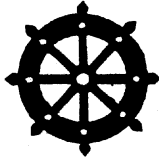


FAMILY LIFE IN BUDDHISM



The Community and the Family

The Buddhist community is made up of ordained persons, called the *Sangha*, and lay persons or householders. Each Buddhist is working towards the ending of the Three Fires of greed, hatred and ignorance, and the transcending of *Samsara* (cycle of life) and Rebirth, by the attainment of *Nirvana* (*Nibbana*), or, in other words, the realization of Enlightenment.

The Sangha includes both monks and nuns, and they live separately in temples and monasteries and do not marry. In some traditions there are, in addition to monks and nuns, priests and part-time monks who marry and lead a family life.

Lay persons in family life form the vast majority of Buddhists. In the text **Rukkadhamma Jataka**, the Buddha expresses the value of the solidarity of the family, using the simile of the trees in the forest: these are able to withstand the force of the wind whereas a single tree, however large, is not able to do so. He confirms and emphasizes the importance of the family relationship and urges lay Buddhists to maintain family ties, together with the honour and dignity of the family as social unit.

The word "family" includes two parent and one parent families and also groups of lay

people living in communities. It includes other relatives living in the household. Relationships with more distant relatives, in addition to the immediate family, are strong among Buddhists and the family is taken to be a supportive social foundation to individual life.

Birth, Naming and Growing up.

Before the birth of a baby the parents visit a temple and arrange to receive the blessings from the Sangha for the baby to be born and for themselves. There is generally no special initiation to be a Buddhist. Many Buddhists choose names which begin with certain auspicious sounds for the children. Often a monk at the temple is consulted as to suitable names.

In some communities a cradle and clothes are prepared and the baby is then placed in the cradle and gifts are placed around. Sometimes when the baby is about a month old the head is shaved and sacred threads are tied around the wrists. At these ceremonies the monks arrange a short service, and are provided with an alms-meal after which they chant blessings.

Parents are keen that the children should acquire a good Buddhist background. Generally there are no life transition ceremonies. In Japan, however, the coming of age as an adult is sometimes celebrated with a special ceremony at the temple.

In some traditions, for example in Burma and Thailand, boys take novice ordination for a short time, varying from one week to three months or more, and live in the temple. In Thailand men also take novice ordination, sometimes several times in their lives.

Marriage.

Marriage is generally considered to be a secular matter and the social ceremony celebrating the marriage differs from one country to another. The marriage is more a family affair, rather than one concerning the two persons only, and often many relatives are invited to a meal at the wedding. The couple may visit the temple before or after the marriage to receive blessings from the monks. In Japan the couple might arrange a Buddhist wedding ceremony. A priest officiates and the proceedings include paying homage to the Buddha, receiving holy water, drinking holy wine, exchanging wedding rings and accepting a set of Buddhist prayer beads.

Today in all countries legal registration of a marriage is the norm and Buddhists comply with the law of the land. Where a man and a woman, even without registration, live together with a long-term serious commitment to Buddhist family life they will be taken to be spouses in a family. By far the most common form of practice in Buddhist communities is a monogamous marriage.



Family and Social Relationships.

Gotama Buddha gave specific advice about social relationships. In the **Sigalovada Sutta** (Sutta is a text) he says to young Sigala,

“...parents, teachers, wife and children, friends, employees and religious persons, they are worthy of honour and respect and should therefore be worshipped by performing one’s duties towards them.”

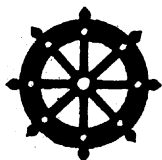
“Children should support elderly parents, perform duties for them, maintain family tradition, be worthy of parents, and perform the necessary funeral rights. Parents should guide children in their conduct, persuade them to lead good lives, see to their education, advise them on marriage and hand over any inheritance to them”, **Sigalovada Sutta**. “Supporting one’s father and mother, cherishing of wife and children, helping relatives and peaceful occupations are blessings”, **Mangala Sutta**. “Being affluent and not supporting the father and mother who are old and past their prime is a condition of a person’s downfall”, **Parabhava Sutta**.

The Buddha taught that men and women have the same spiritual potential and should be treated as equal partners in Buddhist life. “A husband should honour his wife, love her, be faithful to her, allow her to deal with domestic matters and provide security and comfort. A wife should perform her duties well, be hospitable to relatives, love and be faithful to her husband, manage the household and be skilled in her duties”, **Sigalovada Sutta**.

Towards friends, relatives and neighbours one should be generous, courteous, helpful, impartial, sincere, loyal and not forsake them in times of difficulty and need.

Since ignorance is considered to be the greatest mental impurity the teacher-pupil relationship is highly valued. The pupil must respect the teacher and learn conscientiously while the teacher has a duty to do the best by the pupil. There are similar reciprocal duties between employer and employee, and religious persons and lay people.

All this advice given to the householder forms the basis of a good Buddhist family life. The Buddha also gave general advice to the householder to live according to the Five Precepts, and said that persistent effort, protecting one's earnings, maintaining good friendships and a balanced livelihood will lead to happiness in this very life, **Vyagghapajja Sutta**.



Devotions, Worship and Festivals

Devotion and worship are an important aspect of family life, reminding the person of the Teaching and providing a Buddhist background to daily life. The Buddha said that to "...live according to the Teaching, conduct oneself dutifully and act correctly.... was the highest form of worship....", **Maha Parinibbana Sutta**.

A home would usually have a Buddha image placed in a respectful and prominent position. Some houses have a shrine room or a corner of a room arranged as a shrine. In some traditions the houses have a shrine called Butsudan. Images of Sakyamuni Buddha and other Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* are kept here together with ancestral mortuary tablets and some Sutra texts. Sometimes there are *Mandalas* hung on the wall. Some families conduct a short service at home daily or on special festival days, similar to the temple service but shorter. Pure Land Buddhists direct their worship to Amida Buddha and repeat a formula of words which indicate reverence to him, "*Namu Amida Butsu*" (Praise the Amida Buddha). Some Japanese traditions chant the title of the Lotus Sutra, "*Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*" (I seek refuge in the Lotus Sutra) and in Tibet the devotees

chant "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" (Hail the Jewel in the Lotus) Some Buddhists meditate daily at the shrine.

Families visit the temple regularly especially on festival days and on days when a memorial service or a special "alms giving" has been arranged. People dress modestly and respectfully when going to temple and take their shoes off when entering the shrine room. The devotees pay respect to the Buddha at the Buddha image in the shrine room and make offerings of flowers, light, incense and food. The service, conducted by a monk, consists of reciting the Three Refuges (The *Buddha*, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*) and words in their honour, taking the Five Precepts, listening to the chanting of texts and to a talk on the Dhamma, and meditation, and varies little from one tradition to another.

Celebration of festivals is an important and enjoyable part of Buddhist family life. The actual festivals and dates vary in the different traditions. Some important festivals are *Vesak* or Buddha Day celebrating Gotama Buddha's birth, Enlightenment and passing away, *Esala* or *Dhammacakka Day* celebrating the first Teaching, New Year, *Kathina* celebrations at the end of the Rains Retreat, and *Obon* and *Higan* celebrations in memory of departed relatives. The celebrations may include attending a service at the temple, participating in a full day's programme at the temple including taking a contribution for a communal meal, decorating the home, preparing special foods, wearing new clothes, visiting and entertaining relatives, water fights in the street (Thailand), giving food and clothes to the poor, releasing fish and birds from cages, attending special temple dances performed by monks (Tibet), arranging special services in memory of departed relatives and so on. These are all very happy and enjoyable occasions. In addition to these special festivals the day of the full-moon in each month is celebrated with special religious services.

On important occasions such as a change of residence or employment, the children commencing school or taking an examination, many Buddhists visit the temple with flowers or a gift and participate in a blessing ceremony conducted by a monk. Sometimes, as for instance in the case of a memorial service, the monks may be invited home for an alms-meal, a service, and a blessing ceremony which involves the transfer of merit to a departed person.



Death or Passing away

Death or passing away has a special significance to Buddhists because of the belief in rebirth or rebecoming. The biological body comes to an end, but the life energies leave the present body and go on to the next life in another human or other body.

It is important that the person dies with a calm and peaceful mind, because that state of mind influences the next birth. When a person is dying monks or relatives recite or read suitable Buddhist texts to remind the person of the Teaching.

The funeral service is not a sad and sombre affair. The atmosphere is one of love and warmth for the departed one and a remembering of the person's good qualities. The monks conduct the service and chant selected texts dealing with the impermanence of life and other important aspects of the Teaching. In the Pure Land tradition, the ceremony is considered to be an ordination ceremony to prepare the person to meet the Eternal Buddha.

The family and friends arrange memorial services at home or at the temple soon after death and, often, annually thereafter. The

monks conduct the service. After an alms-meal and a talk on the Teaching, there is a simple transference of merit ceremony with the pouring of water from a jug into dish until it overflows. It is symbolic of the merit acquired by the ceremony being given to the departed one. Gifts of money, books, writing materials and other things required by the temple are made. Sometimes money is donated for the publication and free distribution of a book on some aspect of the Dhamma. Some temples arrange a special day in the year when a memorial service is held to remember the departed ones of many families.

In some Japanese traditions the family keep memorial tablets of wood with the names of the departed ones written on them near a small shrine at home. The Japanese festival of Obon is specially to remember departed relatives.

This Paper carries on the discussion on Buddhism from the Papers, No 3 What is Buddhism? and No 4 Who was the Buddha? It was written by Anil D Goonewardene in consultation with Father Michael Barnes SJ.

Questions for Discussion.

1. How do Buddhist ceremonies differ from Christian ceremonies? Is there anything parallel to the Sacraments in Buddhism?
2. What do family responsibilities in Buddhism and in Christianity have in common?

Suggested further reading.

Buddhism for Schools and Colleges Papers
Anil D Goonewardene The Buddhist Society, 1993 1997
The Buddhist Handbook John Snelling Rider, 1987
What is Buddhism? Fr Michael Barnes SJ Paper No 3
What the Buddha Taught Ven Walpola Rahula Wisdom, 1974.
Who was the Buddha? Fr Michael Barnes SJ Paper No 4

This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series "Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" and this further series on "Family Life" offer useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The family is the original cell of social life where people first learn to talk and listen to each other. The health of society depends on the health of family life. It is hoped that this series will promote the value of family life and help families of different Faith traditions to become better acquainted for the good of society.

The Committee is grateful to Anil D Goonewardene for this contribution.

**+ Charles Henderson
Chairman**

COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS PUBLICATIONS

"Family Life in..." series: "Catholic Family Life", (in preparation), "Jewish Family Life", "Family Life in Islam", "Family Life among Sikhs", "Hindu Families", "Family Life in Buddhism" "Japanese Religion in Family Life": set of leaflets £1.00 post free. Bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free.

"Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" series: "Our Neighbour's Faith and Ours - a Catholic introduction to living with neighbours of other Faiths". "What is Islam?", "What is Buddhism?" "Who was the Buddha?", "What is Hinduism?", "The Mosque", "What is the Baha'i Faith?", "Our Sikh Neighbours", "Is God at work outside the Church?", "Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation", "What is Daoism?", "Prayer and Prayers in Islam", "What is Jainism?", "Hindu Festivals", "What is Shinto?", "Who are the Zoroastrians?" "Aspects of Judaism", "African Traditional Religion". The full set, one each of 18 leaflets, is available for £3.00 post free. Orders up to 25 leaflets will be charged at 10p per leaflet plus £1.00p postage and packing. Orders in bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free for each 50.

The eight page leaflet **"Ways of Sharing Faith"** is also available at 20p each post free. **"Hospital Chaplaincy & Other Faiths"** 20p, £6.00 for 50.

ORDERS may be sent to: CFOF, 6a Cresswell Park, London SE3 9RD. Please make cheques payable to: **NCF (Other Faiths)**

Copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from:

Westminster Interfaith Centre: St Anne's, Underwood Road, London E1 5AW.