

# Innovations

## The Buddha's Vision of Social Reform: Foundations of Equality and Compassion

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**Abstract:** *The Buddha's teachings articulate a transformative vision of social reform grounded in equality and compassion, challenging the entrenched hierarchies of caste, gender, and class in early Indian society. This study explores how the Buddha redefined human worth by asserting that spiritual liberation (Nibbāna) is attainable by all individuals irrespective of birth or social status. Using a qualitative and doctrinal approach, primary canonical sources such as the Dīgha Nikāya, Aṅguttara Nikāya, Majjhima Nikāya, Vinaya Piṭaka, and Therīgāthā were analyzed to examine the philosophical and practical dimensions of equality in Buddhist thought. The findings reveal that the Buddha categorically rejected caste-based discrimination, affirmed women's spiritual potential, and emphasized ethical conduct (sīla), wisdom (paññā), and compassion (karuṇā) as essential tools for social cohesion and moral development. Sixteen thematic areas, ranging from biological equality and empowerment to nonviolence and spiritual cultivation, collectively demonstrate that the Dhamma provides a holistic framework for dismantling discrimination and fostering human unity. Ultimately, the Buddha's vision extends beyond sociopolitical reform to establish a moral and spiritual order grounded in interdependence, justice, and universal compassion, offering enduring relevance for creating an equitable and harmonious society.*

**Keywords:** *Social Discrimination, Equality, Empowerment, Gender, Caste, Nonviolence*

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### Introduction

Social discrimination, including caste hierarchy, gender inequality, and class distinctions, has been a persistent feature of human societies. In ancient India, social structures often claimed that birth determined status, purity, and spiritual capacity. The Buddha challenged these inequalities through a vision of spiritual humanism grounded in ethical conduct, mindfulness, and compassion. He emphasized that human worth is determined by moral quality and spiritual potential rather than birth or social position (Peter Harvey, 2013).

The Buddha recognized the biological distinction between men and women as natural but not hierarchical. Both sexes share equal capacity for moral discipline, meditation, and wisdom, leading to spiritual liberation. His teachings promoted equality and mutual respect as foundational principles for a just society (Anand & Behura 2016). His egalitarian vision extended to gender inclusion, providing women with opportunities for spiritual development. Women demonstrated equal capacity for moral and spiritual achievement, proving that biological difference does not limit potential.

Beyond gender and caste, the Buddha's teachings addressed the roots of social violence and inequality. By emphasizing ethical conduct, right livelihood, and the cultivation of loving-kindness, he offered practical guidance to foster harmony and reduce conflict. Ethical relationships within families and communities were considered essential for sustaining peaceful coexistence. This article examines sixteen thematic areas—gender equality, empowerment, family unity, ethical conduct, and spiritual cultivation—to show how the Buddha's teachings provide a holistic framework for eliminating discrimination. By cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom, individuals contribute to collective social harmony. His guidance offers not only a path to personal growth but also a blueprint for social justice and equality.

### **Biological Difference and Gender in Buddhist Perspective**

From a Buddhist perspective, men and women differ only in biological terms, while their physical and mental capacities are fundamentally equivalent. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women within specific cultural and societal contexts. In contrast, sex denotes the biological characteristics that are generally universal, observable, and largely permanent. Social roles and expectations are shaped by cultural, economic, religious, moral, and legal frameworks, whereas inherent physical attributes determine biological sex. (Kamla, Bhasin, 2001).

The Abhidhamma, the third division of the Pāli Tipiṭaka, explicitly explains that the differences between men and women are confined to biological characteristics. According to Abhidhamma, the physical body consists of twenty-eight types of Rupa (form or matter), comprising the four elements (Bhūta: earth, water, fire, and air) and the five sense faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body). Within these forms, female sex (itthi-bhāva) manifests as characteristics associated with feminine appearance, while male sex (puma-bhāva) manifests as characteristics related to masculine appearance. These distinctions in appearance allow clear differentiation between sexes; however, beyond these biological traits, men and women share identical capacities. (Sayadaw Ledi, 1978).

Life is understood as a combination of mind and matter (Nāma and Rupa). Abhidhamma identifies 121 detailed types of minds and 89 summarized types, describing the mind as inherently pure, analogous to clear water. The mind acquires various qualities when mixed with mental factors, such as greed, hatred, and delusion, resulting in diverse mental experiences. Importantly, the nature of these cognitive phenomena is identical for both men and women, irrespective of social or cultural background. The sole inherent difference lies in biological form (bhāva-rupa) (Dhakhwa, 2020). While natural biological differences are immutable, socially constructed behaviours are subject to change.

Consequently, the potential to acquire knowledge, develop skills, and cultivate virtuous qualities is not constrained by sex. Both men and women are equally capable of attaining advanced understanding or spiritual realization, provided they make the effort. Having attained Sotapatti, the first stage of spiritual realization, at a young age, she demonstrated remarkable talents and leadership. She financed the construction of the Pubbarāma Vihāra for monks by selling personal ornaments, mediated disputes within the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, and contributed to the formulation of key monastic discipline rules. Other nuns and laywomen similarly developed their skills and knowledge, demonstrating that empowering women through capacity development was crucial for strengthening both the spiritual and social fabric of the early Buddhist community and practice. In essence, Buddhist thought emphasizes that biological distinction does not limit intellectual, moral, or spiritual potential.

### **Capacity Development for Empowerment**

Gender inequality was widespread before and during the Buddha's time. The Buddha's teachings, however, challenged prevailing social norms regarding women's potential. A notable example is his discourse to King Prasenjit of Kosala. When the king was informed that Queen Malika had given birth to a daughter, his displeasure reflected the societal preference for sons. Observing this, the Buddha emphasized that a daughter, if intelligent, virtuous, and devoted, could excel beyond a son and even assume leadership roles, including governance. The king's mood improved after hearing the Buddha's words, illustrating how guidance and awareness can transform societal perceptions of gender. This highlights the significance of developing women's capacities to realize their inherent potential. (Bimala, 2007).

During the Buddha's time, numerous women demonstrated remarkable ability and leadership in promoting the Dhamma and strengthening the Buddhist community. Among them, Visākhā stood out as a prominent figure and exemplary devotee. Attaining Sotāpatti the first stage of enlightenment at a young age—she became a symbol of spiritual wisdom and generosity. Despite the gender constraints of her era, Visākhā actively contributed to the welfare of the

Sangha. She established the renowned Pubbarāma monastery, funding its construction by selling her wedding ornaments. The Buddha entrusted her with the responsibility of mediating disputes within the Bhikkhunī Sangha, acknowledging her discernment and integrity. Through her efforts, several essential Vinaya regulations were codified for both monks and nuns. Many other women, both ordained and lay followers, likewise advanced their spiritual and social capabilities under the Buddha's guidance, playing a vital role in sustaining the early Buddhist community.

### **Saptaratna Dhana and Empowerment**

The Buddha's teachings emphasize the accumulation of spiritual wealth rather than material possessions. In the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, the concept of the Saptaratna Dhanathe seven kinds of noble wealth is described as the foundation for living a virtuous and meaningful life. The Buddha explained that whether one is a man or a woman, the possession of these inner treasures enables a person to live wisely, happily, and with true empowerment (BhikkhuBodhi, 2012).

#### **The seven types of spiritual wealth are:**

- The Wealth of Faith (Saddhādhana) – Faith in the Tri-Ratna (the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha) and confidence in the law of kamma is considered the wealth of Faith. Such trust leads one to live a righteous and purposeful life.
- The Wealth of Virtuous Conduct (Sīladhana) – Observing moral precepts such as abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false Speech, and the use of intoxicants constitutes the wealth of ethical conduct. It purifies one behavior and contributes to inner peace.
- The Wealth of Moral Shame (Hiridhana) – Possessing a sense of shame toward unwholesome bodily, verbal, and mental actions, and being averse to acquiring unwholesome qualities, is regarded as moral shame. This awareness prevents a person from engaging in immoral behavior.
- The Wealth of Moral Dread (Ottappadhana) – Having a sense of moral fear or conscience that restrains one from wrongdoing through body, Speech, and mind is known as moral dread. It reflects an individual's deep respect for ethical principles.
- The Wealth of Learning (Sutadhana) – A noble disciple who listens attentively, remembers, studies, and reflects deeply upon the Dhamma acquires the wealth of learning. Such a person understands teachings that are good in the beginning, middle, and end, internalizing and realizing them through wisdom.
- The Wealth of Generosity (Cāgadhana) – One who delights in giving, shares freely, and practices generosity without attachment possesses the wealth of generosity. It cultivates compassion and reduces self-centeredness.

- The Wealth of Wisdom (Paññādhana) – Wisdom that is profound, noble, and capable of eradicating suffering is the highest form of wealth. A person endowed with insight into the true nature of reality is truly rich in wisdom.

**Translation:** When a person, be they woman or man, holds these seven treasures, they are not poor for such a life is rich and truly worthwhile.

This teaching reflects the Buddha's profound vision of empowerment rooted in virtue rather than gender or social position. It highlights that true intelligence and strength arise from moral and spiritual qualities that anyone can cultivate. A notable example appears when the Buddha returned to Kapilavastu after enlightenment. His son, Rāhula, as instructed by Yasodharā, asked for his inheritance. The Buddha, instead of granting material wealth, bestowed upon him the seven kinds of spiritual wealth through his teachings and subsequently ordained him. This act symbolized the transformation from worldly possessions to spiritual enrichment, demonstrating that true empowerment lies in cultivating inner virtue and wisdom. The primary objective of this study is to examine the Buddha's vision of social reform as expressed through the principles of equality and compassion, and to understand how these teachings challenged and transformed the hierarchical structures of early Indian society.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research design grounded in textual and doctrinal analysis. The approach was chosen to explore the Buddha's vision of social reform through a systematic examination of canonical sources and relevant commentarial literature. The design enabled an in-depth exploration of the philosophical and ethical dimensions of equality and compassion as articulated in early Buddhist teachings.

### **Sources of Data**

Primary data were derived from canonical Buddhist texts within the PāliTipiṭaka, including the Dīgha Nikāya, Aṅguttara Nikāya, Majjhima Nikāya, Vinaya Piṭaka, and Therīgāthā. These texts were selected for their doctrinal relevance to social ethics, equality, and compassion. Secondary sources included modern commentaries, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly works on Buddhist social philosophy to provide contextual and comparative perspectives.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Relevant passages addressing social hierarchy, caste, gender, morality, and compassion were identified and compiled through content-based textual analysis. The selection process involved careful reading and annotation of canonical texts to extract concepts and discourses reflecting the Buddha's stance

on social equality and reform. A thematic categorization process was used to organize the data into 16 major areas, including biological equality, empowerment, nonviolence, and moral conduct.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using thematic and hermeneutical analysis. Each theme was examined to interpret the ethical and social implications of the Buddha's teachings within their historical and philosophical contexts. Comparative analysis was also employed to contrast Buddhist perspectives with the prevailing Brahmanical social order of early India. The study focused on how doctrinal principles such as *sīla* (morality), *paññā* (wisdom), and *karuṇā* (compassion) contributed to dismantling discrimination and establishing moral equality.

### **Reliability and Validity**

To ensure reliability, cross-references among canonical sources and established commentaries were used to verify interpretations. Validity was strengthened through triangulation between primary scriptures and secondary academic analyses. Scholarly consistency and adherence to recognized translations of the Pāli Canon ensured the authenticity and credibility of findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As this study was based entirely on textual and philosophical analysis, no human or animal subjects were involved. Ethical integrity was maintained by ensuring accurate citations of all sources and by respecting the intellectual property of the original authors and translators.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Redefining Women's Power in Buddhism**

For both men and women, power is essential for self-confidence and self-possession. The Buddha, in several discourses, explained how women can develop and exercise true power. In the *Mātugāma Saṃyutta* (Connected Discourses on Women), he identified five kinds of power traditionally associated with women. The power of beauty, the power of wealth, the power of relatives, the power of sons, and the power of virtue (Bhikkhu, 2000). In society during the Buddha's time, these powers were often seen as measures of a woman's status and security. Possessing them was thought to enable a woman to live confidently within her household and community. However, the Buddha redefined this understanding by emphasizing that external forms of power—such as beauty, riches, family, or children—do not determine a woman's spiritual success or her destiny after death. It is only through the power of virtue that a woman attains a good rebirth and experiences lasting happiness.



In the same discourse, the Buddha outlined five essential virtues that empower women in both this life and the next: abstaining from the destruction of life, abstaining from taking what is not given, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from false Speech, and abstaining from intoxicating drinks that cause heedlessness (Narada, 1993). These virtues, collectively known as the PañcaSīla (Five Precepts), represent the foundational moral discipline for lay followers. Observing them fosters peace of mind, social harmony, and spiritual progress.

**The Dhammapada also highlights the importance of these ethical principles:**

"He who destroys life, speaks falsehood,  
Takes what is not given,  
Goes to another's wife,  
And indulges in intoxicants  
Such a person digs up his own roots in this world."

This verse underlines that moral failure leads to self-destruction. When individuals neglect the five precepts, they obstruct their own wellbeing rather than being harmed by others. Hence, ethical self-discipline is the key to personal empowerment and social stability. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha further stated that one who faithfully observes the five precepts gains five great rewards: prosperity, good reputation, self-confidence, a peaceful death, and a happy rebirth (Bhikkhu, 2018). By upholding Sīla (morality), one cultivates respect for life and nurtures compassion for all beings. This moral foundation encourages nonviolent money, and kindness, extending even to the smallest creatures. Thus, the Buddha's teaching demonstrates that true power does not arise from external possessions or social status, but from inner virtue, which purifies the mind, strengthens character, and leads to freedom from blameworthy actions. Through moral conduct and self-restraint, women and all human beings can attain genuine empowerment, peace, and spiritual advancement.

**Principles of Non-Divide: Foundations of Family and Social Harmony**

Harmony within the family and society is fundamental to living a peaceful and prosperous life. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha outlined seven principles known as the Sapta Aparihāniya Dharma, the Seven Factors of Non-Divide or Conditions for Unity, which serve as a guide for collective wellbeing. These principles were diligently practiced by the Vajji people, whose prosperity and stability were attributed to their adherence to these teachings. The Buddha emphasized that as long as the Vajji princes faithfully followed these seven factors, their community would continue to flourish and remain undefeatable (Sister & Story, 1998).

The historical context illustrates this point vividly. When King Ajātasattu, the ruler of Magadha, sought to conquer the Vajji confederation, he sent his

minister, the Brahmin Vassakāra, to consult the Buddha regarding the matter. In response, the Buddha declared that so long as the Vajjians practiced the seven principles of unity, their prosperity and welfare were secure, and their downfall could not be expected. The seven factors of unity as described by the Buddha are as follows: (i) The Vajjians meet frequently in assemblies and attend their meetings diligently. (ii) They conduct their gatherings peacefully, in harmony, and reach decisions through mutual understanding. (iii) They uphold their established traditions and laws, refraining from enacting new decrees or abolishing the old ones without due reason. (iv) They show deep respect, honor, and reverence toward their elders, valuing their counsel and experience. (v) They refrain from forcibly abducting or detaining women and girls. (vi) They pay respect and homage to their sacred shrines, both within and outside the city, ensuring that traditional offerings and rituals continue. (vii) They protect and support the Arahants (enlightened beings), ensuring that those who have not yet arrived may do so, and those already present may live peacefully within their community (Bhikkhu, 2018).

The Buddha's teaching underscores that unity, respect, and mutual understanding are the foundations of a strong and harmonious society. Discrimination, violence, and gender-based injustice arise where mutual respect and moral discipline are absent. Hence, the *Sapta Aparihāniya Dharma* remains highly relevant today, offering timeless guidance for fostering gender equality, family harmony, and social cohesion. By promoting respect between men and women, valuing elders, and upholding ethical and spiritual values, individuals contribute to a culture of peace and unity, ensuring collective prosperity and the wellbeing of all.

### **Mutual Responsibilities in Buddhist Family Ethics**

A happy family life is built upon shared goals, mutual respect, trust, and affection among its members. The Buddha, in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, delivered a discourse to the layman Sigāla, explaining the true meaning of venerating the "six directions." According to the Buddha, these directions symbolize one's duties and responsibilities toward different groups in society, including family members. Among them, veneration of the West represents the duties between husband and wife, emphasizing harmony, equality, and mutual care.

In traditional male-dominated societies, the concept of *Pativratā Dharma*, the devotion of a wife toward her husband, was commonly upheld. The term *pativratā* literally means "one who is faithful to her husband." However, such traditions often ignored the husband's reciprocal obligation toward his wife. The Buddha, through his teachings, introduced the idea of *Patnivratā Dharma* —the husband's faithfulness and responsibility toward his wife —thereby promoting mutual respect and equality within marriage.



The Buddha's guidance reveals that marital harmony is founded on mutual trust, responsibility, and respect, not on dominance or submission. Domestic conflict, violence, and family breakdown often arise from misunderstanding, mistrust, and irresponsibility. By fulfilling their respective duties, both husband and wife contribute to a peaceful, gender-balanced, and compassionate household—a teaching that remains deeply relevant even in contemporary society.

**Table 1. The Sigālovāda Sutta outlines reciprocal duties to maintain peace and happiness within the household: (DīghaNikāya 31- Sigālovāda Sutta)**

The responsibility of the husband	The responsibility of the wife
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honoring her according to her status as his wife,</li> <li>• Avoiding disrespect or disparagement,</li> <li>• Remaining faithful and avoiding adultery,</li> <li>• Entrusting her with the management of household affairs, and</li> <li>• Offering her gifts and ornaments as a token of appreciation and affection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing the household diligently and keeping it well-ordered,</li> <li>• Being hospitable and supportive toward relatives and friends from both families,</li> <li>• Remaining faithful to her husband,</li> <li>• Protecting and managing family wealth responsibly, and</li> <li>• Performing her domestic duties with dedication and care.</li> </ul>

The Sigālovāda Sutta also extends these principles to the relationship between parents and children. The Buddha emphasized that parents play a vital role in shaping their children's moral and emotional character. To ensure their children's wellbeing and virtuous development, parents should perform the following five duties: (i) restrain them from harmful actions, (ii) encourage them to do good, (iii) provide them with education and vocational training, (iv) arrange suitable marriages at the proper time, and (v) transfer family property to them as inheritance when appropriate.

Children's behavior and values are strongly influenced by the way they are raised. When parents nurture their children with love, discipline, and ethical guidance, they help build a peaceful and compassionate society. Thus, the Buddha's vision of family life is one of mutual responsibility, shared respect, and moral upbringing, forming the foundation of both personal happiness and social harmony.

### **Shared Ethical and Spiritual Virtues in Marriage**

Cordial and harmonious relationships between husband and wife are essential for a happy and prosperous family life. The Buddha provided guidance on how couples can cultivate compatibility in both this life and future lives,

emphasizing shared moral and spiritual qualities. In Buddhist literature, Nakulmatā and Nakulpitā are cited as exemplary couples that illustrate the principles of an ideal partnership.

Once, Nakula's parents approached the Buddha, asking what deeds they should perform to ensure they remain partners in future lives as well. The Buddha responded that couples must cultivate shared virtues and adhere to ethical principles to achieve lasting harmony. He identified the following four key qualities. (Sama-Saddhā (Shared Faith): Couples should possess compatible Faith, uphold the same religion, revere similar objects of worship, and share similar beliefs and principles. This alignment ensures mutual respect and understanding in spiritual matters.

- **Sama-Sīla (Shared Virtuous Conduct):** Compatibility in morality and ethical behavior is essential. Couples should harmonize in their conduct, ethics, manners, and upbringing, fostering mutual respect and minimizing conflict.
- **Sama-Cāga (Shared Generosity):** Couples should share compatible attitudes toward generosity, hospitality, and willingness to help others. Harmonious giving and altruism strengthen bonds and create mutual admiration.
- **Sama-Paññā (Shared Wisdom):** Intellectual and practical compatibility enables couples to understand and reason together. Shared insight and sensible decision-making contribute to a cooperative and stable household.

The Buddha emphasized that couples who cultivate these shared virtues, Faith, moral conduct, generosity, and wisdom, will experience joy and harmony in life and can rejoice together in heavenly realms after death. Many marital conflicts arise from the absence of these qualities; hence, cultivating them is crucial for sustaining a cordial, respectful, and supportive relationship between husband and wife.

### **Sammā Vācā: Principles of Nonviolent Communication**

Women often face various forms of violence, including verbal abuse. Harmful or careless Speech can perpetuate conflict and escalate aggressive behavior. In response, the Buddha emphasized the practice of Right Speech (Sammā Vācā) as a cornerstone of ethical and nonviolent communication. Right Speech includes: Truthful speech (Saccavācā) – speaking honestly without deceit. Polite Speech (Piyavācā) – using courteous and kind language. Praise-worthy Speech (Subhāsita-vācā) – offering constructive or complimentary words. Meaningful Speech (Dhamma-vācā) – speaking with purpose, relevance, and ethical intent.

In the Ambalatthika-Rāhulovāda Sutta, the Buddha instructed his son Rāhula on the importance of ethical Speech. He explained that an unashamed liar can commit any form of evil. Demonstrating with an empty water vessel, the Buddha illustrated that someone who lies deliberately is spiritually "empty" and morally

vacant. He emphasized abstaining from falsehood, slander, harsh Speech, frivolous talk, and any utterances that promote harm, thereby encouraging nonviolent behavior.

**The Dhammapada also underscores the value of meaningful communication:**

Translation: "Better than a thousand utterances comprising useless words is one single beneficial word, by hearing which one is pacified" (Bhikkhu, 2015).

This teaching highlights that thoughtful, truthful, and ethical Speech fosters peace, reduces conflict, and serves as a tool for nonviolent communication, especially in protecting women and promoting harmony in society. Today, the concept of Right Speech is widely recognized in the field of development as a form of nonviolent communication. Internationally acclaimed scholar Marshall Rosenberg has emphasized that nonviolent communication helps improve the quality of relationships, facilitates effective dialogue, builds trust, reduces conflict, and fosters peace. In this context, the Buddhist practice of Right Speech (SammāVācā) can be applied as a practical tool to prevent and address gender-based violence, promoting respectful and nonviolent interactions in both personal and social settings (Rosenberg & Chopra, 2015)

**Ethical Livelihood and the Prevention of Violence**

Livelihood practices have a profound influence on social harmony and personal conduct. Engaging in unethical or harmful occupations often generates conflict, exploitation, and various forms of violence within society. Many domestic disputes and gender-based violence incidents, for instance, arise from the misuse of intoxicants and drugs, both of which are linked to unethical means of livelihood. Moreover, issues such as human trafficking, exploitation of women, and acts of aggression like burn or acid attacks frequently stem from distorted values and greed fostered by wrongful economic activities.

In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Buddha identified Right Livelihood (SammāĀjīva) as one of the eightfold Noble Path, essential for ethical living and the cessation of suffering. This principle discourages individuals from earning a living through professions that cause harm or suffering to other beings. The Buddha outlined five specific forms of trade that are contrary to moral livelihood) trading in weapons (sattha-vāṇijjā), which promotes violence and destruction; (ii) trading in living beings (satta-vāṇijjā), which includes slavery and human trafficking; (iii) trading in meat (maṃsa-vāṇijjā), which depends on the taking of life; (iv) trading in intoxicants (majja-vāṇijjā), which leads to heedlessness and social disorder; and (v) trading in poisons (visa-vāṇijjā), which causes suffering and death (Narada, 1977).

Right Livelihood encourages individuals to engage in honest, compassionate, and non-exploitative occupations that contribute to personal integrity and societal well-being. By promoting ethical and mindful economic

practices, this teaching provides a practical framework for reducing violence including gender-based violence while fostering equality, dignity, and mutual respect among all members of society.

### **Moral Misconduct and the Genesis of Violence in Buddhist Ethics**

In the Sigalovāda Sutta the Buddha admonished the householder Sigāla to refrain from wasting his wealth and moral integrity through six specific forms of misconduct. These six, often regarded as detrimental both to individual and social wellbeing, are enumerated as follows: (i) indulgence in intoxicants that lead to infatuation and heedlessness; (ii) loitering in streets at inappropriate hours; (iii) frequenting theatrical or entertainment venues; (iv) engagement in gambling, which results in negligence and moral decline; (v) association with wicked or harmful companions; and (vi) the habitual tendency toward idleness and indolence.

According to the Buddha, these six forms of misconduct stimulate *kalaha* (contention), *viggaha* (dispute), and *vivāda* (conflict), thereby serving as potential precursors to violent behavior. The Dhammapada elucidates this moral and psychological process in the following verse:

"A fool, while performing evil deeds, does not comprehend their evil nature; yet such a fool suffers for his own misdeeds, as though consumed by fire" (Kaviratna, 1980).

From a socio-ethical perspective, these six misconducts represent behavioral patterns that disrupt moral order and erode the ethical fabric of domestic and communal life. In contemporary contexts, such as Nepal, manifestations of these moral failings can be observed in the rising incidents of domestic violence, particularly violence against women. A study conducted by the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC)- a nationally recognized organization advocating for the prevention of violence against women and the promotion of human rights found that domestic violence constitutes the highest proportion of reported cases of violence against women. The research documented 1,741 cases of violence, of which domestic violence accounted for approximately 65% (1,140 cases). Furthermore, it was revealed that 76% of perpetrators were husbands, while 24% were other family members (Mainali & Thapa, 2022).

Such data underscore the Buddha's insight into the far-reaching consequences of moral misconduct. These behaviors not only precipitate the decline of one's wealth and reputation but also corrode interpersonal relationships and destabilize social harmony. Hence, the Buddha's injunction to householders to abstain from these six forms of misconduct serves not merely as a guideline for individual moral discipline but as a foundational principle for fostering mutual trust, familial cohesion, and societal peace.

### **Buddhist Ethical Principles for Harmonious and Nonviolent Family Life**

In the Saraniya Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha expounded to the Bhikkhus six essential factors that promote happiness, mutual respect, friendliness, harmony, freedom from disputes, and unity within the community. These principles, known as the Saraniya Dhammas literally meaning "virtues that are fit to be remembered" or "qualities conducive to harmony" form the ethical foundation for maintaining peace and collective wellbeing. Although originally intended for the monastic community, these teachings are equally applicable to lay society, especially within the family, as they encourage non-violence, cooperation, and emotional understanding among its members. The six Saraniya Dhammas are as follows (Dhakhwa, 2020).

- To maintain bodily acts of loving-kindness toward one's companions in the holy life, both openly and privately.
- To maintain verbal acts of loving-kindness toward one's companions in the holy life, both openly and privately
- To maintain mental acts of loving-kindness toward one's companions in the holy life, both openly and privately.
- Not to consume or enjoy anything rightfully obtained without sharing it equally among virtuous companions in the holy life.
- To abide, both openly and privately, in pure and unbroken moral conduct—virtues that are unsullied, consistent, and free from defect.
- To abide, both openly and privately, in a noble view that leads to the right cessation of suffering.

These six principles serve as a moral and spiritual framework for nurturing harmony and compassion within all forms of human relationships. In the context of family life, they emphasize that bodily, verbal, and mental actions should be rooted in mettā (loving-kindness). Cultivating mettā helps prevent hostile, resentful, and aggressive emotions that often escalate into domestic violence. When loving-kindness becomes the guiding principle in interpersonal interactions, hatred and violence naturally diminish, fostering peace, mutual respect, and unity within the family.

Furthermore, the ethical insight of the Saraniya Dhammas resonates profoundly with modern principles of gender equality and conflict resolution. The Buddha's insistence on equality, shared responsibility, and moral integrity parallels contemporary efforts to promote mutual respect and nonviolent communication within households. By fostering empathy and moral mindfulness, these teachings provide a timeless ethical Model for building gender-sensitive, inclusive, and harmonious domestic environments. Thus, the Saraniya Dhammas offer not only a religious doctrine but also a universal code of conduct for sustaining peaceful coexistence and preventing domestic violence in modern society.

**Mettā Practice and the Ethical Foundation of Nonviolence** and Violence in contemporary society often arise from the absence of Mettā, the Buddhist principle of loving-kindness. According to the Pāli-English Dictionary of the Pāli Text Society, Mettā denotes benevolence and goodwill toward all beings, while its opposite manifests as anger, irritation, and hostility—emotions that frequently underlie gender-based violence.(Powers, 2016).

Mettā is defined as having "friendliness as its characteristic, promoting friendliness as its function, and arising from the perception of loveliness in beings. It succeeds when it eliminates ill will and fails when it produces selfish affection." Cultivating Mettā thus directly counters aggression and fosters emotional balance (Phan, Z, 2015).

The renowned meditation teacher Ven. Chanmyay Myaing Sayadaw, in his work *How to Develop Mettā*, uses a mathematical analogy: Mettā is like the positive sign (+), while anger (dosa) is like the negative sign (-). Anger diminishes peace and wellbeing, whereas Mettā enhances them. When one understands the constructive power of Mettā and the destructive nature of anger, one naturally inclines toward loving-kindness.

As emphasized in the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification), "By being angry with another, you may or may not make him suffer, but you are certainly suffering now." Anger, therefore, is self-destructive like one who picks up burning embers to harm another but first burns oneself. The Visuddhimagga also outlines detailed methods for cultivating MettāBhāvanā (the meditation on loving-kindness), which involves developing a boundless, non-attached love for all beings. Such love is free from craving or lust and seeks the genuine welfare of oneself and others. A person who develops Mettā internally will naturally abstain from violence. Hence, MettāBhāvanā can serve as an effective means for reducing gender-based violence and promoting equality and social harmony

### **Contemplation on Impurity as a Means to Transcend Sense-Desire**

Harassment and violence often arise from ignorance and excessive attachment to sensual pleasures. When individuals fail to control their sensual desires, they may resort to unwholesome actions. Aśubha Bhāvanā, the meditation on impurity, serves as an effective antidote to this mental defilement. It entails contemplation on the thirty-two parts of the body (kāya-gatā-sati), helping practitioners overcome the kilesa (defilement) of sensual craving and the deluded perception that regards the impure as pure and attractive (Thera, 2004). This meditation fosters detachment by revealing the body's true nature. Although originally prescribed for Bhikkhus, the Buddha emphasized that it is equally beneficial for lay practitioners. The canonical formula recites the thirty-two bodily components, such as hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, heart, liver, lungs, intestines, excrement, bile, phlegm, blood, sweat, fat, tears, spittle, and urine. Contemplating these elements from head to foot and foot



to head cultivates insight into the body's impermanence and impurity, thereby weakening sensual attachment.

Repeated reflection on the body's components enables one to transcend clinging to sensuality. Uncontrolled desire can lead not only to moral downfall but also to self-destructive or violent behavior. The Therīgāthā recounts the story of Subhā, a virtuous woman who resisted harassment by a lustful youth in the forest. Through her mastery of kāya-gatā-sati, she illustrated the repulsiveness of the body, transforming the youth's lust into understanding and moral restraint. This example demonstrates that Asubha Bhāvana is a powerful remedy for overcoming sense-desire, which, if left unchecked, continues to fuel gender-based harassment and violence even in contemporary society.

### Conclusion:

The Buddha's teachings offer a comprehensive ethical and philosophical foundation for social reform rooted in equality and compassion. By rejecting hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, the Dhamma emphasizes universal human dignity and the transformative power of inner moral cultivation. Core principles such as Sīla (ethical conduct), right understanding, and right mindfulness establish individual responsibility as the basis for peaceful and just social relations. Practices that promote nonviolent livelihoods and compassionate communication directly challenge discrimination and structural inequities. The Buddha's framework highlights that sustainable social harmony arises from self-discipline, wisdom, and empathy expressed in everyday life. Therefore, his vision continues to provide relevant and practical guidance for fostering gender justice, reducing social disparities, and advancing inclusive and peaceful societies in the contemporary world.

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