

---

**Cite this:** Gunalankara, G. (2014) "A Buddhist Counseling Perspective to Prevent Divorce" 2nd International Buddhist Conference on International Exchange in the Global Context, on 4th September 2014, at Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA) Pallekele.

---

## A Buddhist Counseling Perspective to Prevent Divorce

Ven. G. Gunalankara<sup>1</sup>

gomilagunalankara@gmail.com

### Abstract

Family is the basic socialization unit of society. If someone breaks this unit, it'll affect the whole society. Therefore divorce has become a major problem in the current world that human beings face. Although divorce ends up the marriage, such disruption was accepted in most western and some eastern countries earlier, now they have understood the harmful effect of divorce, specially, on their children and both wife and husband psychologically, socially and also physically. So, the state and informed people launch many programmes including family and marriage counseling to strengthen the family.

The Buddhist philosophy is rich in guidance for a better family life and shows how to protect and be successful in it. The Buddhist counseling approach which is based on the Buddha's teachings and doctrines is very significant with regard to this matter and it can be used in a practical manner to stop divorce and protect the family. According to the Buddhist perspective, preventing divorce should be started from the day when they got married.

Here, the *Sigālasutta*, alone is considered one of the most significant discourses for the discipline of lay people in the *Dīghanikāya*. It is thought to be very important and enough regarding this matter. These doctrines - specially, refraining from the four factors which spoil the individual and social life (*Satara karmaklesha*, in Sinhalese), four extremes (*Satara agati*), the six factors which cause the decline of money or property (*Bhoga vināsa mukha*), and Duties and responsibilities of six social groups (*Sadisā namaskāraya*) and other advice in

---

<sup>1</sup> B.A. (Hons) Psychology, University of Peradeniya.

this *Sutta* can be used in a practical manner, with counseling value, to prevent divorce. And it should be spread to the whole world including non-Buddhist contexts as a counseling approach.

**Key words:** prevent divorce, Buddhist Counseling, *Sigālasutta*

## **Introduction**

The family is the foundation, the fundamental unit of the society. A child starts his/her life from family. Child's first school, first love, care, protection, pleasure, joy, sad, sorrow and whole the life is family. It is the place where a child learns first, speaking, sensing, feeling, behaving, thinking and all other things. Therefore, the family is called the basic socialization unit of the society. It is the basement of creating a beneficial, great person to the world.

The life of most of people in the world is family. They are happy to live with their parents, wife, husband, sons and daughters. They share their love, affection, protection and feelings like happy, sad, sorrow or fear, with family. Basically, the society runs on the base of family. Therefore, the family has a very significant value in the society.

## **The influence of the divorce**

Marriage and divorce are common experiences in both western and eastern. According to the APA, about 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce. The divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher ([www.apa.org/](http://www.apa.org/)). According to the "UNICEF: Sri Lanka Statistics" the divorce rate in Sri Lanka (Crude divorce rate is 0.15) is some lower than other counties (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>). But the Department of Social Services in Sri Lanka states that the present record of divorces in Sri Lanka is at 400 per day. The Director of the Department, Anusha Gokula said that it is a serious social issue. She added that the number of divorce cases filed within a year of marriage has also risen. The director stated that a special counselling programme will be implemented in order to find a solution to this problem (<http://newsfirst.lk/>).

Healthy marriages are good for couples' mental and physical health. They are also good for children; growing up in a happy home protects children from mental, physical, educational and social problems. Therefore, the affectionate family bond is important for our life.

The divorce ends up the marriage and separates husband, wife and children. The emotional bonds between husband and wife, and parents and children are broken with the divorce. It directly influence to the children and individually both husband and wife. Over half of couples divorcing in the UK in 2007 had at least one child aged under 16 (<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/...>). Royal collage of psychiatrist in UK states that if the parent divorce, a child may feel,

- a sense of loss - separation from a parent can mean child lose not only his/her home, but his/her whole way of life
- different, with an unfamiliar family
- fearful about being left alone - if one parent can go, perhaps the other will do the same
- angry at one or both parents for the relationship breakdown
- worried about having caused the parental separation: guilty
- rejected and insecure
- torn between both parents

(<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/...>)

Apart from that, if the parent divorce, it may cause emotional and behavioural problems in children and they feel loss of love, fear and insecure. It may influence directly to the child's mental, emotional, cognitive and physical growth. Further, it influences to both husband and wife individually, mentally, emotionally, physically and socially. Therefore, it influences to the whole society, directly or indirectly.

The divorce has become a major problem in the current world, due to these influences to the society. Earlier, the divorce was accepted in most of western counties and in some eastern countries, as a good decision. But, they have now understood its harmful effects to the whole society. Therefore, many awareness programmes, and marriage and family counseling programmes are being launched in these counties to strengthen the family by the state and informed people. Many researches are being done to identify the reasons for divorcing and to find out how to solve this problem.

### **Reasons for divorce**

According to the theory of causality in Buddhism, there is a reason for every effect. Divorce is also same. As researches done in different states and cultures, some common reasons can be identified, although there are certain variations among countries and cultures. According to a research done by Australian institute of family studies on "Towards understanding the

reasons for divorce” (1999), they categorize the reasons into four groups, affective reasons, abusive behaviours, external pressures and other. As the research shows infidelity was perceived as the main provocation for divorce by 20 per cent of both men and women.

#### **Affective reasons –**

- Infidelity
- Communication problems
- Incompatibility / ‘drifted apart’
- Self or former spouse had an affair

#### **Abusive behaviours**

- Physical/mental violence to self or children
- Alcohol/drug abuse
- Emotional and/or verbal abuse

#### **External pressures**

- Financial problems
- Work/time
- Family interference
- Physical/mental health

#### **Other**

- Spouse’s personality
- Children problems

([www.aifs.gov](http://www.aifs.gov)- Australian Institute of Family Studies)

Same reasons are shown in another research done by Paul R. Amato and Denise Previti in The Pennsylvania state University, on “People’s Reasons for Divorcing: Gender, Social Class, the Life Course, and Adjustment” (1980-1997). Apart from above reasons, this research shows Immature, no love, unhappy, not meeting obligations to family as other reasons ([nolanbyers.com](http://nolanbyers.com)). These main reasons for divorce are proved by many other researches done in various countries. The Buddhist counselor should be aware of such reasons, when dealing with divorce cases.

#### **Buddhist philosophy as a counseling approach**

The main goal of the Buddhism is attaining to the *Nibbāna* (the cessation of suffering). But, it doesn’t ignore the comfort, benefaction and well-being of worldly life. The Buddha has preached in many times for the betterment of lives of ordinary people, answering the

questions asked by kings, Brahmans and other lay people. For instance, in the *suttas* such as *Siṅgālovāda*, *Vasala*, *Parābhava*, *Vyagghapajja* and *Maṅgala*, the Buddha has taught how to succeed the life; how to up lift lives; how to control and reduce life difficulties; how to solve life problems and how to spend a better life which is praised and admired by all noble wise people. These teachings and activities such as *Bhāvaṇā* (meditation) – as therapeutic methods – are very important in considering of the Buddhist counseling.

The therapeutic method in the Buddhist counseling is also a very systematic process. First, the counselor needs to understand and to be awake to the problem well - what the problem is and the nature of the problem – in listening to the client. Then, he/she seeks the cause/s for it, analyzing the problem. Next, he/she supposes and identifies possible solutions for it, and then follows the way to resolve it, gradually. Viz,

- The problem
- The cause of problem
- The solution for problem
- The way of resolving

The lord Buddha, in his first discourse, in the *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta* preached this method by explaining the four noble truths – the suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way to cessation of suffering. This teaching which is based on the theory of the causality is the method of Buddhist counseling to resolve any problem.

The Buddhist counselor who deals with a divorce case has to follow this method to solve the problem and protect the family. First, the Buddhist counselor should understand the divorce as a problem and its influence to the individuals and the society. Then, he/she should discuss and identify the cause/s for it. In the next step, he/she should seek the proper and possible solutions against the causes by discussing and agreeing with clients. Finally, those solutions should be taken into action to protect the clients' marriage life/family.

### **Significance of *Sigāla Sutta* in preventing divorce**

The Buddhist philosophy is rich with teachings and guidance for a better marriage life. They show how to have a pleasurable life, reducing problems within the family. The Buddhist counselor can use those teachings in counseling sessions to prevent divorce.

When we compare with the reasons for divorce mentioned above, only the *Singāla sutta* in the *Dīghanikāya* has given enough guidance to counsel for a couple, to have a happy wedded life, by preventing divorce. The main teachings of this *sutta* are the teaching of,

- refraining from the four factors which spoil the individual and social life (*Cattāri Kammakilēsā*)
- Four extremes (*Cattāri Agati Gamanāni*)
- The six doors of decline of one's wealth (*Cha Apāya Mukhāni*)
- Duties and responsibilities of six social groups (*Caddisāpaticchādanam*)
- The concept of four treating manners (*Cattari Samgahā Vatthu*)

#### ➤ **The teaching of *Cattāri Kammakilēsā***

The Buddha indicates four behaviours which destroy, demolish or spoil the individual and his/her social life. The four factors mentioned in the *sutta* are as follows.

1. Killing/hurting any human or animal (*Pānātipātā*)
2. Stealing – taking away what is not given (*Adinnādānā*)
3. Infidelity – having sex with another person while husband or wife  
(*Paradāragamanam*)
4. Lying – telling falsehoods (*Musāvadā*)

The Buddha teaches that if a person engages in those activities, it will directly affect to his/her life and it's a disgrace for him/her. When we pay attention on the identified causes of divorce, the infidelity and communication problems are two main reasons. Therefore, the Buddhist counselor can use this precious teaching in the counseling process. The clients should be explained and shown the harmful results of these behaviours and how to have a pleasurable life by avoiding those conflicts.

#### ➤ **The teaching of four extremes (*Cattāri Agati Gamanāni*)**

According to the *Singāla sutta*, the person tends to do unwholesome or evil acts because of four extremes. Viz,

- Desire/craving (*Chandā*)
- Wrath/hatred (*Dvēshā*)
- Dread/fear (*Bhayā*)
- Delusion (*Mohā*)

If a person thinks or goes extremely on these four, he/she doesn't care and understand good or bad behaviours. For instance, a person provokes to infidelity (main reason for divorce) because of the desire/craving (*Chandā*). He/she doesn't see the fault and bad result of what he/she is going to do. He/she thinks that it is good for his/her sexual pleasure. The person provokes to abuse his/her wife/husband, because of the extremes of Wrath/hatred (*Dvēshā*). Therefore, these four extremes can be stated as main reasons for family problems and divorce. The Buddha states that, if the person refrains from these extremes, he/she improves as if the full moon.

➤ **The six doors of decline of one's wealth (*Cha Apāya Mukhāni*)**

The *Siṅgāla sutta* indicates six doors which affect to decline a person's wealth. Viz,

1. Drug/alcohol abuse which clouds the mind and leads to intoxicate and delay  
(*Surāmeraya Majjapamādaṭṭhānānuyogo*)
2. Going for walks in unsuitable/inappropriate times, E.g. in the night  
(*Vikālavisikācariyā*)
3. Visiting carnivals (*Samajjābhicarane*)
4. Gambling/betting which waste time and money (*Jūtappamādaṭṭhānānuyogo*)
5. Company with /associating bad friends (*Pāpamittānuyogo*)
6. Laziness/sluggishness/inactiveness (*Ālassānuyogo*)

These six factors directly affect to person's failure. They raise problems within the family. They are six main causes, even for divorce. For instance, if someone is a drug abusive person, he/she loses his/her wealth (financial problems). Apart from that, mental and physical health problems, violence, emotional/verbal abuse to wife/husband or children, disgrace etc. are some other problems of drug/alcohol abuse.

According to the reasons above mentioned for divorce, Alcohol/drug abuse, financial problems, Physical/mental health, physical/mental violence to self or children, emotional and/or verbal abuse etc. are some of main reasons for divorcing. If a person avoids from these faults/mistakable behaviours, he/she is confidently able to break these awful situations and many other problems within the family. It directly helps to prevent the divorce and to build a family which filled with pleasure.

➤ **Duties and responsibilities of six social groups (*Caddisā paṭicchādanam*)**

The lord Buddha indicates six social groups in the *Sīṅgāla sutta*. Viz,

Parents vs. children

Teachers vs. students

Husband vs. wife

Friend vs. friends

Master vs. servants

Priests vs. lay people

He further emphasizes that each of these groups has to fulfill their own duties and responsibilities for their vs. group. If they do not fulfill and miss them, it is a main root for problems between vs. groups. These groups and their duties and responsibilities can be used very successfully in the Buddhist counseling. Especially, The Buddhist counselor who deals with divorce cases can use these duties and responsibilities of each husband and wife to guide them for a better family life and to give a family management education. Further, the counselor should explain and should let them understand that every wives and husbands expects those duties and responsibilities from his/her vs. group.

These are the duties and responsibilities of Husband vs. wife.

Husband to his wife:

- Should treat her with pleasant words, with praising her – Husband should accept her as a precious gift he got and should praise the good things she does. (*Sammānanāya*)
- Should not humiliate; embarrass; or disgrace his wife (*Anavamānanāya*)
- Refraining from infidelity – having sex with another women while wife. (infidelity is a main reason for divorce (*Anaticariyāya*))
- Giving her the authority, responsibility of family management (managing the income, expenditures and everything) – It is a good honour to her (*Issariyavossaggēna*)
- Presenting her ornaments, jewellery, clothes and other needs (*Alankārānuppadānēna*)

When the husband treats her in this way, wife also has to fulfill some duties and responsibilities for him.

- She prepares the meal and manages well other household tasks  
(*Susamvihitakammantā*)



- Husband's friends, companions and other relatives are well treated by her ((*Susamgahitaparijanā*))
- Refrains from infidelity. She doesn't seek sex with other men even in thoughts (*Anaticārini*)
- Protects and manage everything her husband earns (*Sambhatam Anurakkhati*)
- She is clever at every household works and is not lazy (*Dakkhā Ca Hōti, Analasā Sabba Kiccēsu*)

This precious guidance is very important and practical for a successful family life. If the both husband and wife fulfill their own these duties and responsibilities without missing, they feel pleasure, joy, happy within the family. They trust each other; help each other; share all the happy and sorrows; enjoy the life; will be respected and admired by others. It is a mirror for their children and others. They never think of divorce.

➤ The concept of four treating manners (*Cattāri Saṃgahā Vatthu*)

The Buddha indicates four treating manner in the *Siṅgāla Sutta* which all can be made happy.

1. generosity (*Dānaṃ*) – give what others need.
2. Pleasant words (*Peiyavajjaṃ*) – talk with praise, acceptance. No lying, no abusing harsh words, no useless words.
3. Doing good or benevolent conduct (*atthachariyā*) – good behaviours, without conflicts
4. Impartiality (*Samānattatā*) – treat equally for everyone.

The Buddha preached that if a person treats others with these four, he/she gets esteem, acceptance by others, fame, popularity, honour, glory and goodwill in his life.

This treating manner concept is very significant for wife and husband to live without conflicts within their family. If the husband/ wife treats his/her spouse with these manners, they won't have communication problems between them; emotional and/or verbal abuse; physical/mental violence; ignorance (some of causes for divorce). It means, they are protected in their family. They never see even a sign of divorce.

## Conclusion

According to the Buddhist perspective, preventing divorce should be started from the day when a couple gets married. The teachings of *Singāla Sutta* illustrated above have a very significant value on it. Its teachings of refraining from the four factors which spoil the individual and social life (*Cattāri Kammakilēsā*), Four extremes (*Cattāri Agati Gamanāni*), The six doors of decline of one's wealth (*Cha Apāya Mukhāni*), Duties and responsibilities of six social groups (*Caddisāpaticchādanam*) and The concept of four treating manners (*Cattari Samgahā Vatthu*) provide a great guidance for a successful family life. The Buddhist counselor who deals with divorce cases should have a sound knowledge on using these teachings in a practical manner in the counseling process. Those teachings can be used even in a none-Buddhist context to counsel family problems, with a practical counseling value.