

Buddhist Blessings on Marriage

Bhikkhu Mahinda

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First of all, on behalf of the Maha saṅgha, I would like to congratulate the newly married couple and wish them a very happy, content, and fulfilling married life.

Most people think of Buddhism as a religion of monks and nuns who renounce the world to attain enlightenment. While this is true, in reality, Buddhism has two paths: the Path of Monastics, and the Path of Householders.

Lord Buddha himself, as a Bodhisattva, was a householder in countless previous lives, including in his last life, and knew what it meant to be a married person, supporting family, parents, and society. And therefore, there are a plethora of teachings in the Tipitaka on how Householders should live and conduct themselves. But, the ultimate aim of Buddhism is always Nibbāna, the ultimate freedom, which requires cultivating pāramis. Pāramis are the aids to crossing over the Cycle of Existences to the far shore, Nibbāna. There are a total of 10 pāramis, and several of them can be fulfilled as a married couple.

QUALITIES TO CROSS-OVER (PĀRĀMI)

Giving (Dāna): The couple should be prepared to give to each other, to others, and to deepen their relationship. The couple should espouse common causes and donate to those causes – whether materially or otherwise.

Virtue (Sīla): The couple should observe the five precepts and develop good, virtuous, stainless conduct. The five precepts to follow are: not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in wrong sexual behavior, not to lie, and not to engage in intoxicants such as drugs, liquor, wine, etc.

Renunciation (Nekkhamma): When the couple gives, materially or otherwise, that also helps them practice renunciation because they are renouncing the pleasure they could have had and instead choose to give to worthy causes, with a mind full of friendship and compassion.

Wisdom (Paññā): The couple should listen to wise people, read scriptures together, meditate together to purify the mind, take retreats together from time to time, visit knowledgeable monks and ascetics, and inquire what is good, what is beneficial, and what leads to the good of self and others.

Energetic Endeavor (Vīriya): This is a keystone pārami to develop the energy necessary to cultivate good qualities and expel unwholesome behaviors. Without energy, none of the other pāramis can be developed. When the couple works with Energetic Endeavor to support and raise their family, to support their parents, and to support the worthy causes, that effort turns into pārami.

¹ This and other books and articles by Bhikkhu Mahinda are available at <https://LearnBuddhism.org>. To access over 60,000 Buddhist Teachings, please download the “Learn Buddhism” App (download links at <https://LearnBuddhism.org>). App is completely free and available on Apple, Google, and Web platforms.

Patience (Khanti): This requires the development of tolerance and appreciation for others' opinions, to be patient, and to be understanding. One should give up one's own wishes and desires when needed so that there is no marital discord.

Truthfulness (Sacca): One should be truthful and make amends when required. The couple should discuss the matters in the open and arrive at a consensual decision, as far as possible.

Strong Determination (Adhiṭṭhāna): This is another keystone pārami to develop the mental determination and physical strength needed to persevere and stay the course, come no matter what. The couple should stay with each other and support each other in all worldly conditions: gain or loss, praise or blame, fame or disrepute, and pleasure or pain.

Friendship (Mettā): The couple can develop an attitude of Friendship, Compassion, and Altruistic Joy, for each other, for their family, extended family, and everyone around them. This will reduce any chances of hostility and enmity. The couple should also develop Equanimity to the four pairs of worldly conditions: gain or loss, praise or blame, fame or disrepute, and pleasure or pain. This would allow them to stay together and weather the vicissitudes of life with determination, courage, respect, and mutual love.

Equanimity (Upekkhā): Life is full of ups and downs and is characterized by the four pairs of eight worldly conditions: Gain and Loss, Praise and Blame, Fame and Disrepute, and Pleasure and Pain. No one, but no one, is free from encountering these eight conditions in their life. But what we have control over is how we respond when we encounter them. We should stay in the middle and be equanimous, understanding that "this too shall pass". The husband and wife can support each other as they navigate the ups and downs of life by staying in the middle.

HOW TO LIVE TOGETHER

Besides perfecting the pāramis, a couple should live together in a way where it is possible to support their own spiritual development, to gain happiness in this world and hereafter, and to make their families happy. Herein, the best way to live together is when both of them are observing the five precepts and respecting and honoring each other.

Both the wife and husband must make a conscious choice of how they want to live together and act accordingly. The three suttā below provide detailed guidance on this vital topic.

NDB 4.53 Living Together

On one occasion the Blessed One was traveling along the highway between Madhurā and Verañjā. A number of male and female householders were also traveling along the same highway. Then the Blessed One left the highway and sat down at the foot of a tree. The male and female householders saw the Blessed One sitting there and approached him, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side. The Blessed One then said to them: "Householders, there are these four ways of living together. What four? A wretch lives together with a wretch; a wretch lives together with a female deva; a deva lives together with a wretch; a deva lives together with a female deva.

(1) "And how, householders, does a wretch live together with a wretch? Here, the husband is one who destroys life, takes what is not given, engages in sexual misconduct, speaks falsely, and indulges in liquor, wine, and intoxicants, the basis for heedlessness; he is immoral, of bad character; he dwells at home with a heart obsessed by the stain of miserliness; he insults and reviles ascetics and brahmins. And his wife is also one who destroys life ... she insults and reviles ascetics and brahmins. It is in such a way that a wretch lives together with a wretch.

(2) *"And how does a wretch live together with a female deva? Here, the husband is one who destroys life ... he insults and reviles ascetics and brahmins. But his wife is one who abstains from the destruction of life, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from liquor, wine, and intoxicants, the basis for heedlessness; she is virtuous, of good character; she dwells at home with a heart free from the stain of miserliness; she does not insult or revile ascetics and brahmins. It is in such a way that a wretch lives together with a female deva.*

(3) *"And how does a deva live together with a wretch? Here, the husband is one who abstains from the destruction of life ... he does not insult or revile ascetics and brahmins. But his wife is one who destroys life ... she insults and reviles ascetics and brahmins. It is in such a way that a deva lives together with a wretch.*

(4) *"And how does a deva live together with a female deva? Here, the husband is one who abstains from the destruction of life ... he does not insult or revile ascetics and brahmins. And his wife is also one who abstains from the destruction of life ... she does not insult or revile ascetics and brahmins. It is in such a way that a deva lives together with a female deva.*

"These are the four ways of living together."

*When both are immoral,
miserly and abusive,
husband and wife
live together as wretches.*

*The husband is immoral,
miserly and abusive,
but his wife is virtuous,
charitable, generous.
She is a female deva
living with a wretched husband.*

*The husband is virtuous,
charitable, generous,
but his wife is immoral,
miserly and abusive.
She is a wretch living
with a deva husband.*

*Both husband and wife are endowed with faith,
charitable and self-controlled,
living their lives righteously,
addressing each other with pleasant words.*

*Then many benefits accrue to them
and they dwell at ease.
Their enemies are saddened
when both are the same in virtue.*

*Having practiced the Dhamma here,
the same in virtuous behavior and observances,
delighting [after death] in a deva world,
they rejoice, enjoying sensual pleasures.*

NDB 5.33 Uggaha

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Bhaddiya in the Jāṭiyā Grove. Then Uggaha, Menḍaka's grandson, approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to the Blessed One:

"Bhante, let the Blessed One together with three other monks consent to accept tomorrow's meal from me."

The Blessed One consented by silence. Then Uggaha, having understood that the Blessed One had consented, rose from his seat, paid homage to the Blessed One, circumambulated him keeping the right side toward him, and departed.

Then, when the night had passed, in the morning the Blessed One dressed, took his bowl and robe, and went to Uggaha's residence, where he sat down on the appointed seat. Then, with his own hands, Uggaha, Menḍaka's grandson, served and satisfied the Blessed One with various kinds of delicious food.

When the Blessed One had finished eating and had put away his bowl, Uggaha sat down to one side and said to the Blessed One: "Bhante, these girls of mine will be going to their husbands' families. Let the Blessed One exhort them and instruct them in a way that will lead to their welfare and happiness for a long time."

The Blessed One then said to those girls:

(1) "So then, girls, you should train yourselves thus: 'To whichever husband our parents give us - doing so out of a desire for our good, seeking our welfare, taking compassion on us, acting out of compassion for us - we will rise before him and retire after him, undertaking whatever needs to be done, agreeable in our conduct and pleasing in our speech.' Thus should you train yourselves.

(2) "And you should train yourselves thus: 'We will honor, respect, esteem, and venerate those whom our husband respects - his mother and father, ascetics and brahmins - and when they arrive we will offer them a seat and water.' Thus should you train yourselves.

(3) "And you should train yourselves thus: 'We will be skillful and diligent in attending to our husband's domestic chores, whether knitting or weaving; we will possess sound judgment about them in order to carry out and arrange them properly.' Thus should you train yourselves.

(4) "And you should train yourselves thus: 'We will find out what our husband's domestic helpers - whether slaves, messengers, or workers - have done and left undone; we will find out the condition of those who are ill; and we will distribute to each an appropriate portion of food.' Thus should you train yourselves.

(5) "And you should train yourselves thus: 'We will guard and protect whatever income our husband brings home - whether money or grain, silver or gold - and we will not be spendthrifts, thieves, wastrels, or squanderers of his earnings.' Thus should you train yourselves.

"When, girls, a woman possesses these five qualities, with the breakup of the body, after death, she is reborn in companionship with the agreeable-bodied devas."

*She does not despise her husband,
the man who constantly supports her,
who ardently and eagerly
always brings her whatever she wants.*

Nor does a good woman scold her husband

*with speech caused by jealousy;
the wise woman shows veneration
to all those whom her husband reveres.*

*She rises early, works diligently,
manages the domestic help;
she treats her husband in agreeable ways
and safeguards the wealth he earns.*

*The woman who fulfills her duties thus,
following her husband's will and wishes,
is reborn among the devas
called "the agreeable ones."*

NDB 7.63 Wives

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvattthi in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Then, in the morning, the Blessed One dressed, took his bowl and robe, and went to the residence of the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, where he sat down on the seat that was prepared for him.

Now on that occasion, people in Anāthapiṇḍika's residence were making an uproar and a racket. Then the householder Anāthapiṇḍika approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side. The Blessed One then said to him:

"Householder, why are people in your residence making such an uproar and a racket? One would think it was fishermen at a haul of fish."

"This, Bhante, is my daughter-in-law Sujātā, who is rich and has been brought here from a rich family. She doesn't obey her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, or her husband. She doesn't even honor, respect, esteem, and venerate the Blessed One."

Then the Blessed One addressed Sujātā: "Come here, Sujātā."

"Yes, Bhante," she replied. She went to the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side. The Blessed One then said to her:

"Sujātā, a man might have seven kinds of wives. What seven? One like a killer, one like a thief, one like a tyrant, one like a mother, one like a sister, one like a friend, and one like a slave. A man might have these seven kinds of wives. Which one are you?"

"Bhante, I do not understand in detail the meaning of this statement that the Blessed One has spoken in brief. Please let the Blessed One teach me the Dhamma in such a way that I might understand in detail the meaning of this statement spoken in brief."

"Then listen and attend closely, Sujātā. I will speak."

"Yes, Bhante," she replied. The Blessed One said this:

*"With hateful mind, devoid of sympathy,
lusting for others, despising her husband,
she seeks to kill the one who bought her with wealth:
a wife like this is called a wife and a killer.*

*"When the woman's husband acquires wealth
by toiling at a craft, trade, or farming,*

*she tries to steal it, even if [he earns] but little:
a wife like this is called a wife and a thief.*

*“The lazy glutton, unwilling to work,
harsh, fierce, rough in speech,
a woman who dominates her own supporters:
a wife like this is called a wife and a tyrant.*

*“One always benevolent and sympathetic,
who guards her husband as a mother her son,
who protects the wealth he earns:
a wife like this is called a wife and a mother.*

*“She who holds her husband in high regard
as younger sister her elder brother,
conscientious, following her husband’s will:
a wife like this is called a wife and a sister.*

*“One who rejoices when she sees her husband
as if seeing a friend after a long absence;
well raised, virtuous, devoted to her husband:
a wife like this is called a wife and a friend.*

*“One who remains patient and calm,
when threatened with violence by the rod,
who tolerates her husband with a mind free of hate,
patient, submissive to her husband’s will:
a wife like this is called a wife and a slave.*

*“The types of wives here called
a killer, a thief, and a tyrant,
immoral, harsh, disrespectful,
with the body’s breakup go to hell.*

*“But the types of wives here called
mother, sister, friend, and slave,
firm in virtue, long restrained,
with the body’s breakup go to heaven.*

“A man, Sujātā, might have these seven kinds of wives. Now which one are you?”

“Beginning today, Bhante, let the Blessed One consider me a wife who is like a slave.”

In the above sutta, “The Wife Called Slave” is threatened by violence with the rod, and even then, Sujātā chooses to become such a wife may create consternation, confusion, and question in the mind of many: is this an invitation to continue to suffer abuse? Does Buddhism insinuate that a marriage partner, whether wife or husband, should willingly suffer abuse? Of course, the answer is a resounding NO - in bold and capital letters. Let’s analyze in detail to understand.

- (1) When we read suttas and teachings, we must remember that almost all suttas (except when they are referring to physiological distinctions - e.g., Bhikkhuni Vinaya Rules) apply to both genders. Suttas addressed to Bhikkhus don’t mean they are exclusively for men. A good example of this is the first 10 suttas of the Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: the

first 5 are applicable to men, next five to women - describing exactly the same phenomenon with just the gender reversal. But all 10 of them are addressed to Bhikkhus.

- (2) An Enlightened One cannot, does not, and will not discriminate based on Gender, Race, Age, Caste, National Origin, Language, et. al. So what Lord Buddha says for men will also apply to women (with appropriate changes) - and vice-versa. Thus, while the sutta above describes seven kinds of wives, it would also apply to men and describe seven kinds of husbands.
- (3) Here, the wives/husbands are divided into seven types. The type of wife that Sujātā chooses is the bottom-most one because she was most likely at the top (a killer or a thief) and from one extreme, she jumps to the other extreme! This is also not the Middle Path. So, by no means is there any insinuation that one should make the same choice as Sujātā. Sujātā doesn't take refuge and even the commentary doesn't say anything about her current attainment and future destination. Nor does Lord Buddha approve of her statement or choice.

The only other information we have is that Sujātā Jataka (#269) was also taught to her at this time. Sujātā Jataka states that in a past life, she was a passionate, harsh, and ill-tongued woman who mended her ways after being taught (and similarly in this life also, she mends her ways).

- (4) Finally, let's talk about the elephant in the room: the "violence" part. In this sutta, the wife/husband is only threatened by the spouse, violence is not carried out. So, does that mean that the wife or husband, when subjected to threats or real violence of any kind, has no recourse and must patiently endure the abuse? No, they should and must protect themselves. If needed, they must enlist the support of secular authorities to walk away from a dangerous situation. Here are the reasons why this should happen:
 - a. First of all, a person undergoing violence is NOT capable of being calm, able to meditate, and focus on their spiritual health. To be able to do any of this, one needs to be in a safe and secure situation.
 - b. By protecting oneself, one also protects the other party, the abuser, from committing further kamma that he/she will have to pay for.
 - c. In Buddhism, there is no tit-for-tat, and you don't pay back in the same coin. Buddhism's cardinal principle is: "Violence is never appeased by violence, it can only be appeased by non-violence" (see the story related to Dhammapada 5) ². The emphasis is on ending this cycle of violence and retribution so you can move on to happier situations rather than being subjected to the same existential crises again and again, life after life. We are all free agents and have the agency of choice. The key is to make wise choices, wholesome choices. If the marriage is becoming unsavory, troublesome, and violent; one can try counseling, reconciliation, getting extended family involved, etc. but ultimately, if nothing seems to work, it's better to walk off rather than endure abuse and generate ill feelings inside that will take you on the round of retribution life after life - generating misery for yourself and everyone around you.

HOW TO CHERISH EACH-OTHER

While it might be easier to tolerate each other and live with the differences, what is really helpful, and the ultimate goal, is to cherish each other, warts and all. How to accomplish this? Here is the guidance from the Lord himself.

LDB 31 Sigālaka Sutta

² BL Volume 1, I.4 on CST DHP V5.

27. *'And how, householder's son, does the Ariyan disciple protect the six directions? These six things are to be regarded as the six directions. The east denotes mother and father. The south denotes teachers. The west denotes wife and children. The north denotes friends and companions. The nadir denotes servants, workers and helpers. The zenith denotes ascetics and Brahmins.*

28. *'There are five ways in which a son should minister to his mother and father as the eastern direction. [He should think:] "Having been supported by them, I will support them. I will perform their duties for them. I will keep up the family tradition. I will be worthy of my heritage. After my parents' deaths I will distribute gifts on their behalf." And there are five ways in which the parents, so ministered to by their son as the eastern direction, will reciprocate: they will restrain him from evil, support him in doing good, teach him some skill, find him a suitable wife and, in due time, hand over his inheritance to him. In this way the eastern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.*

29. *'There are five ways in which pupils should minister to their teachers as the southern direction: by rising to greet them, by waiting on them, by being attentive, by serving them, by mastering the skills they teach. And there are five ways in which their teachers, thus ministered to by their pupils as the southern direction, will reciprocate: they will give thorough instruction, make sure they have grasped what they should have duly grasped, give them a thorough grounding in all skills, recommend them to their friends and colleagues, and provide them with security in all directions. In this way the southern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.*

30. *'There are five ways in which a husband should minister to his wife as the western direction: by honoring her, by not disparaging her, by not being unfaithful to her, by giving authority to her, by providing her with adornments. And 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. In this way the western direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.*

31. *'There are five ways in which a man should minister to his friends and companions as the northern direction: by gifts, by kindly words, by looking after their welfare, by treating them like himself, and by keeping his word. And there are five ways in which friends and companions, thus ministered to by a man as the northern direction, will reciprocate: by looking after him when he is inattentive, by looking after his property when he is inattentive, by being a refuge when he is afraid, by not deserting him when he is in trouble, and by showing concern for his children. In this way the northern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.*

32. *'There are five ways in which a master should minister to his servants and workpeople as the nadir: by arranging their work according to their strength, by supplying them with food and wages, by looking after them when they are ill, by sharing special delicacies with them, and by letting them off work at the right time. And there are five ways in which servants and workpeople, thus ministered to by their master as the nadir, will reciprocate: they will get up before him, go to bed after him, take only what they are given, do their work properly, and be bearers of his praise and good repute. In this way the nadir is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.*

33. *'There are five ways in which a man should minister to ascetics and Brahmins as the zenith: by kindness in bodily deed, speech and thought, by keeping open house for them, by supplying their bodily needs. And the ascetics and Brahmins, thus ministered to by him as the zenith, will reciprocate in six ways: they will restrain him from evil, encourage him to do good, be benevolently compassionate towards him, teach him what he has not heard, clarify what he has heard, and point out to him the way to heaven. In this way the zenith is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.'* Thus the Lord spoke.

HOW TO BE TOGETHER IN FUTURE LIVES

Finally, when a wife and husband live together harmoniously, faithfully, pleasantly, and cherish each other; naturally they both desire to be with each other, again and again, in life after life. In the time of Lord Buddha, there was such a couple and they asked this question to Lord Buddha, and here is the answer that was given to them.

NDB 4.55 The Same in Living

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Bhaggas in Suṃsumāragiri in the deer park at Bhesakaḷā Grove. Then, in the morning, the Blessed One dressed, took his bowl and robe, and went to the residence of the householder Nakulapitā, where he sat down in the prepared seat. Then the householder Nakulapitā and the housewife Nakulamātā approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side. The householder Nakulapitā then said to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, since I was young, when the young girl Nakulamātā was given to me in marriage, I do not recall ever transgressing against her even in thought, much less by deed. We wish, Bhante, to see one another not only in this present life but also in future lives.”

The housewife Nakulamātā in turn said to the Blessed One: “Bhante, since I was a young girl given to the young householder Nakulapitā in marriage, I do not recall ever transgressing against him even in thought, much less by deed. We wish, Bhante, to see one another not only in this present life but also in future lives.”

“Householders, if both husband and wife wish to see one another not only in this present life but also in future lives, they should have the same faith, the same virtuous behavior, the same generosity, and the same wisdom. Then they will see one another not only in this present life but also in future lives.”

*Both husband and wife are endowed with faith,
charitable and self-controlled,
living their lives righteously,
addressing each other with pleasant words,
Then many benefits accrue to them
and they dwell at ease.*

*Their enemies are saddened
when both are the same in virtue.
Having practiced the Dhamma here,
the same in virtuous behavior and observances,
delighting [after death] in a deva world,
they rejoice, enjoying sensual pleasures.*

May the newlyweds live together happily, in a dhammic way, cherishing each other, and making themselves and everyone around them happy. May they be happy, be peaceful, be liberated.

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