

Scott: Secrets of Indian Marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode Number 286.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Could your relationship with your spouse benefit from having an Indian view on marriage? Marriage is recognized all over the world as a union between two people. By being married, you establish rights and obligations between each other, between you and your children, and between you and your in-laws.

There can be many reasons that people choose to marry. These reasons could be legal, social, emotional, financial, spiritual, or religious. The views and definitions of marriage widely vary from culture to culture. Some cultures believe in finding someone you love to marry, while other cultures believe in arranged marriages.

India is such a culture that believes in these arranged marriages. Here in the United States, arranged marriages are not the norm in our culture. However, is there something we can learn from the way Indian culture views marriage?

Founder of John ODonoghue Therapy Services in Raleigh, North Carolina, Mr. John ODonoghue is a licensed marriage and family therapist and licensed professional counselor. He offers counseling for individuals, couples, families, and groups. Mr. ODonoghue is currently offering blended family support and therapy groups as well. Mr. John ODonoghue has extensive experience in family issues, relationship and partner issues, and parent/child communication.

Welcome to the show, John. I'm so glad you could join us today.

John: It's my pleasure, Scott. Thank you.

Scott: Well, I'm not sure if everyone is aware of what marriage is like in India. Can you elaborate some on what it's like?

John: Yes. In India, marriage is incredibly important. It's kind of the center of the culture, so girls are taught at a very young age to conduct themselves so that they can get a suitable partner. So it's a really big deal, and they have arranged marriages. When I first lived there in the 70s, I couldn't believe that you would actually consent to meet somebody for one or two minutes and say okay, but now, with the benefit of many years of experience, I think I really understand what a lot of Indians tell me that you don't want to leave a decision that important to people in their early 20s.

And we certainly don't want them to base it on ephemeral things like sexual passion, falling in love, and things like that. These things will pass. So they frame marriage in a very, very different way than we do, but it's a very serious thing. In fact, it's almost too serious, I think, because the dowry system is a real burden on the economic progress of India, but girls are

expected to pay a sum of money to the groom's family, and that causes a lot of hardship and distress.

Scott: Well, what problems do you see that couples are experiencing in their relationship that you think could be resolved by adapting this Indian view on marriage?

John: Oh, I think a lot of -- well, let me go back and maybe talk about what the Indian view on marriage is.

Scott: Okay, sure.

John: So if I could go through some of the views on marriage that Indian marriages have, maybe I can answer it that way. Just a few things. First of all, that dowry system, marriage is a contract and a union between two families, and it's negotiated by the parents of the bride and the groom. So they understand that when you get married and it's really forever, there's no divorce, there's no pre-marital sex, there's no extra-marital sex, it's a lifetime contract.

And they understand that you're going to be dealing with the other person's family for the rest of your life, and you're merging families. I think people don't understand that as much here, and they later find that out, and it can cause problems. That's why, in the arranged marriages in India, people get married within certain strict rules of clan and caste, economic status, shared views on spirituality, rituals, customs, all that stuff, to avert the possibilities of problems down the road.

But more importantly, there are two concepts in Indian culture that I think they actually follow. I've been interviewing people. I'm writing a book called "The Secrets of Indian Marriage", and I'm kind of surprised that these two concepts are really followed.

The first one is called dharma, D-H-A-R-M-A, which means duty. And that means that everybody is expected to perform their own duty and their own responsibility and to actually not look at what other people are doing. And the second concept that is actually more important than I even thought. It's called what we've all heard of, karma. But I'd like to explain what karma means in the psychological sense.

Scott: Okay.

John: It means that -- well, in Western psychology, in cognitive psychology, there's a concept called the foot in the door phenomenon. What does that mean? Well, let's say you're married, and you're tempted to cheat on your wife. And you've never done that before, but you're given that choice, and you decided to actually take that step. That's called the foot in the door. You now have put your foot in that door, and you go through with it.

Well, what happens immediately? We know now from exhaustive research that almost immediately the mind starts to rationalize its behavior. And it does so unconsciously. You don't have any control over it. You don't have a choice but to rationalize it on some level. In other words, you've become changed. You're not the same person that you did now afterwards,

because you've rationalized it and your internal world is kind of different. The next time you want to cheat, you have a pre-arranged template in your mind to make it a lot easier.

So this idea that you make choices moment to moment to moment that are creating your internal world is very important. Most of the Indian people I've spoken to, they keep going back to the emphasis on moral behavior. You don't want to do anything wrong, not because it's a drag or you're self-sacrificing, it's because you get hurt by it. So that's what they call karma.

And the last thing is that they view marriage as a central unit of culture which is connected to the larger culture, to concentric circles of family, extended family, caste, village, spiritual affiliation, and the universe at large. And they really see it that way.

And then, just one more thing. The final vow of marriage that they take is to become friends, meaning you treat your spouse as though he or she is your friend. And that's a very important thing because they actually don't believe in argument very much. Because you don't usually get into screaming arguments with your friends, and you usually temper what you say to a good friend.

And so those are the aspects of Indian marriage. That's most of them in a nutshell right there.

Scott: I can see how the friendship, the karma, the idea of the union of families, all of those could benefit marriage here or anywhere, for that matter. Let's drill down on that point of dharma, just a little bit. You said that was taking responsibility for yourself.

So were you suggesting that in a marriage that I am responsible for me, not so much for my spouse, and she is responsible for herself? Kind of the old saying, that I'll take care of me for you, and you take care of you for me?

John: Oh, absolutely. There's no question that that is -- if both parties did that in marriages here, marriages would work out much better. I always end up telling married couples that, for example, we get irritated by our spouses, right? Just sometimes being with somebody causes feelings of discomfort. And there's a theory in psychology that I think everybody has kind of lined up with. It's called attachment theory. And attachment theory can be very complicated, but it simply says that what human beings need is attachment.

They don't necessarily need love. And we have an attachment system that we learn from our family of origin, from our mother, our father. And we have a series of associations and beliefs and experiences that are called our attachment system.

So what happens, say, you're with your spouse and your spouse irritates you, or you have feelings of discomfort. The dharma and the locus of responsibility on yourself is that you are actually the person that's creating those feelings first. And no matter what your spouse did, you're the author of your feelings, your mood, your associations, your thoughts. That's all of you.

And that all is drawing on a repository of your past, your attachment system, all that stuff. So it's a really good idea to recognize that, and to say, first of all, I am experiencing this. It's not my partner that's creating this.

And the second thing is, if you recognize that, ask yourself what just happened? What did your partner just do? Maybe they left some dirty dishes in the sink. Well, is that really so bad? Should that send you into a downward spiral of anger, and I can't live with you, whatever goes on.

Scott: Right.

John: It's this idea that I'm responsible for my feelings, and you're responsible for your feelings, and I'm not going to take on what you should do. I'm just going to do what I'm going to do. And I think it's very hard to do because it's much easier to try to control other people than to try to control ourselves.

Scott: Sure. So you've caught my attention. You've caught the attention of some of our listeners. And now we're thinking, well, yeah, I'd like our families to be united more. I would like to take responsibility and ownership of myself more and my spouse to do the same. I would like us to be more friends, understand this contract.

You said argue less. They hardly argue. I'm sure that's attractive to all of us. So what would you suggest for us here in the West as couples to do to take advantage of this Indian view of marriage? Where would we start?

John: Well, I think, actually, what we just talked about is a great place to start to say what I'm going to do is be the best person I can, and I'm not going to try to control you. I'm going to accept you because I can't control anybody else.

The seven vows of marriage that they take in India are actually quite similar to the Buddhist eight-fold path. And I think Buddha, his key concept was that we can't control anything, really, outside of ourselves. And to understand that life, the universe, reality, the world, is changing every second, to really rock that at a deep, deep level and accept it at a deep level, was, to him, the root of Buddhist philosophy. That actually causes a deep sense of happiness.

But we want to control things. We want to feel like we're in control. We want to control other people. That's the way our minds are sort of set up. But to give up this controlling other people and accepting other people is something that all of us need to work on. It's difficult, but it's very helpful.

Scott: You mentioned seven vows in Indian marriage. What specific vows are couples making in Indian marriage?

John: Well, the seven vows are pretty universal in India. Actually, they circle a fire sometimes, or they'll say, let's take the next step. But the first three vows are really concerned with vows of: I will take care of myself first. I pledge to be pure.

Now, this is one other thing that a lot of marriage counselors will discover when couples are arguing. The first question I always ask, well, when you're having these horrible arguments, are you drinking? A lot of times they'll say, yeah, that happened when we're drinking, and I'll think, it's horrible to argue when you've been drinking alcohol. We've been there, we've all been there and it's a miserable experience.

And what also happens in marriages is that couples get disappointed with one another. One person might let themselves go. They might not be succeeding in life as much as they did. They might not be taking care of personal hygiene.

So the first three vows of Indian marriage is to vow to be pure, and the vast majority of Indian people don't take drugs or most of them never had a drink of alcohol. So a lack of taking drugs and keeping a pure body and a healthy body is a vow they take to themselves and to the other person. Only in the fourth vow do they get around to the promises to one another. And they basically vow to love and trust one another.

And then the vows turn back towards the larger context of family and life. The fifth vow is to pray for the welfare of all entities in the entire universe. The sixth vow is, I guess, close to what my favorite vow in Western culture is: to love one another through hard times, in sickness and in health.

And the last vow is they pray for a life of understanding, unity, loyalty and compassion and companionship, not only for themselves but also for the peace of the universe.

Scott: It almost sounds like there's as much focus on the individual and the community in those vows as there is on the couple.

John: Yeah, actually more so. Actually, the first three are the focus that I'm going to make myself the best person I can be for you. That's my duty. And the last three vows are really on this notion that we are a cog in the wheel of a larger culture and the universe, and we need to play our part.

And it's kind of a beautiful way to think of it. Whereas I think here, we sort of think that it's you and me against the world, and we need to create this love and this life where we're kind of alone. We're not supported, really, by all of these larger structures. I don't know to what extent people feel that way, but it's a slightly different understanding, I think.

Scott: Well, I think probably here in the West we have a tendency to think, on those first three vows, if I focused on me I'm being selfish or narcissistic.

John: Yes.

Scott: But I really get the point that's being driven home. In a sense I am, in my marriage and in my parenting, the most important person in the room, because if I don't take care of me first, if I'm not healthy, if I'm not wealthy, if I'm not wise, if I'm not happy, how can I give that to my

spouse or to my children? So I think that's a great point that those first three vows are bringing up.

John: Yeah, it really is, and I was just in India in January, and we went up to the mountains, and we had actually booked the most beautiful hotel in the mountains of this jungle area. And we drive up to the place and it's gorgeous and beautiful Indian women come out and put a dot on our head. They play music for us, and we're thinking, oh, this is heaven on earth here.

But they said to our driver, "Don't take the bags out of the car." [laughs] And we go back in and it's, like, "What's going on here?" And they said, "Well, we don't have a room for you." And I said, "You had my money two months ago. I booked it on bookings.com online, and this is our room."

Well, what happened was a rich Indian family came and said, "We love this place. We'll give you twice as much money and send the foreigners down the road. We're staying here." So I was really upset. And they kind of took us to this other place, which was like a camp, which had none of the amenities, no Internet. And I was upset, and nobody else seemed to really see it that way.

And when I got to the new place and talked to the owner of the new place, he said, "You know, that's what they did. They did something wrong, but how are you going to deal with it? You're letting yourself get all upset by this. That's something that they did," and I kind of thought about it, and I thought this is a cultural difference.

I was focusing on what they did wrong and couldn't wait to get to the Internet and post it on Trip Advisor, and they're telling me, "Don't worry about it. It's not that big a deal. And the person that's really getting agitated here is you." Just a different way of looking at life.

Scott: Sure.

John: In India, people seem very happy, and it's because people have such low expectations for life. [laughs] And anything good that happens, it's great.

Scott: Well, with couples approaching their marriage from this viewpoint that you're suggesting, what are some of the changes that you've seen in the quality and interactions of their marriage or relationship?

John: Well, when I explain what I explained earlier about your attachment system and that you're the author of your own feelings, and I'd like you, when you get upset, to take a brief time out, feel your feelings, suffer, feel the anxiety, feel the anger, refrain from acting on it, and then ask yourself what really happened.

That has helped couples a lot, asking couples to really stop arguing so much, to stop fighting so much. It sounds very simple but stop criticizing one another. All of that really helps because I think we don't realize sometimes that when we create these negative states, these negative experiences with one another, it all builds up.

It's just more in the databank. It's more in the memory. It's more in the whole internal life that we have that's negative that we can draw on. So to really minimize those things -- and you know, there's something else that I left out here. I left it out because we do live in a completely different culture, but it's a lot easier for Indian couples to make things work because the roles that they have are very clear.

We have a confusion of who's responsible for what, and we have so many choices here as to how to live our lives. It's really tough. I get agitated when I go to the supermarket and buy cranberry juice because I'm old enough to -- when I grew up, you could just buy cranberry juice. Now there's like 30 or 40 different types of cranberry juices.

Scott: [laughs] Yeah.

John: And it's like that with every single product. So we have this smorgasbord of life. We can do whatever we want here. It sounds great, and that's who we are. We're all about freedom, but it makes things tough. So the women's role is very clear, and the male's role is very clear.

And there's one other thing that I actually forgot about, Scott. In these vows, you're supposed to look at your spouse as God, as an embodiment of God. And I think that's a really important thing, too, because the icky, gooey part of ourselves is our personalities. The beautiful part of ourselves is our soul and our heart and our spirit.

And when people come from their heart, when they come from those deeper places, they become really beautiful, and people become touched by that. So they're always admonished to see the God in their partner and to look beyond the personality. And that's also very difficult to do, too. But it's helpful.

Scott: Sure. John, you've given us a lot of great information today and a lot of things to think about. Is there anything else on an end note that you think our listeners should know?

John: Well, I had a bunch of experiences in India that moved me so much, and talking to couples and hearing about how they deal with their marriages under extremely tough circumstances. I hope to start a few tours next fall to take people to India for a kind of marriage encounter transformation trip. I just want to put that out there. I'm working on a website now, and I hope to launch that in September.

Scott: Well, that sounds incredible, and John, thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

John: Scott, it's been my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Scott: To find out more about John ODonoghue and his practice, John ODonoghue Therapy Services, you can visit their website at johnodonoghuettherapy.com or call 919-645-7179 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week.

For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com.
I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

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