

BUDDHISM AND MOTHERHOOD

by Daya Dissanayake

This is an attempt to understand how Buddha may have seen Motherhood, and how Motherhood could have been accepted by his followers.

MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood will be with us as long as the cycle of rebirth continues, or till the last living creature achieves Nibbana, or becomes a non-returner. In modern terms, till as long as multi-cellular creatures depend on biological reproduction, with the female caring for the fertilized ovum, Motherhood will be with us.

We have a Pali gatha to worship Mother.

Dasa mase urekatva-posesi vuddhi karanam
Ayu digham vassasatam-matu padam namamaham

(For protecting me within the womb - for almost ten months,
and for bringing me up well, I worship the feet of my Mother
wishing her a life of a hundred years)

In the Mitta Sutta we have “mata mittam sake ghare”¹ (Mother is one’s friend at home).

We would never know the exact words of the Buddha on any subject, but from what little we know of Buddha Dhamma today, we do not need any further confirmation that Buddha had held Motherhood in the highest esteem and respect, and that a Mother is a living Brahma or a Deva as believed in South Asia.

Based on the widely accepted biography of Gautama Buddha, he had not been fortunate to receive the love and affection of his biological Mother. Yet he would not have missed the Motherly love

1. SN 1.6. Jara Vagga, Mitta Sutta

that was due to a child, because, Maha Prajapati Gotami nursed him and cared for him, just as if he was her own flesh and blood. Buddha in turn had loved and respected Prajapati Gotami as his own Mother with the highest regard a person could have for another. This has been described in Buddhist literature, including the Mahapajapati Gotami Apadana in the Khuddaka Nikaya, by reporting the incident where Buddha followed closely behind the corpse of Prajapati Gotami at her funeral.

A true symbol of Motherhood should have been Mahamaya Devi, not only for delivering the Bodhisattva Siddhartha, but for bringing him up. The biography of the Buddha records that the Mother died seven days after giving birth, but they do not describe how she died. It is well known that maternal mortality rate would have been very high in the mid first millennium BCE, but such high mortality would have been only more common among the oppressed and the downtrodden women, than among the women of royal and elite families.

The mystery of Maya Devi, birth of Buddha and the place of birth continues to-date, as excavations at Lumbini had revealed pre-Ashokan and even pre-Buddhist evidence as a place of worship. Robin Coningham et.al. reports “Not only was there evidence of permanent constructions older than the Asokan temple but the presence of non-durable architecture had also been identified. Radiocarbon samples from two contemporary posthole fills (contexts 553 and 557) provided dates of 799–546 BC and 801–548 BC (Table 1), suggesting an extremely early delineation of sacred space within this locality, and pushing activity at Lumbini far before the reign of Asoka.”²

An attempt has been made to link the early evidence of fine organic materials and possible wattle and daub structures to the platforms found in early Anuradhapura period in Sri Lanka where platforms had been erected at the foot of Bo trees (*Ficus religiosa*). However so far there is no evidence of a Bo tree at the place of the Maya Devi temple. If Lumbini had been a sacred space before the

2. Coningham R. et.al (2013) *The Earliest Buddhist Shrine: excavating the birthplace of the Buddha, Lumbini* (p. 1109) Antiquity Publications.

time of the Buddha, then it could have been a place of worship of a tree goddess or a Mother goddess, a symbol of Motherhood, for fertility and safe childbirth, and the sacred tree could have been a Sal or Asoka. Perhaps subconsciously the place would be considered by some as a Buddhist sacred space with Maya Devi as a Mother goddess, or a symbol of Motherhood.

After the death of Maya Devi, her sister, Prajapati Gotami steps in to fill the place of the biological Mother, and becomes the symbol of Motherhood. But it was much later that the Buddhists began to consider her as a Mother figure, and with the influence of the Christian concepts, certain Buddhists sects are believing in a ‘Virgin Mother’ of the Buddha. ‘

“Mata yatha niyam puttam,
Ayusa ekaputtam anurakkhe,
Evampi sabbabhutesu,
Manasam bhavaye aparimanam”

“Just as with her own life, A Mother shields from hurt, Her own son, her only child, Let all-embracing thoughts, For all beings be yours.” (Karaniya Metta Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya)

Mata pitu upatthanam,
Putta darassa sangaho,
Anakula ca kammanta,
Etam mangala muttamam

“The support of Mother and father, the cherishing of spouse and children, and peaceful occupations, this is the supreme blessing” (Maha Mangala sutta)

Buddha Dhamma will always be with us, whatever creed we believed in, whether we live in Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, Thailand, China, United Kingdom, Russia or the United States, because it is a universal truth.

SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka we have a saying that our “Mother is the Buddha

at home”. Another is a wish “May our Mother attain Buddhahood”, a few decades ago, men got the words tattooed on their chests. In our culture Mother has always come first, Mata Pitu. Mother and Father.

We have a unique position of the relationship of Buddhahood and Motherhood. Many centuries ago, our Buddhist poets used the term, ‘Ama Meniyo’ to call Buddha as the Mother, the Mother who feeds us Amrta or guides us towards Nirvana. Buddha Dhamma is one with Motherhood, and as long as Motherhood is with us,

Over the past two or three millennia, Sri Lanka had an environment most suitable for the people to understand and accept Buddha Dhamma. Metta, Loving kindness, was inherent among the people. They would not have hurt any other living creature, intentionally, for food or for fun. There had been more than enough vegetable matter for their food, in the fertile tropical climate. Violence, even the concept of violence, would have been totally absent. Our ancestors would have been gatherers of floral material, and not hunters. The study on prehistoric cave paintings done by the archaeologist Prof. Raj Somadeva, did not find any scenes of hunting, which convinces me that there lived only gatherers and there could not have been any hunters, or even hunter-gatherer communities in our country. It raised a question in my mind if king Devanampiya Tissa had really gone hunting to murder an innocent deer, when he met Arhat Mahinda thero. That is why I believe Sri Lanka would be the most suitable country to study the relationship of Motherhood and Buddha Dhamma.

The Sri Lankan Sinhala Buddhist also worship a ‘Mother Goddess’ known as ‘Pattini Meniyo’. Her origin is South India, and known among the Tamil Hindu Community in Sri Lanka as ‘Kannaki’ from the epic Silapadikaram of Ilango Adigal. “In the low country infectious diseases and children’s illnesses were cured by Pattini. In other areas this role was taken over by Kiri Amma; sometimes the Kiri Ammas were viewed as servants of Pattini, sometimes as manifestations of her.”³

3. Obeysekere, Gananath (1984) *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*. (pp 293-96) Chicago. Chicago University Press.

“Pattini was the ‘good Mother’ and the ideal wife, and people propitiated her for the welfare of crops and from freedom from disease. Pattini is a future Buddha. The good Mother image used to be institutionalized in the public pantheon. The bad Mother appeared in the image of the evil demoness Kali.....since Pattini no longer can combine in a single image both the emotional and the practical, the loving Mother is projected onto another omnipresent being in the public pantheon – the Buddha himself. The Buddha, as contrasted with Pattini, has little say over man’s material interests: people do not ask him for health, wealth or freedom from disease. The purely loving aspect of the Mother can be canalized into the figure of the Buddha, who appears in the contemporary ‘Bodhi Puja’ cult as the ‘Mother Buddha.’⁴

There are also many regional female deities among the Sri Lanka Buddhists, and sometimes even shared with the Hindu community, who are often accepted as Mother figures. They are addressed as ‘Amma’ (Mother), even if they themselves had not borne children. One such deity met with in the deep South is “Amma Hamuduruwo” while ‘Hamuduruwo’ is the term of address of a Buddhist monk. ‘Maha Loku Amma’ is considered as the elder sister of God Saman at Sri Pada (Adam’s Peak).⁵ It is also recorded in the Pali chronicles that God Saman was requested by the Buddha to take care of the Buddha Dhamma established in Sri Lanka. We also have ‘Tevani Amma’ and Valli Amma’ as the consorts of God Skanda at Kataragama, again shared by the Buddhists and the Hindus. Mother Earth is always considered as ‘Mahi Matha’ and is worshipped, whenever the farmers begin their new planting season or whenever man disturbs the earth. ‘Kiri Amma’ (A woman who had produced milk and nursed a child during her lifetime) is considered an assistant of Pattini Amma and they are offered alms (made of coconut milk as a substitute for cow’s milk), specially when children suffer from infectious diseases.

Tara is accepted as a goddess and a Bodhisattva, in most of the

4. Gombrich, R & Obeyesekera G. (1988) *Buddhism Transformed*. (pp. 159-62) New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

5. Manamperi, Manohari. (2017) *Mother, A tribute to my mother*. Colombo. Godage.

Buddhist countries, including Sri Lanka. Though in Pali and Sanskrit Tara is often taken to mean ‘star’, “the more popular approach in Buddhism is to interpret Tara’s name as coming from the causative form of the verb t,r ‘to cross’, ‘to traverse’ or ‘to escape’. So we reach the idea of ‘she who ferries across’, ‘she who saves.’”⁶

Tara is also believed to have been born from a teardrop shed by Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva in his compassion on the pain and suffering of humanity. Tara is a later introduction to Buddhism, probably in the 5th or 6th century C.E., and though she has not been considered as a Mother figure, but venerated as a feminine deity, with Buddhists seeking her help, specially in Tibet and Nepal. In Sri Lanka people pray to Avalokiteshvara for health and wealth. We find Tara’s figure, along with Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, in Ajanta and Ellora, too. In Sri Lanka Several statues of Tara had been found, dating back to about the 8th century C.E. She has close similarities to Brahmanic Durga and Parvathi. In China and Japan Kuan Yin is the iconic figure close to Tara.

Dr. Raja de Silva, (former Commissioner of Archaeology) claims that the famous frescoes at Sigiriya are of the goddess Tara, and even the small terracotta figurines found at Sigiriya resembling the paintings are also of Tara.⁷ Even if we accept Raja de Silva’s idea, we do not have anyway to connect it to the veneration of Motherhood, in Sri Lanka around the 5th century CE.

Since there had not been a Mother figure in the Buddhist tradition, in the popular religion, to satisfy the need of a mother figure, other female deities or legendary figures may have been absorbed into popular Buddhism in the same manner the Hindu gods had been accommodated.

BRAHMA-VIHARA

All Mothers, (sabbe satta, human or animal) cultivate Brahma-viharas (sublime attitudes) – Metta, Karuna, Mudita, Upeksha. Motherhood is a higher state than the masculine and the feminine.

6. Dharmacari Purna, Tara: the origins and development http://www.westernbuddhist-review.com/vol2/tara_origins_a_development.html accessed 11/10/2017

7. de Silva, Raja (2002). Sigiriya and its significance. (pp. 85-123) Sri Lanka. Bibliotheque

In conceiving, carrying, delivering and caring for a child, she goes through an experience which no man could ever imagine. In Buddhism Mother becomes one with the universe, or the Brahma. Her love is pure and unselfish, like the love of a Buddha, or a true god.

“Living with Brahma are those families where, in the home, Mother and father are revered by the children. Living with the first devas are those families where, in the home, Mother & father are revered by the children.” (Itivuttaka 106 Thanissaro translation).

In the Sabrahma Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya, Catukka Nipatta) Buddha is reported to have said -

“Bhikkhus, those families are with Brahma, where the Mother and father are worshiped by their children. Those families are with the first teachers (pubbācāriyā), where the Mother and father are worshiped by their children. Those families are with a former god (pubbadeva), where the Mother and father are worshiped by their children. Those families are worthy of reverence (ahuneyyā) where the Mother and father are worshiped by their children.

“Bhikkhus, Brahma is a synonym for Mother and father. The First teacher, is a synonym for Mother and father. A former god is a synonym for Mother and father. Worthy of reverence is also a synonym for Mother and father. What is the reason, Bhikkhus? Mother and father have done a lot for their children, feeding them and showing them the world when they were helpless.”

Addition of the father, is probably a later dilution of what the Buddha may have said, where Mother had been mentioned. Even though we have to accept a father’s contribution in the creation and the development of the new life, it is almost negligible when compared to the role of the Mother. It is well explained in the Filial Piety Sutra treasured in the Far East among the Chinese, Japanese and the Koreans since the time of the Sui and T’ang dynasties (589 – 906). “The Sutra presents probably the most touching descriptions of the Mother’s kindness that one can find in literature.”⁸

However even in the Filial Piety Sutra patriarchy raises its

8. Sung, Kyu-taik. (2001) The Kindness of Mothers: Ideals and Practice of Buddhist Filial Piety. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A%3A1011360216052>

head, adding the need for piety towards Father and Mother. The Sutra is probably influenced by the ancestral worship met with in the Far East, as it begins with the question by Ven. Ananda about Buddha worshiping a pile of bones, and Buddha's response, "This pile of bones could have belonged to my ancestors from former lives. They could have been my parents in many past lives" The entire Sutra is about the love, suffering and sacrifices of the Mother. Buddha further explains that a Mother's bones are black in colour and light in weight, because of the drain on the Mother's body whereby the child takes milk for its nourishment. Each child relies on its Mother's milk for life and nourishment and the milk is the transformation of the Mother's blood and the Mother becomes worn and haggard. The Sutra gives details of the nine months the child is in the Mother's womb, what she suffers during this time and the pain at childbirth. Next we learn of the ten types of kindness bestowed upon the child by the Mother. Yet the Sutra is about filial piety towards parents, though it does not mention any about the contributions of the father.

We come across our previous Mothers in the Mata Sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya, "At Savatthi. There the Blessed One said: "From an inconstruable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating and wandering on. A being who has not been your Mother at one time in the past is not easy to find... A being who has not been your father... your brother... your sister... your son... your daughter at one time in the past is not easy to find." This is probably a simple way to remind people that we are all of the same blood, we are all related and equal in society, whatever labels we may come under. Mother's love is pure and unselfish, like the love of a true god. She can feel love, empathy, kindness through sharpened senses.

FEMININITY

Motherhood has often been associated with the feminine, and in a patriarchal society as the inferior, weaker, second sex, even though in reality, in the entire animal kingdom, the female is the stronger, superior and more intelligent sex. Motherhood is a higher

state than the masculine and the feminine. A Mother rises beyond the mere female or the male. She can feel love, empathy, kindness through sharpened senses. From the moment her ovum is fertilized by a spermatozoa, she becomes the creator of a new life, she becomes one with the universe, while she nourishes the embryo with her own blood, and then with her own milk, and throughout the life of the progeny, with true loving kindness. Since Buddha was trying to show the path for all humanity to escape from their suffering, he would never have discriminated against the women or had any bias based on caste, gender or social status. However cultural factors had greatly influenced the inequality even in the Buddhist society after Buddha.

The patriarchal society still sees the Mother as just a woman, or they refuse to see the Mother as she truly is. However much Buddha had tried to place the Mother above men and women who had not entered Motherhood, the society, managed to drag the Mother down into femininity, in every culture and society, even where Buddhism spread, except perhaps in Sri Lanka to some extent.

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Kancha Ilaiah tries to describe the position of women in the pre-Buddhist society in India, the way he understood it. “The Indus Valley culture of equality had been reduced to oblivion. After this the Rig Vedic brahmanical society was established in which women lost all their social and political rights”⁹ It is only during the time of the Buddha that she was able to regain at least some of her lost status.

The rules for householders and the duties and responsibilities mentioned in the Sutta Pitaka are most probably later inclusions, influenced by the Vedic norms, as mentioned in the Satapatha Brahmana. By this time Manu, Kautilya and Vatsyayana had added their contributions to enslave women even in the teaching of the Buddha, in the later literature.

9. Ilaiah, Kancha. (2001) *God as Political Philosopher*. (p. 181) Kolkata, Samya

As the Mother was pulled down to the feminine, and the gender division in society, however much Buddha preached against all inequality, the Mother was still a prisoner of the culture, of the social norms. She was compelled to care for her children in addition to all the other household chores. That is why among the Bhikkhuni Sangha, in ancient India, we have come across mostly grandmothers who did not have any domestic responsibilities, young unmarried women and courtesans, who never had any domestic duties. Many of them were also rich, with their own wealth, or enjoyed the wealth and power of their families. That is probably why we find 500 matronly women following Maha Prajapathi Gotami to seek ordination and to found the Bhikkhuni Sasana. We also find 500 ladies from the royal and elite families in Anuradhapura following queen Anula to establish the Sri Lanka Bhikkhuni Sasana on the arrival of Sanghamitta theri.

The young Mothers with young children had greater responsibilities at home, and did not have the time or the selfish interest to seek their own salvation, by leaving their children unattended. Many young mothers would not have been able to leave the household and become a Bhikkhuni, because they would not have enjoyed the services of domestic servants to care for the children and attend to the chores of the household. Sometimes they would have been compelled to earn their living too, to feed the children. We do not hear much about such helpless, suffering mothers, and they would have been the mothers who reached the true Brahma state mentioned by the Buddha.

We also find many Mothers, lay disciples, who have placed their names in Buddhist inscription as they have donated residential caves, monasteries and other beneficial gifts to the Buddhist institutions and the Sangha from the time of the Buddha. At the same time, archaeologists have not been able to find any relics or relic stupas containing the remains of any of the female Arahat or Bhikkhunis, either in India or any of the other Buddhist countries. There is literary evidence, recorded centuries later, of the relic stupa of Maha Prajapathi Gothami or Sanghamitta theri, with no archaeological evidence discovered so far. This does not mean that the Bhikkhuni Mothers were ignored or forgotten, but the influence

of the male Sangha and even the kings, would have ensured that any relics of the Bhikkhunis were pushed back into oblivion, and buried forever. Yet Motherhood would have continued to be venerated and respected, among the Buddhist community.

The closest the Indian subcontinent would have come to venerate Motherhood could have been during the time of Ashoka, brought about through his Ashoka Dhamma, but unfortunately with his demise and the collapse of the Chandragupta dynasty the re-emergent Brahmin power allowed the male laity to push women and Mothers back to servility.

Ashoka always had equality in his mind, as we read in his inscriptions. He inscribed, “save munisa pajā mamā” - All men are my children”. (1st Separate Rock Edict) munisa would have meant all human beings, not just men. When he inscribed “sādhu mātari cha pitari cha susrusā” - meritorious is obedience to Mother and father-, significantly Mother came first. (3rd Rock Edict). But in the 9th Rock Edict he blames “Mothers and wives practicing many and various vulgar and useless ceremonies” (translation Hultzsch p. 38). Probably he had been ill-advised that it was the Mothers and the womenfolk who organized all pagan festivals, which contradicts his other statements elsewhere..

However Ashoka appears to have ignored his Mother, and even the Mother of his own children (Mahinda and Sanghamitta), as he makes no mention of them. Among the Mothers of all his children he only mentions the second queen, “Kāluvāki, the Mother of Tivala”, for some unexplained reason. There may not have been any regard for Motherhood in his non-Buddhist environment. Even if he favoured Buddhism, he apparently had not taken any interest about Buddha’s Mother, or step-Mother or to search for their relics. If the place of birth of Buddha was important to him, the Mother who gave birth to Buddha too should have been of importance.

“The Buddha preached to both men and women and recognized the spiritual potential of women.....The woman’s place within the family contributing to the spiritual aspects is well recognized in the sermons of the Buddha and the literary works which emerged around the doctrine. The Mother brings stability, care, patience and

compassion into the home, but is yet capable of dynamism, activity and even physical exertion.....The inability to grasp the distinction between the lifestyle of the householder and the recluse has resulted in misunderstanding the place of women in Buddhism....the virtues in which they (women) excel and the spiritual heights they attain, as well as the magic power they have in converting a house into a home, are central to a Buddhist perspective on women.”¹⁰

Thus we have to also accept that Buddha would never have refused or delayed at ordination of Bhikkhunis, or lamented that with the entry of Bhikkhunis the Buddha Sasana will not last 500 years, or that he had laid special Vinaya rules for Bhikkhunis to be subservient to Bhikkhus. Because most Bhikkhunis would have been Mothers by the time they were ordained, and had cultivated the four Brahmavihara by then, through the love for their children, and through the children to all life on earth. Self-discipline would always be a part of the life of a mother, even before she was ordained.

Much is written and reviewed about Maha Prajapati Gotami’s battle to be ordained as a Bhikkhuni, about Buddha’s refusal to admit women to the ‘Sasana’, and how Buddha’s closest disciple, the young Ananda, convinced Buddha to admit Gotami and her followers.

If Buddha at first had refused to ordain females and to create a Bhikkhuni Sasana, the reason, in some instances, may have been because of his genuine concern for the woman or her family, specially when the woman had to take care of her young children. Buddha would have realized the child’s need for the Mother. With Buddha’s infinite knowledge he would also have known that a woman could follow the path shown by the Buddha, even if she remained a lay person, and a Mother perhaps was placed in a far better position to attain Arhathood as she cared for her children and her family, as she was able to cultivate Brahmavihara.

“A female lay disciple grows in conviction and virtue, discernment, generosity and learning: she takes hold of the essence

10. de Silva, Padmasiri (1987) The concept of equality in the Theravada Buddhist school. in R. Siriwardena (Ed.) Equality and religious traditions of Asia, (pp. 74 – 97) London, Frances Printers.

right here within herself.” (Vaddha Sutta, SN 37.4). A woman, specially a Mother, who has listened to the Buddha, who had developed a greater awareness of Brahma Vihara, who was stronger in mind, and even her body, as she has undergone so much pain and sacrifices would have realized she could be an Arhat whether she remained at home or in the forest. She would also have known that she was needed by her family, that she could be of service to her family and society at the same time she could reach her own salvation. There would not have been a need to leave the household.

SEE BUDDHA THROUGH OUR MOTHER

Buddha Dhamma is one with Motherhood

We may never be able to discuss Motherhood and Buddhism in a rational manner based on available literature. The original words of the Buddha would not have been preserved during his lifetime. because by the time the words were committed to writing, so much could have been changed, omitted or added on. When his words were passed down orally for generations, what was written later may have been far from the original words. The meanings of the words would have been different, in different dialects or regional languages, even in the 6th century BCE. Over the past twenty six centuries the meanings would have changed many times over.

All we could accept is the Four Noble Truths, pointing humanity towards the end of his samsaric suffering. And we needed the four Brahma Vihara to achieve it. We can accept that Buddha would have realized a Mother would be the most eligible person to achieve Nibbana. He may never have felt a need to tell his followers to respect and worship their Mother, because it is inherent in living creatures, because anyone trying to follow the Path would have realized the position of Motherhood, that the Mother was the living Buddha at home. This was realized by the Sri Lankan Buddhists when they say the Mother is the Buddha at home.

Once we realize that Motherhood deserves all our respect and to be considered sacred, we shall be able to show our respect to all womankind. We shall then realize every girl-child is a Mother-to-be, and need all our loving care as she grows up, and such respect for Motherhood will continue throughout our lifetime. If as Buddhists

we really want to worship Buddha, let us worship our Buddha at home, our mother. May our Mothers attain Nibbana.