

Marriage and Divorce in Buddhism

All too often the uninformed hold the mistaken view that Buddhism views the monastic lifestyle as 'right' and the married way of life as 'wrong'. However it is the case that, while in the majority of Buddhist cultures celibate monasticism is held in the highest regard, for those who cannot commit themselves to celibacy marriage and family life are seen as one of the best environments for developing and nurturing wholesome behaviour.

Thus, the Buddha gave teachings to suit both temperaments, lay and ordained. While it is certainly the case that when addressing the ordained sangha he spoke of the faults of family life, in the Blessing Sutra, the Buddha declared:

*'To care for one's wife and children...
This is the highest blessing.'*

Elsewhere, in the Sigalovada Sutra, the Buddha outlined the proper way in which husband and wife should relate to one another:

'In five ways should a wifebe ministered to by her husband: by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her (in the home), by providing her with adornment. In...five ways does the wife...act in sympathy with him: her duties are well performed, she shows hospitality to kin of both, is faithful, watches over the goods he brings, and shows skill and artistry in discharging all her business.'

Marriage itself should have as its foundation loving kindness or 'metta', the wish for others to be happy, and in so being, acts an environment for the cultivation of the same. Furthermore, marriage helps one to improve one's karma and karmic tendencies, for it acts as a framework within which one can refrain from sexual misconduct, the fourth of the five precepts of the upasika.

Despite all this, it would be wrong to assume that Buddhism views marriage as a 'sacred duty' (as, for example, in the Hindu tradition). Marriage in Buddhism is considered to be a 'secular contract'. Thus, monks do not preside over wedding ceremonies. Rather, they will bless the couple during or after the ceremony has been conducted. In fact, they might even perform a blessing without any ceremony taking place as actual and common law marriages are viewed as being of equal status.

Views of marriage in the different traditions

In Theravada Hinayana Buddhist countries, the family way of life is renounced when males leave home to become monks. Once a member of the monastic community, one is forbidden from supporting one's family. In this context family life appears to be spiritually insignificant and indeed it is the belief that one can only actually achieve nirvana or enlightenment as a member of the ordained sangha. However, these are not the only goals of Buddhist practice. The starting point of Buddhist practice is developing the wish to achieve a higher realm rebirth. For those who aspire to this, marriage is seen as being perfectly acceptable. In fact, the monastic community would

find it difficult to survive in these lands without the existence of the lay community as it relies very heavily on it for its support.

In Tibetan Mahayana society, the concept of family is widened to encompass all beings and as such is one of supreme importance; a mother's compassion or 'karuna' (the wish that others be free from suffering) for her children for example, is taken as the highest instance of a state of mind to be cultivated by both the ordained and the lay towards all beings. Here, while monks and nuns are certainly treated with respect, it is the belief that, whether lay or ordained, individuals are equally capable of achieving the higher Buddhist goals of nirvana and enlightenment. (The lay-monastic divide has gradually died out in Mahayana Japan. It would therefore be inappropriate to make comment on the view of marriage *as opposed to* monasticism).

Divorce

While there is generally heavy social pressure against divorce in Buddhist countries, Buddhism accepts it on the following grounds:

- Where the 1st, 3rd or 4th precepts (killing, lying, sexual misconduct) are broken.
- Where the amount of suffering arising as a result of the marriage becomes disproportionate and where that suffering would be alleviated by the divorce