

The Buddha on Weddings and Marriage



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

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As understood in most cultures, marriage is the union of two persons which is recognized by some authority be it religious, legal or social. There are and always have been many types of marriage – polygamous and polyandrous, there are cousin marriages, forced marriages, and in parts of the Islamic world temporary marriages. In ancient Egypt it was usual for a pharaoh to marry one of his sisters. In some countries in west now same-sex marriage has gained legal and social acceptance. Critics of Buddhism have sometimes claimed that it offers little guidance to the lay followers beyond basic morality. An examination of what the Buddha had to say about marriage will demonstrate how ill-informed this claim is.

The various law books of Brahmanism, the main formal religion of the Buddha's time, tell us much about marriage customs and weddings ceremonies in India before the turn of the first millennium. A girl had to be married off within a few months after her first menstruation and a father who failed to do so incurred more blame as time passed. There was a marriage season and the actual day and time of the wedding was determined by astrology. The caste of the two families was a crucial consideration. The two highest castes, brahmins and the warrior caste sometimes intermarried but neither of them married below this, and to marry a *sudra* or an outcaste was inconceivable. According to Brahmanism, there were eight forms of marriage, although the differences between some of them is not always clear. The first five were arranged by the parents without either the boy or girl's consent and usually involved payment or at least the exchange of gifts. When a boy and girl liked each other, asked their parents for permission to marry and it was granted, it was called a *gandharva* marriage. Abducting a girl for marriage was called *raksasa* and could involve "weeping and tears, violence and destruction." The last and lowest type, although still legal, the *paisaca* marriage, involved marrying the girl after having raped her while she was asleep, drunk or otherwise unaware of what was happening. Apart from these eight official marriages there were in fact several other forms of conjugal arrangements. A slave or servant could gradually come to be treated as a wife, a woman could consent to live with a man because he paid her to do so, and a woman taken in war could become a wife. There was also what was known as a temporary wife (*muhuttika*, or *tamkhanika*) when a man and woman came together out of conveyance and parted when either one of them wanted to do so.

According to the *Ramayana* (1st BCE/4th cent. CE?) there were ceremonies that preceded the actual wedding which included making gifts to brahman, checking the genealogies of the two families, and cutting off the bridegroom's side locks (*kakapaksa*), perhaps a sign of full and responsible manhood. The brahmanical wedding was always conducted by a brahman. While the wedding ceremony might differ slightly in different regions they all shared two common features. These were the father of the girl joining the couple's hands and the couple then taking seven steps around the sacred fire. According to some law books the newlyweds were to abstain from sex for at least three days after their marriage. As most couples usually did not even see their future spouse until the wedding ceremony, this would have given them at least some opportunity to get to know each other before physical intimacy began.

There does not seem to have been formal divorce in ancient India, at least during the Buddha's time. If a man was dissatisfied with his wife he simply took another one, sometimes keeping his first wife or perhaps casting her out. Brahmanical law books say a husband could expel his wife if she was barren, unfaithful, cantankerous, and chronically ill or because had not produced a son within a certain number of years. Given that the purpose of marriage was primarily to produce legitimate progeny it is not surprising that brahmanical law books rarely mention conjugal love and affection. In later centuries the permission of some authority – a guild, the heads of the clan or the king, was needed to divorce a wife. The *Arthashastra* advises the king to grant divorces if both parties are unhappy with their marriage.

It is worth pointing out that the area of northern India where the Buddha lived, the Middle Land, was by no means completely brahmanized during his time and would not become so for at least another few

centuries. Brahmanical and Hindu law books such as *Manusastra*, *Yajnavalkyasastra* and the various *Dharmasastras*, present the ideal, not necessarily the actual situation, and their rules were not always enforced by state power. Further, many communities and regions had their own wedding and marriage traditions and took no notice of – or sometimes opposed – brahmanical teachings on marriage, weddings and other matters.

The Pali Tipitaka, the oldest record of the Buddha's life and teachings, tell us something about what the Buddha and the first Buddhists thought about weddings and marriage and how they conducted them. The usual words for a wedding were *mangalakiriya* or *avahamangala*. *Vivaha* referred to the arrangement where the girl was brought to the boy's home and *vivahana* was when the boy went to the girl's. In both cases this was done to the accompaniment of music and dancing.

There is no mention of child marriage in the Tipitaka, nor did the Buddha say anything on this matter. However, all mentions in the Tipitaka of the age of girls being married range from 16 to 20, most being closer to the former. It was thought good for the bride and groom to be the same age (*tulyavaya*). The only thing the Buddha said concerning marital age was that it was inappropriate for men to marry women much younger than themselves. This is mentioned in the Sutta Nipata.

The Tipitaka only occasionally mentions men having more than one wife. Probably only monarchs and the very rich were polygamous. Although the Buddha did not advocate any particular form of marriage, it can be assumed that he favoured monogamy. His father Suddhodana had two wives and as a prince he could have had several wives also, but he chose to have only one. In a discourse on marriage, the Buddha only discusses monogamy, again implying that he accepted this as the preferred form of marriage. In the Samyutta Nikaya he said that if a woman lacks merit she might have to contend with a co-wife (*sapatti*), and the Tipitaka occasionally discusses the disadvantages of polygamy for women. "Being a co-wife is painful", and "A woman's worst misery is to quarrel with her co-wives" Such problems are confirmed by other ancient Indian literature which describes the tensions and manoeuvrings between several wives in the same household.

The Buddha criticized the practice of buying and selling girls for marriage and he commended the Vajjians for having given up the custom of "abducting others wives and daughters and compelling them to live with them" (D.II,74). Consequently, the only types of marriage mentioned with approval in the Tipitaka and even in most later Buddhist texts, are those where the parents gave their daughter without payment or where either the boy or the girl choose their partner.

The Tipitaka says nothing about Gotama's marriage or indeed very little about his life before he became a wandering monk. We know that he was married because it mentions his wife although does not give her name, and makes reference to his son Rahula. The *Lalitavistara* (1st cent. BCE/2nd cent. CE), a literary account of the Buddha's life, describes Gotama selecting his bride and marking his choice by giving the girl his ring (*anguliyaka*). Apparently the giving of engagement rings had become a custom by that time, at least in certain communities. The practice is not mentioned anywhere in the Tipitaka.

The Nakkhatta Jataka pokes fun of using astrology to select a supposedly lucky day for the wedding, considering it foolish and ineffectual. Influenced by the prevailing social norms the first Buddhists probably married within their own caste. But as the Buddha's teachings of human equality started to have the effect in weakening caste barriers, this declined, at least within the Buddhist community. In the 12th chapter of the *Lalitavistara* it has the Buddha's father say that his son can marry even a low caste girl if she is virtuous. He then adds: "He is not concerned with caste or lineage in a wife. He desires only virtue."

There does not seem to be a word for divorce in the Tipitaka, other than perhaps *vivarana* meaning "to break" or "to separate" which is sometimes used in reference to conjugal relations. When a couple fell out

of love, one or the other either left or was expelled from the household. It was usually the wife to whom this happened. When Ugga, one of the Buddha's disciples, decided that he was going to become celibate he informed his four wives that they could continue to live in the house, return to their parents or take another husband. The eldest wife apparently already has her eye on another man and asked to be given to him and Ugga happily did so (A.IV,210).

The Tipitaka preserves only fragments of information about how the first Buddhists conducted their wedding ceremonies. To distinguish their weddings from those of Brahmanism it seems that the elders of one or the other family conducted the marriage rather than having a brahman officiate. The essential feature of the ceremony was when the father of the bride took her hand, put it in the groom's hand and with a ceremonial vase or pot (*bhinkara* or *kundi*) in his right hand poured water over their joined hands. This event in Sanskrit was called the Giving of the Hand (*panipradana*) and marked the culmination of the marriage. The person conducting the ceremony then imparted a benediction to the newly-wedded couple. The pouring of water over the hands is even today a part of Thai marriages and also in some parts of India. A wedding benediction from the Jataka goes: "May your friendship with your beloved wife never decay" (*Ajeyyam esa tava hotu metti bhariyaya kaccana piyaya saddhim*. Ja.VI,323).

Buddhist monks and nuns were forbidden by their rules to act as go-betweens or matchmakers. However, they were allowed to attend weddings. In fact, according to the Vinaya, if the supporter of a particular monastic community invited a monk from that community to attend his son's or daughter's wedding the monk was obliged to go. It is not certain what role monks had in weddings, if indeed they had one. Perhaps their presence was considered auspicious or that it added lustre to the proceedings. Perhaps they took the place of brahmins in receiving gifts. It is also possible that they gave a blessing to the newlyweds. With some sympathy, the Buddha described the discomfort of the newly-wedded bride. "When a young wife is led to her husband's home, either by day or night, for a while she feels great timidity and shyness in the presence of her mother-in-law, her father-in-law, her husband and even towards the servants and slaves."

The Tipitaka contains the first significant references to love and affection between spouses in Indian literature. Having been both a husband for several decades and a father if only briefly, the Buddha was able to speak of marriage from personal experience. A husband, he said, should honour and respect his wife, never disparage her, be faithful to her, give her authority and provide for her financially. A wife should do her work properly, manage the servants, be faithful to her husband, protect the family income and be skilled and diligent. He said that a couple who are following the Dhamma should "speak loving words to each other" (*annamanna piyamvada*), and that "to cherish one's children and spouse is the greatest blessing" (*puttadarassa sangaho ... etam mangalam uttamam*). He said that "a good wife is the supreme friend" (*bhariya va parama sakha*) and the Jataka comments that a husband and wife should live "with joyful minds, of one heart and in harmony" (*pamodamana ekacitta samaggavasam*). The Buddha criticized brahman for buying their wives rather than "coming together in harmony and out of mutual affection" (*sampiyena pi samvasam samagatthaya sampavattenti*), implying that he thought this a far better motive for marriage. "In this world, union without love is suffering" (*lokasmim hi appiyasampayogo va dukkha*) says the Jataka.

According to the Buddha's understanding, if a husband and wife love each other deeply and have similar kamma, they may be able to renew their relationship in the next life. He also said that the strong affinity two people feel towards each other might be explained by them having had a strong love in a previous life. "By living together in the past and by affection in the present, love is born as surely as a lotus is born in water." This idea is elaborated in the *Mahavastu*: "When love enters the mind and the heart is joyful, the intelligent man can say with certainty 'This woman has lived with me before'."

The ideal Buddhist couple would be Nakulapita and Nakulamata who were devoted disciples of the Buddha and who had been happily married for decades. Once Nakulapita told the Buddha in the presence of his wife: “Lord, ever since Nakulamata was brought to my home when I was a mere boy and she a mere girl, I have never been unfaithful to her, not even in thought, let alone in body.” On another occasion, Nakulamata devotedly nursed her husband through a long illness, encouraging and reassuring him all the while. When the Buddha came to know of this, he said to Nakulapita: “You have benefitted, good sir, you have greatly benefitted, in having Nakulamata full of compassion for you, full of love, as your mentor and teacher” (*anukampika, atthakama, ovadika, anusasika*, A.III,295-8). From the Buddhist perspective, these qualities would be the recipe for an enduring and enriching relationship – faithfulness, mutual love and compassion and being each other’s spiritual mentor and teacher.

The Buddha pinpointed faithfulness as one of the most important ingredients for a successful marriage. A husband should not, he said, be unfaithful to his wife or a wife to her husband. A character in the Jataka says: “We do not transgress with another’s wife and our wife does not transgress against us. We relate to others’ partners as if we were celibate.” (*Mayan ca bhariyam natikkamama amhe ca bhariya natikkamanti annatra tahi brahmacariyam carama*, Ja.VI,53).

A good wife was praised in the Canon as “true to one husband” (*ekabhattachini*), a good husband could be similarly defined. The archetypal, devoted and loyal spouse in the Buddhist tradition is Sambula, the wife of King Sotthisena. When he was struck by a disfiguring disease and had to renounce the throne and go into the forest, she ignored all his requests to stay behind and happily accompanied him in his exile. With patience and love she nursed him through and eventually cured him of his disease. When he doubted her faithfulness and shunned her, she would still not abandon him. Eventually, he recognized her faithfulness, apologized for not trusting her, and the two were reconciled.

Conjugal faithfulness and love is an important theme of many other Jatakas too. In one such story, a wife’s devotion to her husband saves him from the machinations of an evil king, and in another, the Bodhisattva instructs a husband to treat his dedicated and long-suffering wife with the respect she deserves. In a particularly moving story, all the friends of a husband desert him when he is confronted by a terrible monster, and even his wife’s courage momentarily to falter. His pleas for help dispel her hesitation and she rushes to his side saying: ‘Noble husband of sixty years, I shall not desert you. Even the four corners of the earth know that you are dearest to me.’ Another story tells of a wife whose willingness to die for her husband saves both of them from certain death (Ja.III,184-7).

Neither the *Mahavamsa* nor the *Culavamsa* say anything about weddings or marriage. The only thing Robert Knox could say on these subjects was that the Kandians gave dowries, married only within their own caste and that “women and men do commonly wed four or five times before they can settle themselves to their contentation.” He also mentioned that fraternal polyandry (a woman having several brothers as husbands) was common. It seems that when two people decided they wanted to make a life together they moved in together after obtaining their parents’ permission. The whole affair was relatively informal and with little or no ceremony. In Burma until recently, a similar situation prevailed. Writing in 1685 Joao Riberio said of low-country customs: “A girl makes a contract to marry a man of her own caste and if the relatives are agreeable they give a banquet and unite the betrothed couple. The next day a brother of the husband takes his place, and if there are seven brothers she is the wife of all of them, distributing the nights by turns, without the husband having a greater right than any of his brothers. If during the day, any of them finds the chamber unoccupied, he can retire with the woman if he thinks fit... she can refuse herself to none of them; whichever brother it may be that contracts the marriage, the woman is the wife of all.”

Neither these nor other sources mention anything like a wedding ceremony. The modern Sinhala wedding ceremony (i.e. *poruwa*), although often called “traditional” is in fact of very recent origins. It was

probably originally created to be an equivalent to the Christian idea of having a specific ceremony. Given the recent origins of the modern Sinhala wedding it might be appropriate to adopt aspects of the most ancient Buddhist ceremony in which water is poured over the bride and groom's hands by the father.