

**Conference On “Governing the Family”  
14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2008 Monash University**

**THE MODEL OF THE FAMILY IN A BUDDHIST COMMUNITY:  
RESPONDING TO CHANGE AND SECULARISATION.**

Padmasiri de Silva, Monash University

First, I shall present the model of Buddhist family life as presented in the ancient Buddhist sermon, *Sigalovada sutta*. Secondly, explore the value of these relationships in the context of contemporary challenges and then select the institution of marriage for detailed discussion paying heed to contemporary psychological, counselling and ethical perspectives. I shall also look at the family as an economic unit and explore some ideas about sustainable life styles. This model of the family shares many features with family concepts in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Tibetan, Vietnamese, Japanese and Chinese cultures in having a focus on reciprocity, social warmth and connection, relatedness and interdependence, particularly among family and friends.

**Restoring the Ancient Logic of Reciprocity in Family Relations**

The first part of the paper describes the traditional model of the Buddhist family as contained in a celebrated sermon, *The Sigalovada Sutta* which outlines a network of six patterns of relationships. The reciprocal relations of duties and responsibilities revolve round parents and children, husband and wife, pupils and teachers, friends and friends, masters and servants, householders and monks. Certain basic values preserve these relationships and emphasize the Buddhist philosophy of interconnectedness. In the world today, with the increasing emphasis on human rights, and the impact of modernization, the *ancient logic of reciprocity* needs to be restored or re-interpreted. We need a framework that emphasizes not merely the morality of rights but also that of responsibility.

It is of great interest that Carol Gilligan in the west emphasized that we need an ethic of care to supplement the ethic of rights: the morality of rights is predicted on equality and centred on the understanding of fairness, while the ethic of responsibility relies on the concept of equity, the recognition of differences in need and gives rise to compassion and care (Gilligan, 1983). In east Asia, the Buddhist focus on the family has been influenced by the ethics of Confucius. The Confucian discourse focus on certain moral virtues cementing family links: kindness in the father, filial duty on the son, kindness in the elder brother, obedience in the younger and so on. The Buddhist family network is both similar and yet different but both focus on reciprocity and interconnectedness. In the *Sigalovada sutta* seniors are represented as little gods who have compassion and tenderness to the juniors or subordinates, excepting the case of friends. The type word ‘*anukampati*’ means more than our use of compassion or sympathy; it is a vibrating force of protecting tenderness.

This poem summarises the relationships:

Mother, father are the east,  
Teachers are the southward point,  
Wife and children are the west,  
Friends and colleagues are the north.  
Servants and workers are below,  
Ascetics, Brahmin are above,  
These directions all should be  
Honoured by clansman true.

He who's wise and disciplined  
Kindly and intelligent,  
Humble, free from pride,  
Such a one may honour gain  
Early rising, scorning sloth,  
Unshaken by adversity,  
Of faultless conduct, ready wit,  
Such a one may honour gain.  
Making friends and keeping them,  
Welcoming no stingy host, A guide, philosopher and friend,  
Such a one may honour gain.  
Giving gifts and kindly speech,  
A life well spent for other's good,  
Even-handed in all things,  
Impartial as case demands:  
These things make the world go round.  
(Dialogues of the Buddha, III, 192-93)

A therapist in USA observes: "From my own observation of Indian, Nepali, Sri Lankan, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and Chinese individuals, I have observed that there is a strong emphasis on social warmth and connection, particularly among friends and family" (Aaronson, 2004, 15). Also as Hazel Rose Markus and Shibu Kitayama cultural psychologists say, in the major cultures of Asia there is a strong emphasis on connection, relatedness and interdependence. Also emphasis on emotional bonding is common in Asian cultures (Rose and Kitayama, 1994, 110). Aaronson also says that in marked contrast, people in North America and Europe have a focus on the individual. Like the *Sigalovada Sutta*, the Hindu *Bhagavadgita* and the Analects of Confucius express the importance of social reciprocity, and also outlines the rules and responsibilities that need to guide different segments of society.

#### *An important issue*

For those who are migrants to Melbourne/ Australia from Asian cultures, within the institution of marriage and family life how do they negotiate cultural values with respect to duty, freedom, individuality love and relationships? Ignoring cultural values may lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding, especially if there are marriages across cultures and even more important children of Asian parents who are born and grow up in Australian soil? Exploring these differences may in the long run

help deeper understanding in human relationships both within and outside the family. Aaronson mentions four important ways in which we can develop cross-cultural understanding: (1) Thinking by means of the other (2) Greeting the others straight (3) Areas where others may have limitations (4) Being aware of the context of engagement with the other

Thinking by means of the other refers to our valuing the expertise of other cultures. Getting the other straight implies the need to grasp the internal logic and beliefs of another culture, and other cultures have limitations when it does not address the kind of problems one has and need illumination. If I am lucid about what I feel within my culture, it is easy to discern the differences with the other culture. Unacknowledged cultural differences may lead to alienation and separation. Cross-cultural reflection is an important dimension in many multi-cultural contexts in Australia, some times within a family (with marriages across race and culture), in the context of work and social interaction.

According to the insights gained by Aaronson as therapist, he says: “Unfortunately, every day in my psychotherapy practice I am struck by the cost of individualism run amok. I particularly see it in the isolation of single mothers, who struggle to find support in raising children. I also see it in the physical and emotional isolation of individuals and even couples who, often because of moves related to education or work, feel unconnected and lost, a feeling exacerbated by a social environment that encourages independence rather than support and connection” (Aaronson, 2004, 21).

Looking at Sri Lankans (not exclusively Buddhists), while I have noticed problems with a few people in therapy beset by adjusting to a western culture, there have been innumerable examples of couples blending very well the Asian ways of reciprocity and connectedness of family and friends with developing a mature individuality, making their own choices and letting the children make their own choice in finding a partner, deciding on educational options and blending well in both work and leisure. Cultural problems are often created by lack of linguistic skills that can be frustrating, unless one takes the hard road to master a foreign language.

### **Contemporary Challenges to Family Life**

In a recent study of Buddhist family life in the modern world from Malaysia, it has been observed: “Modern life is fraught with all kinds of tension and stress. Doubtless, very often it is tension and stress that creates problems in many a marriage. If a proper analysis is made of the root causes of such social problems as pre-marital sex, teenage pregnancies, unhappy marriages and divorces, child abuse and wife battering, we inevitably discover that it is due to selfishness and lack of patience, tolerance and mutual understanding” ( Dhammananda, 1995, 3). While this observation is made by a layman, a Buddhist monk in Malaysia, Ven.Dhammananda presents a way to restore the ancient Buddhist family values, paying heed to the stress and tensions which did not exist in ancient times of the Buddha. The monk observes that marriage is a partnership of two individuals and this partnership is enriched and able to grow. This involves respecting the privacy of each individual, accepting that diversity is a source of richness and that each personality needs the respect and the understanding from the other. “In marriage, each partner develops a complementary role, giving strength and

moral courage to one another, each manifesting a supportive and appreciative recognition of the other's skill in caring and providing for a family" (Dhammananda, 1995, 4).

According to Buddhist teachings, the husband may expect the following qualities from the wife: love, attentiveness, family obligations, faithfulness, child-care, thrift, provision of meals, to calm him down when he is upset and sweetness in everything; in return the wife expects from the husband tenderness, courtesy, sociability, security, fairness, loyalty, honesty, good companionship and moral support.

Conditions have changed today as many wives and mothers are working; and cooking, childcare and the family-budget are shared by the two, husband and wife. Thus mutual understanding and working together on the daily routine, consultations, trust and transparency and settling issues by dialogue help the smooth working of family relationships. Bring up children and educating them is a far more complex issue in a world beset with uncertainties and changes. Also in Sri Lanka, though the extended family system helped the care of the aged, conditions have changed and they are exploring the idea of introducing the concept of retirement villages.

Working as a professional counsellor for over three years, I realized the value of introducing a counselling perspective to Buddhist family life. But some of the best resources for a counselling perspective are found in the psychological and therapeutic resources found in the sermons of the Buddha (de Silva, 2008).

On the economics of the family budget the Buddha offers a life style, which is the middle-path between miserliness and extravagance. It has been observed that when poverty knocks at the door love flies through the window. Buddhist economics of the "small is beautiful" quality has attracted people working on green economics and provides a viable sustainable life style (de Silva, 1998). The householder is expected to collect wealth for his needs in the way that a bee collects honey without injuring the flower. Thriftiness, generosity, caring, industriousness and "earning by the "sweat of one's brow", they all present a rich tapestry of a simple and contented life (de Silva, 1998, 156). In a world dominated by the lure of consumerism, when consumer identity is replacing ecological identity, traditional Buddhist values of ecology and the environment present resources for how families may relate to the earth and society. The ideal of living within one's means and self-reliance were basic values preached to the householder.

### *Parents and Children*

Having being supported by them, to support them when the need arises, perform their duties for them; keep the family traditions and be worthy of the heritage, and after the death of the parents distribute gifts on their behalf.

Parents will reciprocate by refraining the children from evil, support them to engage in wholesome activities, teach them the necessary skills and find a job for them, find a suitable wife and in due time hand over the inheritance to them.

Parents are responsible for the well-being and up-bringing of children and when the child grows up we expect him/her to be a strong, healthy and responsible and useful citizen. The Buddha considered both the home and the school as providing the basic educational outlook and skills. Parental guidance and love are crucial for the child. Today, both parents work, not necessarily for material advancement and luxuries but often just to make ends meet or live a comfortable life and spend for the education of the children.

#### *Duties of Students to Teachers*

By rising to greet them in the class, by waiting for them, being attentive, serving them and by mastering the skills they teach. The teachers will reciprocate by giving good instruction, and be sure that they have understood the teachings, give them a good grounding in necessary skills, recommend them to their friends and colleagues and provide them with security in possible ways.

#### *Duties of Husbands to Wife*

By honouring her, not disparaging her, being faithful to her, by giving the necessary authority to her and provide her with armaments. The wife will reciprocate by properly organizing the work due from her, being kind to the servants, by being faithful to her, protecting the home stores and being skilful and diligent in her regular work.

#### *Duties of Friends to Companions*

Should use kind words, offer gifts, look after their welfare, treating your companion in the same way as you look after yourself, keeping your word. The Companion will reciprocate by looking after him when he is not attentive, by being a refuge when he is afraid, helping when he is in trouble and show concern for his children.

#### *Duties of the Master to Servants*

Arrange their work according to their strength, supply them with food and wages, looking after them when they are ill, sharing special delicacies with them, and by letting them off from work at the correct time. The servant will reciprocate by getting up before the master, go to bed after him, take only what they are given, do their work properly, and be bearers of his praise and good repute.

#### *Duties of the Householders to a Recluse*

Householders should show kindness in thought, word and deed, by keeping open house for them and attending to their bodily needs. The recluses should reciprocate by restraining the householders from evil, encouraging them to do good, be benevolent and compassionate to them, teach them what they have

not heard, clarify what he has heard and point out the way to heaven (*Digha Nikaya* III, 191).

Today, the institution of marriage in particular and other relationships are facing challenges and the Buddhist community in Melbourne has made attempts to preserve the coherence of traditional family values, and this paper attempts to examine the challenges of secularization, and the potential to develop as well as the obstructions for the role of the family as a spiritual vehicle and an agent of social cohesion. Many conditions prevailing during the time of the Buddha in relation to the family have changed: children often find their partners, often with the consent of the parents, and some times the parents encourage them to make a good choice of their own; a large proportion of women even in Sri Lanka work, and often part of the day children are at daycare centers. The concept of education and teaching has changed as it involves great deal of expenditure, though in countries like Sri Lanka free-education up to university level is available. Teachers of teach certain skills and only selected areas in education have an impact on the personality and character of students. The Buddha has given invaluable advice regarding making friends in great detail—is it possible to communicate this message to young people today?

There was some belief in the past that family relationships are natural and they demand little effort to preserve the cohesiveness of the family. A recent study of families in the contemporary world observes that such a belief had some grounds when external bonds of social control and the internal bonds of ethical/religious commitments existed.

Contractual obligations have the advantage of making relationships predictable and saving energy by excluding options and the need for constant negotiation....Now that the integrity of the family has become a matter of personal choice, it cannot survive except through the regular infusion of psychic energy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, 111).

Whether we look at the husband wife relationship or parenting we need what the psychologists and the counsellors describe as the “flow” experience—living fully in the here and now, to focus on goals which are clear and compatible, and where you get an immediate feedback and the challenges and response balance. All this implies that families in contemporary times need to support the emotional well-being of the members and excellence in family life emerges with a blend of discipline and spontaneity.

While the ancient logic of reciprocity helps the Buddhist to stabilize family relationship, current trends call for a more sophisticated kind of counselling education. It was with this goal in mind that we conducted a pilot project on the theory and practice of Buddhism with a focus on “family values” from October to December at the Dhammasarana temple in Keysborough. It was a course that included issues on family ethics and counseling and the practice of meditation. It was a small experiment and a group of about forty young people, mostly undergraduates from universities in Melbourne. There was a great deal of encouragement from the parents and some of the parents also participated.

After this project, I have revisited the Sigalovada sutta and re-worked the network of relations in this sermon in the context of developing emotional well-being in the family and society. Buddhism considers the family unit as the building blocks that go to make society. In this context both ethical values and emotional balance are the qualities that would enhance a healthy family and a healthy society. Tensions remain in families today, challenges to relationships—husband and wife and parents and children and the equally important issue about healthy friendship for children. Over twenty five centuries back, the Buddha cited factors that would help the families to endure for a long time, though these may sound old fashioned, nevertheless they are relevant:

They recover what is lost, repair what is decayed, eat and drink in moderation, and they put in authority a man or woman of virtue”. The Buddha thought that a generational hierarchy would help families to balance intergenerational continuity and change. Well-integrated connectedness and good communication techniques are invaluable. In the context of the world we live today, a family with a great deal of emotional well-being would have minimum space for conflicts and tensions. The ability of the family members to get absorbed in creative and enjoyable ways of spending leisure time is a corrective to the phenomenon of ‘boredom’ and an important ingredient for the emotional well-being of the family.

### **Communications Issues and Relationships: Working with Anger**

A therapist working with Buddhist families has this interesting observation. Buddhism emphasizes the value of minimizing harmful actions of body, speech and mind. Western mind encourages constructive self-assertion from the psychological side and the Buddhist emphasizes restraint of harmfulness from the spiritual side. So striking a balance, we need to work on elements that reduce reactivity, strengthen autonomy, promote emotional sensitivity, enhance understanding of historical sources of hurt, and provide guidelines for safe, effective communication.

Issues pertaining to sanctity of life, abortion, family planning, terminal illness and number of issues in bioethics relevant to family concerns are important, but they do not directly come within the framework of this paper.

### **REFERENCES**

Aronson, Harvey.B. 2004, *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground*, Shambala, Boston.

Csikszentmihaly, Mihaly, 1990, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper-Perennial, New York

de Silva, Padmasiri, 1998, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, Macmillan, London.

de Silva, Padmasiri, 2008 (In the Press), *Introduction to Mindfulness-Based Counselling*, Vishvalekha Publishers, Colombo.

de Silva, Padmasiri, “Women and Sanctity of Life Issues”, *personal notes*, unpublished.

Dhammananda, K.Sri, 1987, *A Happy Married Life, A Buddhist Perspective*, Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala Lumpur; Also available as Dhamma Net International, 1995. (The references in this paper are to the Dhammanet edition).

Gilligan, Carol, 1982, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Markus, Hazel Rose & Kitayama, Shinobu, “The Cultural Construction of Self and Emotion”, in, *Emotion and Culture: Empirical Studies in Mutual Influence*, 1994, American Psychological Association, Washington DC.