# A Buddhist Response to Family Conflict: A Study of Sujātā Sutta

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## Abstract

This article explores the Buddha's teachings as a framework for resolving family conflicts, particularly between husbands and wives, to foster household happiness and promote broader societal harmony. Based on the Sujātā Sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, this research identifies four primary sources of family conflict: heavy responsibilities, sexual issues, financial pressures, and mistrust among family members. These conflicts are viewed as natural outcomes of human attachment to the physical world and the influence of craving, emotional distress, and attachment on mental faculties.

The Sujātā Sutta introduces the concept of seven types of wives, categorizing them into two broad groups: those who exacerbate conflicts (slayer-wife, robber-wife, and mistress-wife) and those who cultivate harmony (motherly-wife, sisterly-wife, friendly-wife, and handmaid-wife). The latter four represent virtuous archetypes, exemplifying care, affection, friendship, and devotion. The motherly-wife nurtures her husband as a mother does her child, safeguarding the family's well-being; the sisterly-wife treats her partner with respectful affection, akin to that between siblings; the friendly-wife approaches her spouse as a trusted friend, fostering love and companionship; and the handmaid-wife exemplifies patience and obedience, maintaining peace within the family.

By recognizing and embracing these virtuous roles, family members, especially spouses, can mitigate conflicts and strengthen familial bonds. This study provides a detailed analysis of the Sujātā Sutta's teachings, offering practical insights into the Buddhist approach to addressing familial discord. It highlights the importance of mutual understanding, ethical conduct, and emotional intelligence in resolving conflicts, contributing to personal and societal well-being. The findings underscore the relevance of Buddhist wisdom in contemporary family dynamics, presenting it as a timeless guide for cultivating harmony and stability.

**Keywords**: Buddhist Response; Family Conflict; Sujātā Sutta

## Introduction

The family, as the cornerstone of societal integration, holds significant importance in Buddhist teachings. According to the Buddha, harmonious family relationships contribute to social stability and individual well-being, with the family functioning as the foundational unit for ethical and cultural acculturation (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005). Particularly, the relationship between husband and wife is the bedrock of the family structure, influencing the broader dynamics between parents and children and the overall social order. However, conflicts within families, ranging from disagreements to severe discord, can disrupt this equilibrium. Family conflict arises from diverse factors, including unfulfilled expectations, poor communication, and divergent values, often leading to separation, divorce, or domestic violence (D'Antonio & Aldous, 1983; Ven. Pategama Gnanarama, 2000).

The Buddha's teachings in the Sujātā Sutta offer profound insights into managing family conflicts by addressing ethical behavior, communication, and mutual respect. This discourse, renowned for its description of the seven types of wives, emphasizes the pivotal roles of compassion, mindfulness, and ethical conduct in fostering familial harmony. By embodying these principles, families can rebuild warmth and cultivate happiness, creating a supportive environment for all members.

However, exploring family conflict through the lens of Buddhist teachings presents unique challenges. First, the traditional Buddhist texts were written in historical and cultural contexts vastly different from contemporary family structures, raising questions about their applicability today (Hare, 1995). Second, family dynamics are shaped by various socioeconomic and cultural factors that may not align with the principles outlined in Buddhist discourses. Lastly, there is a lack of empirical research integrating Buddhist teachings with modern conflict resolution strategies, making it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness in addressing family conflicts.

Despite these challenges, this study endeavors to bridge the gap between traditional Buddhist wisdom and contemporary family dynamics. By analyzing the Sujātā Sutta, it aims to provide practical solutions to family conflicts, grounded in mindfulness, ethical conduct, and compassion. This approach seeks not only to mitigate conflicts but also to inspire families to cultivate harmonious relationships that contribute to individual and collective well-being.

## The Definitions and Causes of Conflict in Sujātā Sutta

Conflict is a universal phenomenon experienced across different cultures and settings, particularly within families. The Sujātā sutta offers profound insights into the definitions and causes of conflict within a family context. This analysis explores the nature and roots of conflict as described in the Sutta, supplemented with contemporary perspectives and Buddhist teachings to provide a holistic understanding of familial disputes.

1.  **Definitions of Conflict**

Conflict can be defined as "a serious disagreement and argument about something important; a state of mind in which one finds it impossible to make a decision or choice" (Sinclair, 1992). The term originates from the Latin conflictus, meaning "to strike together," which emphasizes the active clash or struggle inherent in conflict (Harper, 2024). Within the framework of social theory, conflict theorists argue that family structures often benefit men more than women, perpetuating systemic inequalities and power imbalances.

From a Buddhist perspective, conflict is often viewed as the manifestation of mental defilements such as greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), which distort perception and lead to unwholesome actions (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005). In the context of the Sujātā Sutta, conflict arises from unwholesome attitudes and behaviors within the family, disrupting harmony and mutual respect.

2.  **Causes of Conflict in Families**

The Sujātā Sutta identifies several underlying causes of familial conflicts. These include disagreements over roles and responsibilities, issues related to sexual relationships, material needs, and mistrust or misunderstanding.

*1). Disputes over Roles and Responsibilities*

A major source of family conflict involves disagreements about roles and responsibilities, particularly in traditional settings where gender roles are rigidly defined. In traditional Asia families, males tend to have more power and females tend to have less. Traditional male roles and responsibilities are valued more than the conventional roles done by their wives. For example, women spend as much more than their husbands on housework and child care, the responsibilities of parents-in-law and relatives. The case of the conflict in

Pali Canon mentions, that on the way going arm food the Buddha heard a great noise and clatter at Anāthapiṇḍika's home. Anāthapiṇḍika's explanation is:

> It is Sujātā, my daughter-in-law. She pays no heed to her mother-in-law, nor her father-in-law, nor her husband; neither does she venerate, honor, reverence, or respect the Exalted One. (Hare, 1995).

Thus, the Buddha's explanation reveals conflict's casual connection with the mental factors rooted in the wrong attitude towards perception. Nowadays, the conflict of family members is arising between wife and husband and parents and children, far away from the conflict between the old generation and the new generation in one house. This situation underscores the role of wrong attitudes and perceptions in fueling discord (Hare, 1995). Modern studies corroborate these insights, revealing that unequal divisions of labor and societal expectations contribute significantly to marital strain. The Buddha emphasized mutual respect and shared responsibilities to mitigate such conflicts, advocating for a balanced partnership where both spouses contribute equitably to the family's welfare (Dhammananda, 2005).

*2. Issues Related to Sexual Relationships*

Another critical cause of family conflict relates to sexual relationships. Modern societies have witnessed a growing trend toward extramarital relationships and premarital sexual activity, often driven by emotional instability and a lack of maturity. These behaviors jeopardize the sanctity of marriage and family life (U Ja Ti La, 2018).

The Buddha recognized the challenges posed by attachment and craving in marital relationships. He taught that attachment to physical and sensual pleasures can lead to discord and suffering. Addressing such conflicts requires cultivating mindfulness and restraint and fostering a deeper understanding of the impermanent nature of worldly pleasures (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005).

*3. Conflicts over Material Needs*

Financial issues frequently cause friction in families, particularly in poverty or economic disparity contexts. The saying "When poverty knocks at the door, love flies through the window" highlights the strain financial insecurity can place on relationships.

In the Sujātā Sutta, the Buddha alludes to the role of material needs in generating conflict, urging families to practice contentment and prudent financial planning (Hare, 1995).

Modern research supports this view, showing that financial stress is a leading cause of marital dissatisfaction and divorce.

Dhammananda (2005) advises individuals to prioritize economic stability before entering into marriage. A secure financial foundation reduces anxiety and provides a basis for a harmonious relationship.

*4. Misunderstanding and Mistrust*

Misunderstanding and mistrust are often at the heart of family disputes. According to his book (Dhammananda, 2005), conflicts between spouses frequently arise from unmet expectations, lack of communication, and an erosion of trust. When the initial romantic phase of marriage fades, couples may struggle to reconcile differences in personality and values, leading to tension and discord.

The Buddha emphasized the importance of open communication and the cultivation of trust in resolving such issues. He outlined five principles of well-spoken speech—truthfulness, kindness, gentleness, timeliness, and purposefulness—that can help foster understanding and prevent miscommunication (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005).

## 3.  The Role of Cultural Expectations in Family Conflicts

Cultural expectations play a pivotal role in shaping family dynamics, influencing how individuals perceive their roles and responsibilities. These cultural norms can act as both a unifying force and a source of discord, particularly when there are disparities in expectations among family members. For instance, differences in how spouses or generations interpret their roles often lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Studies have shown that generational gaps, where the traditional values of older generations clash with the modern perspectives of younger members, are a common source of tension within family units (Hünteler, 2022).

Communication styles further amplify these challenges, as cultural norms often dictate how conflicts are expressed and resolved. When family members come from diverse cultural backgrounds, these differences in communication styles can lead to misinterpretations, creating heightened tensions (Caughlin & Gerlikovski, 2023). This is particularly evident in situations where respect and honor, deeply ingrained in many cultures, become sources of conflict. For example, in the Sujātā Sutta, Buddhist teachings emphasize respect for elders as a fundamental value, illustrating how unmet expectations of honor can exacerbate familial discord (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2003).

Another crucial aspect is the role of gender norms, which often perpetuate traditional divisions of labor within families. These imbalances can lead to dissatisfaction and conflict, as seen in contemporary studies highlighting the strain caused by unequal responsibilities between partners (Antman et al., 2021). Understanding these cultural factors is essential for addressing family conflicts effectively, as they provide critical context for the underlying issues at play. Addressing these conflicts requires culturally sensitive approaches that consider the intricate dynamics shaped by these expectations.

### 4. Socioeconomic Factors in Family Conflict

Family conflicts often arise from a confluence of underlying factors, with socioeconomic conditions playing a critical role. Among these, economic disparity emerges as a significant source of tension, particularly in settings of poverty, where financial instability strains relationships. The adage, "When poverty knocks at the door, love flies through the window," encapsulates the fragility of familial bonds under financial duress (Dhammananda, 2005; Friedline et al., 2021). Research shows that economic hardship not only affects the psychological well-being of individuals but also undermines family cohesion by increasing emotional stress and limiting access to conflict resolution resources (Federal Reserve Board, 2023).

Financial stress, closely intertwined with economic disparity, is a leading cause of marital dissatisfaction and divorce. Modern studies highlight the importance of economic stability in fostering harmonious relationships. Financial security has been linked to lower anxiety levels and greater satisfaction in partnerships, underscoring its role in reducing the likelihood of separation (Harris & Wertz, 2022).

Cultural expectations also influence family dynamics by shaping perceptions of roles and responsibilities. Differences in cultural norms may lead to misunderstandings, particularly in diverse family units where conflicting values complicate interactions (Pew Research Center, 2023). Similarly, generational differences often exacerbate tensions, especially in multigenerational households. These conflicts stem from differing views on roles and responsibilities between older and younger generations, reflecting broader societal changes in values and expectations (Friedline et al., 2021).

Addressing family conflicts requires an understanding of the socioeconomic context to ensure that solutions are both relevant and effective. For instance, Buddhist teachings that

emphasize harmony and mindfulness may need adaptation to address the challenges posed by economic pressures and cultural expectations in modern families. Families can better navigate their challenges and foster stronger bonds by tailoring conflict resolution strategies to these realities.

### 5. Broader Implications of Family Conflict

Family conflicts, while often rooted in specific issues, can have broader implications for emotional well-being, social relationships, and community harmony. When unresolved, such disputes can lead to feelings of insecurity, resentment, and isolation among family members.

The Sujātā sutta provides a framework for addressing these conflicts through mindfulness, ethical conduct, and compassion (Hare, 1995). The Buddha's teachings emphasize the importance of understanding the underlying causes of discord and taking proactive steps to foster harmony and mutual respect.

### 6. Modern Applications of the Sujātā Sutta

The insights from the Sujātā sutta remain relevant in contemporary society, where family structures and dynamics continue to evolve. By addressing the root causes of conflict— be it through equitable division of labor, financial planning, or mindful communication— families can build stronger, more resilient relationships.

Modern studies in psychology and family therapy also echo the Buddha's teachings, emphasizing the importance of empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution skills in maintaining healthy relationships (Siegel, 2010). Integrating these principles into daily life can help families navigate challenges and cultivate a sense of unity and cooperation.

In conclusion, the Sujātā sutta offers timeless wisdom on the definitions and causes of conflict within families, highlighting the role of attitudes, behaviors, and social dynamics in shaping relationships. By addressing issues such as unequal responsibilities, sexual relationships, financial concerns, and mistrust, families can foster harmony and understanding. The teachings of the Buddha provide practical guidance for navigating conflicts, emphasizing mindfulness, ethical conduct, and compassion as essential tools for building lasting connections.

## The Figure of Seven Types of Wives in Sujātā Sutta

Nowadays, family conflict is the root of huge conditions that have internal and external effects. This Sutta takes the figure of seven types of wives taught by the Buddha to Sujātā and asks her which types of wives she would love to be. Based on the answer, it can be the template of the role for either husband or wife (Hare, 1995). The seven types of wives are:

1. A Slayer: she is described as pitiless, fond of other men, and neglectful, even contemptuous, of her husband.

2. A robber-wife: she squanders the family wealth and is dishonest with her husband.

3. A mistress-wife: she is shrewish, rude, and coarsely spoken when it suits her, lazy and domineering.

4. A motherly-wife: she cares for her husband as a mother to her son and carefully guards the family's wealth.

5. A sisterly-wife: she defers to her husband in the same affectionate way that a younger sister defers to her older brother.

6. A friendly-wife: she loves her husband as he is her best friend; through friendship and love she is devoted to him.

7. A handmaid-wife: she is calm, and patient and obeys her husband in all ways.

Based on the sutta's explaining, he explained that the first three kinds of wives are harsh, immoral, lacking in respect after death will wander in the miseries of hell; and the following the rest of four kinds of wives are precepts long established and restrained after death will wander in the happy heaven world. The answer of Sujātā that she wants to be a handmaid and a wife from this day forth (Hare, 1995).

The seven types of wives are a figurative example of a family in modern society. A wise wife should know when being a slave wife, a good friend-wife, a sister, and a mother beside her husband and child. A nice husband is also known to be a friend-husband, a brother, and the right man to look after a loved wife and child. It is a finding of closeness and understanding each other in a family.

## The Solutions of Family Conflicts

Family conflicts are inevitable in human relationships, stemming from differences in values, communication styles, and expectations. However, Buddhist teachings offer practical solutions to manage and resolve these conflicts, fostering harmony and understanding. The Sujātā Sutta provides valuable insights into the nature of familial roles and responsibilities, emphasizing compassion, respect, and mindfulness as the cornerstones of peaceful cohabitation. This section explores three key solutions to family conflicts: becoming a friendly partner, embodying a motherly or sisterly role, and practicing the virtues of calmness and patience.

1. **Becoming a Friendly Partner to Share Responsibilities**

The Sujātā Sutta narrates the story of seven types of wives, categorizing them based on their attitudes and behavior toward their spouses. Among them, the Buddha extols the qualities of a "handmaid wife"—a person who embodies selflessness, respect, and a commitment to shared responsibilities. Sujātā, the protagonist, acknowledges herself as a handmaid, embodying contentment, obedience, and a pure heart. The Buddha praised her for her calmness and resilience, describing her as fearless, enduring, and free from anger (Hare, 1995).

This teaching highlights the importance of partnership in addressing family conflicts. Both spouses must view themselves as teammates who share responsibilities and face life's challenges together. According to Gunaratana (2011), developing mindful communication and mutual understanding is crucial for resolving interpersonal issues. By adopting a friendly approach, spouses can alleviate burdens, reduce stress, and prevent misunderstandings. Sharing family duties allows each partner to feel valued and fosters an environment of cooperation, reducing the likelihood of conflict.

2. **Embodying a Motherly or Sisterly Role**

The second solution to family conflict involves embodying a nurturing, caring, and empathetic role, akin to a mother or sister. This approach emphasizes active listening and mutual understanding. When conflicts arise, family members must identify the problem collaboratively and work toward a resolution. Listening to all perspectives and encouraging open dialogue fosters trust and cooperation within the family.

In the Buddhist view, the essence of a successful marriage or family relationship lies in mutual understanding, contentment, and the willingness to share life's challenges. Dhammananda (2005) identifies four types of marriages: wretch, goddess, god with wretch, and god with goddess. Ideally, partners should aspire to the latter type, characterized by mutual respect and shared responsibility. Barash and Lipton (2011) suggest that empathy and cooperation are evolutionary traits that strengthen bonds and resolve disputes effectively.

This nurturing role also extends beyond immediate family members to the broader social circle, including friends, in-laws, and neighbors. A motherly or sisterly partner exhibits true love, empathy, and a willingness to support others in times of need. These qualities not only resolve conflicts but also strengthen familial bonds and create a supportive community (Hanh, 2010).

### 3. Practicing Calmness and Patience

The third solution to family conflict is cultivating calmness and patience. Many family disputes arise from misunderstandings, mistrust, and impulsive reactions. The Buddha emphasized the importance of moral discipline, generosity, and wisdom in maintaining harmonious relationships. For instance, a husband should treat his wife with the love and respect he would expect in return, fostering a relationship built on equality and trust (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005).

Calmness and patience are particularly crucial in resolving conflicts related to trust and communication. The Buddha taught that actions should be guided by mindfulness and compassion. He advised individuals to reflect on the merit, harmlessness, and beneficial outcomes of their actions, ensuring that their behavior aligns with ethical principles (Hare, 1995). Siegel (2010) highlights that practicing mindfulness enhances emotional regulation, allowing individuals to respond to conflicts with composure and clarity.

Additionally, the Buddha outlined five principles of well-spoken speech: it should be timely, truthful, gentle, purposeful, and delivered with kindness (Hare, 1995). Applying these principles in daily interactions can significantly reduce misunderstandings and foster a positive atmosphere within the family. For example, speaking kindly and truthfully about household finances, responsibilities, or personal challenges can prevent conflicts and build trust.

Calmness and patience also extend to the broader dynamics of family relationships, including interactions with in-laws and extended family members. Politeness, kindness, and attentiveness are essential qualities for managing these relationships. For instance, a wife can

show respect for her husband's earnings and ensure that household expenditures are properly managed. Similarly, family members should create an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation, setting a positive example for future generations (Hanh, 2002).

The Buddhist approach to resolving family conflicts emphasizes shared responsibilities, empathy, and mindfulness. Family members can foster harmony and understanding in their relationships by becoming friendly partners, embodying nurturing roles, and practicing calmness and patience. The teachings of the Sujātā sutta provide a timeless framework for addressing conflicts, offering practical solutions that promote mutual respect and compassion. These principles not only resolve conflicts but also strengthen familial bonds, creating a supportive and harmonious environment for all members.
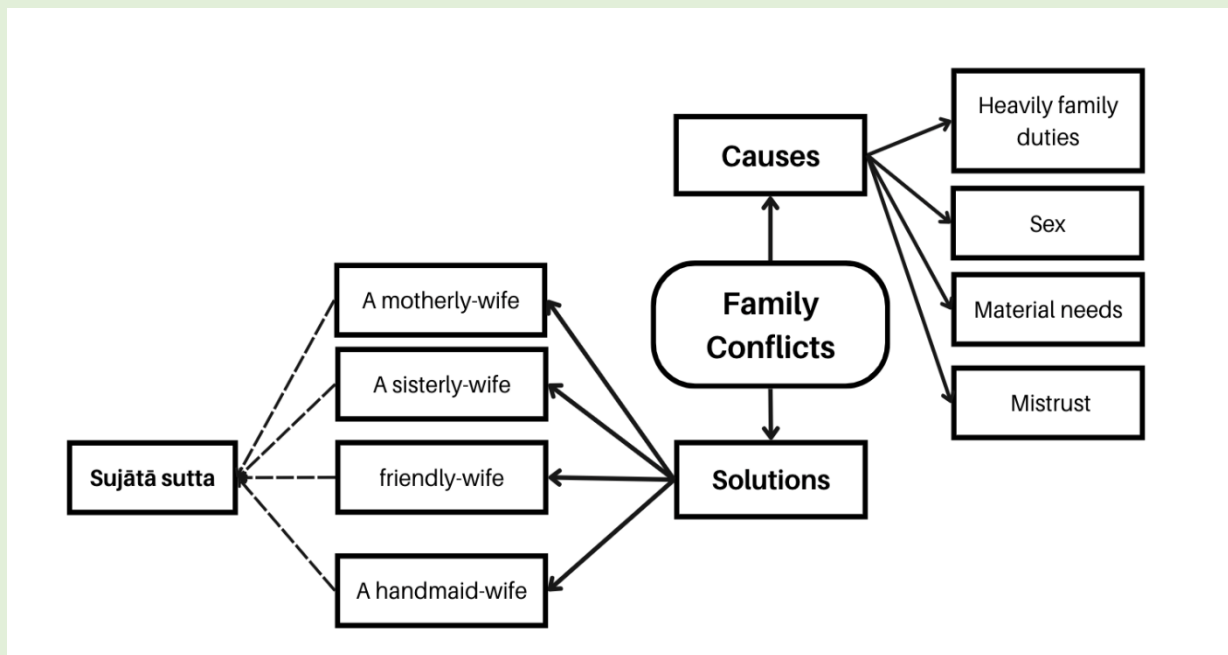


**Figure 1** The family conflicts and the solutions based on Sujātā response

## Conclusion

The Sujātā sutta gives the seven types of wives that guide any family, a couple, or any relationship problems. Conflict theorists have also seen the family as a social arrangement benefiting men more than women and the shape of conflicts are serious disagreements, arguments, and conflicts by physical or verbal actions. The Buddha has rejected any kind of violence, in any type of situation, with total compassion and patience. Finding the cause of the generated family conflicts comes from the duties or responsibilities of husband/wife to

each other, parents-in-law, friendship and relatives' relationships, sex needs, material needs, and mistrust each other between husband and wife. For the understanding real causes of family conflicts, the Sujātā sutta gives solutions based on explaining the role of seven wives types that can help individuals control emotions and behaviors, establishing ethical guidelines for a family living in a harmonious and peaceful home atmosphere. Family members and other relationships can avoid conflicts when they know well their duties in a family and respect each other. The Buddhist values and dhamma's teaching can become an essential factor in creating self-understanding promoting peace in a family and spreading to large society.

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