

## THE BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TOWARDS DIVORCE

S. Langker

*Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya*

### Introduction

In social philosophy, marriage is one of the essential institutions to be taken into consideration. In order to maintain the nucleus family system, its continuation is vital. With regard to relationship, the relationship between the husband and wife, be it between the old or young couple plays a vital role in shaping up a peaceful and harmonious family life. A peaceful society is possible only if the relationship between these two runs smoothly as it is considered to be the foundation for all kinds of relationship in society, i.e. the political, the social and the economical. The Buddha being a religious teacher was never reluctant to advice the lay folks for the wellbeing of their secular life. Although Buddhist teachings are directed to only one goal, liberation, recommending the renunciation of the secular life, the Buddha was nevertheless very much aware of the fact that the social life of the people runs smoothly, and the relationship of husband and wife is no exception. In fact, it is clear that in many discourses it is observable that this subject matter has been well taken into consideration and discussed explicitly. The main objective of this work is to understand the causes that lead to "divorce" and the factors creating a friendly relationship between the husband and wife.

### Methodology

This research is based on a textual study, specially referring to the Pāli Suttas and *Jātaka* stories.

### Discussion

The Pāli term for the divorce is *vivāhaü nirakaroti* or *lopeti*, while the noun form is *vivāhanirakana*. However, these terms are not occurring in any of the texts in the Pali Canon, except the term *vivāhaü asaüyutta*, another synonym for divorce, occurs in the *Jātaka Pāli II*. The term divorce could be viewed from two perspectives as 'secular' and 'religious'. In secular sense, it is referred to 'legal separation' between the husband and wife. While in religious sense it is referred to 'renunciation' of worldly life. But, here, the main focus will be paid to the former perspective.

Although Buddha's sole objective was to guide the people in the moral path to liberation, *Nibbāna*, yet he was very much concerned about the happiness of the people leading the household life. In many contexts, though not directly, the subject matter of divorce is not dealt, yet the causes that lead to divorce and factors that create a healthy relationship between the husband and wife are shown. In the *Sumana vagga* of the *Aḡuttaranikāya*, (Handy, 1958) the Buddha outlined the code of conduct for wives to be followed diligently. In the *Sattabhariyā Sutta* of *Aḡuttaranikāya*

(A.IV.91), again, the Buddha categorized wives into seven types depending on their attitude (of sweetness and bitterness) towards their husbands. It is also to be noted that there are types of husbands, parallel to the seven types of wives. There are four qualities for a good match (*samajāvi-dhamma*) mentioned in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* (Handy, 1958) for partners in life in order to make sure of their capability, providing a firm foundation for a long married life. There are four principles for leading a household life (*gharāvāsa-dhamma*) that can be used by the couple sharing in goodness (*S.I.215*). Moreover, sharing of responsibility between them would help to serve each other for the betterment of their relationship as presented in the six directions (*D.III.192*). There are a number of conditions which are peculiar to a woman and the husband should considerate and respond them with care and sympathy; and four of such peculiar conditions are mentioned in the *Saṅgīyuttanikāya* (Feer, 1960). The *Kuḍāla Jātaka* explicitly shows the reason for separation between the couple when either the husband or the wife is not faithful each other. This is, indeed, the result of not practicing the third precept of the five codes of conduct (*Pañcasāla*). The *Bhāridattajātaka* is of important in this regard that the husband should be permitted by the first wife if he is to bring home another woman as wife. Also the first wife should treat the second wife gently and with care as her own sister. The *Kāli Yakkhinā Jātaka* clearly states the results of wives torturing one another. In this respect, the practice of *Mettā* (loving

kindness) is very important, even if a couple gets divorced.

### Conclusion

This is, in fact, clear that Buddhism neither rejects nor accepts the system of divorce but it clearly explains the causes that lead to divorce or separation and factors for creating a healthy relationship between wife and husband. Further, it recommends duties to be fulfilled towards one another in terms of a healthy and long lasting relationship. Besides, the couple should practice three kinds of proper conduct (*D.III.215*) towards each other. They are *kāya-sucarita* (righteous bodily conduct), *vacā-sucarita* (righteous speech), and *mano-sucarita* (righteous mentality). The practice of *Brahmavihāra* is vital in this regard.

### References

- Feer, M.L. (1960). *Saṅgīyuttanikāya*, Vol I, London: Luzac and Company  
 Handy, E. (1958) *Aṅguttaranikāya*. Vol IV, London: Luzac and Company