

Married to the Dharma

THE DHARMA OF RELATING. Even the Buddha looks up to the Dharma from the very start of his ministry to his very last days.¹ My marriage with Ratna has been rooted in the Dharma from the very start. We married out of mutual love, but there is a greater love that vitalizes our marriage: our love for the Dharma. We are both full-time Dharma workers.

As we are still unawakened followers of the Buddha, our lives go through ups and downs just like those of any other couple. We have been together for the last 17 years and counting. We have two sons and two cats, and the thought of giving up our marriage never occurs. However, whenever our Dharma discipline slackens, so does our relationship seem shaken. When such difficulties arise, we simply “renounce” each other for the moment to go to our favourite quiet spots to reflect over things. We never fail to return to minister to one another, and back to our work. For our Dharma work is as valuable as our lives themselves, if not more.

We never have any problem looking at each other eye to eye as we deal with our lives’ mundane daily rites and rounds. Our moments of pains and suffering are our stern teachers through whom we see one another’s weaknesses and strengths. We are always reminded that to love is to learn.² Marriage is the beginning of a life-long friendship, and our Dharma work imbues it with both happiness and meaning.³

Not a day goes by without our reading some Dharma, or translating a sutta, or editing an essay, or writing a reflection, or running classes, or giving counsel, or meeting others in quest of happiness, or answering email requests for teachings, or simply meditating. Such efforts need to be fuelled by a fifth kind of food: Dharma joy.⁴

THE DHARMA OF DATING. As we often take public transportation for classes and appointments, we use the waiting and travel time to freely share our thoughts with one another. If I’m travelling alone, or going for time-consuming health appointments, I would bring along a copy of the Sutta Discovery to proof-read or prepare for my lessons.

Our special moments together are simple ones: having a meal at a hawker centre, or doing our marketing chores, or walking in a spacious garden, or just sitting together. We see them as spaces in our lives that free up our minds, allowing us to focus on one another. Where there’s love, there’s always time.

There are always spaces in our lives if we care to look. The Dharma blesses our lives with spaciousness so that we can unconditionally accept others, such as when we are bonding with our two teenage sons. Such harmony at home expedites our Dharma work and sutta translation, which in turn feeds our lives with present joy. It empowers me to write this blissful reflection to bring you joy, too.

THE DHARMA OF CONSULTING. Although I am the “sutta specialist” and Ratna is my “multi-task” manager (running the Minding Centre, etc), we regularly consult one another over many matters. We discuss which suttas to teach next, what courses to launch, or what new books to publish, the dates for events, our children’s education, the state of our finances, or the pains of those who have touched us. If I’m

¹ See **Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2/1:138-140), SD 12.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009-12/12.3-Garava-S-s6.2-piya.pdf> & **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.3b/2:138), SD 9: <https://sites.google.com/site/dharmafarer/home/digha-nikaya>

² See “To love is to learn” (R282): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R282-130306-To-love-is-to-learn-107.pdf>

³ On happiness and meaning, see “Sad is not really bad” (R278): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R278-130206-Sad-is-not-really-bad-105-rev.pdf>

⁴ See “Not by Food Alone” (R262): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R262-121017-Not-by-food-alone-95.pdf>

approached by someone to make some big decision, my response would be, “I need to consult my wife on this.”

After all, my wife and I are in a life-long relationship. No decision is too small for us to discuss, nor too big, for it to benefit the both of us, or our family as a whole. This is even more meaningful as we are very independent individuals, each with our own duties and interests. Regular consultations make our mutual love more vital, our individual independence even more real and meaningful.

THE DHARMA OF WORK. The Sigal’ovāda Sutta (D 31) and related teachings⁵ guide our relationship, home life and networking with others. How easily we can forget even the best teachings when are engrossed in the busy world. That is why the suttas repeat themselves, and we need to constantly taste the Dharma, just as it is, with neither additive nor taste-enhancer. Living the Dharma is like breathing fresh, clean, invigorating air.

Both husband and wife have their own roles in the home, keeping it happy and Dharma-centred. Such roles need not be gender-centred, but shared according to our capabilities and inclinations. It is not a power-mode life, bull-doing others, but a love-mode affair, like the gentle rain falling on all plants that they may grow, flower and fruit.

To respect another is to accept that person just as he is, and to inspire him to tap his good and genius. We should love others not only for the good they are, but more so for the greater good they can be. We are, we can be, a part of that happy possibility. We can help make a meaningful future possible.

THE DHARMA OF SPIRITUALITY. Each of us practises the Dharma in our own way, but with the same goals: growing in personal discipline (respecting our bodies and speech), in mental cultivation (feeling inner peace), and in wisdom (learning from failures and pains, and seeing the bigger picture through such learning). Mutual happiness deepens when we see greater meaning in our lives. The basic meaning of life is that we are impermanent, an on-going process capable of great goodness.

Each of us expresses our feelings in different ways. We show our appreciation for goodness in different ways. We apologize for our lapses in different ways. If we can see and accept such special, even unique, personality traits in our loved ones, then we are opening our hearts and touching theirs. This is the spirit of a happy and meaningful life together. Such lives enrich the whole of society and posterity.

THE DHARMA OF NON-SELF. Marriage is a great way of giving up selfishness, a renunciation of sorts. A good marriage moves us to rise above “I,” “me,” and “mine,” especially when it comes to feelings. We might *have* things, but we can only *be* our feelings. We can only *feel*, but never keep them. For they are ever passing, simply reflecting the way we see things. Feelings are only meaningful when we know and accept that they can change. A feeling is like a well-aimed arrow: it only flies to its target (or not) only when we let it go.

It’s all right to be sad, or angry, or fearful, or disappointed: they will all pass. The same goes for being happy or satisfied: it comes and goes. Just as we may feel bad feelings or good feelings, we must also allow and accept such feelings in our spouse and loved ones. To accept another’s feelings is to accept that person totally, and to know that we are capable of connecting with one another.

In a relationship, the most important person is not the one in the mirror (it’s not a real person) but the one you hold dear. We might love someone deeply enough even to be ready to die for that person. But once dead we are no more useful to anyone. We must *live* for those we love, and *love* those who live, and *show* it truly. They may pass on into new lives, but our sweet memories of them are forever.

⁵ D 31/3:180-193, SD 4.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.1-Sigalovada-S-d31-piya.pdf>

It's good to know that someone loves us with his life. This is the thought that truly counts. Here's a true story of a young girl with a rare and bad disease. Only the blood of his younger brother who survived it could help her. The surgeon explained this to the boy, who then, with a deep sigh, agreed to give her his blood. As the transfusion was on its way, the boy said in a soft shaky voice, "Will I start to die right away?" The boy thought that he had to give *all* his blood to his sister! The more we truly love, the more we have love, the more we truly *is*.⁶

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⁶ Please reflect on the singular "is" here. For a study, see **Love**, SD 38.4: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.4-Love-piya.pdf>