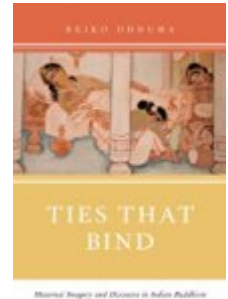


Reiko Ohnuma. *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-991567-5.



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Motherhood is a fertile metaphor employed toward various ends in Buddhist texts representing many genres and sectarian concerns. Motherhood, at least from the perspective of one who has been a child, is universally intelligible in visceral, precognitive terms (not to get too Freudian, but everyone has had a mother). Of course, anyone might have had the first-hand experience of being a mother, too—though the vicissitudes of *saṃsāra* would obfuscate empirical lessons learned.

What makes motherhood an ideal metaphor for grappling with more profound elements of Buddhist soteriology, though, is its distance from the experience of those who use it. Motherhood is at once a proximal source of knowledge and inspiration (a familiar, recognizable site for negotiation of dharmic ideals), and at the same time, in both genetic and social ways, “a lingering tie that simply *could not be broken*, despite one’s renunciation of worldly life” (p. 5). In narratives written by and for monks, the mother—as image, metaphor, character, and, as Reiko Ohnuma argues, “iconic embodiment”—finds remarkable

salience, given the community’s putative central concern with renunciation of family life (p. 8). In *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*, Ohnuma surveys a rich narrative landscape, lingering on the usual suspects (the Buddha Gotama’s own two mothers Māyā and Mahāprajāpatī) among the surprising number of mothers productively utilized in a vast corpus, and drawing attention especially to generative stories of other mothers. She examines both the utility and the limitations of mother imagery and discourse in premodern Buddhist texts. Her subtitle might subtly mislead, as her survey exceeds (in both spatial and temporal terms) anything that might reasonably be understood by “Indian Buddhism.” But Ohnuma is well aware of the immense scope of her broader intellectual endeavor: “to understand a general ‘Indian Buddhist discursive world’ that displays remarkable consistency over time in terms of narrative themes, character-types, plotlines, conventional tropes, similes, metaphors, and images” (p. 6). In *Ties*

That Bind, her choice of motherhood is the binding tie.

Scholars familiar with Ohnuma's work will recognize here a good deal of material she has profitably mined in the past. Chapters 1 and 2 derive almost wholly from earlier work published in 2007 in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, as do chapters 3-5, published in 2006 in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.^[1] In this book, however, Ohnuma has further developed her general argument about the palpable and productive ambivalence toward the mother that is evident across a huge range of Buddhist texts. Here she fruitfully juxtaposes such ideas as maternal grief and debt to the mother, and steps back from the immediacy of the metaphor to question the work it does, both for the community that initially imagined it and for its sustained power. The generally felt ambivalence toward motherhood manifests itself in her appraisal of the narratives that wrestle with the complementary but contradictory characters Māyā and Mahāprajāpatī. She concludes that "Māyā, the idealized birth-giver, through her early death, spares her son both the guilt of abandoning his mother and the anxiety of being obligated to repay her, whereas Mahāprajāpatī, through her nurturance, care, and survival, allows the Buddhist tradition's renunciant sons an avenue of expression for guilt, anxiety, indebtedness, and other components of a complicated human relationship" (p. 112). She also advances a line of feminist ambivalence about the centrality of such mothers, emphasizing the tension inherent in recognizing both the identity of women with men (to bolster an argument for equality) and the differences (to valorize the unique attributes of women, especially in terms of procreation).

In her introduction, Ohnuma charts her course with an impressive caveat: "I am aware that my methodology, which is historicist only in a very broad sense, goes against the current cult of historicity that has increasingly come to charac-

terize both Buddhist Studies and the humanities as a whole" (p. 7). She is clear that her attention will be less on actual mothers than on "the *theme* of motherhood and the *figure* of the mother" characteristic of the "South Asian Buddhist imaginary" (p. 8). But she expresses the hope that she might nevertheless "catch ... an imaginative glimpse of *actual human mothers*," venturing that her work is motivated by "a desire to understand Buddhist texts as the products of people much like ourselves--the sons (and daughters?) of their mothers" (pp. 8, 9).

Chapter 1, "A Mother's Heart Is Tender': Buddhist Depictions of Mother-Love," introduces examples of mother-love, son-love, and father-love, as well as good and bad mothers, with cross-examinations of the use and effectiveness of each trope. Ohnuma gently enters her survey of the discourse with her unsurprising observation that there is a difference between particular and general mother-love. Mother-love is described in intimate, emotional terms, and represents on an emotional level a model of compassion for those cultivating loving-kindness; but when examined, the value of the trope is in the particularity involved in characterizing the intensity of mother-love (as in love for an only son): "Because one's own children are more highly valued than other people's children, because sons (in premodern South Asia) are more highly valued than daughters, and because an only child is more highly valued than one of many children, it is only the mother's love for 'her son, her only son' that reaches the intensity that allows it to serve as an appropriate metaphor for the love of the Buddha" (p. 15). She thus argues that the relationship between a mother and a son imaginatively exerts "a particular force" (p. 31). At the same time, it is its particularity and extremity that make mother-love a hindrance on the path; it is the ultimate tie that binds one to (in) *saṃsāra*. Mother-love is thus a manifestation of ambivalence, "a double-edged symbol that simultaneously succeeds and fails" (p. 15). The chapter culminates with an examination of

the erasure of the particular mother that is effected by the tradition's development of the imaginative idea (to be cultivated in meditation) that affection toward all sentient beings is warranted just insofar as all such beings have been, or will be, one's mother.

Chapter 2, entitled "Whose Heart Was Madened by the Loss of Her Child: Mothers in Grief," examines maternal grief as a "potent symbol of intense suffering--a heightened version of the suffering that entraps all deluded beings within *samsara*" (p. 38). Asking "how can a paradigmatic embodiment of attachment and suffering be transformed into a detached and saintly ideal?" (p. 39), Ohnuma plumbs familiar stories from the *Therīgāthā* of various grieving mothers who become nuns, showing that "mother-love is incompatible with the idealized state of enlightened detachment, and the particularistic love of the mother stands in stark opposition to the universal compassion espoused by the Buddha" (p. 50). She applies the work of Susan Sered, noting the particular "salience" the death of a child holds in the religious expressions of women (p. 39). Yet "the mothers of the *Therīgāthā* thus speak with a 'patriarchal' voice--'patriarchal' not in the sense that these women have been subordinated or suppressed by men but, rather, in the sense that they have adopted without question the universal and abstract values typical of patriarchal, male-dominated religions and have fully made such values their own" (p. 50). Ohnuma recounts several stories as counterexamples to the violent "de-mothering" of the grief stories. One particular exception is the transformative tale of Hārītī. Hārītī is called "Mother-of-demons" in the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*, "extant only in Chinese and most likely a Chinese composition" (p. 58). This particular tale most compellingly supports Ohnuma's thesis that particular love for one's own child might be transformed into general love for all children, indeed, for all sentient beings. The *yakṣiṇī* Hārītī was terrorizing Rājagṛha, stealing and eating others' (human) children until the Buddha hid her fa-

vorite of her own five hundred sons under his alms bowl. Hārītī's profound grief at his absence offers a teaching moment (to Hārītī within the narrative, and to all outside it) when the Buddha suggests that her own extreme grief at losing just one of so many sons pales in comparison to the grief of the mothers from whom she has taken an only child. This, however, is a somewhat problematic choice if the goal is contemplating the ties innate in the human condition, as Hārītī is a *yakṣiṇī*--decidedly nonhuman--which may have deeper soteriological implications.

In chapter 3, Ohnuma trains her focus on Māyā as "idealized birth-giver," and "the ultimate 'good' mother--one who fulfills her birth-giving function in a clean and pleasant manner and then quickly gets out of the way" (pp. 66, 67). She says Māyā is "an idealized embodiment of the Maternal Function--she is Woman as Mother and Birth-Giver, and nothing else whatsoever" (p. 67)--little more than the vessel that is only partly responsible for Gotama's birth. Ohnuma explains that Māyā's expeditious and convenient death "'freezes' her in the role of Mother, by disallowing any further narrative development of her character" (p. 81). She concludes the chapter with a comparison between Māyā and the Virgin Mary. Chapter 4 is devoted to a parallel focus on Mahāprajāpatī, and the "nurturance, guilt, and debt" involved in her characterization. She argues that Gotama's renunciation serves as a "social death" that results in Mahāprajāpatī's grief, exacerbating the feeling of debt he might be expected to have felt (p. 89). Chapter 5 considers the two mothers side by side, mainly in terms of the length of their lives and therefore the depth of their relationships with the Buddha. Ohnuma cites several Chinese sources here, broadening her survey. Ohnuma concludes that each woman exemplifies certain idealizations experienced by monks: laywomen as nurturing feeders (if spiritually less than capable), and nuns as "a troublesome presence within the Saṃgha through their demands for equality and respect," even if they were "often

spiritually capable” (p. 133). It would have been interesting, perhaps, to draw a starker parallel with the swiftness of Māyā’s physical and Mahāprajāpatī’s “social death” through renunciation; the particular ways in which each woman exits the scene may add to the emotional value they pique as characters.

Ohnuma then moves from the biographies of particular characters to both the particular and general, time-bounded biological functions and physical planes of mothers. Chapter 6 alternates between the fertile metaphor of pregnancy, which emphasizes the mother’s experience, and that of gestation, where the mother is reduced more or less to a container with the focus on what is being developed. Ohnuma contemplates particular cases where pregnancy is a generative metaphor: the “birth of Buddhahood” because of Sujātā’s nourishing offering (p. 135); Yaśodharā’s pregnancy and the birth of Rāhula as a process parallel to the bodhisattva’s renunciation, asceticism, and enlightenment (p. 139); the bodhisattva as a pregnant woman, according to which metaphor “the ‘aspiration to enlightenment’ (Skt. *bodhicitta*) that initiates the bodhisattva career might be seen as the moment of conception, the bodhisattva career itself as a long and often-difficult pregnancy, the ten stages through which the bodhisattva passes as the ten lunar months of gestation, and the final attainment of Buddhahood as the climactic moment of birth” (p. 146); the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) as the “Mother” of all buddhas (p. 148); and the “son-centered nature” of the pregnancy metaphor for the enlightenment process in the Mahāyāna concept of *tathāgata-garbha* (p. 154). In chapter 7, Ohnuma explores the form and function of breast-feeding as a metaphor for compassion, and returns to the idea (introduced earlier) of “displacement” as a powerful rhetorical strategy in mother-centered texts—that is, “a process by which all of the lingering emotions the son still feels toward his mother are given elaborate and affectionate expression, but only after being redirected or displaced onto an-

other, suitably Buddhist object” (p. 168). She contends that “emotional commitment” to Buddhism is triggered when mother metaphors are employed and redirected (p. 170). This chapter concludes with a rather imaginative comparison of breast-feeding with the shocking acts of self-sacrifice evident in stories of the bodhisattva.

Chapter 8 examines “motherhood on the ground,” and reflects on the work of Ohnuma’s earlier chapters through the lens of recent work in feminist theory (particularly the work of Patrice DiQuinzio, Sara Ruddick, and Susan Sered). From this perspective, Ohnuma develops the fresh insight that past scholars have overlooked *positionality*; the Buddhist tradition’s focus on, or even valorization of, motherhood (as meditation, metaphor, or motive) is almost entirely from the child’s (usually son’s) perspective, and not from the mother’s own perspective.

Ties That Bind belongs in the same scholarly conversation as Liz Wilson’s *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (1996) and John Powers’s *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (2009). It is suitable for classroom use, providing extensive primary materials in translation, and being likely to stimulate productive discussion.

Note

[1]. Reiko Ohnuma, “Mother Love and Mother Grief: South Asian Buddhist Variations on a Theme,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 1 (2007): 95-116; and Reiko Ohnuma, “Debt to the Mother: A Neglected Aspect of the Founding of the Buddhist Order of Nuns,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2006): 861-901.

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