

Mother Love in Buddhism

Buddhism defines the ideal mother as an example of universal love, the middle way, and bodhisattva path. In patriarchal dominant cultures, this ideal has limited women to the role of self-sacrificing mother, especially the mother of sons. Traditional China is examined as the model of this oppression. Within Buddhist philosophy, everyone is innately capable of transformation and awakening. Although there is no concept of guilt, there is a concept of regret or remorse. Yet in western cultures most people are taught that they are guilty of sin from birth. For women in Christian society, this sin has been passed down through the first mother, Eve, who dared to seek knowledge. However, in Buddhist thought, there is no such taint against women. Nevertheless, patriarchal dominant cultures also adapted Buddhist philosophy to suit their mores. Yet, in spite of these patriarchal constructs of what it is to be a mother, what we learn from our mother, her love and nurturance to us as children, is what makes peace possible. This peace may be achieved through the bodhisattva ideal. In the same way that a mother loves her only child, a bodhisattva loves all beings. She knows the suffering that life promises, the pain and sorrow at the loss of loved ones, the ravages of old age, disease and death. A bodhisattva, whether male or female, returns to reach out from his/her rung on the ladder of life and help others.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings

—*Metta Sutta, Sutta Nipata 143-151*

Buddhism is filled with rich imagery and metaphor of the ultimate love being like the ideal love of a mother for her child. In Buddhist philosophy, there is no

greater love than that of a mother for her child, nor almost any greater sacrifice than a woman giving her body for the birth of a child. Motherhood is thus revered for its lessons of love and sacrifice. Yet, motherhood is also disparaged for its attachment to the child because it is through attachment that one experiences suffering. This essay examines the love of a mother idealized in the many Buddhist *suttas* and writings as an example of universal love, the middle way, and *bodhisattva* path. Also discussed are the roles of motherhood in patriarchal dominant, Buddhist cultures, particularly in traditional China.

Within Buddhist philosophy, everyone is innately capable of transformation and awakening. Although there is no concept of guilt, there is a concept of regret or remorse. In western cultures, however, most people are taught that they are sinners from birth. For women in Christian society, this sin has been passed down through the first mother, Eve, who dared to seek knowledge. However, in Buddhist thought, there is no such taint against women. Nevertheless, patriarchal dominant cultures of the East also adapted Buddhist philosophy to suit their mores. Yet, in spite of these patriarchal constructs, motherhood and what we learn from our mother, her love and nurturance to us as children, the *bodhisattva* ideal, is an avenue to peace.

Universal love

The state of universal, unconditional love for all beings is known as *metta*, loving-kindness. The goal of *metta* is the desire for people to be happy. It is unconditional. Yet, before offering love to another, one must love oneself. The Buddha teaches that if you can sustain a loving mind for as long as a finger snap, you can achieve *nirvana*, ultimate truth (Dharmasiri, n.d.: 43).

Developing a mind that dwells in loving-kindness delivers you from the suffering of self-concern and attachment. To accomplish this, the Buddha encourages his followers to strive for a mind that is one-quarter loving-kindness, one-quarter compassion, one-quarter appreciative joy, and one-quarter equanimity (Bodhi, 1995: 43:1). These four qualities are known as the *Brahma-viharas*, the Divine Abodes or Four Immeasurables (Harderwijk), of which the first is *metta*, loving-kindness.

The second Immeasurable, compassion or *karuna*, is the desire to end the suffering of others. The idealized mother of Buddhism incarnates this paragon of self-less devotion and compassion toward her children. According to Buddhist practitioner and author, Sharon Salzberg (1995) :

It is compassion that removes the heavy bar, opens the door to freedom, [and] makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. Compassion takes away from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of self. (frontispiece)

We can envision *karuna* embodied as a loving mother who's every thought

and action carries the intention to heal her sick child. It is the dying mother who with compassion tells her young children that life is like waves on the ocean, unique yet part of the whole. Each wave crests then returns to the ocean from which it came.

Compassion is also understanding and acceptance. It breaks down the barriers of duality that have been created by patriarchal culture. Compassion is the wish that all beings be free from suffering. This understanding and acceptance characterize a mother's unconditional love for her child. If we can love each other as a mother loves her child then we shall know compassion.

Happiness at the good fortune of others defines *mudita*, appreciative or sympathetic joy, the third Immeasurable. It is an unselfish state requiring the complete absence of envy or jealousy. *Mudita* is a foreign concept in our competitive, western societies. *Mudita* insists that we not consider beneficial resources as finite quantities. Just as a mother always has enough love for all of her children, there is enough joy to celebrate the successes of others.

The fourth Immeasurable, equanimity or *upekkha*, is a state of love, compassion, and joy for the happiness and well-being of others. Equanimity is not indifference. As a mother, equanimity is the realization that although you love all of your children equally, their temperaments dictate that you treat them differently. For example, one child may be sickly and requires more attention to her health, while another does well in school and requires more freedom to explore on her own, while the third may need more stroking to allay her insecurities. A mother loves all her children while recognizing their individual needs.

In our relations with one another, equanimity is recognizing that our relationships are often built upon the arbitrary: a compliment or praise can make a friend, while an unkind word or criticism makes an enemy. Equanimity is the ability to see beyond the arbitrary and superficial, and recognize that we all want the same thing in our lives, ultimately that we and our loved ones achieve happiness. Once we come to this understanding we can regard all beings in the same way.

Equanimity, *upekkha*, means balance. The goal of this Immeasurable is to equate our love and compassion toward all beings and balance emotions such as elation and depression, joy and sorrow. It is letting go of the anxiety and fear of living, of dying, giving in to the void of uncertainty, and trusting in the law of cause and effect, *karma*.

Treating all living beings equally is significant in light of the Buddhist belief in rebirth. The Buddha taught that it would be difficult to find a being that had not been your mother, father, brother, sister, son or daughter in a former life (Dharmasiri, n.d.: 45). Salzberg contends that in the endless round of rebirths, we have done it all: loved, hated, feared, killed, maimed, raped, saved, and served (1995: 185). In Buddhist philosophy, there is no separation from any living being because we have been everything and done everything before; no one is inferior or superior to anyone else. Each and every life is

interrelated and interconnected. The great master of Buddhist philosophy, Nagarjuna, reasoned:

If we divided this earth into pieces the size of Juniper Berries, the number of these would not be as great as the number of times that each sentient being has been our mother.

The middle way

Buddhism is the way of the Middle Path, or Middle Way. Before and since the birth of the Buddha known as “*Uākyamuni*,” many spiritual seekers have looked to either asceticism or hedonism as a way to enlightenment. Having followed both roads and finding no fruit himself, the Buddha urged us to discover for ourselves the path of no extremes. As the Theravadin monk, Narada, emphasizes:

Like a mother who makes no difference between herself and her only child and protects it even at the risk of her own life, even so does the spiritual pilgrim who follows this middle path radiate his thoughts of loving-kindness identifying himself with all. (1988: 326)

Buddhism teaches that by following this middle path we may end suffering and *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth and death, or the persistence of existence, and find enlightenment.

The middle way consists of eight rules to live by, the Noble Eight-fold Path: right understanding, thoughts, speech, actions, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Thoughts of love and understanding given to all beings are right thoughts. The Buddha instructs us that love and understanding has the potential to ease the suffering of all beings (Nhat Hahn, 1991: 33). Understanding that in life there is suffering and pain, that the cause of this suffering and pain is thirst, craving and desire, and that the way to end this suffering is the middle way, the Noble Eight-fold Path, is the nature of wisdom and right understanding (Rahula, 1978: 49). This deep understanding constitutes the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.

The role of motherhood

In some predominantly Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, women are often called *matugama*, a Pāli word that means “mother folk” or “society of mothers” (Narada, 1988: 311). In such patriarchal dominant cultures, one of the few ways a woman can achieve a place of honour is as a mother. During the time of *Uākyamuni* Buddha, it was expected that a woman become a mother and bear sons, ten sons being the ideal number (Murcott, 1991: 75). Motherhood was regarded as “a convenient ladder to ascend to heaven”; by fulfilling her maternal role a woman earned her place in the higher realms (Narada, 1988: 311).

Moreover, a woman could achieve high regard in becoming a mother. In *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentaries on the Therigatha*, Susan Murcott quotes the Brahman Vaisista as he asserts:

The teacher is ten times more venerable than the assistant teacher, the father a hundred times more than the teacher, and the mother a thousand times more than the father. (1991: 77).

Lama Tsering Everest teaches that in the Mahayana tradition, there is no more venerated and exalted action than bearing the pain that allows another living being to have a precious human birth and a chance to attain enlightenment (Mandell, 1995: 57).

A mother thus embodies wisdom, self-respect, self-esteem, strength, pride, compassion, honor, caring, listening, kindness, logic, forgiveness, and love. Idealized motherly love may be considered a prototype for all love:

If we contemplate on our own mother's kindness towards us, our fondness for her will grow. Before our birth we were protected and preciously carried in her womb.... Our presence there was not only a great physical burden to her, but was also a responsibility curtailing her freedom of action.... At birth, we gave great suffering to our mother, yet she forgot this at once and rejoiced as though she had found a precious gem. We had no control over our physical functions, yet she felt no revulsion towards our vomit or excretions and cared for us gently.... Without her constant attention we would not be alive now. (Murcott, 1991: 77)

As virtuous as a mother's love is, not just any woman can birth a Buddha. She must be the Right Mother. A woman who gives birth to a Buddha must be "exceptional in every way" (Paul, 1985: 63). In preparation for the birth of the Buddha *Uākyamuni*, Maya, his mother, vowed to her husband, King Suddhodana that she would bring no harm to any living thing neither by theft, intoxication, frivolous speech, slander, falsehood, envy, nor false views. Instead, she would live a life of chastity, "amity to all," and "practice in the eleven moralities" (Paul, 1985: 63). Queen Maya died a few days after the birth and was reborn as a *deva* in the Tusita Heaven.

Additionally, the very earth on which we live is our mother. She bears witness to our disrespect in the form of environmental degradation and weapons of war and suffers in silence. Yet, thus far, she is unfailing in her forgiveness of all that has been done to her. Indeed, in Buddhist thought, sacrifice is integral to motherhood.

The *Sutra about the Deep Kindness of Parents and the Difficulty in Repaying It* enumerates the ten kindnesses, or sacrifices, that are bestowed by the mother on her child:

The first is the kindness of protection and care while the child is in the womb.
The second is the kindness of bearing suffering during the birth.
The third is the kindness of forgetting all the pain once the child has been born.
The fourth is the kindness of eating the bitter herself and saving the sweet for the child.
The fifth is the kindness of moving the child to a dry place and lying in the wet herself.
The sixth is the kindness of suckling the child at her breast and nourishing and bringing up the child.
The seventh is the kindness of washing away the unclean.
The eighth is the kindness of always thinking of the child when it has traveled far.
The ninth is the kindness of deep care and devotion.
The tenth is the kindness of ultimate pity and sympathy.
(cited in Nicholson, n.d.)

Diana Paul critiques the feminine image in Mahayana Buddhism, arguing that “motherhood represents suffering, pain, bondage and dependency” (1985: 61). For Paul, within Mahayana Buddhism, “Motherhood falls into the realm of secular, not sacred” and the goal is to be liberated from the suffering and other fetters of motherhood (61). Accordingly, Paul insists, “The mother cannot be free from suffering or from the attachments to existence because of her attachment to her children” (66). Moreover, as further exemplified in the *Sutra of the Child and His Five Mothers*, a woman may be bound and severely limited by the role of mother and her relationship to her child (cited in Paul, 1985: 65).

Motherhood in traditional Chinese Buddhism

As Buddhism spread and flourished in other countries, it was coloured by the differing cultural contexts in which it found itself. China serves as a perfect example because of its pre-existing philosophy of Confucianism and the emphasis it places on honouring parents. Author and historian of Asian religions, Alan Cole (1998) notes that in traditional China, filial piety was demonstrated through the relationship of father and son (2). Buddhism in China also recognizes the special emphasis on the relationship between mother and son but the kindnesses of a mother to her child are a debt to be repaid. This “Repaying the Kindness,” *bao en*, involves making donations to the local Buddhist monastery for frequent services and recitations of the Buddhist texts, a practice, which produces merit while it counteracts sin (Cole, 1998: 3). The cycle of debt and repayment is conceived as: “(1) the son’s sense of indebtedness to the mother, which needs to be repaid by (2) the son patronizing a Buddhist establishment, which claims to have (3) the means to save mothers from and resolve the ‘debt-crisis’ in the family” (Cole, 1998: 2). The underlying threat is

the ill fate of sons and daughters who fail their mothers (Cole, 1998: 207).

Central to the practice of traditional Chinese Buddhism is the belief that woman is intrinsically tainted while man is less tainted. Any goodness garnered by a woman comes through mothering a son (Cole, 1998: 10). Consequently, a son's wife is viewed as a threat to the filial piety of the son as she may derail him from his duty and seek his love as her own (Cole, 1998: 76). In the *Sutra on the Filial Son*, "mother love" is sanctioned as safe and family-promoting while the love of the "other woman," including a wife, is seen as dangerously against the family and society (Cole, 1998: 132).

Purity and taint are also played out in the mother's anatomy. The upper half of the mother, which includes face and breasts, is considered good, as they are sources of nourishment. The lower half of the mother is reviled for its reproductive power and uterine blood, considered the vilest substance in the cosmos (Cole, 1998: 230). Cole points out that the mother "has made a double blood sacrifice": milk was a sacrifice of "white blood," a kindness given by the mother compounding the debts to be repaid, just as the blood from the mother's vagina is the sin that must be counteracted (Cole, 1998: 231).

Yet, the mother is known as "the loving parent" (Cole, 1998: 29) and, accordingly, there is no stronger love than a mother for her son (Cole, 1998: 139). In the *Sutra on the Profound Kindness of Parents*, the son is thus encouraged to return this love and fall in love with his mother not as she is, but with a younger, idealized version of her (Cole, 1998: 149).

Whereas in other Buddhist traditions a mother is exemplified for traits such as her wisdom, compassion, and clear-sightedness, in China, with the exception of Kwan-Yin, she has no elevated cosmic stature (Cole, 1998: 227). Nevertheless, a child is encouraged to follow a mother's instructions to gain the protection of the gods and win good fortune (Cole, 1998: 269, n. 37). As exemplified in the *Sutra of the Bodhisattva Kwan-Yin*, the conditions to be born in Pure Land are explained as being like a mother on her deathbed who instructs her sons to awaken to the thought of enlightenment and repay the kindness of parents by embarking on a career as a *bodhisattva* (Paul, 1985: 265).

The Bodhisattva path

A *bodhisattva* desires the welfare and happiness of the world. In the same way that a mother loves her only child, a *bodhisattva* loves all beings. A *bodhisattva* so loves the world that she is willing to give her life again and again for the benefit of others. She knows the suffering that life promises, the pain and sorrow at the loss of loved ones, the ravages of old age, disease and death. Whether male or female, a *bodhisattva* returns to reach down from his/her rung on the ladder of life and pull up those he/she is able to help. It takes tremendous courage to pledge the vow of the *bodhisattva*:

May I attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings, and may I not enter final nirvana until I have helped the last blade of grass to attain

nirvana. (Dharmasiri, n.d.: 92)

In the *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha exhorts that no one should follow him at his word but should make every effort to attain his/her own perfection. This is the guiding principle of the *bodhisattva*. Before the Buddha attained enlightenment, he perfected himself through many lifetimes as a *bodhisattva*. Perfecting himself is to say that the Buddha recalled our interrelatedness and interconnection with all life. This path consists of three main stages: preliminary devotional practices; generation of the thought of enlightenment; and practice of moral perfections, paramitas (Dharmasiri, n.d.: 89). The greatest of these perfections is the *Prajnaparamita*, *the Perfection of Wisdom*, and “Mother of All the Buddhas.” The supreme excellences, or paramitas, are the energy of Mother *Prajnaparamita* manifesting spontaneously through the sincere practitioner (Boucher, 1997: 61).

The Great 25,000 Verse Prajnaparamita Sutra is considered the founding text of the Mahayana school of Buddhism and the second turning of the wheel of the *dharma*. The text celebrates the matrix of existence and perfection of wisdom, *Prajnaparamita* (Boucher, 1997: 64). The “Mother of All the Buddhas” gives birth through her wisdom to the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy (1991), calls her: “Mother of the *Tathagatas*,” “Mother of the *Sugatas*,” “Mother of the *Bodhisattvas*,” “instructress of the *Tathagatas* in this world,” and “genetrix and nurse of the six perfections” (109). Thus, wisdom is honored as the image of the mother. The Buddha’s disciple, Shariputra, sings beautifully about her in the *Mystic Hymn to the Wisdom Mother*.

She is worthy of infinite praise. She is utterly unstained, because nothing in this insubstantial world can possibly stain her. She is an ever-flowing fountain of incomparable light, and from every conscious being on every plane of being, she removes the faintest trace of illusory darkness (cited Hixon, 1993: 17).

Prajnaparamita, Mother of the Buddhas, is wisdom teacher. The feminine character of this wisdom has been conveyed in the vivid imagery of the eager *bodhisattva* being called “a pregnant woman on the verge of birth,” “a mother ministering to her only child,” and “a man who has a date with a good-looking woman” (Macy, 1991: 109). Lex Hixon, in *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra* writes that to the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, *Prajnaparamita* “is their true nature, matrix, guide, power and bliss” (1993:116)

Prajnaparamita compassionately reveals the world to us, as it truly is, *yathabutham*, not by cradling, cuddling or clasping us to her bosom but through her wisdom and clear-eyed vision (Macy, 1991: 111). The Buddha teaches that all beings suffer and therefore inspire in us and need our compassion. *Bodhisattvas* spring forth from this terrible dream of suffering to liberate us as mothers. Like

mothers, they love us as their children, especially a newborn baby. With natural love and compassion, asking nothing in return, *Bodhisattvas* sacrifice their lives to end human suffering. This love is the heart of compassion. Hixon claims, “*Bodhisattvas* ... become [the] Goddess *Prajnaparamita*’s fully conscious expression” (1993: 40).

Mother *Prajnaparamita* gives “birthless birth” to awakened enlightenment and *bodhisattvas*, their spiritual daughters and sons, through the “radiant blackness of her womb” (Hixon, 1993: 96). They drink of her “mother’s milk” to sustain their “courage and compassion” (Hixon, 1993: 4). She is endless, *ananta*, like space (Macy, 1991: 110). She is the circle with no beginning and no end. She calls us to be born from her womb as *bodhisattvas*, ready to reach out and improvise through her wisdom, the *upaya*, skillful means (Macy, 1991: 113). Faith in her means letting go of all illusions, accepting the void, and freeing yourself from fear. Her mantra contains the entirety of Perfect Wisdom: *Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi, Svaha!* (Gone, gone, everyone gone, go to the other shore, to enlightenment, Rejoice!)

The *bodhisattva* ideal is expressed through the examples of compassion of Kwan-Yin, Amitabha and Tara. Kwan-Yin is known as a mother figure for those who have need of a mother and is the “maternal aspect of the Mahayana Buddhist ideal” to some (Paul, 1985: 266). Amitaba, Buddha of the Pure Land, in this instance depicted as a woman, was her compassionate, dying mother who advised and inspired her daughter, Kwan-Yin, to pursue the *bodhisattva* path (Paul, 1985: 266). Tara’s name means “One Who Saves.” So great is her compassion for all living beings and desire to prevent their suffering, that Tara’s love is said to be stronger than a mother’s for her children. In the *Tara Tantra*, she is known as the “Mother of the Buddha of All Three Times” and the compassionate savior of all beings.

Conclusion

As the Theravadin Buddhist monk and historian, Walpola Rahula observes, “The love of a mother for her child is neither Buddhist nor Christian: it is mother love” (1978: 6). Mother love is not unique to Buddhism. The image of a mother breastfeeding her baby is one of the most potent images of human love (Davidson and Harrington, 2002: 71). True peace lies within each of us, whether Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Jew, or any of the other numerous spiritual practices and religions of the world, and it can be found by reconnecting with the power of our mother’s love, not the martyred motherhood of patriarchy but the guilt-free affection that nurtured us when we were children. Sharing this love with the world as a mother shares her love with her children is one avenue toward peace and may be our greatest gift to another.

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