and go, ‘Mom.’” That's okay, too. Our family responsibilities never end.

I'd love to suggest a very powerful practice, which is to set kind intentions. This is something we can do at any given moment, which is radically different from an expectation that is so often connected to the roles that we assume. This is just setting a kind intention.

Can I, the next time when I'm with my family, set an intention to be respectful and kind, even to the most difficult family member? This is from Gary Snyder, a Zen poet, practitioner, teacher, and a father. He says, “All of us are apprenticed with the same teacher—reality. It's hard to get the children herded into the car and down the road to the bus. It's just as hard as chanting sutras in the Buddha hall on a cold morning. One is not better than the other. Each can be quite boring. They both have the virtuous quality of repetition. Repetition and its good results make the very activities of our lives into the path.”

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May you walk this path with ease while you hold this family dukkha, seeing the causes of suffering, seeing moments of freedom, and being with the totality of it. Make this whole life the path.

I just stumbled onto this from [singer-songwriter] Rod Stewart. He said, “You go through life wondering what it is all about, but at the end of the day, it's all about family.” I want to thank you for your kind attention, and may you and your family be peaceful. Thank you.