

# Buddhist Ethics

## The Path to Nirvāna

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## 6 The Layman's Duties to his Associates

### CHILDREN AND PARENTS

The duties of children to their parents were stressed in India from a very early date. *Rukkhadhamma Jātaka* expressed the value of the solidarity of a family, using the simile of the trees of a forest; these are able to withstand the force of the wind whereas a solitary tree, however large, is not.<sup>274</sup> The Buddha confirmed and emphasized the family relationship, exhorting all persons who decided to remain in the worldly life to maintain the family ties together with the honour and dignity of the family as a social unit. The Asoka *Edicts* concern themselves very much with the duties of children to parents; we have, for example: 'Meritorious is obedience to mother and father';<sup>275</sup> 'Right conduct to mother and father is obedience';<sup>276</sup> 'Obey mother and father';<sup>277</sup> 'Listen to mother and father'.<sup>278</sup> These are, however, modifications of the Upanisadic dictum: 'Be one to whom mother is a god. Be one to whom father is a god.'<sup>279</sup>

*Āṅguttara Nikāya* records that great approval is accorded to families where the parents are held in high respect. Such families, said the Buddha, counted as belonging to the Brahma rank (*sabrahmakāni*) and with the early great teachers (*sapubbacariyakāni*); they were 'worthy of offerings' (*āhuneyyā*),<sup>280</sup> an expression indicating great distinction since it was used also by the Buddha in reference to the members of the Saṅgha. He pointed out that parents do much for their children, bringing them up (*āpādakā*), taking care of them (*posakā*), introducing them to the

world (*lokassa dassetāro*).<sup>281</sup> The duty of supporting one's parents is included in the three good things proclaimed by the wise, the other two being the practice of charity (*dāna*) and the going forth into the homeless life (*pabbajjā*). The debt to one's parents is, in general, impossible to repay; it can be discharged only in a case where the child arouses in his parents confidence in the Dhamma, settles and establishes them in morality, replaces their meanness by generosity, or, dispelling their foolishness, settles and establishes them in wisdom.<sup>282</sup>

*Sigālovāda Suttanta* gives five ways in which a child should minister to his parents. He should maintain: (i) I will support my parents since they at one time supported me, (ii) I shall take upon myself the duties incumbent on them, (iii) I shall establish a succession, (iv) I shall follow a method of inheritance, and (v) I shall make gifts in due course to the dead. In return, the parents should show their love for their children by (i) restraining them from vice, (ii) exhorting them to virtue, (iii) training them for a profession, (iv) arranging a suitable marriage for them, and (v) in due course handing over to them their inheritance.<sup>283</sup>

An occasion is recorded when certain sons fulfilled none of the duties prescribed; rather they followed the course taken by the children of Shakespeare's *Lear*. The story is told in *Samyutta Nikāya*<sup>284</sup> where an elderly and once-wealthy Brahman, coarsely dressed and very weary, visited the Buddha at Sāvatti. He stated that he had four sons who, with their wives, had put him out of their houses. The Buddha advised him to recite the following verses when the populace had assembled in their local Hall:

‘Those in whose birth I took delight,  
For whose existence I had longed,  
They now together with their wives,  
Reject me as one would a hog.

‘Wicked, contemptible are these  
Who spoke familiarly like sons,  
Yet far from filial care of me  
Now leave me, aged and alone.

‘Just as a worn-out horse is forced  
Away from food and driven from his shelter,  
So do these children drive away their father  
To beg for alms at other people's doors.

‘Better a stick, I say, would be  
Than disloyal sons estranging me;  
At least it keeps away an ox  
Or drives away a pariah dog.

‘Yet — once bewildered, in the dark,  
Now I have gained a solid hold.  
Supported firmly by the hold,  
Though once I stumbled, now I stand.’

The aged Brahman followed the Buddha's advice and his sons amended their behaviour.<sup>285</sup>

For reward for keeping the rules of conduct, there is given the case of Sakka, ruler of the *devas*. Sakka, when a man, declared he would observe the following seven conditions: (i) That he would maintain his parents, (ii) Revere the head of the family, (iii) Use gentle language, (iv) Speak no slander, (v) With a mind free from stain conduct himself in his home with generosity, delighting in renunciation, be willing to listen to petitions, and delight in sharing gifts, (vi) Speak the truth, and (vii) Not give way to anger; if anger should arise in him he would repress it quickly. As a result of so living and conducting himself, the Tāvatisa *devas* conferred on him the name ‘Good man’ (*sappurisa*) and in due course he became the Ruler of the *devas*.<sup>286</sup>

#### HUSBAND AND WIFE

Of the more advanced type of advice given to householders much was of necessity directed to the relationship between husband and wife since they were to be considered by their children as *devas*. The story of Nakula's parents is a case in point.<sup>287</sup> Here the father lay ill, and the mother, reminding him that death with a worried mind was followed by bad results,

reassured him on these points: that she could support the children and maintain the household by spinning cotton and carding wool; that since she and the father had led a good life together for sixteen years she would not re-marry; that she would welcome the Exalted One and members of the Saṅgha even more warmly than before; that as long as there existed any *upāsikās* she would keep the Moralities in full, would acquire calmness of mind, become established in the dhamma and discipline (*dharmavinaya*), put an end to doubt, abolish indecision, be self-confident, not relying on others, and live in the Teacher's teaching. The reassurance was sufficient to heal her husband. He rose from his bed and not long after, with the aid of a stick, visited the Buddha. The Buddha remarked on his great gain in having such a wife as Nakula's mother, compassionate and solicitous for her husband's welfare, for a counsellor and teacher, and said that as long as he had any women lay-disciples at all she should be one of them.

For interpretation of *Sigālovāda's* adoration to the direction of the West, the *suttanta* gives five ways in which a wife should be ministered to by her husband: (i) by being courteous to her, (ii) by not despising her, (iii) by being faithful to her, (iv) by handing over authority to her, and (v) by providing her with necessary adornments. In return, the wife should minister to her husband: (i) by ordering the household well, (ii) by hospitality to their relatives, (iii) by fidelity, (iv) by taking care of his wealth, and (v) by her industry.<sup>288</sup> *Aṅguttara Nikāya* takes into account the case of the wife who fulfils her task perfectly, and here the Buddha enumerates the four qualities by which woman wins power in this world and has this world in her grasp.<sup>289</sup> These are as follows:

She is capable in her work; whatever her husband's home industries, whether in wool or cotton, she is skilful, gifted with an enquiring mind into the work, and able to carry it out. She is able to manage her servants, knowing the duties of each and seeing these are carried out; further, she knows something of sickness and is able to allot the food suitably. She studies the approval of her husband and keeps safe whatever money, corn,

silver or gold he brings home. With these qualities, said the Buddha, 'she wins power and this world is within her grasp'.<sup>290</sup>

This, however, does not establish her ultimate limitation. She may win power in the world beyond, have the world beyond in her grasp. By what means? By establishment in confidence, virtue, charity and wisdom. For confidence she knows the arising of a Tathāgata and such and such is so.<sup>291</sup> She is accomplished in virtue by the keeping of the Five Precepts. She is accomplished in charity, living at home with thought free from avarice, delighting in alms-giving. She is wise in the penetration into the rise and fall of things and in the complete destruction of suffering. With these four qualities she wins power and has the world beyond in her grasp.<sup>292</sup> Yet though these last four qualities contain realization of the destruction of suffering, her reward is only formally acknowledged as rebirth in the *deva* worlds.

Instructions to girls about to marry are recorded in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as having been given by the Buddha at the invitation of a man whose daughters were shortly going to their husbands. The Buddha advised them to rise early, work willingly, order their affairs smoothly, and to cultivate gentle voices. They should honour and respect all persons honoured and respected by their husbands, whether parents or recluses, and on the arrival of these should offer them a seat and water. Other instructions were similar to those given to wives, namely, skill in the various handicrafts, care of servants and sick people, and care of the wealth brought home by the husbands.<sup>293</sup>

A further point raised by the Buddha concerned appreciation of the trials of women who, in addition to the disabilities of their sex, were called upon to leave their own families and to live with their husbands'.<sup>294</sup> From that time on, the wife was cut off from her former associates and was entirely dependent for her happiness on the new conditions and surroundings. While the Buddha speaks of ill-assorted couples, and of couples in which both the husband and wife are bad or good,<sup>295</sup> a particular address dealing with what would appear to be a form of frustration is also extant. The persons concerned were Anāthapiṇḍika, owner of the

famous park, and his daughter-in-law, Sujātā.<sup>296</sup> The Buddha, going one morning to the house of Anāthapiṇḍika, heard a great noise therein; likening it to that due to fishermen who had just made a haul of fish he enquired the reason for it. Anāthapiṇḍika replied that the commotion was due to Sujātā who was rich and had been brought from a wealthy family; she took no notice of her parents-in-law or of her husband, nor did she respect the Buddha himself. The Buddha called to her and she came and sat down by his side. He said that there were seven kinds of wives, one like an executioner inflicting punishment, one like a thief, one like a mistress, one like a mother, one like a sister, one like a companion, and one like a slave. When the Buddha asked which of the seven she herself was, Sujātā replied that she did not understand, he had put the matter too briefly; but would he teach her the Dhamma so that she might understand? The Buddha expounded. The executioner wife was pitiless and corrupt, a prostitute. The thief robbed her husband of his gains. The lazy gossip and shrew with loud voice was a mistress. The mother-wife cared for her husband and his possessions as she would for an only son. The sister-wife behaved like a younger sister to an elder. The companion-wife behaved as the term would indicate, as a companion. The slave-wife endured all things, remaining calm and pure in heart, and obedient. The last four kinds of wife would, at death, wander in a heavenly world. Sujātā said that she would be the seventh kind. Exactly what she had in mind is left to the interpretation of the reader, but the fact that she found herself in a responsible position in a Buddhist household could hardly have been independent of an inner awareness of the nature of life and therefore of a subconscious desire for knowledge of the Dhamma. The Buddha did not refuse her request to be taught.

#### FRIENDS

If the matter of selection of the family into which one is born in the present existence is closely connected with the karmic effects of previous lives, the selection of one's friends is clearly more directly associated with the circumstances and acts of the current

life. Physiologically, the world is perpetuated by the family relationship, but the Buddha has also given the quality of making friends as one which is instrumental in 'making the world go round'. 'The person who is kindly, who makes friends, makes welcome, is free from avarice, is understanding, is a conciliator, such a one obtains good repute. Generosity, kindly speech, doing good to whatever person, fairness in all things, everywhere, as is fit and proper, these are indeed the means on which the world turns, just as a chariot moves on quickly depending on the pin of a wheel axle.'<sup>297</sup>

Concerning the selection of one's friends, and one might also say the including of oneself in their selections, the following observations are made. One makes friends with a person who gives what is hard to give, does what is hard to do, and is forbearing when it is hard to be so.<sup>298</sup> A person who is inferior to oneself in morality, concentration and one-pointedness of mind, and wisdom, should not be followed, served or honoured except for reasons of compassion. A person who is one's equal in them should be followed since one's conversation with him would be on these subjects and so conducive to mutual profit and comfort. A person who is one's superior in them should be followed, served and honoured with reverence since one would increase one's own virtue and understanding thereby.<sup>299</sup> One should not be angry with an ungrateful person but merely avoid him,<sup>300</sup> while a wise enemy is better than a foolish friend.<sup>301</sup> One should not loiter amongst enemies; a night or two nights with such brings suffering.<sup>302</sup> One may recognize a potential enemy in that he will not smile at sight of one, will not show a welcome, but will deliberately turn his eyes away.<sup>303</sup>

In the case of good companions where a mutual friendship is already established, certain duties are incurred. Loyalty to one's friends brings service and support, freedom from enemies, a welcome home after one's travels, and success in one's undertakings.<sup>304</sup> One should live up to one's promises,<sup>305</sup> and should regard with friendliness any object or person that has done one a service. For example, one should not break a branch of a tree that has sheltered one; if one has accepted hospitality for