

Extended Family Karma

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(Editor's Note: The following article originated as a 1997 teisho given by Roshi, who developed and reworked it for Zen Bow.)

The teisho this morning will be on our karma with our families, and in particular our more extended families. 'Family' is a broad topic, and to get my arms around it in the time we have, I'm going to leave aside what for most of us are our very closest family members: parents, children, and spouses. That leaves us with all those relatives besides parents whom we had no choice in acquiring: siblings, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins, in-laws, and on out.

It's not by chance that my mind has turned toward this topic in January. We've just emerged from the holiday season, which for many of us is one of the most challenging periods of the year. It's a time when we are called upon to spend time with family members we don't see much. Every year I hear from my students, and others, of the trials involved around the holidays with either hosting family or visiting family members they don't live with. And I have my own many experiences with this, of course. The six weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year is as family-rich as it gets. It's kind of the family-karma equivalent of the peak shopping season.

To talk about family is to talk about life, really, and since there are no real beginnings in Buddhism, we can take any point on the cycle of life and death and start there. So let's start with those we usually grow up with: our sisters and brothers. It's become more widely understood that we are not shaped just by our parents, but that our siblings, too, can have a profound influence on our minds and our emotional life. The literal meaning of 'karma' is 'action,' or 'action and reaction,' but in relationships it can be rendered as 'affinity.' To spend years under the same roof with someone else is evidence of

strong affinity. Sometimes the affinity between the siblings is keenly felt, and may be reflected in a striking resemblance. Even here, though, this closeness may not extend through their lives. Buddhist practice confirms the Buddhist teaching that relationships, like all other phenomena, are subject to change. Relationships mutate because—just for starters—individuals change. The genetic material we share with our siblings is for life, but the relationship itself is a dynamic one. Over time it may either warm up or cool down, sometimes more than once.

My own original family was very close-knit, and four of my five sisters have been members of the Center. At one time all five of us were attending sesshin here. Since then, though, we have dispersed geographically, and as far as I know only two or three of them still do Dharma practice. In one way it makes no difference to me; when in their company I feel the same comfortable bond with all of them, equally, that comes from membership in the same litter. But I feel an extra intimacy with the ones who practice. It's called Sangha.

Now, what about siblings who don't feel close to one another, and may never have? Roshi Kap-leau never felt much in common with his siblings, he said, and did almost nothing to stay in touch with even the ones he hadn't lost track of. I have heard him marvel at how he could have come out of the same family as his brothers and sisters. Still, the Law of Causation precludes random occurrences. To share the same parents is the effect of previous causes. Those who accept this could set to wondering, 'What might my siblings and I have been to each other in past lives that would have brought us together in this one?' Zen has no use for such speculation, and if we can simply take the relationship for what it is, enjoy what we've had in common in this life, and treat each other as the Buddhas that we

are, that's enough. But for many of us it's not so simple, and we have questions about our sisters and brothers that do matter: How much do I engage with my siblings and my wider family? When do I need to get involved in their problems, and they in mine? What do we owe each other?

In such matters, our tradition offers a guiding principle: the middle way. When feeling our way through our obligations to siblings, we need to avoid two extremes. One is sentimental attachment, clinging to a sibling connection out of habit or the notion that one is supposed to. A Buddhist teaching holds that every sentient being has been our mother in some previous life, and thus we need to cultivate love toward everyone equally, without preference to kin. The Buddha, to free himself from family attachments in order to pursue enlightenment for the sake of all beings, left his clan to become a homeless one. Such is the monastic ideal, but even lay people can overdo their involvements with siblings. If the relationship seems to have devolved into just a husk of what it once was, without mutual benefit, and we can give of ourselves more fruitfully to our children, parents, spouse, or others in need, then it may be time to reduce our involvement with the sibling.

The other extreme to avoid in navigating through our sibling relationships is to ignore our responsibilities to them. The nature of our bond with our siblings is a rare one, in statistical terms if no other. Brothers and sisters grow up together because their karma brought them together. Somehow, we needed, or still need, to learn something from one another. If we can't use this bond to practice giving, the first of the Six Perfections, in what relationship (beyond parents, children, and spouse) can we?

With our parents, the obligation side of things, at least, is clearer. To begin with, they gave us ... life! They then followed that up by providing us with some twenty years of survival necessities—and a lot more. Buddhism has it that we 'choose' our parents, drawn to those love-makers by an affinity with them. But like any of us, our parents don't exist apart from others. They are

interwoven with THEIR family, which includes the children already born to them when we arrive—our older sisters and brothers. By extension, then, our birth signals our karmic affinity with our parents' whole family as well.

Our parents may have sisters and brothers of their own—our aunts and uncles—who also are part of the family configuration we join upon being born (reborn, if you will). Grandparents, too, are members of the clan that welcomes us, as may be some cousins, the children of our aunts and uncles. Later may come our nieces and nephews—the children of our siblings—as well as grandchildren. What do I owe all these people, and they me, by virtue of our family ties?

For most of human history these were non-issues. Strong family bonds were the norm in agrarian-based and nomadic societies, out of necessity. Family obligations and privileges were clearly understood, as they are in tribal cultures still. Far-Asian cultures are steeped in Confucianism, which teaches that to bring order into the world it is first necessary to create order within the family, and one of the five principal relationships spelled out was that between older and younger brother.

In contemporary Western societies we're left to sort out the implications of our relationships largely on our own. This is particularly so in the United States, where personal happiness is a principal value, and individual choice rules. Family roles, expectations, and responsibilities are something of a free-for-all. Life is far more complex than in traditional societies, with most women (as well as men) now working outside the home. Families are scattered about, and no one seems to have much time. How much can I afford to devote to my extended family members, especially given the needs of my parents, my spouse and children, and the demands of my work? For most of us there is no final resolution to these questions. We keep renegotiating them as our family dynamics shift.

As if all this with our own blood kin were not complicated enough, marriage compounds the issues. All at once, and automatically, we



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acquire a second extended family: in-laws. The marriage vows, and the legal commitments that come with them, unfurl a whole new tapestry of family obligations and privileges. Weddings generate enormous waves, socially, economically, and spiritually, and it is that rippling effect that gives them their mythic quality. How many wedding scenes have been portrayed in literature and on screen? How many of us have gone to considerable lengths to attend weddings? We honor them as a tribute not only to the love between the bride and groom, but to the wider web of mutual family caring that is coiled in the wedding as seed potential. Again, no individual exists apart from his or her context; there is only interbeing.

Our spouse's family may not be one that we would have chosen for its own sake. But once the wedding is over, our husband's or wife's family is ours. It's a package deal. By its very nature, then, marriage testifies to the affinity between us and our in-laws, for better or for worse. Now we may have to work with not just the karma of our own blood relatives, but the karma of our spouse's nuclear and extended family. In doing this, it may help to remind ourselves that there

is only one thing that could have brought the two sides of the family together: mutual affinity. Our karma with them is now official, if not permanent. It can enrich our lives; it can strain our lives. It certainly complicates them to some extent. Zorba understood this when he cried out, 'Wife, home, children—the full catastrophe!'

Divorce, if it occurs, creates still more complications, sometimes with the painful loss of in-law relationships. If remarriage follows, it may bring step-children, and, if our parents remarry, step-siblings and half-siblings. And on and on. A contributor to an issue of *Tricycle* on families labeled this 'the distended family.'

For decades now we have been learning about the crippling effects of divorce on individuals and society and the breakdown of the traditional family. But there is a silver lining of opportunity in this unquestionably dark cloud. As more and more families mutate to include second spouses, step-relatives, half-siblings, and unmarried partners in addition to blood relatives and in-laws, we are called upon to open up wider to get our arms around them all. It becomes a test in applying traditional family values such as love, caring, and tolerance to a broader, more diverse



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grouping of people. Our experience of ‘family’ can become more inclusive.

In primitive cultures, marriage candidates often have to come from one’s own tribe. Even in our own country, today, many families would find it a stretch to welcome an in-law of another ethnic background. But more families than ever now are having to accommodate to a diversification of their clan. When a child hooks up with someone of another race, or a brother with a gay partner, or an aunt remarries and becomes ‘born-again,’ or a stepsister goes vegan, or a nephew marries a rabid Republican (or Democrat), their families must choose between circling the wagons or opening them up. The intelligent course is to adapt to change. Adaptive mutation spurs evolution.

When all is said and done, a family, whether of the smaller scale or the larger extension into in-laws and step-relatives, is a kind of mini-society. The further it expands out from the nuclear family, the closer we get to just ... society itself, the nation, and then all of humanity. In the end it might dawn on us that it really doesn’t matter so much whether we are related to someone in the conventional sense. Why should it, when we

are all sons and daughter of noble birth, equally endowed with Buddha Nature?

Getting back to the holidays, they do seem more trying now than they used to be. With blended families now common, increasing numbers of people feel compelled to divide their time between two or more households. I’ve heard from people who spent their whole vacation traveling from one family to another to keep everyone happy. This takes its toll, of course, while also depriving everyone of the chance to really settle into a longer visit and relate more meaningfully to one another. (On the other hand, it means there is less time in each household to get on one another’s nerves. Ben Franklin famously said, ‘Guests, like fish, begin smelling after three days.’ And travel time, at its best, can offer a chance to decompress.)

But the anxiety that so many people feel before setting off to visit family for the holidays is not just due to the travel involved, or even the shopping. It is from the anticipation of getting tangled up in family karma. When we get back together as adults with our parents and siblings, who among us doesn’t slip into old patterns of conflict? For those of us on a spiritual path, it

is especially humbling to see our same buttons getting pushed in the same old way. We'd made some progress, it seemed—and then we visit family and regress.

Still, the arena of nuclear-family reunions itself offers a rich opportunity for working on ourselves. The critical feedback we get from our siblings (and parents) is not likely to be entirely invalid. We may hate getting flak from them, but usually there is some truth to it. After all, who would know our most stubborn faults better than our siblings and parents? Then it's up to us as Dharma practitioners to work with their feedback. It's a chance for us to show them we've grown up. We may not handle ourselves so well on the spot, but later, with the help of *zazen*, we may be able to see our fault, and that seeing can then fuel further practice.

Things get tricky when family members don't want to let us change. All too often they see us not as we are, but as they remember us, and they behave out of reflex. And we do the same with them.

Even the legendary T'ang dynasty Ch'an master Mazu, who is said to have had 139 enlightened disciples, didn't fare well when he returned home. Thirty years old and already a renowned Zen master, he was warmly welcomed by the people of his home village, except for an old woman who had been his next-door neighbor. She snorted and said, 'thought all the commotion was caused by the visit of some extraordinary person. In fact, it's no one but that little guy of the family of Ma the garbage cleaner!' After hearing this, Mazu (with a smile playing at his lips, I'd bet) composed the following verse:

I advise you not to return to your native place,
For no one can be a sage in his own home.

The old woman by the side of the brook
Still calls me the garbage man's son!

We need to exercise the utmost vigilance when back in the company of our original family. It begins with noticing whatever tendencies we may have to react to siblings and parents out of our old ideas of them. That moment of awareness is decisive in enabling us to see them as they really are and then respond out of the present and not the past. Just as important, though, is to recognize when they are reacting to us out of some shared karmic residue, and not get hooked by it.

Any of our interpersonal relations offer grist for the mill of practice, but family presents a challenge all its own. With siblings, in-laws, and other extended family, most of us have greater psychic distance than with parents, children, and spouse, which creates greater ambiguity in those links. Who are all these people who are extensions-of-us-but-not-us, and what do we do with them? Let's hope we never come up with an answer to this, but go on living with the flux that is the very nature of living beings. We don't want to 'know' our siblings, in-laws, and others because then it wouldn't truly be them that we know. *Zazen* helps release us from memories and notions about our relatives so that they, too, can be free of the same. Meanwhile, we do our best: 'All family members, without number, I vow to liberate.'

This article appeared in the following issue of Zen Bow: 'Family Karma', Vol. 28, No. 4, 2005. For permission to reprint, please contact the Rochester Zen Center.