

Ten Reflections (8 of 10) Kinship

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Hello and welcome to this eighth discussion of the Ten Reflections. These are reflecting on things which are invaluable for the development and growth of our spiritual life, or if you prefer, rather than the word spiritual, maybe our heart life – the fullness of our hearts. Today's topic is kinship and it goes along with yesterday's topic of community. Community has a lot to do with the relationships we have with people: the feeling of belonging, of connection, the feeling of friendliness with people. So it has a little bit more to do with dynamics and relationships.

Kinship, as I understand it, involves something deeper than our relationships. It's a way in which our heart sees others. It's a way in which we feel that we're family. When I was about 18 I went back to meet some of my aunts and uncles. The meeting surprised me. I'd grown up with them a little bit, but that was the first time I was close to being an adult. One of my aunts made it clear in some way or other that we were family, meaning we had deeper roots than if we were friends, or we liked each other or there was just kind of a raw, basic acceptance of each other. Maybe kinship is like a family ship. I was struck by that and reflected on it, and it stayed with me in probably the first 10 years of doing Buddhist practice.

The sense that there could be this kinship, this family feeling for everyone, slowly grew on me. We're all kin, we're all family. Sometimes I delight in the thought that, if we could trace our ancestral lineage backwards in time, we would all converge someplace. If nowhere else, maybe a million years ago in the plains of Africa where we would all have a common origin. We all are part of the same family.

We know that this human race of ours is phenomenally effective at creating division, phenomenally effective at creating alienation, separation, and very strong boundaries between the inside and outside. Those who belong and those who don't belong. Those who are part of my family, my tribe, my village, my nation, whatever it might be. We see these divisions so strongly that the "other" sometimes gets demonized, sometimes gets treated as less than human.

The cost of this is a kind of separation from ourselves, a kind of truncation, a limiting of ourselves. Because if we see other people as "others", as radical others, as distinct from us, as separate, as belonging to some other category from us, whether it's another family or tribe or village or nation or ethnicity or race or whatever, that limits our capacity to be whole. It limits our capacity to let all our faculties be open and receptive to take in the humanity of others. So these divisions we live in become divisions that we carry inside of ourselves.

Part of the influence of mindfulness meditation is to begin to soften and then dissolve these divisions that we carry inside ourselves. These divisions that come with ill will, hatred, judgment, bias, prejudice, selfishness. This kind of selfishness is collective. Selfish for my family. Selfish for my village, my people. And those can begin to dissolve. If they don't dissolve, there's maybe a lot of subconscious or unrecognized pain. There's unresolved work. Sometimes this can be very dramatic.

Sometimes it involves a deep alienation from all people. Some people carry around with them a perpetual anger, hostility, even resentment towards all people, anybody they encounter, or huge categories of people. Sometimes it's towards certain genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, races. There are all kinds of ways in which it's carried within us, and it can really break people. It can really mean a lifetime of having a broken heart or being alienated even from oneself.

So, as we do mindfulness practice we start feeling the impact, the cost, the hurt of living in a divided world, living in divisiveness. I've known people who have done this practice, and at some point, after many years, were able to put down their resentment towards certain individuals. They saw through the inherited bias, prejudice, racism that they'd grown up with. I've known people who have changed dramatically from how they grew up because they saw how painful it was for themselves to carry this divisiveness. Part of that movement of healing is to discover what I call our universal kinship with everyone. I like the idea that we're discovering we're all family, even people that we've never met before we can meet as if we're family.

It had a huge impact for me many years ago, the first time I met this Buddhist monk named U Sīlānanda. He's dead now, but he was a Burmese monk who first came to live in the Bay Area, San Francisco to teach this basic mindfulness practice that I was to learn in Burma. I'd heard about him, so before I went to Burma, I called him up on the phone and asked him if I could come see him, and he said, yes, please come. So I went to his house, which was also his temple then.

What blew me away, what was a little bit life-changing for me, was that although I'd never met this person, when he opened the door, I had the very distinct feeling that his friendliness, his warmth, his receptivity to me was like he was meeting a long-lost friend. He was just so delighted and receptive. To have this feeling of someone I didn't know treating me with such a kinship, such a warmth, opened a whole world of possibility for me. Not so much that I could be the same way, but maybe more importantly that it was possible to drop the divisiveness, the separation, the us versus them. For me it was a lot to do with fear, fear of others, fear of opening up, but it began to seem possible not to live that way.

As I continued my mindfulness practice it kind of folded in this possibility, that this fear of others, fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of all kinds of things, didn't have to be there. The sense of separation from others and treating others with a certain kind of separation, the need to keep my distance, didn't have to be there. Something began softening and opening in me. Over time, the sense of kinship grew and grew and grew. I would say that that is a very important guiding principle for me, or feeling for me, the sense of kinship with people. I like the feeling.

I delight in going to the supermarket to see if there's an opportunity with a checkout clerk to just have a little bit more human contact. To look at them, look them in the eye and ask how they're doing, or to have some simple conversation where there's a feeling of some contact that's deeper than just a casual "hello". Not that I'm staring at people, but this contact often happens, some kind of recognition when our eyes meet. That sometimes happens to me when I look certain mammals in the eye. Something profound happens to me for a moment, some profound feeling of kinship.

What is your sense of kinship? What is your sense of non-kinship? Do you have a sense of kinship that's bounded by a certain community, that only for them do you have that sense? If that's the case, what gets in the way of having a wider sense of kinship than the community for whom it's easy for you? Do you understand what are the dynamics in you that create division in our society, social divisions between you and the people who are not in that circle of kinship. What is it for you to have some sense of universal kinship?

There are distinctions between how we love, care for, and are friendly with people who are different in circles of community in our lives. There are differences. But what about a universal kinship where we love, we care for, we respect, we value all people as kin? In that way that we do not create or live by the artificial barriers that we contribute to keep people out of our hearts, away from our hearts.

I hope you appreciate that this might point to how kinship could be a universal human need and characteristic. How does it work for you? That's the reflection for these next 24 hours, and maybe you can see that there's a connection between your sense of kinship and your capacity to love.

Thank you very much.