

goodrelationships.

# LOVE & RELATIONSHIPS?

→ a →

## Buddhist PERSPECTIVE

Are you feeling dissatisfied with your relationship? Angela Barrett discovers a new Buddhist guide for couples that could be just what you need

Many of us enter a committed relationship thinking we've found the person of our dreams. And for the first 18 months or so this can seem like the case. But when the gloss wears off and the relationship becomes more grounded in reality, dissatisfaction can too easily set in – unless we take action.

Sarah Napthali, author of the internationally acclaimed *Buddhism for Mothers* series, has released her latest book *Buddhism for Couples*. It applies Buddhist principles to relationships to help us better understand our behaviours and be able to counteract the apathy and negativity that afflicts many long-term matches. But it's a relationship book with a difference: Napthali, a long-term practitioner of Buddhist teachings, reveals that she is not an expert and doesn't have all the answers. "I really cringe at self-help books where you are spoken down to by an all-knowing expert," she says. "In my books, I talk as an imperfect person because I think you learn so much from other people's mistakes."

Here, Napthali reveals how Buddhist ideas can transform our relationships for the better.





## THERE WILL ALWAYS BE CHANGE

Humans are driven to resist change but change is one thing that's a certainty in life. Buddha called this 'impermanence' and said that rejection of this fact – and an expectation that someone else will keep you happy – is a major cause of human suffering. We will change, our partners will change and our circumstances will change. Of course, it's easy to accept change for the better but it's our response to negative change that determines our level of relationship satisfaction.

One change that commonly creates dissatisfaction is when passion and romance begin to wane. If we embrace the Buddhist notion that everything is impermanent, we'll know to expect different seasons in our relationships, we'll cling less and be more able to make the most of the phase we're in.

**WHAT TO DO:** Know that whatever is happening now – be it good or bad – will change. Remember, it too shall pass. Be aware that even if your relationship has come out of the passionate stage, the next stage can be satisfying in a different way, offering more emotional stability and a deeper connection.

## KNOW THAT SUFFERING IS INEVITABLE

Buddha's First Noble Truth is that suffering, unsatisfactoriness and stress are part of life and long-term relationships. Although this might sound depressing, if you really take this on board, your tolerance of the inevitable bad times will be greater. The good news is in Buddha's Third Noble Truth: suffering can end the moment we let go of our attachment to things being a certain way. The starting point for doing this is simply bringing what Buddha called 'bare attention' – observation without judgment – to our unpleasant thoughts and feelings, and to do this with an attitude of compassion and kindness towards ourselves. The aim isn't to make the unpleasantness go away but to stop struggling against it while it's there.

**WHAT TO DO:** Understand that all couple relationships, even ones that look perfect from the outside, will have periods of great difficulty. When an unpleasant thought or feeling about your partner arises, notice it and refrain from judging it.

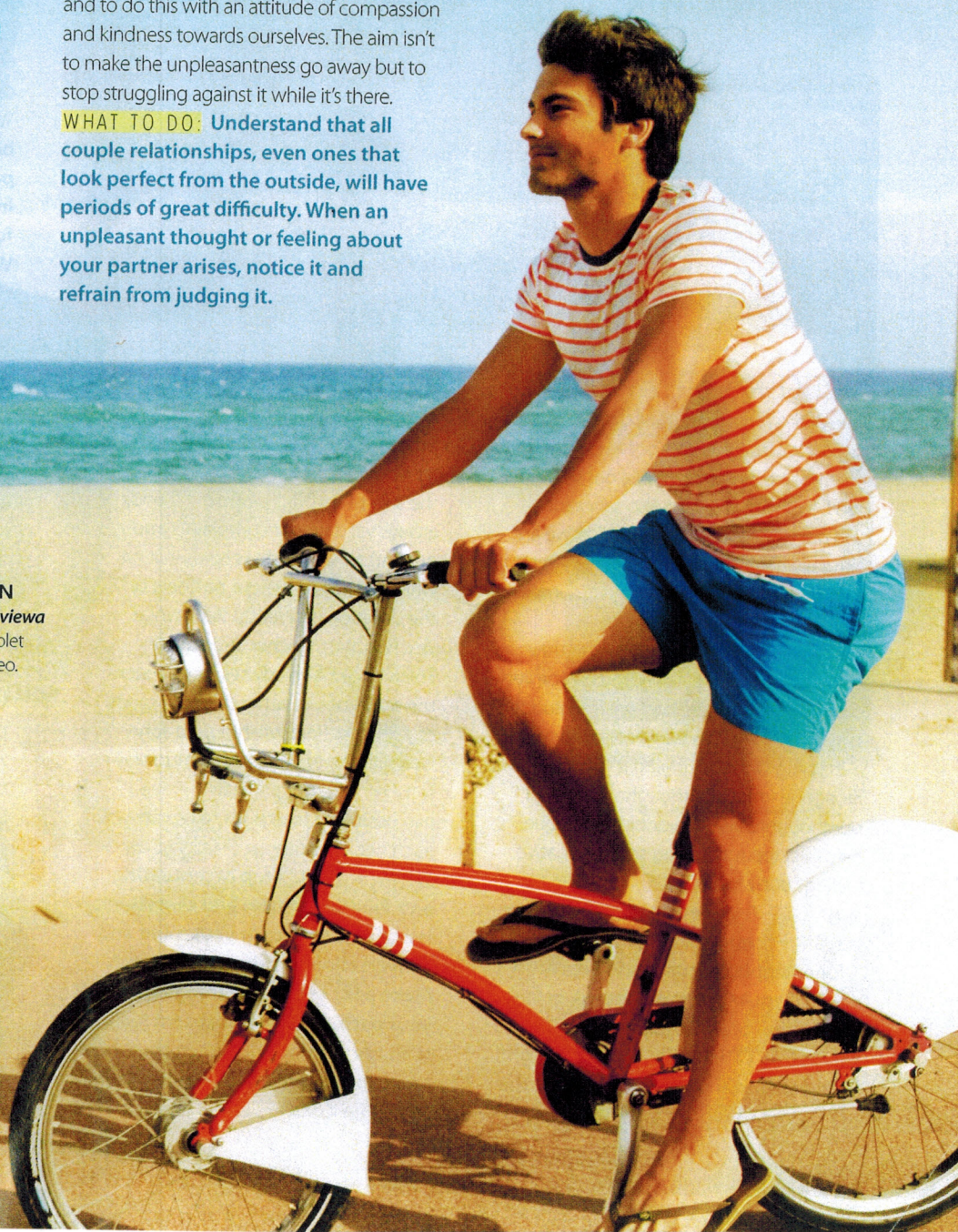
## CHECK YOUR EXPECTATIONS

The expectations we have of our relationships often make us miserable. We expect a lot from our partner: romance, emotional support, great sex, friendship, stimulating conversation and shared parenting. In the past, extended family and even the community provided much of this support. Buddhism teaches that our capacity to enjoy life is not governed by having all our expectations met. This is liberating because it means contentment in our relationship can be cultivated from within – it's not fully determined by whether our partners are how we want them to be.

**WHAT TO DO:** Make a list of all the things you're expecting from your partner. Which ones could you get from others? Cultivate connections with friends and family to reduce the load on your partner. ►



**HEAR AUTHOR SARAH NAPHTALI'S TIPS FOR A ZEN RELATIONSHIP.** Use the free **viewa** app and hold your phone or tablet over this page to watch the video.







## NOTICE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

One of the most important concepts in Buddhist practice is that not all our thoughts are true or trustworthy. While our thoughts can be helpful, they can also sabotage us and our relationships. As a species, we are naturally prone to a negativity bias which can see many of us wasting years compiling lists of our partners' faults and past misdemeanours while overlooking their wealth of positive qualities. This can be very damaging to our relationships. The Buddhist practice of mindfulness – noticing how we are feeling without judging it – helps us recognise unhelpful thoughts. Labelling our thoughts, also a Buddhist technique, helps us stop ruminating so the negative feelings don't snowball.

**WHAT TO DO:** Become aware of your negative thoughts. Label your thoughts – for example, 'my nobody loves me voice', if you're feeling unloved, or 'my exhaustion brain', if you're tired. By separating yourself from your thoughts in this way, you begin to take away the power and influence they have over you.

## ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

Many women enjoy venting to their friends about their husbands and there's no doubt it can make us feel better in the short term. But beware: if friends always validate our complaints about our partners, this will keep us in a rut where we fail to see our partners or the situation differently. Renowned Zen Buddhist teacher and author Thich Nhat Hanh advises us to 'water the seeds of joy', rather than the seeds of suffering. Relationship guru John Gottman agrees and says that to stay satisfied with our partners we need five positive interactions to counteract each negative one.

**WHAT TO DO:** Stop accentuating and reinforcing how bad everything is and make space in your mind and conversation for what's going well. Make a list of positive things about your partner. Savour pleasant feelings towards your partner when they arise and express gratitude to him for the things he does.

## WORK ON FORGIVENESS

Many of us are in relationships where apologies are few and far between and grudges are held for decades. In Buddhism, grudge-holding is seen as detrimental to our karma. It is said to punish the grudge-holder more than the offender. While forgiveness feels like an act of kindness towards another, it's equally an act of compassion towards ourselves as it frees up mental space for more nourishing material than our grudge. Forgiveness – which can be greatly assisted by a heartfelt apology – is about letting go of the past and is one of the best things we can do for our wellbeing and relationship.

**WHAT TO DO:** Apologise when you behave badly and encourage your partner to do the same. Use your imagination to help you feel empathy for your partner's emotional difficulties. Work on letting go of anger and resentment about your partner's past wrongs. Admit that you too are fallible.

## SEE YOUR PARTNER WITH BEGINNER'S EYES

As our relationship matures, many of us stop seeing our partners for who they are in the present moment and relate to an outdated image of them created long ago. Seeing them in this fixed way invites dullness and boredom because we operate on autopilot, and see them as the same old person. Buddhist practice encourages us to be open, present and curious about our partners – to perceive them as a mystery. Jack Kornfield, a leading American Buddhist teacher, urges us to 'see the inner nobility' of all human beings. This must of course include our partner. Like us, our partner is constantly changing and deserves to be seen afresh each day.

**WHAT TO DO:** Work on the idea that you don't fully know and understand your partner. Really open up to who he is in the present moment. Let go of the baggage you're holding onto about the relationship and meet the person who is before you right now, in this moment. ☺