

BUDDHIST APPROACH TO HARMONIOUS FAMILIES IN THE CHANGING SOCIETY

by Kyoung-Hee Lee*

1. BACKGROUND

There is no doubt that “family” is an important social institution. Its function is to perpetuate society through procreation and socialization. Family structure has changed over the last few decades. Whatever the structure has changed, family is expected to provide stability in a sexual, emotional, intellectual and social way that nothing else can do. OECD has provided an overview of the changes in family formation, household structure, work-life balance, and child well-being. Today, many families are confronting with problems such as separation, divorce, financial problems, issues related to sexuality, alcohol or addiction, abuse between parents and children, and family conflicts. These problems would be deeply distressing and may lead to negative emotions, cognitive and behavior disorders, and mental diseases. Thereby some families are at risks of disintegration. When families are weak, societies begin to break down. The crisis of “family disintegration” and the task of “social integration” are the current challenges to overcome. As one of the most important agents of socialization and social

* Professor. Director, Dhamma Clinic for Psychosomatic Therapy, South Korea.

control, religion has played a significant role in organizing and directing social life. Buddhism exposes the reality of human life and also stresses the mundane happiness for lay people. Accordingly, the main concern in this paper lies in how Buddhism supports harmonious families, boosts the family-friendly society, and ultimately sustains society in the changing world.

2. OBJECTIVE & METHODOLOGY

The prime objective of this paper is to examine the Buddhist approaches to harmonious families for sustainable societies in the contemporary changing society. The research is mainly textual study. The collected data was observed on the historical, comparative, and critical bases.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. What is meant by Family?

3.1.1. Etymology

Family, etymologically, means servants of a household, from Latin '*familia*',¹ abstract noun formed from '*famulus*' (servant, slave). The Latin word rarely appears in the sense parents with their children, for which '*domus*' was used. Derivatives of '*famulus*' include '*famula*' (serving woman, maid), '*famulanter*' (in the manner of a servant), '*famulitas*' (servitude), '*familiaris*' (of one's household, private), '*familiaricus*' (of household slaves), and '*familiaritas*' (close friendship).²

3.1.2. Definition

In the most basic definition, family is defined as a group of people who share a legal (or a blood) bond. Families are legally bound through birth, marriages, adoptions, and guardianships including the rights, duties, and obligations of those legal contracts. George Murdock and Talcott Parsons are the main theorists often

1. This term means 'family servants', 'domestics collectively', 'the servants in a household', 'members of a household', 'the estate', 'property', and 'the household including relatives and servants.'

2. Online Etymology Dictionary, "Family". Available at: <http://www.etymonline.com> [Accessed: 15 June 2016].

mentioned in discussions relating to the family. George Murdock (1965) described that the family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. Murdock argued that the nuclear family was a universal social institution because it fulfilled four basic functions—the sexual, reproductive, economic, and educational functions—for society. However, his description brought about a stereotype of the family. Although nuclear family is still used as the basic structure for a family in modern society, Murdock’s definition is outdated to cover emerging different types of families. Talcott Parsons (1951) developed the functionalist perspective on the family by focusing heavily on nuclear, heterosexual families to the exclusion of other family forms. He noted that the nuclear family, consisting of only parents and their growing children, predominates in industrialized societies.

3.2. Families in Transition

“Family” is a single word, but it has many different meanings. Moreover, it is often used metaphorically to create more inclusive categories such as community, nationhood, global village and humanism. Recently, the number of family members has fallen and the forms of families have changed. “Family” was today’s important issue, and society was just beginning to accept different types of families—nuclear family, single-parent family, cross-generational family, adoptive/poster family, never-married family, blended family, grandparents as parents, same-sex parents, etc.³

Levine and Levine identified the Fourteen Trends occurring in family structure, family relations, and related phenomena (Levine & Levine, 1996:102-108).⁴ Those trends have implications for the development of children and their treatment in the educational

3. American Academy of Pediatrics, “Different Types of Families: A Portrait Gallery”. Available at: <https://www.aap.org> [Accessed: 20 November 2018].

4. These are ①increase in single-parent families, ②increase in the percentage of working mothers, ③smaller family size, ④child neglect and abuse, ⑤increase in the proportion of households without children, ⑥serial-marriage children, ⑦skip-generation families, ⑧disappearing fathers, ⑨increases in cohabitation, ⑩increased prominence of peer cultures among youth, ⑪increased influence of television and other media, ⑫loss of support from grandparents, ⑬increase in single-parent families headed by fathers, and ⑭increase of violent crimes among youth.

system and other modern socializing institutions. Ellwood and Jencks addressed the Basic Trends and Eight Hypotheses of the rapid changes in family structure (Ellwood & Jencks, 2001:6).⁵ Even though the shapes of families may be changing, the values that make them work need not disappear. In other words, the traditional family system may disappear, but that does not mean it is worthless.

3.3. Families at Risk

In most societies, family is the principal institution for the socialization of children. Recently, family systems are faced with greater challenges arising from a decreasing number of marriages, more divorces, lower birthrates, the soaring population of senior citizens, domestic violence, child abuse and a higher suicide rate. The “families at risk”, in general, means families who may find it difficult to keep their children safe. The risk factors are mainly caused by unemployment, poverty, addiction, violence and mental health issues. These are especially associated with child abuse or neglect.

3.3.1. Single-parents Worldwide

Single-parents were very common in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the most common cause is the death of a parent. Approximately 1/3 to 1/2 of all children in this era experienced the death of a parent during childhood. Since then, medical advances and improvements in sanitation and maternal care have significantly reduced mortality of people in reproductive age. Today, the leading reasons for the rising number of single-parents by divorce, accidental pregnancies and single-parenting by choice. According to the OECD database (2014), the number of single-parent households is rising worldwide: 17% of children aged 0-14 live in single-parent households, women head approximately 88% of these households, and the majority of single-parents are employed. The largest increases in single-

5. Families have changed in a multitude of ways. Marriage is being postponed and sometimes being eschewed entirely. Cohabitation is up, divorce has risen. Single parenthood has grown. It is the latter trend that primarily motivates this review. If adults were shifting their patterns of commitment, it would probably not be a source of great public concern were it not for the fact that children are often involved. But there is powerful evidence that children in single parent families fare worse than those in two-parent settings. At a minimum their incomes are lower, and they often do more poorly in a wide variety of areas from schooling to criminal activity.

parent households have been in most industrialized countries like America, England, Denmark, Sweden, France, etc. According to the 2016 US Census, single-parents have more than tripled as a share of American households since 1960: 27% of children under 18 live in single-parent households in the US (more than 23% of American children are being raised without a father, and 4% of children are raised without their mother). Among these households, 80% are headed by single mothers. One-third has a college degree and 1/6 have not completed high school. About 60% of single mother in the US live in poverty. Only 29% of single mothers ever received child support per month.⁶

3.3.2. Big Rise in Number of Working Mothers

The continued rise in the number of working mothers had been a “major feature” of the labour market in the world. Working mothers have been striving to carve out a place for themselves in the working world, while balancing motherhood. According to an overview of statistics on working mothers in the United States, labour force is retaining working mothers with children in all age groups at higher rates than they were four decades ago (Statista, 2018). Other findings show there has been a big rise in the number of working mothers over the past two decades in England. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) says 4.9 million women were working in 2017 while looking after children up 1.2 million since 1996. There has been a particularly big jump in the employment rate among mothers with children aged three or four, from 56% to 65%. This comes as the government expanded the provision of free childcare from 15 to 30 hours a week in England. The policy is designed to help boost employment for parents, particularly mothers, looking to return to work or increase their working hours (ONS, 2017).

3.3.3. The Failure of Shared Custody: Fatherlessness and Its Risks

For a long time, fathers have largely guided the marital choices of their children and directly supervised the entry of children, especially sons, into the world outside the home. Most important,

6.Spaced-Out Scientist (2017), “Single Parents Worldwide: Statistics and Trends”. Available at: <https://spacedoutscientist.com> [Accessed: 22 November 2018].

fathers assumed primary responsibility for what was seen as the most essential parental task, viz. the religious and moral education of the young. As a result, societal praise or blame for a child's outcome was customarily bestowed not (as it is today) on the mother but on the father (Wilson & Neckerman, 1986:239). Currently, increasing numbers of children are being raised without fathers.

Fatherless families stem from the industrial revolution. Industrialization and the modern economy led to the physical separation of home and work. The nineteenth century's "progressive fragmentation of labor, combined with mass production and complicated administration, the separation of home from the place of work, and the transition from independent producer to paid employee who uses consumer goods" led to "a progressive loss of substance of the father's authority and a diminution of his power in the family and over the family" (Blankenhorn, 1996:13). During the mid-1960's, social barriers to divorce started to crumble and the divorce rate began a dramatic upward spiral. Rates of divorce have doubled since the 1960's in Belgium, France, and Switzerland, while they have risen threefold in Canada, England, and the Netherlands (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1994).

"Fatherlessness" is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. Despite its scale and social consequences, fatherlessness is a problem that is frequently ignore or denied. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. And it is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women (Blankenhorn, 1996:1). Fatherlessness indicates "the failure of shared custody" or destabilized families for parenting. Growing up without a father implies that children are exposing on serious risks.

Above all, there are increased dangers of sexual violence and risks of early sexual behaviour. As universal problem, "Child Sexual Abuse" (CSA) has various adverse effects on the psychological, physical, behavioral, and interpersonal well-being of the victim (Singh, Parsekar, & Nair, 2014). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines CSA as "the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend and is unable to give

informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violate the laws or social taboos of society” (WHO, 2003). The escalating risk of childhood sexual abuse in our society stems primarily from the growing absence of married fathers and the growing presence of stepfathers, boyfriends, and other unrelated or transient males” (Blankenhorn, 1996). Young people often have more opportunities to engage in immoral conduct because of less parental supervision in a single-parent home.

In the United States, 50 percent in female householder families compared to 10 percent of children in two-parent families were in poverty in 1995 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Children living in poverty are vulnerable to environmental, educational, health, and safety risks. Compared with their peers, children living in poverty (especially young children) are more likely to have cognitive, behavioral, and socio-emotional difficulties. Throughout their lifetimes they are more likely to complete fewer years of school and experience more years of unemployment (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2018:6). Over a third of the young men and women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-nine have little or no ambition ten years after their parents’ divorce. They are drifting through life with no set goals and a sense of helplessness. Low self-esteem, depression, delinquent behavior, and persistent anger were observed among many children of divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). Numerous studies show that boys are raised without a strong male presence in their lives show insecurity about their gender identity, low self-esteem, and, later in their lives, trouble forming intimate relationships. The problems may develop from living without male role models don’t usually show up until adolescence or later, and include having difficulty forming successful male/female relationships in adulthood (Kennedy, 1994:39).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Where Does Happiness Begin?

According to sociology, SES (Socio-economic Status) including social prestige, job, and educational level is considered as an indicator of success in a capitalist society. People want to succeed by

all means possible. It is hard to deny that most people have rushed to make more money and enjoy more material abundance due to their unlimited desire. Sometimes people may not be satisfied with their wealth and success, but rather their positive thinking brings them inner peace, satisfaction, and happiness. That is the reason of why the Buddha tells us “not to be controlled by possessions but to live a free life”. “Pursuit of Happiness” is the fundamental theme of the Buddhism. The Buddha stresses the present or mundane happiness, which may begin at home. Happiness is about cheering up and learning to love ourselves through small pleasures that come from daily life. First of all, it may come from good relationships with families.

4.2. Conditions of the Mundane Happiness

The Buddha said the four kinds of happiness that may be achieved by a layperson who enjoys sensual pleasures, depending on time and occasion: ownership, enjoyment, freedom from debt, and blamelessness.⁷ In the *Dīghajāṇu-sutta*, the Buddha explained the four conditions of welfare and happiness in this present life⁸—accomplishment in industry (*uṭṭhāna-sampadā*), accomplishment in protection (*āraṅkha-sampadā*), good friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*), and righteous livelihood (*samaḥivitā*). The *Mahāmaṅgala-sutta* expatiates upon those conditions—‘much learning’ (*bāhu-sacca*) ‘skill’ (*sippa*), ‘morality’ (*sīla*), ‘proper training’ (*susikkhita*), ‘charity’ (*dāna*), ‘having had meritorious deeds’ (*kata-puññatā*), etc.—of mundane happiness in more detail as the highest bliss in this life. The Buddha specially accentuated training and skill to be happy in the mundane life for the lay people.⁹ These may motivate people to work harder in school and go to college so that they can get a better job. A job is a prerequisite for living in modern society. In order to have a successful career, it is essential to graduate from university.

4.3. Who leads the Harmonious Families?

7. A. II. 69; NDB, 4:62, WP, p. 452; W. Rahula (1978), p. 83.

8. A. IV. 281-2; NDB, 8:54, WP, pp. 1194-1195.

9. M. I. 370-80; MDB, 56:18, WP, p. 485.

4.3.1. *Husband and Wife: The Best Companions*

Men and women who are legally married to one another are given by law specific rights and duties resulting from that relationship. Householder should use the possessions legitimately obtained for happiness and well-being for parents, wife and children, servants and workpeople, friends and relatives.¹⁰ According to the *Siṅgālovāda-sutta*, there are five ways in which a husband should minister to his wife, by not being unfaithful to her, by giving authority to her, by providing her with adornments. And also there are five ways in which a wife, thus ministered to by her husband as the western direction, will reciprocate: by properly organizing her work, by being kind to the servants, by not being unfaithful, by protecting stores, and by being skillful and diligent in all she has to do.¹¹

Healthy marriage is good for couples in mental and physical health. It is also good for children that growing up in a happy home protects children from mental, physical, educational and social problems. But, the burden of trying to maintain a relationship, caring for a child and holding down a job is often too much for married couple to handle, leading to arguments and often divorce. Bad relationships, which means going to get divorced, probably they might find themselves getting into a spiral of negativity. Over recent years the marriage rate has waned and the divorce rate has waxed. Some Suttas would be good materials for the 'Marriage Education' (ME) as well as family counseling. The *Uggaha-sutta* tells five qualities of wife's duty for the bride-to-be.¹² The *Bhariya-sutta* states seven different types of wives such as killer, thief, tyrant, mother, sister, friend, and maid.¹³ The same may be said of husband. There is something inscrutable in women's heart. Therefore, husband should enter into his wife's feelings as women's exceptional situations. The *Āveṇika-sutta* explains the peculiar sufferings to women which women experience but not men.¹⁴

Getting married to right person is what's important for both

10. A. III. 45ff; NDB, 5:41, WP, p. 665.

11. D. III. 190; LDB, 31:30, WP. p. 467.

12. A. III. 36ff; NDB, 5:33, WP. pp. 657ff.

13. A. IV. 92; NDB, 7:63, WP. p. 1064.

14. A. III. 239; CDB, 37:3, WP. p. 1287.

of husband and wife. Samajivī-sutta shows requirements for ideal couple. When the Buddha visited the house of Nakulapitā, both Nakulapitā and his wife professed themselves their faithfulness to each other and their desire to be husband and wife in subsequent births not only in this present life. And then, the Buddha said it is possible if they have the fourfold compatibility: faith (*saddhā*), virtue (*sīla*), generosity (*cāga*), and wisdom (*paññā*).¹⁵ As mentioned above, the Buddha preached a woman's duties and roles in several Suttas. Herein, one thing to notice is that the same reasoning applies to men compatibly. Modern woman's rights advocates have promoted gender equality, but it is already taught through the Dhamma 2,600 years ago.

4.3.2. Parents and Children

Parents and children relationship forms a basis for all subsequent human relations. The Sigālovāda-sutta describes their reciprocal obligations in five ways. The parents should minister to their children in five ways such as restraining them from evil, encouraging them to do good, training them for a profession, arranging a suitable marriage, and handing over their inheritance to children at the proper time. Also, children should minister to their parents in five ways such as supporting their parents, performing their duties for them as sons and daughters, keeping the family traditions, deserving their heritages, and offering alms for the late their relatives after parents' deaths.¹⁶

Parents: The First Teachers

In the Early Buddhist Scriptures, parents are compared with Brahmā, Devas and the First Teachers. The Brahma-sutta and Sabrahmakāni-sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya and Itivuttaka of Khuddaka Nikāya state the duty of supporting parents by children. According to these Scriptures, the families where mother and father are respected by their children are like living with Brahmā, Devas and the First Teachers.¹⁷ Mother and father are worthy of gifts from their children because of the earnest devotion of parents towards their

15. A. II. 61ff; NDB, 4:56, WP, pp.445-6.

16. D. III. 189; LDB, Ch. 31:28, WP, p. 467.

17. A. I. 132; NDB, 1:31, WP, p. 228; A. II, 70; NDB, 4:63, WP, p. 454; Iti, 106.

children with boundless loving-kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). Children should revere their parents as sons or daughters, and show them due honor, serve them with food and drink, with clothes and bedding, by massaging and bathing them, and by washing their feet. Because of these service to mother and father, children are praiseworthy in present world and deserve rejoice in heaven after death.¹⁸ Just as the wife is the best companion of her husband, sons are truly the support of their parents.¹⁹

Children: The Supporters of Parents

Generally, parents wish for a son to be born in their family. Putta-sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya gives an explanation for the reason by the following five prospects: having been supported by us; he will support us; he will do work for us; our family lineage will be extended; he will manage the inheritance, when we have passed on; he will give an offering on our behalf.²⁰ Because of the earnest devotion of parents towards their children, mother and father are worthy of gifts from their children. “Filial piety” (Chinese: 孝, *xiào*) is a tradition and virtue of Eastern society. There is particular emphasis on respect for the elderly in East Asia, associated with Confucius’ doctrine of filial piety, which means obedience, respect and support for elderly parents. It is one of the key elements of Confucian philosophy. Confucius taught that filial piety is “a virtue of respect for one’s parents and ancestors.” According to the Dhammapada, ministering to mother (*matteyyatā*) and ministering to father (*petteyyatā*) are pleasant (*sukhā*) in this world.²¹ Those terms refer to good conduct (*sammā-paṭipatti*) towards the mother or father. In fact, filial piety is the basis of human conduct and the source of all virtues across times and spaces.

5. CONCLUSION

Family system has fundamentally changed over the past few decades. Today modern families are faced with greater challenges. Recent surveys provide an overview of the families in transition.

18. A. II. 70; NDB, 4:63, WP, p. 454.

19. S. I. 37; CDB, 1:54, WP, p. 128.

20. A. V. 43; NDB, 5:39, WP, p. 663.

21. Dhṃ, vs. 332; Dhṃ, 23:13, CBDEF, p. 258.

Fertility rates have been persistently low in many OECD countries leading to smaller families. With marriage rates down and divorce rates up, there are an increasing number of children growing up in single-parent or reconstituted families. Sole-parent families are of particular concern due to the high incidence of poverty among such households. Important gains in female educational attainment and investment in more family-friendly policies have contributed to a rise in female and maternal employment, but the increased labour market participation of mothers has had only a limited effect on the child poverty rate. Child well-being indicators shows that average household incomes have increased, but child poverty rate has also risen. Family is a basic social unit. We believe “happiness begins at home.” Happy families make up a healthy society, which is necessary for a society to ameliorate human sufferings and to sustainable social world.

Buddhism aims to get rid of sufferings and to attain happiness. The Buddha states the Noble Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*) as the middle way (*majjhimā-paṭipadā*) of moderation, between the extremes of sensual indulgence (*kāma-sukhallikānuyoga*) and self-mortification (*atta-kilamatha*). Buddhism can be regarded as an integrative therapy for families by approaches to trans-generational, structural, strategic, experiential, solution focused, and narrative therapies. *Āveṇika-sutta*, *Bhariya-sutta*, *Brahma-sutta*, *Dīghajāṇu-sutta*, *Mahāmaṅgala-sutta*, *Putta-sutta*, *Sabrahmakāni-sutta*, *Samajivī-sutta*, *Siṅgālovāda-sutta*, *Uggaha-sutta* will further help us understand intricate family relationship and family functioning. They would be a guideline for harmonious family life. *Jātaka* stories give suitable examples of family therapy *Gijjha-Jātaka*, *Kaccani-Jātaka*, *Kelisīla-Jātaka*, *Māhadhammpāla-Jātaka*, etc. expose various issues, including marital conflicts and family troubles (Harischandrea: 1998). Modern people seem to be more isolated, but they are always connected with their families.

References

- The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (*Samyutta Nikāya*) (2000). Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- The Dhammapada (1993). Translated by Naradada Thera. Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.
- The Long Discourses of the Buddha (*Dīgha Nikāya*)(2012). Translated by Maurice Walshe. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (*Majjhima Nikāya*) (2009). 4th ed. Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- The Numerical discourses of the Buddha (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*) (2012). 4th ed. Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Blankenhorn, David G. Jr. (1996). *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Ellwood, David T. and Jencks, Christopher (2001). “The Growing Differences in Family Structure: What Do We Know? Where Do We Look for Answers?”. Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, pp.1-6. Available at: <https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/u4/Ellwood&Jencks.pdf> [Downloaded: 29 October 2018].
- Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (1995-2018). *America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*.
- Furstenberg, Frank F. Jr. and Cherlin, Andrew J. (1994). *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harischandrea, D. V. J. (1998). *Psychiatric Aspects of Jataka Stories*. Galle-Sri Lanka: Upuli.
- Singh, M. M., Parsekar, S. S. and Nair, S. N. (2014). “An Epidemiological Overview of Child Sexual Abuse”. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 3(4), pp. 430-435.

- Kennedy, Marge M. (1994). *The Single-parent Family: Living happily in a Changing World*. New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks.
- Levine, Daniel U. and Levine, Rayna F. (1996). *Society and Education*. 9th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Murdock, G. P. (1965). *Social Structure*. New York: MacMillan.
- OECD (2014). *OECD Family Database*.
- Parsons, Talcott (1951). *The Social System*. New York: The Free Press.
- Wallerstein, Judith and Sandra Blakeslee (1996). *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade after Divorce*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- World Health organization (2003). "Child Sexual Abuse". *Guidelines for Medicolegal Care for Victims of Sexual Violence*, Geneva: World Health organization, pp.75-93.
- Wilson, William Julius & Neckerman, Kathryn M. (1986). "Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap Between Evidence and Public Policy Issues," In: Sheldon H. Danziger & Weinberg, Daniel H. trans., *Fighting Poverty: What Works and What Doesn't*. MA: Harvard University Press, pp.232-259.
- American Academy of Pediatrics, Available at: <https://www.aap.org> [Accessed 20 November 2018].
- Online Etymology Dictionary, Available at: <http://www.etymonline.com> [Accessed 15 June 2016].
- Spaced-Out Scientist, Available at: <https://spacedoutscientist.com> [Accessed 22 November 2018].