

The life and death of a false refuge- family

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I confess the title of this talk is not completely accurate....maybe not the death of the false refuge yet but it is in the death throes.

This a current overview of the particular place my family has had in my GFR journey.

In fact not only this family in this lifetime. But there is a strong thread in this arena of family, connection, unconditional love, support and devotion going back lifetimes I believe. So it's a big topic for me. . Your life of course may be completely different so none of the facts will resonate but maybe you have experienced similar phases when working to unravel a different sort of false refuge.

The phases I have identified in this journey are:

-the defensive phase, curiosity and interest phase, inspiration phase, transformation phase and illumination phase

DEFENSIVE PHASE

I'd like to start by sharing a poem:

One Hundred and Eighty Degrees.

by Federico Moramarco

'Have you considered the possibility that everything you believe is wrong, not merely off a bit, but totally wrong, nothing like things as they really are?

If you've done this, you know how durably fragile

those phantoms we hold in our heads are,

those wisps of thought that people die and kill for,

betray lovers for, give up lifelong friendships for.

If you've not done this, you probably don't understand this poem, or think it's not even a poem, but a bit of opaque nonsense, occupying too much of your day's time,

so you probably should stop reading it here, now. But if you've arrived at this line,

maybe, just maybe, you're open to that possibility, the possibility of being absolutely completely wrong, about everything that matters.

How different the world seems then:

everyone who was your enemy is your friend, everything you hated, you now love,

and everything you love slips through your fingers like sand.'

A pivotal step in my gfr journey was to seriously consider that I might be wrong about something I had always been so sure about.

When I first started studying the dharma I could relate to the language of false refuges around the themes of food cravings, career, money and sex. Hard evidence accumulated easily on those fronts. I was quite happy agreeing that there was nothing to be found in these refuges that could give permanent satisfaction in this lifetime. But as a mitra, an area in which I constantly struggled to understand what the texts and my study leaders seemed to be implying, was the idea that family was a false refuge. Well, in particular, my family.

My relationships within my family were largely, consistently satisfying.

I was the recipient of large doses of love, kindness, interest and care from my family that was consistently reliable and trustworthy. It seemed to me at the time to be unconditional. I initially felt the Buddhist teachings were asking me to not trust, not rely on nor find my relationships within family satisfying at any level. You tend to think in absolutes when you are defensive! A real inner tension arose around all of this that went on for years. It didn't make sense to me why I wouldn't GFR to them.

I came from a family where initially at least there seemed to be little suffering. For many years my impression was that everyone seemed pretty happy. Up to my 30's was sort of a 'Camelot' period of my life with little if any existential drama.

However when little bumps of dukkha appeared along the way I found my family connections provided a 'safe' haven. Any suffering seemed easier to face when I was in their company. I definitely went for refuge to the comfort my family provided. If it's on offer that is quite a natural human response really! At that stage of my life this is what I thought refuge meantsurrounding yourself with anything that eased dukkha.

So a little background might be helpful.

My parents, siblings and extended family of uncles and aunts cared deeply about each other. There was largely an atmosphere that was protective, encouraging and celebratory of life. My friends liked coming to my place, people liked being around the vibe there. Even being quite poor money wise, we were rich in other ways. My parents were positive and warm people who taught myself and 4 siblings to share the little we had and to be kind and offer support to others less fortunate.

Even though we had little money I remember feeling secure in the values that surrounded me as I grew up. When my mother got some money from the sale of my grandparents' home after they had died she gave the whole amount as a gift to the autistic society to help families have access to respite. We didn't have a car or phone and we always had to carefully balance the food budget but it seemed like the most natural thing to see my parents helping others. We knew others suffered and we responded where we could. So from my family I imbibed strong guiding principles about what mattered most in life and felt at the time like these had a certain sense of security.....and I often went to refuge to that.

In adulthood I followed the family recipe for happiness and rather unconsciously coupled up, had a family and set about creating a 'secure' loving home for my partner and children. By my early 30's that task was achieved and we surprisingly found ourselves financially 'secure' as well.

But one day, before coming across the dharma, whilst living in a sweet house with a loving husband, 3 gorgeous children surrounded by a beautiful forest I unexpectedly 'woke up' to a new way of seeing things.

Hanging clothes on the line on an ordinary day in an ordinary way I was suddenly overcome by a deep 'knowing' that life was not really like this...that 'this' was not the whole truth.

From that moment on I knew I couldn't rely fully on what I had always believed to be reliable. It was an intensely calm moment but unsettling as I had no framework to hold this sudden insight. It seemed to have arisen out of a place of abundance rather than specific unsatisfactoriness. But it left me with a strong sense I could not trust what had once seemed so trustworthy. Although I had little daily evidence of suffering in my 'happy' life I know now this was the bedding in of a closer encounter with the First Noble Truth.

It is no surprise then that certain events unfolded over the following 2 years that led me to the Melbourne Buddhist Centre, newly divorced and on a quest to explore this Truth. Quite quickly I had a strong heartfelt connection with the Buddha and Dharma.

However, I would sit in study groups at the Buddhist centre cringing at the excerpts from the Pali Canon that encouraged moving away from family and warning of the dangers of being a householder. These dharma passages often read, to me at least, as saying that having a strong connection or commitment to family was akin to inviting the Bubonic plague into your life. That something I valued tremendously had no value. I would dive in and scoop up the few crumbs of teachings that shored up my perspective, like those that mentioned a duty to look after ones parents.

One time in study we were being asked to create a 2 D model of a mandala.

I remember the tension in thinking I 'should' move my family into the outer rings and dutifully draw the 3 jewels in the middle. However this way of 'seeing' the refuges just didn't make sense to me. My family was important to me and increasingly so were the 3 jewels. My dilemma was..... How could I fit all this in the 'centre' of my life? And anyway where was this so called 'centre'?

PHASE OF CURIOSITY AND INTEREST.

To See It by Laura Davies Foley.

'We need to separate to see the life we've made.

We need to leave our house

where someone waits for us, patiently, warm beneath the sheets.

We need to don a sweater, a coat, mittens, wrap a scarf around our neck,

stride down the road,

a cold winter morning, and turn our head back, to see it—perched

on the top of the hill, our life lit from inside.'

So I needed a shift of perspective to see this 'life lit from the inside'....

Around this time I began to move from defensiveness to interest in what the Buddha had to say about refuges. This was because I had started to deeply believe what the Buddha was saying about almost everything else. Every time I looked into his teachings I found truth. I started to suspect that there was more to the Sangha jewel than what I had been seeing.

When I looked at the local sangha, although I was grateful to them for helping me access the Dharma and I admired a lot about their practice that was impressive...something always seemed to fall short when measured against my family. Relationships between Sangha members were not always harmonious and I struggled at times to find ways to connect and be myself fully with my newly emerging spiritual friends. When I thought of GFR to the Sangha jewel I had always pictured the Arya sangha. I just didn't get the other bit! I see now that I was looking to Sangha to prove its capacity for love, comfort, encouragement, empathy and support before I could make space for faith in the Sangha jewel.

There is a lovely image of the way a caterpillar moves tentatively from leaf to leaf....it hovers and checks out the next leaf before it feels confident to take the rest of its body across onto the new leaf.....the Sangha leaf.....I needed to be sure it would support the weight of my expectations.

Little did I know that over the years it would become clear to me that the criteria I was using then for that comparison between family and sangha were not the ones to use.

INSPIRATION PHASE

One day I read some words from the Maha Parinibbana sutta.

The Buddha, when he was close to dying, said to Ananda:

Make an island of yourself,

make yourself your refuge; there is no other refuge.

Make truth your island,

make truth your refuge; there is no other refuge.

I was fascinated by these lines as soon as I heard them. Make an island of yourself....Make truth your island.....there is no other refuge...

I would reflect on why the Buddha would say this. Why did I need to be an island. Wasn't Buddhism about interconnectedness and love? How could I make truth my island?

From my perspective in those early days I could only imagine being on an island that still had room for all my family and loved ones!

As I went to refuge more fully to the Buddha and the Dharma the urge increased to understand accurately 'my house lit from the inside.'

I was missing something and I needed to find a way to get a better view. I just couldn't keep believing that the Buddha was right in every aspect of his teachings except what he had to say about Sangha versus family! Slowly over time I was also being stretched and challenged as I got to know Order Members and deepen my communication with them. My future KM 's had come into my life. There was something intensely satisfying in my communications with experienced Order Members even when it was uncomfortable. I was uncovering new aspects of friendship that I had not experienced even within my family or closest non Buddhist friends. I really began see the value in studying and going on retreats with people who were also going for refuge. There was mutual understanding of the Goal.

My family undoubtedly loved me but they also would have loved to see me stay married and committed to a lifestyle that they were still convinced brought happiness.

I slowly began to feel stretched by sangha friends in a healthy way. I really wanted to share the 3 jewels with others and was happy helping develop a little Buddhist centre that had sprung up in my home. The Sangha jewel was finally being polished.

On an island you can walk right around it and see 360 degrees view.....nothing gets left out with perfect conditions for right view to arise. I knew I needed more intense conditions than what I had in my worldly life to metaphorically take the journey to this Island of Truth.

I also had to do this whilst bringing up a family and working fulltime. So I used any spare time I had going on retreats including solitaires and increased my communication with my mitra friends and experienced Order Members in particular.

I had a regular meditation practice, began to notice what I could or couldn't give away or do without, kept identifying attachments and the suffering that came with them, connected creatively with certain Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and turned consciously to face my worst fears. These fears were like sharks encircling the island ...they needed to have specific attention and focus so I could navigate the waters.

I began to see more clearly from a different perspective what was going on in my internal and external landscape.

TRANSFORMATION PHASE

The catalyst for this phase was a very strong experience in meditation that I had on a solitary.

I really experienced for the first time how my three daughters too were on the Wheelthe Laws of impermanence and insubstantiality and the reality of the First Noble Truth could not be avoided by anyone. No matter how good a parent I was or was going to be, no matter how much I loved my children ...that day I deeply knew I could not protect them from suffering.

All this is, of course, rather obvious dharma which I had been reading about for years. However, there is a great difference between just intellectually thinking something is probably true and really carrying that truth in your bones/heart/mind.

This was a very sobering realisation and also freeing in unexpected ways. From that moment onwards aspects of my parenting changed. A wrong view had been largely over-

turned. I actually left the solitary early and didn't go home to my family immediately but went to a friend's house by the ocean.

I remember floating on my back in this vast ocean still stunned by the reality that this indeed was the truth.....for my loved ones, for me, for every sentient being. There was suffering, nothing was permanent and everything was constantly in a state of flow. There was not a thing I could do to help those I loved avoid those Truths. Fortunately the Buddha had been clear about the Path forward.

So the result was, rather than sinking into despondency, I noticed something more relaxed, richer, creative and real coming into my relationship with family members -especially my 3 teenage daughters. I was able to begin to let go of a tendency towards over responsibility which had always resulted in there being a certain level of flight/fight protective mode in my communications, thoughts and actions.

A certain level of GFR to Buddha and Dharma had brought a calmness into my life but it was a bit like seeing a waterbird gliding beautifully on a lake....underneath the surface the little feet were still paddling like mad. This was the sort of energy and effort involved with trying to avoid suffering when you refuse to accept the first Noble Truth. Slowly the paddling lessened....more faith and confidence in the teachings arose.

The joy was in being able to connect with my daughters more fully as individuals, a creative process involving 'seeing' them anew, trying to discover them freshly moment to moment. In particular, for me it also signalled a necessary movement from a reliance on the group (in my case a reifying of family as the true and safe haven) to becoming more of an individual. My family's creed had always been that 'we are always here for you no matter what.' And that had consistently been true.

When I divorced and made life choices that puzzled my parents. I remember my father said to me 'I don't understand you at the moment but you are my daughter and I will always love you and be here for you.' He really meant it. But of course it was slowly dawning on me that fulfilling this promise was essentially not possible. It's a good intention but as I learnt when my dear brother died at 49, one of my granddaughters died at birth, family members went on to experience other traumas... even great love cannot delay the turning of the Wheel in the mundane world. I had been expecting the impossible from my family and also with my goal of providing refuge for those I loved. Rather than avoid or try and push away suffering, the Dharma gave me new ways to meet that suffering.

I remember doing 'on the spot Tonglen' practice quite a lot at that particular stage. If I woke at night worrying about one of my teenage daughters at the time I would send loving kindness to her and myself as a worrying mum for a few minutes and then I would broaden my perspective to include every mother and daughter in the same situation in the world at that moment...probably 100's of thousands. From acknowledgement of suffering came connection and enrichment.

ENRICHMENT PHASE

This movement away from taking refuge in my family did not feel like something was lost but rather something even richer opened up that had the taste of freedom. My family remain incredibly important people in my life. I feel free to respond wholeheartedly to being with them just because I enjoy their company or when they or I might need support. How-

ever, I feel far less weighed down with fear for them and myself and the feet don't need to paddle quite so fast these days!

I extended a visit home recently as my 80 year old mum was unwell and I could see she was troubled. Two of my uncles had died within 6 months and her own health has been in her words. 'letting her down.' She was very depressed about it. She told me when the family gather now, she sometimes has panic attacks when everyone leaves. as she feels a sense of dread that someone might die. I see the fear in her and I know the only thing I can do is 'live my practice' in her company.

I realise how fortunate I have been to have the teachings encouraging me to take impermanence and interconnectedness seriously. I didn't come to believe I was wrong about GFR to my family just because I was hanging out with Buddhists all the time or because that was what the texts told me to think. From personal experience I came to see that it was unfair, unreasonable and basically deluded to be thinking that my family was responsible for providing something permanent and unchanging and that we could protect each other from suffering.

Going for refuge to the 3 jewels enriched and strengthened my relationships with my family in ways I could not have originally imagined.

A sense of expansion unfolded to make room for the emerging of a deep interest and connection with the Bodhisattva Ideal. Suddenly everyone was on the island! I thought I had lived a reasonably other regarding life up to that stage. But I could see it was still largely self referential. I was often doing what I thought a good person should do and what made me feel better.

But this new heart energy came from taking the Lakshanas as the criteria for knowing what was reliable, supportive, and unconditional. This energy was expansive and responsive often without the labour of thought or decision making or preferences. There was a redefining of what I knew was involved in unconditional love. It was the beginning of the thinning of boundaries around where love was to be placed and who or what was worthy of that love.

I remember once finding myself staring at the wrinkled hand of an old man at the supermarket, fumbling for coins in his wallet, apologising nervously as he was not wanting to hold up the impatient people waiting in line. My heart felt so full of love and tenderness for him. I felt expansive enough to have stepped towards any hand. It seemed that hand held the suffering of the whole world in that very moment. I moved towards him and helped him get the right coins out and we left the store smiling the biggest smiles together.

I also began to experience more frequently a 'coincidence of wills' during collective practices like rituals or work projects with the sangha. I finally had some heart/mind understanding of why there were three jewels not two.

ILLUMINATION PHASE

Right now I no longer so strongly relate to that image of an island. Boundaries around what is spiritual in my life and what is not continue to become less hard edged over time. I know there isn't really a mainland where my false refuges dwell nor an island to travel to and sit polishing the jewels.

I want to keep up conditions and practices that support myself and others to Go for Refuge to the Truth. It seems to be the most important thing I can do with my time and my life, as from that everything else is affected, not just what is in my own mandala but all mandalas everywhere. Connecting with the 3 jewels generates energy and with that energy comes light.

This light of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha is limitless and unconditional. The word dipa in Pali can be translated as island but also as light/lamp.

So the Buddha's instruction to Ananda could also read.

Make a light of yourself,

Make yourself your refuge

There is no other refuge

Make Truth your light

Make truth your refuge

There is no other refuge