

THE BUDDHIST WAY OF LIVING FOR THE SUSTAINABILITY: HARMONIOUS SRI LANKAN FAMILY AND MODERN CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

A family could be understanding as a primary unit to develop interpersonal relationships and more widely ensuring the social unity in many Asian societies. According to Murray Bowen, families so profoundly affect their members' thoughts, feelings, and actions that it often seems as if people are living under the same emotional skin. Family members naturally solicit each other's attention, approval and support and react to each other's needs, expectations, and upsets. Therefore, to develop sustainability in a society, the family unit should be strong and harmonistic to bear its members' achievements and failures. In this research, there will be an in-depth analysis of the Sri Lankan family unit and will conceptualize it in the Theravada Buddhist discourse. It will also open an interesting dialogue between the Buddhist teachings and the traditional concepts of Sri Lankan family to understand the modern challenges towards its socio-psychological structure.

When considering the discourse of Buddhism, its teachings show a complex and multifaceted relationship with the family, family life, and familial discourses. Therefore, many Buddhist texts highlighted a strong renunciatory and the relationships are portrayed as a

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primary source of attachment, delusion, and suffering. However, when considering the Buddhist lay community that is organized on a familial basis, in practice, Buddhism accommodates and supports the family in multiple and diverse ways. Even the Buddhist Saṅgha itself has frequently chosen the language of “family” to describe the strong bond between the members of the community. It is obvious that the doctrine of the Buddha is meant not only for mendicant monks but also for ordinary men and women living in their homes with their family members. According to *Sigālovāda Sutta*, the Buddha has advised to “worship” or to respect the six directions in fulfilling one’s duties as a good householder. In this six directions, the Buddha has considered parents as the east, teachers as the south, wife and children as the west, friends and companions as the north, servants and employees as the nadir, and religious leaders as the zenith. According to Dhammadika sutta of *Sutta nipātha*, the Buddha has advised him that a layman should keep five precepts, and he should live a life of chastity in peace with his family. The Buddha also advises every husband and wife to live as an angelic couple, which will invite peace and success here and hereafter.

In Sri Lanka, with the great heritage of the Theravada Buddhist culture, Buddhism and the concept of the family unit maintain a strong relationship. Sri Lankan Buddhist monks advise on the conduct of familial life and promote rituals and practices supportive of fertility, procreation, and the productivity and success of the family. They also indirectly involve in some familial matters to ensure the harmony between family members. Therefore, some specific values and morals were developed in the Sri Lankan Buddhist family. Respecting parents and looking after them when they are sick or old or in need of support are some unconditional values in Sri Lanka. Children are well raised with these qualities in an average family life and funeral rituals including arms giving ceremonies should also have completed by Children. Supporting the marital partner and children supplying all their needs is another important aspect of the Sri Lankan family discourse. Children’s psychological improvements and their behaviours are very important in the Sri Lankan family unit which is considered as the duties of both parents. In the twenty-first century, with the globalization, modernization

and the social mobilization, parents' life became more scheduled in Sri Lanka and that is directly affecting the well-balanced family structure. Thus, Sri Lankan people are reconsidering these family values based on Buddhism. To develop these values, in schools, in media and even in some public places, there are some collective programs for the young generations.

A family could be understanding as a primary unit to develop interpersonal relationships and more widely ensuring the social unity in many Asian societies. According to Murray Bowen, families so profoundly affect their members' thoughts, feelings, and actions that it often seems as if people are living under the same emotional skin. Family members naturally solicit each other's attention, approval, and support and react to each other's needs, expectations, and upsets (Kerr 2000). Therefore, to develop sustainability in a society, the family unit should be strong and harmonistic to bear its members' achievements and failures.

In some theories of family, developmental processes are inevitably important in understanding this unit. According to the development theory of the family, families, and individuals can change over a period of time. They progress through a series of similar developmental stages and face similar transitional points and developmental tasks. Developmental tasks which are the growth responsibilities arise at certain stages in the life of the family. To be a successful, family, members need to adapt to the changing needs and demands and to attend to tasks that are necessary to ensure family survival (Hammond & Cheney 2018, pp. 8-9). For this survival, emotional support within and outside the family is an essential fact. It will be helpful to prevent personal and family risks factors like alcohol and substance use, child abuses, risks of children's psychology and mental disorders like bipolar as well as domestic violence and child neglect. Since most of the abusive parents had a miserable past with their own parents, these kinds of risk factors could be transmitted from their own memories of violence. Therefore, in some cases, there should be specific ways to deal with children's issues and behaviors especially when they are raised in an abusive environment (Chibucos et al. 2005, p.7).

It is obvious that family ties are thus capable of performing a great

deal of social labour (Wilson 2013). With the development process of childhood, children should be trained as a productive worker related to the modern education system. It became an essential aspect of the modern capitalist companies which was affected by the Globalization process. In this modern workplace, the knowledge and skills are not the only measurements to weight the capability of a worker. But also, their mental stability, cooperative behaviors like teamwork, respect for the workplace norms, perform in challenging tasks, commitment and loyalty will be measured in the workplace environment (Sanders 2009). If an adult worker failed of achieving these goals and performing poorly in his workplace, that should be examined not only with their personality issues but also with the way they were raised in their family. Therefore, it is obvious that raising a child in a good and healthy family environment can affect the child as an individual and the society as a developmental unit. This is an essential fact to develop sustainability.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the common disorders can occur among children when the family ties are not strong. That disorder interferes with functioning or development of a child's brain with hyperactivity especially disturbing his educational activities. This situation can be continued even through adolescence and adulthood (Forgan 2012, pp. 2-6). Bad parenting and child neglect could be some common reasons behind this disorder with the exception to common genetic occurring. From the teenage period, many people victimized common mental disorders like stress, anxiety, depression and bipolar. Most of the patients show some miseries in their childhood memories which could improve with stressful environmental facts in later years. Family members have responsibilities of giving attention and loving kindness to children from the early childhood stages. Except that some aggressive behaviour of children could be a result of domestic violence which can continue into their adult life.

Since a stressful family can affect its future generations too, there is a strong need for sorting out familial matters within the family circle to build a sustainable society. Though there are several psychological and sociological methods in the modern western academia to propose solutions for developing a harmonious family, in

this research, there is an attempt to introduce the Buddhist concepts which can be used to develop the peace and harmony in the family. To examine these Buddhist concepts, will use some *suttas* in the Theravada Buddhist discourse. Also, to understand the practical use of these concepts will focus on the Sri Lankan Buddhist family unit. It will open an interesting dialogue between the Buddhist teachings and the traditional concepts of Sri Lankan family to understand the modern challenges towards its socio-psychological structure.

When considering the discourse of Buddhism, its teachings show a complex and multifaceted relationship with the family, family life, and familial discourses. Therefore, many Buddhist texts highlighted a strong renunciatory and the relationships are portrayed as a primary source of attachment, delusion, and suffering (Ohnuma 2014). According to some verses in *Khaggavisāna Sutta* of *Sutta Nipāta* a Buddhist monk can enjoy his freedom of loneliness cutting all family ties.

“Cutting off the householder’s marks, like a kovilara tree that has shed its leaves,

the prudent one, cutting all household ties, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Abandoning offspring, spouse, father, mother, riches, grain, relatives, and sensual pleasures altogether, wander alone like a rhinoceros.”

(*Khaggavisāna Sutta, Sutta Nipāta*)

In *Nandana Sutta* of *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha explained that those with children grieve because of their children. A person’s grief comes from acquisitions since a person with no acquisitions doesn’t grieve (*Nandana Sutta, Samyutta Nikāya*). Therefore, more material gain including relationships means more difficulties and regrets in life. Also in the *Piyajatika Sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha explained that sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair are born from one who is dear, come springing from them (*Piyajatika Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya*). Further, in the *Maggavagga* of *Dhammapada*, the Buddha strongly encourages the renunciation from the family life.

“There are no sons to give shelter, no father, no family for one

seized by the Ender, no shelter among kin.

Conscious of this compelling reason, the wise man, restrained by virtue, should make the path pure right away that goes all the way to Unbinding.”

(Maggavagga of Dhammapada)

In Sōna Sutta in of Anguttara Nikāya, the Buddha has given strong advises to a Buddhist monk who wished to go back for the lower life with disavowing his noble path. In this occasion, the Buddha admired renunciation, seclusion, non-affliction, the ending of craving, the ending of clinging or sustenance, and non-deludedness which related to the noble life of Buddhist monks (Sona Sutta, Anguttara Nikāya).

Though, Buddhism itself based on the renouncing aspect that essentially antithetical to family life, in all Buddhist societies, the language of family is strongly used to continue various ascetic ties among members. Even the Buddhist Saṅgha itself has frequently chosen the language of “family” to describe the strong bond between the members of the community. In Buddhism, ordination meant that “goes forth from home into the homeless” (agarasmā anagariyam pabbajjiti) (Dhanañjaanii Sutta, Samyutta Nikāya). Therefore, from the complicated lay society, a Buddhist monk will go to another bondless unit to achieve great freedom from ordinary life. In this society, the ascetic community stay as a family with great desires and help each other’s spiritual goals. They do not crave for material achievements but for the eternal happiness. In Itivuttaka, the Buddha compares him as a Brahma and introduced his followers as his children who were born from Dhamma. “I am a Brahman, responsive to requests, open-handed, bearing my last body, an unsurpassed doctor and surgeon. You are my children, my sons, born from my mouth, born of the Dhamma, created by the Dhamma, heirs to the Dhamma, not heirs in material things” (Itivuttaka, Khuddaka).

It is obvious that the doctrine of the Buddha is meant not only for mendicant monks but also for ordinary men and women living in their homes with their family members. When considering the Buddhist lay community that is organized on a familial basis,

in practice, Buddhism accommodates and supports the family in multiple and diverse ways.

According to *Sīgālovāda Sutta* of *Digha Nikāya*, the Buddha has advised to “worship” or to respect the six directions in fulfilling one’s duties as a good householder. In these six directions, the Buddha has considered parents as the east, teachers as the south, wife, and children as the west, friends, and companions as the north, servants and employees as the nadir, and religious leaders as the zenith (*Sīgālovāda Sutta*, *Digha Nikāya*). If some layperson needs to achieve the material as well as spiritual success in his ordinary life, he should respect these important persons in his life. Most of them are close family members of him. According to *Dhammadikasutta* of *Sutta Nipātha*, the Buddha has advised Dammika that a layman should keep five precepts and the eight-factored observance. He should live a life of chastity in peace with his family as he should support his mother and father as his duty and engage in lawful trading. A layman who carries this out diligently goes to the gods called “Self-radiant” (*Dhammadikasutta*, *Sutta Nipāta*).

According to *Vāsala Sutta* of *Sutta Nipāta* the Buddha introduced the real outcast people, and in some incidences, it related to the family relationships. “Whosoever being wealthy supports not his mother and father who have grown old know him as an outcast. Whosoever strikes and annoys by (harsh) speech, mother, father, brother, sister or mother-in-law or father-in-law know him as an outcast” (*Vāsala Sutta*, *Sutta Nipāta*). In *Mangala Sutta* of *Khuddaka Nipātha* the Buddha admires a layperson who supports his family as a great blessing. “To support mother and father, to cherish wife and children, and to be engaged in a peaceful occupation, this is the greatest blessing. To be generous in giving, to be righteous in conduct, to help one’s relatives, and to be blameless in action, this is the greatest blessing” (*Mangala Sutta*, *Khuddaka Nipātha*).

According to *Anana Sutta* in of *Anguttara Nikāya*, there are four kinds of bliss that can be attained in the proper season, on the proper occasions, by a householder partaking of sensuality. These four kinds of bliss are the bliss of having, the bliss of (making use of) wealth, the bliss of debtlessness, and the bliss of blamelessness (*Anana Sutta*, *Anguttara Nikāya*). This discussion directly related

to the successful life of a lay person. On the other hand, in Kula Sutta of Samyutta Nikāya, the Buddha described ways in which a family can go to the downfall. According to that families go to their downfall because of kings, or because of thieves, or because of fire or floods, or their stored-up treasure disappears, or their mismanaged undertakings go wrong, or in the family, a wastrel is born who squanders, scatters, and shatters its wealth, and inconstancy itself. If one lay person should have a wealthy family he can also follow a noble way to achieve that. Whatever families are rich with much wealth, many possessions, a great deal of money, a great many accoutrements of wealth, a great many commodities all have become so from giving, from the truth, from restraint (Kula Sutta, Samyutta Nikāya).

In Buddhism, the relationship between husband and wife was commonly discussed. The Buddha advises every husband and wife to live as an angelic couple, which will invite peace and success here and hereafter. In few Suttas he strongly condemned of cheating the partner and sexual misconduct with other women. Parabhava Sutta, Nirayavagga, Malavagga are some suttas which refuse sexual misbehaviours which can badly affect the family life. According to Samajivina Sutta of Anguttara Nikāya, if both husband and wife want to see one another not only in the present life but also in the life to come they should be having conviction, being responsive, being restrained, living by the Dhamma, addressing each other with loving words which they benefit in manifold ways. With this they can achieve happiness in their lay life. Their enemies are dejected when both are in tune in virtue. Having followed the Dhamma here in this world, both in tune in precepts and practices, they delight in the world of the gods, enjoying the pleasures they desire (Samajivina Sutta, Anguttara Nikāya). In Buddha's Birth Stories or *Jātakas* he explained his strong tie with his wife Yashodhara in every life he was born as a Bodhisattva. In most stories, the Bodhisattva's behaviour towards his family and his loving wife was a good precedent for the other laymen in Buddhist societies. Yashodara also acted as the same way. In the total picture, the Buddha always encouraged loving words, charming characters, patience, honesty, and kindness. If people follow his Dhamma, there

is no need to develop separate family virtue since the real Buddhist will be a very generous person who treats his family members well. For his young disciples, the Buddha acted as a spiritual father with love and kindness. Especially, for small novices, the Buddha advised them in a tender manner and preached Dhamma in a different way for easy understanding.

With following these kinds of Buddhist teachings, Asian Buddhists, biologically and geographically relate as kin to their religious and genetic families. Biologically Asians have strong bonds with their families. Even when they get ordination, they have the same relationship with their monastic family. In lay families, not only in parental relationship but also between siblings there is a strong bond which promotes the attitude to help each other. In every aspect of Asian heritage, they admire family based ethics and values. In Sri Lanka, children are raised in a different manner than in other continents and attempt to give family virtue which are the great values of society.

In this country, with their influential heritage of the Theravāda Buddhist culture, Buddhism and the concept of the family unit maintains a strong relationship. Sri Lankan village as a small social unit always adjoins with a Buddhist temple. Sri Lankan Buddhist monks advise on the conduct of familial life and promote rituals and practices supportive of fertility, procreation, and the productivity and success of the family. They also indirectly involve in some familial matters to ensure the harmony between family members. If there are misbehaved or alcoholic fathers in these villages who harass their spouse or children, the chief incumbent of the temple intervenes and advises them for better family life by explaining the Buddha's Dhamma. Therefore, laymen inevitably respect this invisible spiritual authority of the temple. In every village, the temple conducts Dhamma schools on Sundays for free of charge. Villagers send their children to these schools no matter which economic condition they have. Many social and familial values are introduced in these schools by Buddhist monks or other voluntary teachers. The Ministry of Buddhist Affairs distributes printed books to these Sunday schools with a common syllabus of Buddhist teachings. From the grade one syllabus, these lessons were prepared to teach

the value of being a true Buddhist, treating parents with generosity, the value of almsgiving, better occupations, the Buddhist way of treating children, relatives, other humans, and animals, practicing virtues like Ahimsā, Mettā, Mudithā, Karunā and Upekkā. Not only in these schools, but also in the governmental schools, Buddhism is a compulsory subject which introduces greatest family ethics. However, in some books, there are contradictory views on this Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka of teaching Dhamma and Vinaya from early childhood (Wickremeratne 2006, p.18). However, as children, people will never admire this training but as an adult who faces circumstances of a busy life, people see the value of these Buddhist teachings.

Historically, some specific values and morals were developed in the Sri Lankan Buddhist family. Children are encouraged to show respect to their parents before going to school and to bed. Respecting, supporting, loving caring parents in their old age. Though a lay person is wealthy and he did not treat his old parents well, then the society has a tendency to criticize his virtue. If someone abandoned his parents on the road or badly treated them in the house, media cover those stories and show that there is a decline in human values in the society. Parents are considered as a great asset and their duty of raising a child in difficult situations always admired. The commitment to feed children, to educate them and to introduce virtues of the society for better humanity is the greatest gift parents can give for a child. Children are well raised with these qualities in average family life. When the parents are dying, the Buddhist monks would be asked to do some chanting funeral site should also be help by children. People in the village come to help and the Buddhist monks work as conductors.

After taking care of old parents till their death, funeral rituals should be also completed by children. Villagers help children in the funeral and there are specific Sinhalese Buddhist rituals when the funeral ceremony takes place. The deceased was kept for 2 or 3 days before it's sent to cemetery. Wearing a white piece of cloth, pouring water to children's hands. Boy caring the coffin on to the shoulder. There are rituals like pouring water to children's hands while chanting Buddhist stanzas and giving a piece of white cloth

as a remembering cloth. Male children hold the coffin on their shoulders when it is taken to the cemetery. Normally after seven days and after three months, children arrange Dhamma preaching ceremonies and arms giving ceremonies in their houses. In these ceremonies, Buddhist monks offer merits to spirits of parents while remembering their virtue. Some children arrange the alms-giving ceremony every year to memorize their parents as well as comfort the spirit. These kinds of rituals are also common in other Asian Buddhist societies which remains as a great aspect to remember their parents and other ancestors. On the other hand, these ritual ceremonies are good opportunities for a family in generations loving caring, sharing work, money, etc. Cooking together, spending money together and sharing works together in these events make the family bond strong. Not only funeral ceremonies but in some general ceremonies like the New Year Festival, the family bond becomes stronger with the participation of all family members.

Supporting the marital partner and children and supplying all their needs are other important aspects of the Sri Lankan family discourse. Cheating is considered as serious misbehavior which evokes criticisms and the domestic violence could be punished with the civil law. People are advised that should not have sexual relationship with others but the spouse married person having different partners other than the spouse it could be a sin as well as a legal matter. Mothers are devoted to raise children in a good manner and protect them until they become an adult. Sri Lankan mothers are really generous and show a good caring for their children. Most of the mothers are working for better functions of the family. Father is also committed to finding better occupations for the wellbeing of the family and collect assets for their children. Children's psychological improvements and their behaviors are very important in the Sri Lankan family unit which is considered as a duty of both parents. As mentioned before, in common cases, children are raised us a Buddhist way. However, unlikely to the modern western societies, some parents practice small punishment methods while others believe love and kindness is the best way to take care of the stubbornness. No matter how they were grown up, until their marriage, parents keep the eye to avoid harmful behaviors.

Meaning that father and mother are responsible of their children good or bad manner in a Buddhist family. However, in some modern opinions, these continuous interferences of parents were slightly criticized.

From childhood, Children listen to lots of stories which promote Buddhist virtue and patriotic feelings. In this scenario, the extended family unit is more admired. Grandparents have the great security for their grandsons and daughters who teach many behaviors and introduce traditional stories and songs to their young children. Children's love and respect towards their grandparents is never ending. In Sri Lankan society, popular Buddhist stories came through generations. Some of Buddha's Birth stories like Vessanthara Jātaka, Sāma Jātaka, Kusa Jātaka, Chandakinnara Jāthaka (Cowell & Francis 2009) and the story of Ajasatta, the story of Rahula and Yashodarā became more popular. For the common Buddhists, these stories make more sensitivity about the commitments of parents and the value of the family unity. Therefore, the Buddhists in Sri Lanka have a feeling that a well-managed family life with baring each and every obstacle they face. Another most important thing is that people believe their children should be sensitive for the problems of the society and to nature. Some mothers practically show that saving an ant's life could be a merit which even their young children can do. They introduce Metthā and Karunā as good feelings to develop for surrounding living beings. Small living beings to elephants are treated well in front of the children in an average family. In every evening, an ordinary Buddhist family worships the Lord Buddha in their house and in every Poya day the family goes to the temple to worship the Buddha. In this way, Sri Lankan families have strongly bonded with Buddhism generation by generation they continue their own way of living them in Buddha's teaching. This harmonious family achieves internal peace in the society and it leads to sustainability. Once Sri Lanka was a developing country but its crime rate was recorded as at a low level. It is amazingly a tourist-friendly country from early ages which shows hospitality for every outsider.

However, in the Twenty-first century, with the globalization, modernization, and the social mobilization, this family unit faces

many challenges. On the one hand, parents' life became more scheduled in Sri Lanka which is directly affecting the well-balanced family structure. Since the country's per capita GDP is a bit lower, most of the mothers go for work. Every girl child is educated by their family and seeking equal job opportunities as a positive aspect of society. Consequently, women had a strong say in health and fertility behaviour. They were capable workers who can compete with their male counterparts. According to the World Bank report, modern women in Sri Lanka who sought various employments in the government and private sector have less time to spend with their children. But revealingly, the same study found that having young children had no significant effect on men's prospects in the labour market (<https://www.worldbank.org>).

In this discourse, female workers as mothers have to play a dual role and their contribution for better parenting is having some difficult challenges. In some cases, mothers have to keep their children in childcare centers. When these parents are back from the workplace, other household activities and an intensive educational workload of the children interrupt the smooth function of their neutral communication and practices. Time which majority of the Sri Lankan Buddhist parents spend before with their children is not available with this scheduled lifestyle. In the average level, children also becoming a part of the technological life, in some cases which shows an addiction to computer games and social media. Previous values and norms which came from generations are not easily transmitting to the young generations. In some cases, urban Sri Lankans more tend to have single parent families. The link which grandparents built with young generations could easily erode. These changes in kinship patterns directly affect the modern child in many ways. In urban environments, some children let their parents live alone or send them to elderly homes which often have poor facilities. According to researches some parents are not satisfied the living they experience in their elderly ages no matter where they live (K.D.M.S. Kaluthantri 2018, pp. 140-145). Though this percentage is low, it is affecting the society which questions modernized attitudes. Therefore, there should be some activities to develop these values according to Buddha's teachings.

Nowadays, Sri Lankan people are reconsidering the traditional family values based on Buddhism. To develop these values, in schools, in media and even in some public places, there are some collective programs for the young generations. As I mentioned, there is a tendency to encourage Sunday Buddhist schools throughout the island, while private tuition classes are competing with this system on Sundays (www.ucanews.com). Though some regimes have decided to remove Buddhism and History from the school syllabus, the civil society is fighting to keep these subjects in the curriculum and continually give Buddhist education for children from their childhood. This Buddhist teaching aspect is also moderated with media which promote Buddhist programs and even Buddhist TV channels to teach these values. Every morning, in TV channels, not only chanting of Buddha Suttas, but also there are some other Dhamma programs. In most of these programs, Buddhist monks advise lay family members of being a good person; treating parents well; having honest and committed relationships. In every Poya day not only on TV and Radio channels but also in temples there are discussions and programs to teach Dhamma. Buddhist communities also organize programs to teach respect for parents especially focusing on school communities to let these children be more sensitive on their parent's feelings and values.

It can be concluded that though the modernization process has affected the ordinary family life among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, there are some popular ways of establishing family values and ethics again. Buddhist monks and other Buddhist activists in Sri Lanka keep waking a discourse for a harmonious family. It is obvious that, after ethics and values are devalued in a society, the whole system will collapsed with an ever increasing crime rate and other disturbances. Therefore, family-based development should be the evolving plan for the country's sustainability. Better sustainable plans will enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations. Therefore, to enhance potentials, Buddhist values and ethics should come through a peaceful family relationship which should be given priorities parallel to the material developments. In this background, only Buddhism and capitalism could be intertwined. These values, as well as the love and kindness

of the parents, make people strong and their mental health will be more stable in any stressful working environment.

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