

FAMILY IN BUDDHISM

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The Buddha's compassion saw that no being exists alone, whether human or non-human. The world is a society of beings who utterly depend upon one another. We can do nothing unless we are committed to each other, neither exist, nor grow spiritually. As human beings, he taught, we have a very special place in the complex order of beings. We are unique in our ability to see what is good. We can choose to *realise* it in our own speech and action. We are able to *develop* the inner purity and strength to give, in all our relationships, what is needed by others. We can create a safe society in which we grow.

What, then, should be this relationship to other beings? What kind of relationship did the Buddha hold up as the model for us to follow? "As a mother who would give up her life for her only child - this is how you should feel towards all beings"

So the Buddha taught. This self-sacrificing love, love that seeks to protect and benefit, to feed and teach, even at the extreme cost, is a mother's love. It is this love that the Buddha taught. It is practical, caring and generous and it is selfless.

Parent and child - in this we find the basis of all human society, welfare and safety. Buddhists are taught that the parents are for the child as the earth itself to all the plants and creatures. To show the respect and care, which is due to the parents from the child, is one of the four uniquely important religious opportunities. To care for a Buddha, for an enlightened person, for the mother and for the father - these are the four greatest blessings. This is the first and fundamental relationship. Nothing can develop unless we give unselfishly, without counting the cost, yet wisely, both as children and parents. No true religion and no good society can develop where the relation of parents to children is not cherished above all.

When a very superior religious man asked the Buddha, "Who are the Gods?" the Buddha answered, "Let father and mother be your Gods." They created us, they supported us, they watch over us. Feed them, care for them, let them have authority. This is not only while they live. Buddhists everywhere remember their parents in regular special ceremonies after death. In such a

ceremony, a Buddhist family may gather to commemorate the death of the parents. The family does not mean only the children, but all the relatives. They invite monks to their home and reverently offer food and gifts to monks. The monks, who have no other means of support than what they are given, are offered simple necessities. Then the monks recite scriptures and give blessings; one of them who know the dead man or woman well, talks of him in a sermon. All that was good in his life is remembered and so this family's ideals, affections and traditions are preserved. As all concentrate in loving thoughts and pure feelings, the closest relatives pour water into a bowl until it overflows, symbolising their overflowing feelings of goodwill.

This scene embodies the interdependence of men. The monks cannot eat unless the family contributes towards their support and the family in turn feeds on the spiritual and social disciplines taught by the monks.

Loving kindness is taught by the Buddha as the highest feeling. Beings live in a world caught in suffering, a world where none can survive without supporting and being supported by others. It is not a vague or sentimental love-feeling. It is a disciplined, practical way of life, from cradle to grave.

At each stage of life, definite disciplines are set out, for the parents and the children. Here are the primary duties of the parents - there are five.

1. Guide children away from evil.
2. Persuade them to do good.

In its first years, the young mind is nourished by the moral code of the parents. It is not only what the parents profess, it is what they really are and do which the child drinks in, involuntarily and lovingly. He enters the world moulded by them. In five ways the parents communicate their real sense of right and wrong:

- a. They rejoice in the welfare of others; they resist the impulse to harm others by cruelty, anger, or hatred. Buddhists undertake to avoid killing and hurting.
- b. In relation to possessions - they truly honour other peoples' rights, and give freely and wisely, after protecting their own. Buddhists undertake to train themselves not to steal or cheat.

- c. In relation to honour and purity in relationships - where fidelity is a virtue, neither temptation nor seduction abuse the safety of marriages or families. Buddhists undertake to train themselves not to commit adultery in act or thought.
- d. In speech - their speech is truthful, kindly, just and sensible.
- e. In responsibility - the parents never risking their own or the family's honour or safety through intoxication or carelessness.

These are the five precepts, which a Buddhist undertakes as a free individual.

SELF RESTRAINT

In bringing children up, there is the two-fold work of restraint and of development. Restraint means self-restraint, and also being under authority.

Self-restraint is highly esteemed by the Buddha. Neither pain nor pleasure is to be allowed to deflect us from what is compassionate and right. Buddhist family life is based on an intense and devoted family affection. It is full of joy and teasing and jokes and laughter. Especially, there is a great tradition of giving - giving food, giving presents, giving hospitality, giving help - all kinds of giving are greatly enjoyed. But from the earliest days children are taught simple physical restraint in private and public. The family eats together, goes on holiday together, visits together, works together. It is a closely and strictly ordered unit in which the respect for age and respect for seniority felt in the mind is expressed by the body and the tongue. This discipline is not fear of punishment, but trust and mutual respect.

So close and caring a relationship becomes extremely valuable to the child. What greater punishment than to destroy the very trust that feeds us, is the source of our pride and joy? Conscience develops as one finds he cannot bear to break the family code or to be seen dishonouring it.

Over and again the Buddha taught that evil is its own punishment - it marks us, and our lives with ugliness, distrust and real poverty. It ends in the unrelieved anguish of loss and regret, even after many years of hectic pleasure-making. This is just the inevitable and natural order of things.

In caring for children, as well as these two aspects of development and restraint in the moral life, parents have three other major duties :

3. To provide children with an education.
4. To set them up in a suitable marriage
5. To hand over their inheritance at the right time.

The moral code comes first in Family Life, without which desires and resentment might leave no relationship unharmed - the training of conscience, through the five precepts.

But in developing the family, the Buddha taught us that we should not neglect the everyday basis of happiness.

3. Skill and learning are highly praised by the Buddha equally for men and women. Next to the relationship between parent and child comes that of teacher and pupil. The obedience, affection and effort offered by the pupil to the teacher have its origin in the simple duties and skills in which parents first train the child. Among these is the impact of participation in the religious life - silence, respect and attention develop in the religious atmosphere, when the immediate family, or the whole extended family gather to pay their respects and to dedicate their lives in devotion. The child also learns stories and songs about the Buddha's life and memorises scriptures.

4. "The highest gift a man on earth can gain is a good wife." In Buddhist culture there is no prearranged marriage yet the parents' wishes are very important. The betrothal of two young people is not just casual or private affair. It does mean the joining of two great family groups, who will be related in one extended family network. All relatives linked on both sides through that marriage, should offer one another company and friendship, business partnership or any other kind of support. The choice in marriage is certainly based on love; but then it is a greater responsibility - to unite and to develop the welfare of so many people. But the wishes of the young people come first.

In the family, there is a natural order of seniority. Basically it is a patriarchal society, in the sense that the men are usually expected to lead the family business. But the Buddha also stressed the moral equality and interdependence of men and women, each taking their honoured place in

society. Age is respected, also. For the family the Buddha prescribed the very same recipe of success as for the state, and as for the community of monks. Given the orderly relations that arise from mutual respect of senior and junior, the family should meet often to talk and discuss. Let it meet with the firm intention of arriving at an agreement. After full and free discussion, let the family not leave its councils without agreeing to a common course of action.

5. Similarly, when the parents' inheritance is divided, it is shared equally. But on the oldest child, falls the duty of taking charge of the family councils and the family affairs. This principle brings up the fifth duty of the parent - to distribute the inheritance.

The way of life described above is shrewd and realistic. It has disciplines to restrain and over-ride the natural irritations of family life. It gives each member a definite and productive role in a common enterprise. Absolutely essential to the purpose of the family is the family's prosperity.

The Buddha taught often that the proper management of wealth, income and property is a prime duty of a layman and a great blessing. With this wealth, we create security, freedom from hunger, freedom from fear. "Misery for the householder is poverty, which leads him to fall into debts and so to pay interest for them, and sometimes to be harassed by the money lenders, and go to jail on failing to repay debts."

Our duty as a family is to create wealth by honourable means in order to provide for the welfare and happiness of the family and its dependents. We manage the family income so as to do four things - to provide for the family's immediate needs; to set money aside for contingencies; to invest and to give generously to good and deserving causes. Even a monk who has no other means of support than the food donated day by day is told to feed his parents if there is none to look after them.

And so the family is taught also four ways to create a basis of economic health - these are: skill and energy in work; the management and protection of wealth; the association with good people, who by their virtue will make good friends and to live a life wisely balanced against their means.

The parent who has performed these five duties, will certainly gain his or her rewards. The children in turn fulfil five great obligations :

1. To support the parents.
2. To perform their duties as children towards their parents.
3. To maintain the family traditions, preserving its prosperity, and carrying on its work.
4. To act so as to be worthy of their inheritance.
5. To perform religious duties and to offer religious gifts in their parents' name even after they are dead

Parents and child, teacher and pupil, husband and wife, friends, employer and employee, religious guide and disciple - these are the roles we play; these are the very framework of society. In the family, we learn the values, skills and disciplines required.

Each relationship is based on the wise commitment of one partner to another. Each lives primarily to support, guard and guide the other. This spirit is one of loving acceptance - the parent is committed to guarding, supporting and guiding the child equally in pain and pleasure, success and failure. We find that for the Buddha, authority is therefore bound up with forgiveness.

True freedom is found in a life based on the greatest safety: - the undying care and protection of the united family. Certainly, given this, there need never be a person lost, or lonely. Even if a child's family are all dead, there are uncles, cousins, in-laws. All would see it as an honour and fulfilment to adopt, feed and love the child; and not only a child, but the old and infirm just as much.

So we can see that the Buddha has taught the happiness of a whole society is the happiness of the family. This way of life vibrates with caring and with taking care. It guards tradition. Heart and mind and body are given the creation of happiness for others, here and now. This will bring its own undying rewards thereafter.