

Review of Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, xiii + 262 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-991567-5

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In *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*, Reiko Ohnuma combines rigorous scholarship, attention to detail, and an enviable clarity of writing to produce an engaging and thought-provoking work. With *Ties That Bind*, Ohnuma contributes to the ongoing discussion about gender and Buddhism with a necessary exploration of the diverse concepts of the mother and motherhood in Indian Buddhist writings. Many of the mothers under discussion are idealised or stylised portrayals – incomplete figures used to illustrate a particular concept – often at the expense of their realism. Ohnuma maintains that ‘Buddhism had a complex and ambivalent relationship with mothers and motherhood’ (2012: 4), using mothers as iconic figures to embody ‘types or interpretations’ of motherhood (2012: 8). Ohnuma strives to balance her discussions of iconic representations of motherhood with the occasional, fleeting glimpse of the ‘actual’ mothers of the monks writing the texts.

The sources which are encompassed under the heading of ‘Indian Buddhist texts’ are explained in the Introduction as textual works (as opposed to visual depictions) ‘primarily from premodern South Asian Buddhist literature preserved in Sanskrit and Pali’, (2012: 6) although a few sources are Chinese or Tibetan translations of Pali and Sanskrit works which are no longer extant. Overall, the sources are a wide-ranging set, across schools and types of Buddhism, time periods, and geographic locations.

Shortly after defining the scope of the sources, Ohnuma discusses her uses of ‘mother’ and ‘motherhood’: she is seeking the ‘worldly, mundane, and very human’ (2012: 7) mother figure rather than ‘any notion of a Universal Mother, Archetypal Mother, or Eternal Feminine Principle...’ (2012: 7). For example, one common depiction portrays mothers as embodied representations of *samsara*, while another employs the mother figure to highlight how spiritual pursuits

(associated with the masculine) are preferable to worldly pursuits (associated with the feminine).

This book can be divided roughly into four sections. The first two chapters detail Ohnuma's concept of mother-love, the 'love a mother has for her child' (2012: 11). As evidenced by the sources referenced, it appears that the South Asian Buddhist literary concept of mother-love is either idealised to the point that it is unattainable for the average woman, or denigrated and used as the clearest representation of all that is undesirable about *samsara*: attachment, strong emotions, clinging, and desire. Mother-love is further examined in Chapter 2 through examples of women whose grief at the loss of a child overpowers them. Here Ohnuma draws on poems from the *Therīgatha* to provide examples of what she terms radical 'de-mothering': a process where the mother's grief is eradicated by severing the bond between mother and child, therefore 'eradicating her status' (2012: 42) as a mother. Only then is the (former) mother able to attain liberation. Ohnuma emphasises that this transformation frames motherhood as utterly incompatible with spiritual advancement. Other examples in Chapter 2 demonstrate, however, that there is some room for accommodation where motherhood is concerned.

The second section of the book, Chapters 3–5, contains a set of discussions around the figures of Māyā, the Buddha's birth mother, and Mahāprajāpatī, the Buddha's maternal aunt and his second mother who raised him. Through a series of critically analysed examples, Ohnuma shows that Māyā is depicted as the paragon of the 'good' mother in that she serves her function as a pure birthing vessel, leaves her son with no guilt or debt towards her, and then quickly dies. Ultimately, Māyā is neither realistic nor attainable as a model of motherhood, nor is she a complete figure. Her place in Buddhist history is confined to her birthing function, and although she becomes a heavenly deity after she dies, she is denied any additional spiritual development.

It is in Mahāprajāpatī that Ohnuma locates the realistic mother, the one to whom the Buddha owes a debt for nurturing him, and the one who goes mad with grief when her son renounces his princely life in favour of the ascetic path. As with the figures Ohnuma addressed in earlier chapters, Mahāprajāpatī is given the opportunity to transform her grief into spiritual development; not only hers, but that of a great number of other women who follow her as she seeks to create a renunciant path for Buddhist women. Ohnuma speculates that the Buddha is finally persuaded to accept Mahāprajāpatī's request due to the debt he owes to her for her tireless nurturing.

When comparing the two women, Ohnuma at first states that whereas Māyā is the 'good' and 'short-lived' mother, Mahāprajāpatī is the 'problematic' mother who does not neatly disappear. Such a precise division is not possible though, as Mahāprajāpatī becomes fully liberated from the attachments of motherhood and mother-grief, as well as the roles of wife and widow, by the time of her death. Ohnuma observes that Mahāprajāpatī becomes a symbol for the capability of all women to achieve liberation. Māyā is forever frozen as the 'good' mother-vessel and nothing more. Ohnuma concludes by observing that neither Māyā nor Mahāprajāpatī is a 'good' or 'bad' mother; both contribute to an understanding of the complex roles of motherhood and womanhood (as separate from motherhood) in Buddhist literature. Furthermore, Ohnuma likens the dilemmas faced by the Buddha regarding familial debt to that which was experienced by the monks who authored Buddhist texts.

The third part of the book considers the metaphorical representations of pregnancy, gestation, and breastfeeding. It is worth noting that these chapters are more speculative in nature and open to interpretation than previous chapters – a point Ohnuma readily acknowledges. This section explores the general devaluation, dismissal, or omission of the pregnant or breastfeeding woman in favour of her son, or the son's father. I found Ohnuma's examination of the pregnancy simile in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* particularly interesting, as it constitutes a prime example of many of the themes of *Ties That Bind* regarding mothers and motherhood: the generally low regard in which women and mothers are held, the valorisation of the child (a son) over the wretched mother, and the likening of the mother's body to a disgusting vessel that is best shed as quickly as possible. However, the following chapter on 'Breastfeeding and Compassionate Deeds', is perhaps the least convincing chapter in the work, especially Ohnuma's speculations regarding the similarities between bodhisattvas' gifts of the body and breastfeeding, which seem less grounded in the sources as compared to examples provided in other chapters.

The final chapter offers several additional examples of motherhood and spiritual development in early Buddhist literature, augmented by contemporary examples of living women successfully incorporating motherhood into monastic life. It is a fitting connection to the interpretations Ohnuma has offered of early Indian Buddhist writings to the contemporary world, as well as a means of considering what might have been in the past, a lived reality that could differ significantly from what the textual sources otherwise suggest.

Ohnuma's careful crafting ensures the work's accessibility for scholars and students in Buddhist Studies, Gender Studies, History, and Literature, as well as many other fields. The value of this book cannot be overstated: it contributes a vital perspective to the ongoing discussion of women in Buddhism, contains meticulous research that is amply supported by an impressive range of primary Buddhist sources, and serves as an excellent example of writing for a diverse audience.