



Parents & Children

Transmitting the Buddhist Heritage
Across Generations

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Nayaka Thera



The Buddha stressed the importance of giving a child a good education. This is one of the main responsibilities of a parent. Furthermore, the gift of Dhamma excels all other gifts. Therefore, to give a child an education in the Dhamma is indeed the best gift.

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PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Transmitting the Buddhist Heritage across Generations

Social life begins with our parents; the intellect is cultivated through our teachers; family life is adjusted through experience; the world is appreciated through friends and relations; interdependence is realised through our employment; and our final goal is achieved through spiritual guides.

Society is a complex unit consisting of individuals each having a specific relationship with one another. Each person has a special place within the order of things. Each has a set of duties to perform, and the wellbeing of society depends on how each individual member functions in it.

One essential requirement for a happy society is that the individuals constituting the society must have tranquillity of mind. This tranquillity of mind arises from purity of thought, word, and action, which means the observance of an ethical lifestyle based on the Five Precepts. As human beings we are unique in our ability to see the difference between good and bad. We have

the capacity to make moral choices and thereby to influence the pattern of our own lives and that of others. This influence is exerted through our thoughts, speech, and actions. If we can develop inner purity and strength, then we have established the basis on which we can give what is needed by others in all our relationships. It is up to us to create a safe and harmonious society.

The moral, economic, and social stability and wellbeing of a society are all rooted in the life-long disciplines of family and marital relationships. We must train in the habitual use of reason to balance varied needs, to act for others' welfare, and to rejoice in others' good. These are the essential elements by which we grow together.

Society grows through a network of interdependent relationships. Every relationship is a wholehearted commitment to support and to cherish others. The world is a society of beings who depend utterly upon one another. We can grow neither materially nor spiritually unless we are committed to one another. The function of all social bonds is to provide a life-path both as a realistic discipline and as an opportunity for fulfilment, which guides and rewards at every stage from birth to death. In this strong web of relationships, marriage plays a central part.

The relationships of parents and child, teacher and student, husband and wife, friend and companion, employer and employee, the ordained and the layman—these are the roles we play; these are the very framework of society. In the family we learn the values, skills, and disciplines required to fulfil our roles in

society at large. All these relationships are developed by generosity, kind and gentle speech, a life of service, and the warm, responsive quality of the mind. This is how self-development serves others. Let us appreciate that true freedom is found in the undying care and protection of the united family. Given this, there need never be divorce or a breakdown of traditional morality.

Buddhist teachings are designed to enable men and women to achieve fulfilment and satisfaction in this life through their own efforts, and to establish a social order for the welfare of all. That is, Buddhism advocates a way of life that ensures the creation of a healthy society.

Buddhism also gives insight into the very nature of human beings and human affairs. It makes available the means to develop a simple and practical discipline of life suited to one's own temperament and conditions. It creates a steady growth of confidence, generosity, moral energy, sensitivity, concentration and understanding. These are the pillars of both the spiritual life and family life. Work, stability, generosity and joyfulness are the marks of such a lifestyle, and these are generated in a way that accommodates change and does not depend on superficial tastes; above all, such a bond is a shield against suffering. The basis of the Buddha's teaching is that every thought, word and deed has significance both for one's own welfare and for the welfare of others.

The life of marriage is a unique balance of enlightened self-interest and unselfish devotion. It should be a religious partnership, a relationship free to

grow, with trust and freedom from fear. Different but complementary, each partner develops strengths that support and sustain the other. Neither is superior nor inferior; rather, the marriage bond should be a true partnership.

The following statement of the Buddha's emphasises four qualities—faith, virtue, generosity, and wisdom—which both partners should develop equally in their attitudes, outlook and modes of behaviour.

“If householders, both husband and wife, hope to be in one another's sight 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.”

Āṅguttara Nikāya IV 55

Each relationship is based on the intelligent commitment of one partner to the other. Each lives primarily to support, guard and guide the other. This spirit is one of loving acceptance. The fulfilment of the human heart and mind in marriage is finding a balanced way through a testing and unsatisfactory world, a slow and patient task of constant awareness and love. This is the path for those who seek to triumph over difficulties and limitations, to establish virtue, patience, concentration, wisdom and freedom. Rigid ideas about male and female roles, about rights and privileges, are most likely to generate heated differences of opinion, factious feelings, and eventual disappointment.

In short, marriage grows from understanding, not impulse; from true loyalty, not indulgence. Marriage functions as an understanding of the balance of the needs of many, not the private satisfaction of the two immediate partners. The institution of marriage provides a basis for nurture and culture; it gives protection from loneliness, deprivation, and fear. A wholesome, secure, and loving relationship in marriage is of the utmost importance to the well-being of the family and of society.

The legends contained in the Jātaka stories provide many excellent similes which help to clarify the teachings of the Buddha. In the *Rukkhadhamma* (Jātaka No. 74) we find expressed the value of solidarity:

“It is meet that kinsfolk should dwell together in concord and unity. For when kinsfolk are at one, enemies find no opportunity. Not to speak only of human beings, even sense-lacking trees ought to stand together. For in bygone days in the Himalayas a tempest struck a sal-forest; yet, because the trees, shrubs, bushes, and creepers of the forest were interlaced with one another, the tempest could not overthrow even a single tree but passed harmlessly over their heads. But alone in a courtyard stood a mighty tree; and though it had many stems and branches, yet, because it was not united with other trees, the tempest uprooted it and laid it low. Wherefore, it is meet that you too should dwell together in concord and unity.”

The moral code comes first in family life, without which selfish desires and resentment might leave no relationship unharmed. In the family the parent is

committed to guarding, supporting and guiding the child, equally in pain and pleasure, in success and failure, remembering that authority is bound up with forgiveness. A family that trains in coping with pain and disappointment, pleasure and greed, is itself the best educational institution. This training of the conscience is provided through the two great protectors of righteousness: shame (*hiri*) and fear (*ottappa*). *Hiri* is the embarrassment we feel when we find ourselves not adhering to the good behavioural pattern that we expect of ourselves; *ottappa* is the dread of punishment or retribution if one is caught committing some wrong, or the dread of the kammic result of an unwholesome act. Conscience develops as one finds one cannot bear to break the family code or to be seen dishonouring it. What greater shame is there than to destroy the very trust that feeds us, which is the source of our pride and joy? With trust and mutual respect, with confidence in each others' responses, the family becomes a closely and strictly ordered unit in which the respect for age and seniority felt in the mind is expressed by both acts of body and speech.

No true religion and no good society can develop where the relationship of parents and children is not cherished above all. According to the Buddhist teaching, the family is the most important human association for the formation and socialisation of the infant. Sons and daughters learn diverse things under various teachers when they grow up, but the first and most important lessons they learn at home from their parents—like how to talk, eat and clean themselves, and how to behave properly.

Hence the Buddha said that parents are Brahmā—God—and also our first teachers: “Brahmā is a term for parents. Early teachers is a term for parents. Parents are worthy of offerings, because the mother and father do much for children. They bring them up, nourish them, and introduce them to the world.” No matter where the parents may be when the children grow older, they should visit their parents and offer them all their requisites and gifts. That is why the Buddha said they are worthy of offerings. When the Buddha was asked, “Who are the gods?”, he replied, “Let your father and mother be your gods.”

Brahmā is believed to have four noble qualities (*brahmāvihāra*), namely: loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), appreciative joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Parents maintain these four qualities towards their children throughout all the different events of life, from the moment of conception onwards. Therefore the reciprocal relationship between parents and children, and the attitude of parents towards their children, are fashioned by these four qualities. The Buddha advised his followers to widen these feelings to apply them to all. These social feelings are to regulate our relationship towards our fellow-beings as well as between the individual and society. At the beginning these are social qualities, yet they can be developed into spiritual states which are highly blissful if cultivated properly.

When a child is born it is unable to live even for a few days without the help of someone else. It is the parents who look after and nurse him. Parents have to provide all the essential care until the child becomes

grown up and is in a position to live without the help of others. The love of parents towards their children is beyond words; it is limitless. They do everything humanly possible to care for their children. They look after them, even going without proper sleep themselves, and they spend sleepless nights for the sake of their children.

To the best of their ability, they nurse them, feed them, wash them, clean them and arrange for their comforts. Parents are willing to spend all their wealth and forgo their own comforts for the sake of their children. They spend lavishly on their children's education, their one and only purpose being to see their children prosper and live happily. Their children's joy is their joy, their children's prosperity is their prosperity. If the child falls into any difficulty, his parents are also distressed and miserable. Limitless is the assistance and help rendered by parents to their children.

"As a mother gives up her own life for the sake of her child..." This quotation is from the Buddha's Sermon on Loving kindness, the Metta Sutta. 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; above all, it is selfless. But this love should not be kept just for one's own child. It is a love to radiate to all humanity, in fact to all beings.

According to the Sigālovāda Sutta, which deals with the code of conduct for the laity, there are five duties parents are to perform towards their children:

(1) The parents should dissuade their children from doing evil. Parents are the first school for their children, where they learn their elementary lessons in good and evil. Therefore, parents should be very careful to steer their children away from all kinds of evil, such as lying, cheating, dishonesty and revenge.

(2) The second duty of parents is to persuade their children to do good. By their words and example, parents should persuade the children to develop and manifest good qualities, such as kindness, obedience, courage, honesty, perseverance, simplicity and good manners.

(3) The third duty of parents is to give their children a good education. The best legacy that parents can bequeath to their children is proper education. There is no treasure more valuable for a human being than a good education. Parents should see that their children learn a suitable art or science as well as ethical and moral principles. Education develops discipline, and the disciplined person is a blessing to any nation or country.

(4) The fourth duty is to arrange a suitable marriage partner for their children. There are two types of marriages, i.e., love marriages and arranged marriages. It is a paramount duty of parents to see whether the marriage of their children would develop into a life-long companionship, because marriage should start with love coupled with the advice of the parents. It should, however, develop later in life into a companionship. The wife is called in Buddhist literature 'the second most important person in one's life', the first being oneself. The wife is also called 'the best friend' (*bhāriyā paramā sakhā*).

If husband and wife do not assist each other, do not love each other, do not share their happiness and sorrow with each other, do not look after each other, do not respect each other, their experience will be life-long misery. The parents have the right to advise their children with regard to their proposed marriages. Parents should admonish them and explain the duties of a husband and wife as given in the Sigalovāda Sutta.

(5) The fifth duty of parents is to hand over their inheritance to their children at the proper time. During their lifetime, loving parents not only do everything for the prosperity and wellbeing of their children, but they also make all preparations and arrangements for their future comfort and wellbeing. Their ancestral property, together with their hard-earned wealth, forms a proper bequest or legacy.

Buddhists are taught that parents support the child as the earth itself supports all plants and creatures. The debt of moral obligations can never be repaid to one's parents, even if one were to sacrifice one's life for their sake. If a child ministers to his parents in every possible way for a hundred years, if he establishes his parents in supreme authority and absolute rule over the mighty earth, not even thus could he repay his debt to his parents. Thus said the Buddha:

"I declare that one can never repay two people, namely mother and father. Even if one carries about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and doing so would live a hundred years.... Even if one establishes one's parents in supreme authority, in the absolute

supremacy over all the world.... even then one could not repay them. Why so? The reason is that parents do much for their children; they give life to them, nourish and bring them up, and introduce them to the world.”

Āṅguttara Nikāya II 4.2

There are some children who do not realise this or who forget the amount of affection and care their parents have lavished upon them. Parental love is always greater than filial love. One cannot expect children or babies to be grateful or dutiful as they are still immature, but it is very wrong if children are ungrateful, stubborn or disobedient when they grow up.

There are three types of children described in the Buddhist scriptures. These are: *avajāta*, *anujāta*, and *atijāta*. Those who are inferior to their parents in every respect are called *avajāta*. Those who are on the same level as their parents are called *anujāta*. And those who excel their parents in every way are called *atijāta*. Even in their dreams parents do not want their children to be inferior to them. All parents without exception want their children to excel them in learning, virtue, and position. Therefore, every child must endeavour to fulfil these hopes. The parents’ one and only hope is to see their children grow up to become good and ideal people. They would be happy if their children surpass them, and they would surely be unhappy if their children fall below their expected standard. In order to lead children on the right path, parents must first set an example for them to follow.

In the first years, the young mind is nourished by the moral code of the parents. The Buddhist heritage has no dogmas to pass on to future generations. It is a way of life based on the criterion of unsatisfactoriness of life due to craving. This craving is eradicated by the successful practice of generosity, morality and wisdom, and it is these qualities that should be taught by example and guidance from one generation to another. One is mindful that it is not only what the parents profess, but rather what they really are and do, that the child drinks in, involuntarily and lovingly. The child enters the world moulded by the parents.

In five ways parents communicate their real sense of right and wrong for the protection of the child, the protection of the family, and the protection of the society.

(1) They rejoice in the welfare of others; they resist the impulse to harm others by cruelty, anger, or hatred. Buddhists undertake to train themselves to avoid killing or hurting any living being.

(2) In relation to possessions, they truly honour other people's rights, and give freely and wisely, after protecting their own. Buddhists undertake to train themselves not to steal or cheat.

(3) In relation to honour and purity in relationships, where fidelity is a virtue, neither temptation nor seduction abuse the safety of marriages among families. To Buddhists everyone else, with the exception of one's spouse, is like either a parent, a brother or sister, or one's child. Buddhists undertake to train themselves not to commit adultery or sexual misconduct in act or thought.

(4) Their speech is truthful, kindly, just, and sensible. Buddhists undertake not to speak falsely.

(5) Parents never risk their own or their family's honour or safety through intoxication. Buddhists undertake to avoid hallucinogenics and intoxication, which will cause carelessness.

There are some ways for children to repay partially, but not fully, their debt to their parents. These are: by dissuading them from evil, by encouraging them to do wholesome deeds, and by being good children living as closely as possible to the ideal. If they live as ideal children, they fulfil one of the ways to repay their parents. Parents should be provided not only with fleeting material support, but also with substantial spiritual support, like confidence, morality and wisdom. Dutiful, loving children are always obedient to their parents who have bestowed upon them their overflowing love and compassion. They never disregard their wishes. They never get angry with them, nor provoke them, nor hurt their feelings. They always uphold their good name and honour by showing excellent character, refined behaviour, charming manners, and a noble demeanour. In every way, and to the best of their ability, they should try to be worthy children of worthy parents. They do nothing which might discredit their parents' good name even after their death.

The Rock Edicts of the great Indian emperor Asoka (c. 280 BC) often dealt with the duties of children to their parents: "Meritorious is obedience to mother and father," "Right conduct to mother and father is

obedience," "Obey mother and father," "Listen to mother and father."

In the Sigalovāda Sutta the child is advised how he should honour his parents:

(1) As the parents have supported the child, so should the child support the parents. Sons and daughters should support their parents. They should wait upon them when they are sick or old. In fact they should deem it a great blessing and privilege to minister to, wait upon and look after their parents when they become helpless, old or destitute.

(2) The child should do the parents' duties. Children should always try to understand the needs of their parents, and they must try to provide them to the best of their abilities. Children should not hesitate to provide anything that their parents require for their satisfaction. They should see to the comfort and happiness of their parents.

The Bodhisattva considered it his greatest privilege to sacrifice even his own life for the sake of his parents. It is a Bodhisattva virtue, a Bodhisattva ideal to look after his mother and father. It is a duty not only to see to their material happiness, but also to their spiritual progress. Children should try to encourage their parents to develop virtues such as generosity, morality, piety and wisdom.

(3) Children should uphold the family tradition and lineage. It is an important duty of children to continue the good works started by their parents. They should preserve the family tradition by carrying on any philanthropic or social work started by their parents,

especially after their death. The good name of the parents should be preserved by their worthy children. Good, cultured children do nothing to bring discredit to the good name of their parents.

(4) Children should act in such a way as to be worthy of their inheritance. Whatever legacy or property they receive from their parents should be protected and, if possible, increased. Children may earn a lot in later life, but they should always preserve the ancestral property with due honour and care.

(5) Furthermore, children should offer alms in honour of their departed relatives. It is one of the noble duties and customs to remember and revere parents after their death. Children offer alms to monks and the needy, and then transfer the merits acquired thereby to the departed ones.

Buddhists believe in rebirth. They know that their departed parents have taken birth somewhere else. Therefore, after performing suitable meritorious deeds, they radiate their thoughts of goodwill towards their dead parents, wishing them wellbeing and happiness wherever they may be. They give periodic alms offerings in their parents' name, or give donations to charitable institutions, or publish Dhamma books, or establish schools, hospitals, orphanages or other institutions. Dutiful and loving children perform various philanthropic works in order to perpetuate the hallowed names of their parents. They do so as a mark of gratitude in memory of their beloved parents.

As a son or daughter, one has to be useful to one's parents in whatever way one can. One should not

demand things that one's parents cannot afford, but try to make the best use of the facilities they are in a position to provide. One should develop one's inborn talents and also gain whatever new knowledge one can, so that one grows up to adulthood as a capable person, ready to shoulder some responsibility in society. Hence, when one grows up to adulthood, one should be in a position to engage in some useful trade or profession to earn enough to maintain oneself and also to help one's ageing parents and other deserving relatives and friends.

When one is married, one should not be a burden or cause embarrassment to the partner, but should be in a position to contribute in whatever manner possible to make the task of the other easy and pleasant. Next, as a parent too one should be an asset, a source of strength and inspiration, to the children. When one grows old and feeble one should try to be as little a burden as possible to the children.

This moulding and shaping of duty-conscious and law-abiding family members—both parents and children—will lead to the emergence of a good social order. The result will be the creation of a contented humanity. That has been the aim of the Buddha's teachings. Hence we can see that the Buddha taught that the happiness of a whole society depends upon the happiness of the family. This way of life resonates with the ideal of caring for others.

The importance of *mettā*, loving kindness, must be fully recognised. Loving kindness must first be shown to oneself, the individual must be inwardly confident before he or she can be of service to others. Then this love should be radiated to one's parents, thinking, "As I

am happy, may my parents be happy.” In this way one radiates these pure thoughts of goodwill to family and friends; to neighbours; to strangers; to those who may be unfriendly or hostile towards us; to all of humanity. The most commonly recited and meditated upon sutta in Buddhism is the Metta Sutta, which should be recited daily by all Buddhists.

When such love is taught and becomes the most central theme of one’s life, and the status of the family is held as the nucleus of society, it can be more easily appreciated how, in Buddhist countries, family unity is still extremely strong. However, as modern materialism creeps into the fabric of every culture; as media such as television, with its perpetual salutations to the glories of craving and violence, becomes available even in small villages; as childrens’ education places more importance on skills for monetary gain than on excellence of character; so even in the bastions of Buddhist culture, traditional values are waning.

Some reasons for the erosion of traditional morality may be that modern youth takes less notice of the advice handed down from one generation to the next, advice such as has already been quoted: “...should have the same faith, the same virtue, the same generosity, the same wisdom.” Instead they rely on the earthly emotions that are tied more to instant sexual attraction than to a sense of lifetime commitment. This is not to say that Buddhism demeans the importance of sexuality in the committed relationship, for this surely is the strongest emotion of mankind. But such emotions should be used wisely and correctly; marriage should neither be based wholly on

sexuality nor ignorant of its real nature, but become free of dependence on it. This thinking would surely maintain the safety of a lasting relationship.

As the children, with their fine education, move from their home environments to get work elsewhere, often in a foreign country, slowly the 'thin end of the wedge' of corruption of moral standards is inched into their weakening traditions. The first generation, and even the second, may be able to hold on to the ethics inherent in their heritage, but those that sustain it longer are most fortunate.

There is still another reason for the decline in human relationships and the weakening of traditional morality. Often, a person may have too many undertakings, so that he is not only unable to complete these undertakings successfully, but may neglect his duties to his family and relations owing to lack of time and distraction by his external responsibilities.

To tackle these crises let us not cling to the older rules just because they may have appeared successful in the past. Let us not insist on acceptance of dogma, let us not try to conquer with authority, but let us reintroduce self-respect, self-confidence, and self-love.

True freedom is found in a life based on the greatest safety, which requires the undying care and protection of a united family. Certainly, given this, there need never be a person who is lost or lonely. Even if a child's immediate family members are all dead, he still has uncles, cousins and in-laws. All should see it as a source of honour and fulfilment to adopt, feed and love the child. This holds not only for a child, but also just as much for the old and infirm.

The moulding and shaping of duty-conscious and law-abiding members of a family (both parents and children) mean the emergence of a good social order with the creation of a contented humanity as a further result. That has been the aim of the Buddha's teachings. So we can see that the Buddha has taught that the happiness of the whole society is based on the happiness of the family. This way of life is permeated with the ideals of caring and being cared for. It guards tradition. Heart, mind and body are given to the creation of happiness for others, here and now. This will bring its own undying rewards hereafter.

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