

CHAPTER 21

Marriage and Family in Buddhism



Buddha taught that in our lives we constantly suffer. The reason we suffer is that we are continually dominated by desire. To end our suffering and find inner peace, we must follow the Eightfold Path (see Chapter 17 in *My Journey in Life: A Student Textbook for Character Development* for an explanation of the Eightfold Path). By living a life based on this way, eventually we can attain Nirvana, a state of consciousness in which we feel no greed, hate or ignorance. Instead we feel a deep peace and compassion for all living creatures.

Buddha taught that ideally to follow such a path, a person should become a monk or a nun, renouncing all worldly ties and living a celibate lifestyle.

“The wise do not call a strong fetter that which is made of iron, wood or fiber; much stronger is the fetter of desire for gold and precious stones, for sons and wives. These seem soft but drag a man down,

and are hard to undo. Therefore some men cut their fetters, renounce the life of the world and start to walk on the path, leaving pleasures behind.”

— Dhammapada, 345–46

Many people do not feel a calling to become a monk or a nun. In this case, Buddha said that they should marry and become good husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Through doing so they also can grow spiritually and receive great blessing. That’s why Buddha put great importance on family relationships, because they can be a source of either great joy and enrichment or else of suffering and spiritual harm.

Buddhism teaches that what most people call love is a need for others rather than the wish for their well-being. When people say, “I love you,” it often means “I want you for myself.” If we truly loved a person, we would never tire of working for his or her happiness. Instead, what people really never tire of is working for their own happiness. It is this need or selfish desire that creates problems and suffering in human relationships.

Buddha did not talk about the existence of God. He was concerned that speculating about the existence and nature of God would distract a person from the important task of spiritual growth and perfection. So, when a very superior religious man

To support one’s father and mother,
To care for one’s wife and children,
And to have a peaceful occupation.
This is the highest blessing.
Generosity, good conduct,
Helping relatives,
And blameless action.
This is the highest blessing.

— Sutta Nipata 262



asked Buddha, “Who are the gods?” Buddha replied, “Let father and mother be your gods.” In other words, the best way to serve God is to serve one’s parents.

Mother’s love

Buddha taught that a mother’s love is the closest parallel to pure love or compassion that an ordinary person can understand. For this reason he held up a mother’s practical, generous and selfless love as the model for all relationships.

“As a mother who would give up her life for her only child—this is how you should feel toward all beings.”

— Buddha

By meditating on the kindness of mothers, Buddhists believe that they start to have some understanding of what genuine, selfless love is all about. Here is what one Buddhist has said about his mother:

“My mother’s kindness is responsible for all the opportunities I have of making use of my physical body and of leading the sort of life that I do. If she hadn’t taken care of me when I was in the womb, I wouldn’t have been born alive. If she hadn’t fed me well afterward, I wouldn’t have enjoyed the various functions of my physical body, such as using my eyes to see the most beautiful objects, my ears to hear the most beautiful sounds, my nose to smell the sweetest perfumes, my tongue to enjoy the most delicious tastes, or my body to enjoy sexual love and have many children.

Also being skillful and creative with my hands; all this depends on my mother’s kindness. My mother always took care of me, feeding me properly, protecting me from dangers, directing my life, and making me study so that I could have a comfortable life and good reputation. From the time of my conception she has been worried and concerned about me.”

— Lama Zopa Rinpoche, *The Wishfulfilling Golden Sun*



Meditation

One Buddhist meditation is to contemplate the kindness of mothers. You might try the following exercise:

Close your eyes to avoid distractions and try to picture your mother, or someone who you feel is an ideal mother, or someone who you feel has been most like a mother to you. Think about the times when she looked after you when you were a child. Remember the games she played with you; the things she taught you; the things she gave you; the places she took you; the way she looked after you when you were ill. Let all the memories of your mother return to you now. Then consider the following statements: A mother loves her child without expecting anything in return. Whether sick or tired, depressed or run-down, a mother will do everything within her power to give to her child. Even if her child abuses or neglects her, or turns out to be unpleasant and unkind, a mother will continue to love and care for that child. Try to generate a feeling of warmth and gratitude toward your mother.

Family ethics

Buddha first taught his code of social ethics for a householder to a young man called Sigla. In this speech Buddha outlined the duties of parents and children, husbands and wives, teachers and friends.

Duties of parents

Buddha taught that there are five ways in which parents show their love for their children:

1. By guiding them away from evil
2. By persuading them to do good
3. By providing them with an education
4. By setting them up in a suitable marriage
5. By handing over their inheritance at the right time.

The first few years of our life are the most formative, and the people who make the greatest impression in our life are our parents. It is not only what our parents say but also what they really are and do that we absorb. We enter the world and are cultivated through our relationship to them and their moral values. This is why it is important for parents to set a good example for their children to follow.

Buddhist family life is intensely affectionate. It is full of joy and laughter. There is a great tradition of giving: food, presents, hospitality and help. All kinds of giving are greatly enjoyed. It is a close and ordered unit in which the respect felt in the mind is expressed by the body and tongue. This discipline is not fear of punishment, but trust and mutual respect. Buddha taught that evil is its own punishment: It makes our life ugly and ends in regret, even after many years of pleasure-making.

Duties of children

Buddha taught that there are five ways in which children should minister to their parents:

1. By supporting their parents
2. By performing their duties as children toward their parents
3. By maintaining the family lineage and tradition
4. By acting so as to be worthy of their inheritance
5. By performing religious duties and offering religious gifts in their parents' name even after the parents are dead.

Buddha said that children can never repay their parents for giving birth to them, for all the love, sacrifice and kindness they have given. However, some parents do not live up to the standard that Buddha described. In this case, rather than reject them, Buddha taught that children should help their parents to change. "If one has immoral parents, one should inspire them to be moral. If one has stingy parents, one should be generous and inspire this virtue in them. In this way a child can more than repay the debt he owes to his parents."



Marriage

The basis of Buddha's teaching on marriage is that every thought, action and word should be for the sake of the other's welfare. Thus marriage is not an impulsive affair, but grows from an ever-deepening mutual understanding. Yet marriage is not for the couple alone, because in the Buddhist tradition they also will care for their parents and children, and indeed any member of the two families who needs support. Marriage is therefore for the sake of the community and not merely for the private satisfaction of two partners.

Like every experience, marriage should help us to become better people. We can develop spiritually by learning patience, concentration and developing wisdom. Our spouse is a fellow traveler and mentor on this path to enlightenment.

If both wife and husband hope to be in one another's presence so long as this life lasts and in the future life as well, they should have the same faith, the same virtue, the same generosity, the same wisdom; then they will be in one another's sight so long as this life lasts and in the future life as well.

— Buddha

Within marriage Buddha recognized the need for different roles through which each spouse could complement the other. There is no sense in which one is superior to the other. Superiority is to be found instead in loyalty, gentleness, generosity, calm and dedication to the Noble Path.

Duties of a husband

The five ways in which a good husband fulfills his responsibilities to his wife are by:

1. honoring her
2. treating her with respect
3. being faithful
4. sharing authority with her
5. showing his appreciation by giving her presents.

Duties of a wife

The five ways in which a good wife responds to and loves her husband are by:

1. managing the household well
2. being hospitable to his family as well as her own
3. being faithful
4. taking care of the family's belongings
5. skillfully and industriously completing her duties.

Also Buddha taught that there are four roles that a wife fulfills:

1. She watches over her husband with loving sympathy, like a mother
2. She holds him in respect and quietly honors him, like a younger sister
3. She is glad to see and be with him at any time as a best friend
4. She is as obedient and loyal as a faithful family servant.



The wedding

In some Buddhist countries it was the tradition and moral duty for every young man to spend at least three months in a monastery before marrying. Here he would learn about Buddhism and develop his spiritual life. Only after receiving such training was a man considered worthy of becoming a husband. Usually the first question to a suitor was whether he had completed a term as a monk.

In most communities the marriage ceremony is largely non-religious, although monks are invited into the home of the bride on the morning of the wedding. They are offered a special feast and, in return, recite Buddhist scriptures (*the paritta*) to protect the bride and groom. The monks then return to their monasteries before the wedding ceremony begins. They neither witness nor participate in the ceremony.

Sexuality

Buddha did not judge or condemn the sexual instinct but pointed out that it could be dealt with in three ways:

1. We can be dependent on our sexuality in a way that generates righteous worldly pleasure and happiness. In such a relationship both man and woman are deeply dependent on each other.
2. We can abuse and pervert our sexuality through lust, hatred and greed. If we follow this path, we tend to create pain and suffering both for others and for ourselves.
3. We may live neither dependent on it nor ignoring its real nature. We become free of dependence on it.

This last is the Middle Way in which sexuality is acknowledged and regarded compassionately without being indulged in ways that lead to suffering. One masters sexual desires instead of being their servant. The only place in which sexual relationships are free from guilt and lust is within marriage. Here it is the natural expression of a deep, loving relationship.

Buddhists believe that sexual relationships outside marriage result in suffering. This is because such relationships are based mainly on the desire for pleasure rather than unselfish love. For this reason, such relationships hinder our spiritual growth. We become even more dominated by our desires, and sexual thoughts fill our minds. We also become entangled in relationships that are dishonest and selfish. If we use people as a means to satisfying our own desires, we can never really know who they are. This makes the relationship empty, and as a result we become lonely. To escape from this loneliness people often make the situation even worse by finding yet another partner. For a Buddhist, sexual freedom means freedom from slavishly serving sexual desire.

Adultery

Faithfulness in marriage is an absolute. Buddha taught that from the moment of marriage a man must regard all women other than his wife as either his mother, sister, or daughter, depending on their age.

“Four things happen to the thoughtless man who takes another man’s wife: He lowers himself, his pleasure is restless, he is blamed by others, he goes to hell. Yes. The degradation of the soul, a frightened pleasure, the danger of the law, the path of hell. Considering these four, let not a man go after another’s wife.”

— Buddha, Dhammapada, 309-10

Questions for Discussion



- Buddhists seem to value a mother's love more than the love of a father. Why do you think this is? Do you think that a mother's love in some way differs from a father's?
- How do you think selfish love can harm both others and ourselves?
- Why do you think a Buddhist is expected to spend some time in a monastery before marrying?
- Why don't Buddhist monks attend the wedding ceremony?
- Discuss how the Buddhist view of love and sexuality differs from the contemporary Western view.
- Non-Buddhists might interpret sexual permissiveness as sexual freedom. Act out a discussion between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist who believes in sexual freedom.
- How did Buddha advise children to treat their parents? What do you think of his advice about dealing with parents who are not ideal?