

Mother tree

Mother's Day – with the apostrophe S – celebrates the mother in our home. She is not only the womb of the family, but its heart and hands. In early Buddhism, mother's love is celebrated in the Metta Sutta (the Discourse on Lovingkindness) as the epitome of unconditional love. We should love all beings just as a mother loves her one and only child. Indeed, a truly loving mother loves every one of her children as if each were her only one.

The most nourishing quality of a loving mother is her presence. We not only feel safe and good, like being in the shade of a cool tree, but we also feel that we are the most important person in the world in her presence. A child who receives such an unconditional love grows up to be a wholesome loving person with a healthy social effect on others. Such a love accepts us just as we are, so that we are capable of bringing forth the best of our potentials, especially becoming a true individual.

Our mother is the tree from which we flower into fruits. And as seeds, we must fall as far away from the tree as possible so that we are really free to be ourselves. If we remain within her shadow, then we would never grow. A wise loving mother prepares her child to be free of her in due course, just as her mother has done before her. A true mother's love is the solid ground on which a good and sure person stands and grows to live and love in her own time.

A vital part of Mother's Day should be that of reflecting that not everyone has the good fortune of the love of a happy mother. Many of us have been hurt or are being abused by our mothers. The bitter fruits of this are very clear: we find it difficult to love anyone, mainly because we have not been shown how. Since we know only hurt, we keep hurting others, especially those who truly love us.

So we are nothing but a mother's dark shadow. This is the worst that a mother can do for her child. In an important way, such a person has abandoned herself as a fount of love, and hence is only mother in body (biologically) but not at heart. This terribly upsets the natural order of things, as it is difficult for her child to show gratitude to her, since what defines a mother – unconditional love – is not there.

Yet a child must grow, even on her own, albeit painfully, slowly. If such a child has the courage and wisdom to fly from the dark shadows of unlove, she would surely rise from the mud of her sufferings to be a beautiful lotus in the bright sun, whose leaves no pain could stick to.

On the other hand, if the child is seen only as a mother's investment, then the child must patiently wait for the healing hands of change to mellow the mother in some way. Thankfully time takes away everything, mothers and all. Then we are free to look back with insight that our pains have wised us up: such a mother is a victim of her own circumstances. She was herself never loved, only a link in a painful legacy of unlove.

It is then time to forgive with compassion, to be kind to those even when they do not deserve it. In forgiving, we break the painful samsaric chains, so that we are truly free of the dark past, and look ahead to bright days of loving and being loved, and teaching others to love.

Motherhood, on the other hand, is not merely a gender role. A few of us, for various reasons, only have a father, some even from very young. Our father then must fulfill the twin roles of mothering and fathering. This is easier to imagine and act on if we see them as loving with the heart and the head, or with compassion and wisdom.

The heart aspect of mothering is that of *humanizing* a child. A child is only born with a human body, but not always a human heart. During the first seven years, mothering humanizes a child, and loving the child makes her a loving human.¹ Male mothering, if gently and properly done, has just the same effect. To feel loved empowers us to love.

If all this fails, Buddhism gives us a second chance, that is, learning to love ourselves. To truly love ourselves, we need rise above the self, as it were. We must see ourselves as we see those whom we like or love. We need to constantly hold an ideal or mental image of someone truly loving, in the spiritual sense.

In **the Sacca Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 141), the Buddha declares:

Emulate Sāriputta and Moggallāna, bhikshus! Associate with Sāriputta and Moggallāna, bhikshus! They are wise and helpful to their companions in the holy life. Sāriputta is like a child-giver [mother]; Moggallāna is like the child's nurse. Sāriputta trains others for the fruit of streamwinning [initial sainthood], and Moggallāna for the supreme goal. (M 141.5/3:348) = SD 11.11

First, we immerse ourselves in that total love: we accept ourselves unconditionally (“I accept myself just as I am.”) Then we direct that same unconditional love to others who are important to us, including animals. Visualize a beautiful white lotus in our hearts radiating with lovingkindness all the time.

Mentally radiate this light of lovingkindness to everyone around us, and to anyone we feel a need to direct it to, no matter how far away. If we feel strong enough, then we could also direct it to those who have hurt us. Before falling asleep, visualize that bright lotus gently radiant: sleep happily.

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¹ See “We are not born human” (RB 44): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/RB44-Not-born-human-111130.pdf>. On the humanization process, see **Love** = SD 38.4 (4.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.4-Love-piya.pdf>.