

Buddhist Pre Marriage Counseling

*Dr. Sarath Chandrasekara
Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy*

Marriage is an important step in one's life. Marriage helps one to maintain happiness, though sharing life with another may become troublesome for various reasons. More than ever before, young people pay attention to Pre Marriage counseling because of those very problems which arise from sharing life. It is also noticed that some people attend counseling prior to their marriage because it provides support and guidance necessary to resolve both potential and actual problems. In all of this the family as an institution provides the basis for one's personal development. When families are disturbed in their development, people seek family counseling. If one family member becomes seriously ill, it impacts everyone in the family. Family counseling can be applied to families in various ways, either with individual family members or as a group with many family members who experience the same problem within the family or even with additional families who experience similar problems. The important points to examine when providing Buddhist Pre Marriage counseling are; what does the family mean to each of the members? How do they maintain the family as a group? What are their common goals? And what is the objective of the counseling? Generally, the main goal of Pre Marriage counseling is directed at establishing equilibrium within the family.

Family is a complex unit characterized by several orders and sub orders. Through counseling, family members become conscious of their roles, which is essential in maintaining the equilibrium. According to Mehler, the family can be viewed in two units namely parents and children, and husband and wife. The harmony between the family members is highly dependent on their ability to communicate effectively among themselves. It is often noted that in dysfunctional families, sound communication is lacking and it is due to the lack of ability to communicate that families are falling apart. Through counseling, the stress and mental pressures that arise through unhealthy family dynamics can be resolved, leading to a balance and harmony between the family members. Thus, an important task in succeeding as a family is effective communication.

Often, parents expect their off spring to achieve the dreams that they could not achieve for themselves. Therefore, the parents make decisions on behalf of their children in order to achieve their lost dreams. If children do not agree with the decisions made by parents, there will be conflicts between the two groups. When expectations remain unfulfilled, both parties become frustrated. Also in these matters the home, school, parents and teachers bear a huge responsibility in the individual development of a child. In such cases counseling must be done individually. Another aspect of family counseling is establishing mutual relationship between family members. A problem that the counselor may encounter is the difficulty in getting all the family members to a single meeting due to various reasons. However, difficult it may become, such meetings need to be arranged to help rebuild relationships between the parents and the children, which remains an important task in counseling.

The concept of family receives significant attention from both sociologists and psychologists. Their approach to resolve family issues are known as family therapies which constitute treatments in which the whole family is the focus, rather than an individual family member. Social scientists have shown that there are three basic human expectations namely safety, satisfaction of the basic needs and undisturbed life. Also the

dynamics arising from emotional states and interpersonal relationships among the family members contribute to the personal development and the welfare of each and every family member. For example, Murray Bowen explains that the family must be examined as a system with chronic anxiety as the basis of unhealthy family dynamics in which the place of siblings is given an important role. The structural theorist Salvador Minuchin explains that attentions must be paid to role relationships within the hierarchical family structure in family counseling. Jay Haley's strategic therapy looks at the family issues from a problem solving perspective. Virginia Satir, a feminist family theorist, examines family issues through interpersonal communications. These are indications that there are numerous ways to look at families in resolving unhealthy dynamics. A healthy family is the corner stone of a society and thus contributes not only to the progress of an individual and the society but also to a country at large. The two elements, the individual and the society are interdependent where one needs the other to survive. Social development evolves as a result of their interactions within this relationship. All these different methods provide an in depth understanding of family dynamics for the purpose of counseling and therapy.

Long before all these counseling methods were known, the Buddha, knowing that every human being wishes a peaceful and happy life, offered several discourses on healthy family dynamics and successful family Marriage life. Before we get marriage getting ready for the marriage is most important aspects and then we can learn many things in advance to the marriage. In achieving a peaceful and a happy life, the Buddha had shown a young Count Singāla a distinct path as discussed in the *Sigālovada Sutta*¹ of the *Dīgha Nikaya (D.N.)*. Singala had the habit of waking up in the wee-small hours, taking a bath and in soaking wet clothes, worshiping six celestial directions namely the East, the South, the West, the North, the Bottom and the Top, seeking progress and happiness as a family tradition. After seeing this unrewarding activity, the Buddha strategically recommended to Singala to replace the six directions of worship with six groups worthy of respect, attention and support and to follow them in his search for peace and happiness. The recommended replacements were the Parents to the East, the Teachers to the South, the Family to the West, the Friends to the North, the Servants to the Bottom and the Noble Clergy to the Top. In this discourse, the Buddha spoke clearly of sixty one duties and responsibilities for the individual toward the above mentioned groups promoting harmony in the family and justice to the society. This list includes almost all the factors that are being discussed in the modern day family counseling and therapies.

In the Pali Suttas, the world family may be referred as *Kula*, *Vamsa* or *Gotta*.² Though *Sigālovada Sutta* takes a prominent place in Buddhist Family pre marriage Counseling, several other *Suttas* and *Jātaka* Stories on this subject can be found in the *Pāli Canon*. Some of them are as follows: *Mahāparinibbana sutta*, *Agganna Sutta*, *Uggaha Sutta*, *Pattakamma Sutta*, *Migasāla Sutta*, *Sabbrahma Sutta*, *Vasala Sutta*, *Parabhava Sutta*, *Mahagovinda Sutta*, *Sattabhariya Sutta*, *Culavyuha Sutta*, *Mallikā Sutta*, *Cullavedella Sutta*, *Vatthu Sutta*, *Natthiputta Sutta*, *Dhītu Sutta*, *Vepulla Sutta*, *Vanijja Sutta*, *Vyaggapajja Sutta*, *Kinti Sutta*, *Parisa Sutta*, *Kosambi Sutta*, *Mahanama Sutta*, *Sakkanamassa Sutta*, *Itthibandhana Sutta*, *Purisa Bandhana Sutta*, *Sama Jataka* and *Māthuposatha Jātaka*

Parent – Children Relationships

The Buddha used the analogy of the celestial direction east to depict the cardinal importance of parents in one's life. As the sun rises from the East depicting its cardinal

¹ D.N.Sigālovada sutta

² Pali English Dictionary p.528

importance as the first indicator of directions at dawn, there is none more valuable than one's parents in one's world. Parents give birth to their off-spring, bring them up and show them the right direction in this world, sacrificing for their growth and development. The Buddha mentioned that it is never possible for one to completely re-pay one's parents for these gifts and sacrifices. This becomes clear in the *Sabrahamma Sutta*³ of the *Anguttara Nikāya* in which the Buddha pays tribute to parents as “*Brahmāthi bikkhave mātupittunna metan adhivachanan pubbhadevathi, ahuneyyathi, bhikkave mathupinnametān adhivacanan*”. This means that the Buddha strategically endorsed parents in the place of Brahma ascribing them holiness. According to the Hindu philosophy the world is created by the Brahma. In this context, the parents who possess such Brahma qualities should be honored as such. His discourse on parents as “*matapitanukampitassa mahanama kulaputtassa vuddhiyeva paticancha na parihani*” stated also in the in the *Anguttara Nikaya Panch Vagga*. This means that the individual who receives the wholesome blessings of the parents can anticipate wholesome progress rather than unwholesome demise.

If we take note of the Buddha's biography, it becomes evident how the Buddha treated his parents. Subsequent to his mother *Queen Maha Maya*'s rebirth, He appeared in the *Tusita Divine Abode* to expound dhamma to her joy and comfort and to help her reach enlightenment. When *King Bimbisara*, His father, was sick, he expounded dhamma to help him heal his illness. The Buddha also helped his step-mother *Queen Maha Prajapathi Gotami* not only to enter but also to establish the Order of Bikkhunis. All of these depict examples of how He respected his parents.

In the *Mahā Mangala Sutta*, it is expounded that looking after the parents constitutes a major factor in happiness of an individual. Those who do not look after their parents cater to their down fall and suffering as discussed in the *Vasala Sutta*. According to *Pattakamma Sutta*, looking after the welfare of parents (*matapitharan sukkheti pinethi*) constitutes a responsibility of the children. From children, the parents have only a few expectations. The children are supposed to support them (*bahathone karissati*); perform duties incumbent upon them (*kaccena thesan karissati*), keep up the lineage and good tradition (*kulavansam thapessati*), be worthy of their heritage (*dayajjan patijjati*), and transfer merits in due time (*petanan kalakantanān dhakkinan anupadassati*).

There are also expectations of the children from their parents. They are: restrain children from evil (*pāpā nivarenti*), exhort them in virtue (*kalyāna nivesanti*), give them skills for a wholesome profession (*sikkhan sikkhapenti*); encourage them to a suitable marriage (*patirupena dārena sanjojenti*) and the timely hand over of inheritance.

Husband –Wife Relationships

In pre marriage counseling, pay more attention to learn the relationship between the partners. The trust between the husband and the wife is the basis for the welfare of the other family members. In the *Singāovada Sutta*, the Buddha discusses five factors for the husband to uphold and treat his wife. They are namely showing respect (*sammāna*), being courteous (*avamānna*), being faithful (*anatichariya*), handing over authority of the household management (*issariya vossaggaha*) and providing her with adornments (*alankāranappadanena*).

It is the duty of the husband to honor, love and care for his wife. In our society every one of us likes to be respected and honored. Similarly the same should not be denied to the wife when it's due. Also the husband shall not insult his wife nor shall he speak roughly or use foul language to hurt her feelings. A husband shall avoid involving

³ A.II.Sabrahamma Sutta p. 132

in extramarital affairs. Now-a-days, such relationships could lead to sexually transmitted disease and many other illnesses such as Hepatitis B among others. These kind of unwholesome activities lead to disharmony and distrust between the partners and make the family unit dysfunctional. They may end up in divorce, irreversibly destroying the relationship. The wife also has five duties and responsibilities toward her husband. They are namely performing her duties (*susanvihita kammanta*), showing hospitality to relatives of both sides (*susangahita parijana*), watching over the goods brought home (*samhatan anurakkhanti*) and enthusiastic and skillful discharge of all her duties (*dakkhava hoti anlasa sabbanivesu*). These duties and responsibilities need to be taken seriously in order to create a harmonious environment for family members to grow. For example, the wife could take a lead role in the manner in which the family treat their friends and relatives; especially when treating relative on the husband's side. When neglected, this leads to a lot of dysfunction in all these areas, giving rise to stress and unpleasantness resulting in conflicts among family members. These things can adversely affect the individual development of the family members. It is the wife's responsibility to take care of the wealth earned and spend it in a manner to promote and achieve success of the family in terms of the family's future economic development and personal growth. The economic stability of families can be a strength for resolving family conflicts. It may also enable them to achieve unity and harmony among family members, when in conflict.

The Buddhist pre marriage Counseling is based on resolving issues before they turn into nasty conflicts. It's an approach based on problem prevention rather than conflict resolution. It addresses the root causes and effects and finds ways to prevent issues from becoming a conflict. If the husband and wife attend to their duties and responsibilities, their family experiences harmony and progress. This is the balance or the equilibrium conducive for the family to grow. This is the goal of the Buddhist pre marriage Counseling.

Though proclaimed 2600 years ago, the Buddha's teaching is aimed not only to achieve Nibbāna, but also to contain invaluable and significant socio-psychological guidelines toward a pragmatic approach which remains applicable to family life even in modern day society. The Buddha appreciated the advisory guidelines given to Visākha, the prominent lay female attendant at the time, by her father prior to her marriage. They are as follows:

- The issues or problems arising within the household should remain and resolve within the family democratically. (it is not about secrecy within a few family members)
- The issues or problems from outside the family should be left outside
- Give loans only to those who can afford to pay back.
- Do not give loans to those who cannot afford to pay back.
- Give to those who deserved to be given within the affordability without anticipating anything in return.
- Sit in a place that enables one to stand up when an elder arrives
- Eat healthy
- Sleep healthy
- Support your husband in all his right and appropriate efforts
- Care for and be hospitable to the parents of the husband

The Buddha also describes seven different types of wives in the *Sapthabhariyā Sutta*.⁴ Accordingly, they are as follows:

⁴ A.IV.SattabhariyāSutta pp 414

- *Vadhakasama Bahriyā* (Hostile wife): The wife who insults the husband and has unethical relationships with other men.
- *Chorasama Bahriyā* (Stealing wife): the wife is similar to a thief and spends and destroys the wealth earned by her husband.
- *Aiyasama Bahriyā* (Uncomfortable wife): the wife who speaks foul language and puts her husband in a very discomfoting and an embarrassing position.
- *Matusama Bahriyā* (Motherly wife): the wife is similar to the mother of the husband who safeguards all earnings of the husband and taking care of him like a child.
- *Bhaginisama Bahriyā* (Sisterly wife): the wife who is like a sister and takes care of the husband similar to how a sister looks after a brother.
- *Sakisama Bahriyā* (Harmonious wife): the wife who becomes happy even at the sight of the husband and is happy all the time and maintains happiness of the husband.
- *Dasisama Bahriyā* (Servant wife): the wife serves like a servant attending to all duties and looks after the husband.

In the *Sanvāsa Sutta*⁵, the Buddha noted that the mutual relationship that exists between the man and wife may take the following characteristics.

- A corpse like man (*chovo*) lives with a corpse like wife (*chāvā*)
- A corpse like man (*chovo*) lives with a goddess like wife (*devi*)
- A god like man (*devo*) lives with a corpse like wife (*chāvā*)
- A god like man (*devo*) lives with a goddess like wife (*devi*)

The most harmonious couple is the god like man lives with a goddess like wife. This compatibility helps a family to develop family harmony, promoting individual growth while becoming a blessing to society. In promoting happiness in married life, the late Venerable Dr. K Sri Dhammananda⁶ wrote the following to describe the mutual relationship that should exist between man and wife. A wife should provide the husband with love, attention, family expectations, trust, care of the children, household efficiency, food preparation, help to resolve problems, and the support he needs. In the same manner the husband has to fulfill toward his wife certain duties such as kindness, courtesy, socialization, safety, fairness, affection, honesty and civilized behavior and support.

The emotions such as love, affection and care are clearly explained in the *Purishabandana Sutta*⁷ and *Itthibandana Sutta*⁸ of the *Anguttara Nikaya*. The emotion of love between the man and women arises through the experiences involving the five senses: namely the figure, the smile, the talk, the tears, the clothes and the apparel, the voice and the touch. According to the Teachings of the Buddha, the powerful emotion of love evolves mutually in both individuals in the background of these experiences and progresses as a strong force incomparable to any other forces known to humans. The mutual love, care and trust are fundamental to the existence of a family. All of their problems can be resolved through effective and open communication as partners. This gives rise to happiness and balance. The Buddha has recommended ten points for the civic life of the average householder (*prutagjana*). They are as follow:

⁵ A.II.Samvāsa Sutta p.110

⁶ K.Dhammananada. A Happy Married Life, pp 25-26

⁷ A.V.Purisa Bandhana Sutta p .80-81

⁸ A.V.Itthibandana Sutta p.80-81

- Attend to the needs of your parents
- Devote yourself for the wellbeing of your children
- Provide safety and welfare to your wife
- Maintain mutual understanding and civic duties of the married life
- Look after the needs of your relatives
- Respect the elders
- Invite divine beings to rejoice in your wholesome deeds
- Bless the departed to be well, happy and peaceful
- Abide by the law of the land and
- Ground your family in a harmonious way of life free of unworthy efforts.

Once it was brought to the attention of the Buddha the question of an old man marrying a very young woman. In one of the *Suttās* in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, The Buddha points out that due to mental and physical tensions and the distractions in these circumstances, the family life cannot be maintained successfully. In the same *Nikāya*, it is mentioned that when a person is born to a harmonious family, this person becomes a blessing not only to the family but also to their environment of friends and others similar to the summer rains that make the crops thrive while generating a “good feeling” all around. In the *Migāsala Sutta*, the Buddha applies the term “*sadāra santushti*” to explain that with harmony, husband and wife gain the maximum benefits of their sexual life, the pinnacle of married life. The successful married life or a harmonious family is a blessing not only to the people around them but it is also a state to which even the divine beings pay respect, according to the *Sakkaanamassa Sutta*.⁹

Writing an analytical account of *Singālovada Sutta*, S. Daya Fernando¹⁰ explains that the wife shall not be understood to be a slave of the husband while both of them enjoy equal rights in the partnership which becomes a close association of two trusting friends.

The book “The Chicken and the Duck”, of *Ajahn Chah* provides a good anecdote for pre marriage and family counseling. A newly married couple went for a walk together in a wood, one fine summer’s evening after dinner’ They were having such a wonderful time being together until they heard a sound in the distance:

“Quack! Quack”

“Listen, said the wife, that must be a chicken”

“No no’ that was a duck,” said the husband.

“No, I’m sure that was a chicken,” she said.

“Impossible, Chickens go ‘Cock a doodle doo’ ducks go ‘Quack, Quack!’ That’s a duck, darling,” he said, with the first signs of irritation.

“Quack! Quack” It went again.

“See! It’s a duck” he said.

“No dear’ that’s a chicken. I’m positive” she asserted, digging in her heels.

“Listen wife! That is a duck. D-u-c-k, duck! Got it? He said strongly.

“But it’s a chicken” she protested.

⁹ S.I Sakkanamassa Sutta .p.416

¹⁰ S.Daya Fernando. *Budu Samaye Desapālana Cintanaya* (Sinhala Edition)p.175

“It’s a friggin’ duck, you, you...”

And it went “Quack, Quack! Again before he said something he oughtn’t.

The wife was almost in tears. “But it’s a chicken”

The husband saw the tears welling up in his wife’s eyes and, at least, remembered why he had married her. His face softened and he said gently, “Sorry, darling, I think you must be right. That is a chicken.”

“Thank you darling,” She said and she squeezed his hand.

“Quack! Quack!” came the sound through the woods, as they continued their walk together in love.

The insight that the husband finally awakened to was this: who cares whether it is a chicken or a duck? What was much more important was their harmony together and that they could enjoy their walk on such a fine summer evening. How many marriages are broken over unimportant matters? How many divorces cite "chicken or duck" stuff.

When we reflect on this story, we will remember one’s priorities. The marriage is more important than being right about whether it is a chicken or a duck. And besides, how many times have we been absolutely, certainly, and positively convinced that we are right- only to find our later, we were in fact totally wrong? Who knows, that could have been a genetically modified chicken made to sound like a duck!

Throughout this paper I have attempted to point out the importance of the Buddhist principles in pre marriage counseling. Therefore, in concluding, it becomes obvious that maintaining the functionality of families impacts society because the family is the smallest unit of society. The family unit provides a conducive environment for the emergence of a united and just society. In the Buddha’s Teachings, we recognize the concept that each person is responsible for his/her own actions and behavior and must accept the accompanying results whether good or bad. The teachings also recommend guidelines to lead a harmonious family life, as an average householder, with wholesome outcomes indicating that this Teaching is not only about human suffering and reaching Nibbana. The importance lies in the fact that these principles of counseling are focused to alleviate root causes in an approach to prevent problems from arising, rather than problem solving. It’s a way of family health promotion. Though the goal of this Teaching is achieving enlightenment, the same concepts can be applied to maintaining a harmonious life. From this discussion it becomes evident that most of the concepts of modern psychology and sociology are similar to the Buddha’s Teachings. Only through analytical discussions can the Buddhist concepts be explained to the benefit of people who need help in healing and achieving inner peace and happiness.