



MOTHERS AND MOTHERHOOD IN INDIAN BUDDHIST LITERATURE

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Mothers and Fathers in Conjunction

- Both parents are equally praised and celebrated.**
- Children owe an enormous debt to both parents.**

“Mothers and fathers do much for their children. They take care of them and nourish them and show them this world.”

“If a man were to carry his mother on one shoulder and his father on the other shoulder for as long as he lived...and if he were to anoint and massage their bodies, bathe them and knead them, while they were to urinate and defecate all over him...[and even] if he were to establish his mother and father in kingship...over this [entire] great earth..., even so, Monks, he would not repay or requite his mother and father!”

(Aṅguttara Nikāya)

Elevation of Mother Over Father

—(Commentary on the previous passage): *Mother* should occupy the *right* shoulder; *father* should occupy the *left*.

—Both matricide and parricide are included among the five “sins of immediate retribution” (Skt. *ānantarya-karma*)—but Buddhist sources “almost uniformly rank the murder of a mother more severely than that of a father.” (Silk 2007: 257)

—(From *Laws of Manu*): “The teacher is ten times greater than the tutor; the father is a hundred times greater than the teacher; but the mother is a thousand times greater than the father.”
(trans. Olivelle 2004: 34)

Idealization of Mother-Love

—Mother-love is depicted as the purest, most compassionate, most self-sacrificing type of love possible.

Sonananda Jātaka (No. 532)

(Sona's description of mother-love to his brother Nanda): Even before the child's conception, the mother anxiously "worships the gods and questions the stars and the seasons"—wondering, "under which constellation will a long-lived son be born?" Once she becomes pregnant, she immediately "gives rise to love for the offspring in her womb"; and once the baby is born, she "soothes her crying child with breastmilk and lullabies," "nestles him in between her breasts, suffuses him with the touch of her body, and wraps him up in the cloak of her arms." She "pleases and appeases him," "protects her innocent child from frightful wind and heat," "treats him with tenderness," and "looks at him with a loving heart."

Sonananda Jātaka (cont'd)

When Nanda is later reunited with his mother, his mother “goes to him and embraces him, smells and kisses his head, and extinguishes the grief in her heart.”

She says to him: “Seeing Nanda at long last, my heart trembles, like the tender shoot of a fig tree, fanned by the breeze.”

**(Alan Cole [1998] on medieval Chinese Buddhism):
Mother-love is the emotional “hook” that guarantees the son’s devotion to the patriarchal family.**

Mother-Love as Religious Metaphor

—Mother-love comes to serve as the most appropriate metaphor for the love and compassion that a buddha or bodhisattva radiates outward toward all sentient beings.

—Buddhas and bodhisattvas are said to love all beings “just as a mother loves her only son.”

—Thus, it is the *mother’s love for the son*, in particular, that is idealized as an example of pure, compassionate love.

—In discussions of loving-kindness (P. *mettā*, Skt. *maitrī*):
“Just as a mother would guard with her life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind toward all living beings, and loveing-kindness toward the whole world.”

(*Sutta Nipāta*)

mother-love

buddha-love

her own child alone

**all sentient beings
equally**

particularistic love

universal love

selfish attachment

selfless detachment

**Mother-love : the most potent manifestation
possible of desire, attachment, and clinging**

A narrative motif in Hindu and Buddhist versions:

Motif: A man becomes the father of several sons. He is later transformed into a woman, and as a woman, she becomes the mother of several more sons. The question is asked: Which sons do you love more—those of which you are the father or those of which you are the mother?

Hindu version (from the *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra*)

He/she has greater love for the sons of which she is the mother, because “sons are dearer to a woman.”

Buddhist version (from the *Dhammapada Commentary*)

“Friends, I have a stronger love for those [sons] who were born from my womb.”

**Sorreya feels “ashamed” at having given this reply.
He becomes a monk, withdraws into meditative solitude,
and quickly attains nirvana and becomes an arhat.**

“I have no love at all for anyone.”

**Neither mother nor father nor any other relative
can do that which a well-directed mind can do far better.
(*Dhammapada*, v. 43)**

From Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*:

The advanced meditator observes that all phenomena of the past, the present, and the future are impermanent. He comes to realize that the impermanence of phenomena in the past has caused him suffering, and the impermanence of phenomena in the present is causing him suffering. Therefore, he makes a conscious decision to remain completely detached from all phenomena in the future, in order to bring about an end to suffering.

A mother accompanying her three sons to the execution ground:

“Seeing that her oldest son’s head had been cut off, and that her middle son’s head was being cut off, she let go of [any] attachment for her youngest son, [thinking,] ‘This one, too will be just like them.’”

A mother who becomes pregnant with a son eleven times in a row, the first nine of them stillborn, the tenth one dying in her arms, and the eleventh one still in her womb:

“Seeing that nine of her babies had died, and the tenth was dying, she let go of [any] attachment for the one in her womb, [thinking,] ‘This one, too, will be just like them.’”

From Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*:

FOUR BRAHMAVIHĀRAS

loving-kindness (P. *mettā*)

**a mother's love for her
baby son**

compassion (P. *karuṇā*)

**a mother's love for her
sick son**

sympathetic joy (P. *muditā*)

**a mother's love for her
adolescent son**

equanimity (P. *upekkhā*)

**a mother's love for her
adult son**

Ambivalence of Mother-Love

“On the one hand, mother-love is idealized as intense, compassionate, and self-sacrificing in nature, made akin to the Buddha’s love for all beings or the Buddhist meditator’s cultivation of loving-kindness, and consistently elevated above father-love in this regard. On the other hand, mother-love is negatively portrayed as being overly exclusive and ultimately selfish in nature, and is perceived as a pernicious form of attachment keeping one bound within the realm of samsara . . . As metaphor, maternal love is idealized; as reality, it is ultimately condemned.” (Ohnuma 2012: 22)

The Mother-in-Grief

- an iconic embodiment of suffering
- seems to share the spiritually stunted status of animals
- often described as being driven into madness because of her grief

BUT: Even such a mother is able to attain nirvana.

In the *Therīgāthā*, 5 out of 73 poems exhibit the same pattern: A mother loses her child to death and is driven completely insane by her grief. She then encounters the Buddha (or one of his disciples), who gives her a teaching that snaps her out of her grief and allows her to regain control of her wayward mind, whereupon she becomes a Buddhist nun and goes on to attain nirvana.

How does this dramatic transformation take place?

(1) Always involves a movement from the *particular* to the *universal*, from the personal emotion of grief to the abstract truths of death and suffering, from the death of one particular child to the endless cycle of death and rebirth that characterizes the entire universe.

(2) This transformation is made possible only by erasing the specific identity of her deceased child, permanently severing the mother-child bond, and eradicating her status as “mother”—it is a “de-mothering” of the mother.

Ubbirī

Overcome with grief upon losing her infant daughter Jīva.

[Buddha]: “Eighty-four thousand [daughters],
all of them named Jīva,
have been consumed
in this cremation ground—
for which among them do you mourn?”

jīva = “living being”

Paṭācārā



(Temple mural from Nava Jetavana Temple in Śrāvastī)

**Goes insane
with grief upon
losing her
husband, two
sons, parents,
and brother.**

[Buddha]: “Sister, get a hold of yourself! For just as you are now shedding tears, on account of the death of your sons and so on, so also, the tears that have been shed within this round of rebirth, without beginning or end, on account of the deaths of sons and so on, is greater than the water of the four great oceans.”

“My sons are both dead. My husband is dead on the road. My mother, father, and brother have been cremated in a single heap.”

“Just as this water is subject to destruction and loss, so too are the conditions resulting in life for living beings.”

Kisā Gotamī and the Mustard Seed



(From *Illustrated History of Buddhism*, Young Men's Buddhist Association, Burma, 1951)

“Who can count those who have died here?”

**“This is not the doctrine of a village,
the doctrine of a town,
nor the doctrine of a family.
This is the doctrine for the whole world
of [human beings] and gods:
All of this is impermanent.”**

**“Her heart, which had been soft with
mother-love, grew hard.”**

(Dhammapada Commentary)

**Susan Starr Sered, “Mother Love, Child Death,
and Religious Innovation” (1996)**

Women-dominated religious traditions = offer the possibility of reestablishing contact with deceased children and maintaining regular, ongoing relationships with them, thereby denying the finality of death and the complete severance of the mother-child bond

Dominant, patriarchal religions = interpret child death in abstract and universal terms, terms that sever the interpersonal mother-child relationship and erase the identities of specific, deceased children

**“particular dead babies rather than
dead babies in the abstract”**

Hārītī



—a *yakṣiṇī*
(female demon) in
the city of Rājagṛha

—married to the *yakṣa*
Pañcika

—mother to 500 sons,
of whom the youngest
(and her favorite) is
Priyaṅkara

—steals and devours
the human children of
Rājagṛha

(All translations taken from Peri 1917)

“Hārītī, because you no longer see just one of your five hundred sons, you are experiencing such suffering. So what must be the suffering of those whose only child you take and devour?”

“Others love their children, just as you do . . . [and they, too,] go along the streets and lament, just like you.”

“It is because you yourself love your own son that you eagerly run around, demanding to see him. Why, then, with such cruelty do you continually devour the children of others?”



—her son is restored to her
—she becomes a loving mother
once more
—she will be enshrined in
every Buddhist monastery
—monks will make food offerings
to her and her children every day

In exchange:
—she will protect all
Buddhist monasteries
—she will grant children
to the childless and cure
children who are sick

Sid Brown on modern Thai Buddhist nuns (*māechī*):

“It appears that *māechī* are making a new role for themselves, combining the qualities of the ascetic role that are so admired of men in Thailand with those of the mother/nurturer role so admired of Thai women.”

(Brown 2001: 116)

As a consequence, many *māechī* have become “contemplative-activists” who engage in a variety of social campaigns that often focus on bettering the lives of mothers and their children. These nuns are “renunciants who nurture”—and their path is “a new kind of spirituality, a woman’s spirituality” that is unique to nuns and not held in common with monks.

(Brown 2001: 141)

Ciji Gongdehui (Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation) of Taiwan

“. . . the largest civic organization in Taiwan, claiming 4 million members worldwide in 1994, and nearly 20% of Taiwan’s population. It gives away well over US \$20 million in charity each year, runs a state-of-the-art hospital, and has branches in fourteen countries.”

(Huang and Weller 1998: 379)

“I realized that I used to love too narrowly. I had only two children, whom I was killing with my possessive love. And I was never happy with this aching love. But now I have so many children. I see everyone I help as my own child. I have learned that we have to make our mother love into a world love.” (Huang and Weller 1998: 386)

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Thank you for listening!

Questions? Comments?