

# MANAGING FAMILY ISSUES CONCERNING HOUSEHOLDER: AN INTERPRETATION BASED ON SIGĀLOVĀDA SUTTA

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All forms of life are regarded precious in the Buddhist tradition. Most religions and even scientific communities have the same attitudes towards life. Even though there are very many forms of lives, human life is believed to be the highest form of life on the earth. This is the common belief in the world. According to Buddhism, to be born as a human being is a rare opportunity.<sup>1</sup> A human being is regarded as the highest form of life because human beings have a more developed brain, than any other creature. In other words, human beings are the most intellectual. Early Buddhism accepted this idea the same reason.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many other traditions and beliefs, Buddhism emphasises that all forms of life should be respected and protected, not only human beings. The very first precept of the five precepts in the Buddhist tradition, presented as *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇ sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi* is especially designed to assure the protection of all living things in the world. There are very many occasions where Buddhism promotes the importance of harmonious attitudes towards living things. Since a human being is the most intelligent thinker, Buddhism systematically gives advice on how to organize one's personal life.

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1. Dh., *Buddhavagga*, v. 4.: *Kiccho manussa paṭilābho-kiccaṃ maccāna jīvitaṃ*,

2. *Sutta-nipāta Aṭṭhakathā*, p. 36: *Manassa ussannatthāya manusso*,

The Teachings of the Buddha have been preserved and practiced to the present day which is popularly known as the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* that explains different aspects of *Dhamma*, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma*. It contains not only the guideline of training rules, prohibitions, allowances, and regulations managing a Bhikkhu's life, but it also contains the same which is being applied in the case of conduct of householders or lay-people to manage their life in proper way. One of the most important *Sutta* is the *Sigālovāda Sutta* of the *Sutta Pitaka* which is also called as the “*Exhortation to Sigāla*,” or “*Gihi-vinaya*” or the “*Householder's Discipline*,” a worthy name for a masterly exposition. In the Pāli many terms for “*householder*” are in use like *agārika*, *gahapati*, *gahattha* and *gihin* which is most broadly refers to ‘*any layperson*’ whereas from Buddhist point of view it is often used synonymously with laity or non-monastic person or often contrasted with that of wandering ascetics (*Samaṇa* or *Śramana*) and monastics (*Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhuni*) who would not live in a normal house and who would pursue freedom from attachments to houses and families. *Upasakas* and *Upasikas* or *Śrāvakas* and *Śrāvikas* are generally addressed as householders and other laypersons who take refuge in the Buddhism.

#### **PRINCIPLES OF FAMILY MANAGEMENT IN THE SUTTA:**

The *Sigālovāda sutta* presents some management principles with regard to family in the form of ethics. Taken the householder as the central figure of the family these ethical principles have been explained by the Buddha. The relationship between husband and wife should be amiable and courteous. Wife should be treated by husband with respect and honor and should be faithful to her. This is the key element in family management according to Buddhism. The *Sutta* explicitly explains the family and social relationships set forth instructions and teachings pertains to *householder's* socio-economic and spiritual progress. Modern man can lead a very happy and prosperous life if he/she understands the significance of social relations explained in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*. The socio-economic and cultural transformations by the Buddha can be seen explicitly even in the present time in Buddhist world. This is the key element in family management according to Buddhism. She should be well looked after by providing necessary requisites such as clothes,

jewelry and so forth. She should be granted the authority to manage the household. Husband is the breadwinner of the family and wife is the one who manages the house. He should not despise her. The Buddha mentioned that wife is the closest friend of husband,<sup>3</sup> advisor and helper in household management.

For a happy family life, the Buddhist teachings further provide a Code of Discipline for householders (*gihi vinaya*) which are mentioned in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*. In this Sutta, the Buddha advises Sigāla, a young man who is a son of an ordinary householder, how to earn and allocate his wealth and savings. Further states that *a householder should accumulate his wealth as a bee that collects nectar from a flower. The bee harms neither fragrance nor the beauty of the flower but gathers nectar to produce sweet honey.* Similarly, people are expected to obtain their wealth by treating nature gently and non-aggressively. Sigāla was then told to divide his income into four portions: one-portion for his daily expenses and his family; two-portions for investment in his business; and the fourth should be reserved for unforeseen emergencies such as drought, floods, pestilence, and disease etc. The Buddha then asks Sigāla to abstain from four acts of defilement which lead to the destruction of life: killing, stealing, lying, and adultery.

Furthermore, the Buddha states the duties of a householder in terms of protecting his wealth and conducting his lay life. A householder should abstain from the four factors which instigate evil acts: craving, anger, ignorance, and fear. A householder should also avoid six practices which lead to the dissipating of wealth:

*Indulgence in intoxicants which causes inebriety and negligence leads to dissipation of wealth, sauntering in streets at un-seemingly hours leads to dissipation of wealth, frequenting shows and entertainment leads to dissipation of wealth, addiction to gambling which causes negligence leads to dissipation of wealth, associating with bad companions leads to dissipation of wealth, and habitual idleness leads to dissipation of wealth.*

In the same *sutta*, the Buddha advises to “worship” (respect) the six directions in fulfilling one’s duties as a good householder:

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3. S. I, 37.

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. In turn, parents have to look after their children and educate them, children have to honor their parents and maintain family traditions, teachers must train and instruct their pupils properly, and pupils must be diligent and dutiful to their teachers. A husband should be kind, loyal, and respectful to his wife, supply her needs, and give her authority at home. Wife in return should be faithful, understanding, efficient, industrious, and economical in performing her duties. Friends should be generous, courteous, kind, benevolent, and helpful to each other. Employers must be considerate, assign tasks according to employee strength, give adequate wages, look after their illness, and give holidays. Employees in return must be honest, sincere, and faithful to their employers. They must do their work well and appreciate the virtues of their employers. Laymen should support monks and other religious leaders in deed, words, and thoughts of loving-kindness. Religious teachers should preach discourses (*suttas*) and show the way to happiness. In the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, the Buddha again summarizes the Code of Conduct:

Young householder, the noble disciple refrains from four acts of defilement, he does no evil which is instigated by four factors, and he does not indulge in six practices causing dissipation of wealth. Thus avoiding these fourteen evil things, he covers the six directions and follows the path for success ....

The *Sigālovāda Sutta* is the main *sutta* extensively ascribed to the overall noble qualities for the well-being of individuals and of the society. Thus, the Buddhist code of ethics is primarily intended to address the lofty qualities of a happy, peaceful, and prosperous lay livelihood because these are based on the underlying Buddhist assumption that a moral life is the only way to attain the ultimate individual emancipation. It is stated in the *Sigālovāda Sutta* that one gathers wealth little by little as bees collect honey. Such accumulated wealth should be divided into four parts: One part for day-to-day expenses, two parts for investment, and the balance to be kept as precautions against contingencies. It is possible once the Buddhist concept of consumption is practiced, conspicuous consumption

will be minimized and hence restricting consumption to one fourth of income would be feasible.

### HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT IN THE SUTTA:

There are five principles of family management in this *sutta*: systematic management of household (*susamvihita kammantā*), well treatment of household work people and servants (*samgahītaparijanā*), faithfulness to husband (*anaticārīnī*), taking care of what is brought by husband (*sambhatam cānurakkhati*) and cleverness and diligence in household affairs (*dakkhā ca hoti analasā sabbakiccesu*)<sup>4</sup>. These are the duties of wife according to Buddhism. Both husband and wife do management of family servants and work people. In relation to work with people, husband and wife are employers (or masters). There should be a good employer employee relationship in the household management. The householder, as the master and employer, should handle his employees in a strategic and efficient manner.<sup>5</sup>

In the management of household work people as well as employees master should be strategic and efficient. Buddhism advises masters to be sympathetic and compassionate towards employees and servants. When assigning duties, master should know the strength and expertise of his employees. The Buddha advised to assign duties depending on their strength and expertise. In the society of the Buddha's Day, as indeed until very recently, in all societies world-wide the household was the cornerstone of the economy. The Buddha's advice to the head of a household, in the *Sigalovāda Sutta*,<sup>6</sup> is in fact a social charter on workers' rights. The Buddha begins by formulating the antecedent duties of employers. The contemporary relevance of the following principles can be appreciated if one recognizes that they correspond to Articles 23 and 24 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The head of the household as head of a productive, unit should allocate work according to the strength and abilities of his employees (*yathabalaṃ kammanata samvidhadena*), provide food and just wages to his

4. D. III, 190.

5. Kottegoda Warnasuriya, Op. Cit., p. 166.

6. *Dīgha Nikāya*: 31.

workers (*bhatta-vetananuppadabena*), provide healthcare for his workers (*gilana upatthana*), cultivate close friendship with the workers (*acchariyanaṃ rasanāṃ samvibhgena*), not exploit their labour power, but recognize their right to periodic leisure and rest (*samaye vossaggena*).

The commentary to the *Dīgha Nikāya* elucidates this strategy in the following words. Master should not ask old people to do a hard work that should be done by younger men. Moreover, women should not be given hard work.<sup>7</sup> In order to maintain good and amiable relationship master should treat them well. He should provide wages and meals (*bhattavetana*). Whatever delicacies he enjoys, he should share with them. He should kindly treat them by releasing them from work at due time. When they are sick, he should not employ them. He should provide proper medical facilities to them. There is no doubt that the Buddha was the first person to propose employee medical care system.<sup>8</sup>

### **TRACES OF HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE SUTTA:**

The principles regarding humanistic Buddhism, and its application to human resource management are considered as the strategic implication of the organization as a whole; divide responsibilities with well-defined job descriptions; know the importance of coordination; plan the details with best intentions; execute with full effort and determination; report frequently and timely to inform one's supervisor; take responsibilities and be accountable for them; evaluate performance and follow up. A modern manager or leader should conduct himself/herself in the following manner: Be humorous and keep a smile on your face; avoid hasty and harsh reactions; treat others leniently and give them respect and credit; take responsibility when something is wrong; put aside any personal gain or loss and go forward; let communication flow freely and strive for agreement; serve others, keep your own word; adjust and adapt and be considerate of others; pay respect to other's opinions and coordination. Strong group dynamics synchronize the steps

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7. DA. p. 964.

8. D. III, 191.

of upper management and operational employees, ensuring the formation of consensus and shared values necessary to achieve the organizational mission and goals.<sup>9</sup>

Ignoring and abandoning one's duties and responsibilities towards different social groups brings catastrophic consequences into society. We are fortunate to have very helpful advice from early Buddhist teachings. The best discourse to start with is *Sigālovāda sutta* or discourse for advice to *Sigāla* which has explained the social groups in the following way:

*“And how, young house holder does a noble disciple cover the six quarters? “The following should be looked upon as the six quarters. The parents should be looked upon as the East, teachers as the South, wife and children as the West, friends and associates as the North, servants and employees as the Nadir, ascetics and Brāhmaṇa-s as the Zenith”<sup>10</sup>*

If a person follows the six paths of good relationships as highlighted in *Sigālovāda sutta*, one can minimize his/her problems of life which will ultimately result into peace and happiness to his/her life and family.

Fourteen points are given in the *Sigālovāda-sutta* for the householder to manage their lifestyle in the society which is very much applicable even in present world's cut throat competitive life. This will contribute to progress in both worlds. Therefore the Buddhist lay life has to be lived by considering this world and the next world. The Buddhist advice is that man has to develop in these two spheres. This is clearly stated in the *Andha sutta* which compares these two aspects with the two eyes of an individual. *If a person is not developed with regard to these two aspects he is like a blind man who has lost the two eyes. If one has to develop only one eye then he is like a man with one eye. But if one has to develop two eyes he is like a person with two eyes. One who has developed thus this world and the next world he is considered to be a great person in this Sutta. That is the instruction given in this Discourse.*<sup>11</sup> In this way one who does

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9. Richard L. Kimball, Op. Cit., p. 241.

10. D.I.467.

11. A. I. 238. (*Andha Sutta*)

not have the two eyes is like a blind man. Therefore this discourse gives the instruction for the development of worldly progress as well as spiritual progress. To consider both these aspects as equally important is essential for an ideal lay life. This further explains that the instructions found in the canon do not underestimate the life of sensory pleasure for the layman.

According to Buddhism, poverty is a form of suffering who is enjoying the life as a sensory pleasure. Therefore it is understood that such a layman by the strength of his arm and by the sweat of his brow earned wealth righteously and became rich.<sup>12</sup> But at the same time it is also mentioned by the Buddha that no one should enjoy wealth being under the influence of craving. The wealth that is not used because of craving is said to be like water in a pond guarded by a demon<sup>13</sup> in the same way Buddhism does not approve when income is little to lead an excessive life and also to lead a life of want when there is much wealth.<sup>14</sup> Therefore one who leads a lay life must be happy to share his wealth for the good of others. Thus, a person has to be happy that they have earned enough and by consumption they are leading a happy life and without falling into debt are also leading a righteous life.<sup>15</sup> In this way the economic stability can be built up and on its basis secular life can be made happy which will lead to peaceful and friendly living. Buddhism gives instructions towards the building of such a family. Here much responsibility lies with the husband. The well-known *Sigālovāda-sōtta* advises the husband to treat his wife in five ways<sup>16</sup>:

1. Courtesy
2. Not despising
3. Faithfulness
4. Handing over authority and
5. Providing ornaments

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12. D. III. 304. (*Singala Sutta*)

13. J. III. 113.

14. A. II. 335. (*Vyaggapajja Sutta*)

15. A. II. 130. (*Anana-sutta*).

16. D. III. 305. (*Singala-sutta*).



As the husband treats his wife in these ways and discharges his responsibilities properly according to the *Sigālovāda-sutta*, the wife also has to consider the following five points<sup>17</sup>:

1. Perform duties in appropriate order
2. Gentle
3. Faithful
4. Protective and
5. Diligent

In the same way the Buddha has also pointed out in the *Sattabhariya-sutta*, the seven types of wives. One day the Buddha paid a visit to the house of *Anāthapiṇḍika*. At that time inside the house there was a big commotion. The Buddha then inquired from him what was wrong in his house. Then he explained that the new daughter-in-law named *Sujātā* who came from a very rich family had become a nuisance to the whole family. She would listen to no one, not even to her husband. She had become arrogant and quarrelsome. The Buddha called her to a side and told her that there were seven types of wife (Slayer, Robber, Mistress, Mother, Younger sister, Companion and Handmaid) which further explains the nature of each and every type of wives one by one. Then he asked her what she would like to become. Having understood what was preached she submissively declared that she would like to be the handmaid of her husband.<sup>18</sup>

What all these show is the Buddhist attitude to family life. The behavior of a wife is important to build up a good family. And also it shows that the good quality of a wife is to please her husband in almost every way.<sup>19</sup> In this way Buddhism shows how their mutual responsibility and participation lead to a successful secular life. Their pleasant affectionate union Buddhism appreciates very much. Thus, the family life is encouraged.

According to the *Samvasa sutta* there are four types of family.

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17. D. III. 302. (*Singala-sutta*).

18. A. IV. 414. (*Satta-bhariyā-sutta*).

19. S. I. 12. (*Khattiya-sutta*).

The first is a bad husband with a bad wife, the second is a bad husband with a good wife, the third is a good husband with a bad wife and the fourth is a good husband with a good wife. The last one is given the highest value. The *Sutta* says that this union is similar to that between a god and a goddess.<sup>20</sup> Thus Buddhism while appreciating family life has given a divine value. That is clear from the explanation given about how a husband becomes a god. From this *Sutta* the nature of divine value that has been attributed to such couples can be understood. It is in this way Buddhism is giving a meaningful place to secular life.

Buddhist point of view on the status of parent in the family occupies a central place because parents are given the names like *Brahma*, *Pubbācariya*, *Pubbadeva* and *Āhuneyya*, etc.<sup>21</sup> who bring up children and introduced them to the world.<sup>22</sup> They also get them to avoid bad conduct and engaged in good deeds and learn arts and crafts. At the proper time they get them, to marry suitable partners and transfer the wealth.<sup>23</sup> In this way parents are very helpful to children who provide them with food and drinks clothes and other necessities. They also massage their bodies and bathe them. They also have to pay respect to their own parents.<sup>24</sup> When parents are quite old children have to look after them and do whatever is necessary for them. They also have to continue and preserve the family tradition and the wealth. When parents are dead and gone children transfer merit for their benefit.<sup>25</sup> It is said the mother is like a shelter for children<sup>26</sup> and best friend in the house.<sup>27</sup>

However, much we help our parents in this world it is not at all sufficient.<sup>28</sup> It is said in the *Sabrahma-sutta* that attendance on

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20. D. III. 294. (*Sanvāsa Sutta*).

21. A. II. 132. (*Sabrahma-sutta*).

22. A. II. 164. (*Suppaṭikāra-sutta*).

23. D. III. 304.. (*Singala-sutta*).

24. A. II. 132. (*Sabrahma-sutta*).

25. D. III. 304.. (*Singala-sutta*).

26. S. I. 16. (*Kutika Sutta*).

27. S. II. 66. (*Mitta Sutta*).

28. A. II. 164. (*Suppatikara-sutta*).

parents will bring praise in this world from the wise and birth in a heaven in the nextworld.<sup>29</sup> If a person even though he is capable of maintaining his parents does not do' so that is a reason for his downfall.<sup>30</sup> It is also a very low behavior. In this way Buddhist literature has appreciated parental contribution. For this reason steps have been taken to appreciate it. It can be said that a person leaving a secular life it would be proper to know about these. At the same time for a person living in society it would be good to have friendship with good friends. Thus he can avoid bad behavior and engage in good behaviour. Looking at in this way the ordained members also can do some useful service from the religious point of view. These religious members have been mentioned as the uppermost direction in the *Sigālovāda-sōtta*. A layman has to be respectful to them bodily, verbally and mentally. When they visit his place for alms they should not close their doors on them but offer what they could. In the same way religious members, also have to treat the layman in six ways<sup>31</sup>:

1. Dissuade him from evil
2. Persuade him to do good
3. Love him with a kind heart
4. Make him hear what he has not, heard
5. Clarify what he has already heard and show him the path to heaven

This shows Buddhism has understood the value of parental contribution and steps have been proposed to evaluate their service. It is very useful that the person who is going to lead a secular life to know all about this. In the same way for a person intending to lead a social life it is essential to have a friendship with good friends. On this matter religious members can do some useful service from the religious side. The *Sigālovāda-sutta* mentions the class of ordained members as the uppermost direction. For a layman has to cultivate

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29. A. II. 132. (*Sabbrahma-sutta*).

30. D. III. 305. (*Singala-sutta*).

31. Ibid p.307.

friendly attitude towards them bodily, verbally and mentally. When they visit his house for alms he should not close the door. He must provide them what he could. For such a layman ordained members should instruct by six ways<sup>32</sup>:

1. Prevention of doing evil deeds
2. Establishing in good deeds
3. Wishing good with a kind mind
4. Getting him to listen to what he has not heard
5. Clarifying what he has already heard and lastly and
6. Showing the path to heaven.

The *Sigālovāda-sutta* introduces the teachers as the southern direction. For them pupils have to respect them by rising from the seat in salutation, by attending on them, by eagerness to learn, by personal service and by respectful attention while receiving lessons. The teachers on their part should train them in the best discipline, they have to see that the pupils grasp the lessons well, they instruct them in the art and sciences, they introduce them to their friends as associates and they provide for their safety everywhere.

As the western direction the *Sigālovāda-sutta* has discussed husbands and wives. Earlier in this article this was dealt with as the northern direction the relation between friends was introduced in the *Sutta*. This was done by giving what the friends needs, by courteous speech, by being helpful, by being impartial and by sincerity. If friends are treated in this way they would on their part help him in the following way namely by protecting him when he is heedless, by protecting his wealth when he is heedless, by becoming a refuge when he is in danger, by ignoring him when he is in troubles and showing consideration for his family. In the same way for the treatment regarding servants and employees the *Sutta* gives the nadir as the direction. He should assign them the work according to their ability, by supplying them with food and wages, by tending them in sickness, by sharing with them any delicacies and by granting them leave at times. When servants and employees

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32. Ibid p.308.

are treated in this way they will come to work early and they will not leave the work unfinished, they will not steal, they will do their duties well and they will speak the good name of their master.<sup>33</sup> So in this way when problems are minimum, happy secular life could be led by following this system. Thus as the internal relation between these people is maintained the success in worldly life will continue in that social context.

## CONCLUSION

In modern times, Bhikkhu Bodhi has identified *Sigālovāda sutta* as the “most Comprehensive *Nikāya* text” which pertains “to the happiness directly visible in this present life.” The *Sigālovāda Sutta* explicitly explains the family and social relationships. It gives a set of instructions and teachings that pertain to man’s socio-economic and spiritual progress. Modern man can lead a very happy and prosperous life if he understands the significance of these social relations explained in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*. Some scholars are of the opinion that Buddhist philosophy is interested only in higher morality and it ignores the social and economic welfare. This is also another misconception of Buddhist socio-economic and political philosophy. The socio-economic and cultural transformations by the Buddha can be seen explicitly even in the present time in Buddhist world. Making a comment on the social upheaval of Buddhism, Narendranath Bhatthacharya says: “The rise of Buddhism was certainly to serve some social purpose. It had some distinct social and functional role. But very few attempts have been made to understand all these.” It is a well-known fact that Buddhism is capable of making a drastic transformation of the present day competitive and war-like Society. For such a transformation, it needs a proper knowledge and correct understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. The first significant work in the Buddhist social field was done by C. F. Koppen titled “Die Religion des Buddha” in 1957 where he mentions that “.....the Buddha was viewed as the emancipator of the oppressed and a great political innovator.” The *sutta* advocates a well-balanced material and spiritual well-being in order to maintain a simple family and individual life and to help

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33. Ibid.

attain the ultimate stage liberation i.e. *summum bonum*, or Nirvaṇa.

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