Motherhood(s) in Religions: The Religionification of Motherhood and Mothers' Appropriation of Religion

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“Like a Mother Her Only Child”: Mothering in the Pāli Canon

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Abstract: This paper examines mothers and mothering in the Pāli canon and commentaries and contends that a mothering path emerges when the deeply patriarchal traditional hierarchy of values is challenged and, following Karen Derris, the unthoughts related to mothers and mothering, which this hierarchy of values generates, are also challenged. The article focuses on three main female characters, Māyā, Mahāpajāpati, and Visākhā, whose paths as mothers or as lay followers of the Buddha who “stand in the position of a mother” constitute a deliberate soteriological path in the Pali Buddhist texts. It draws on contemporary Buddhist Studies feminist scholarship (in particular, the work of Karen Derris (2014) and Liz Wilson (2013)) as well as motherhood studies (in particular, Sara Ruddick’s (1989) work based on Adrienne Rich’s (1976) foundational distinction between motherhood as a patriarchal institution that oppresses women and mothering as women’s lived experience to outline how mothering activities in the Pāli canon can be discerned as a soteriological path that follows the same trajectory as the Buddha’s Bodhisatta path that begins with making a solemn vow (patthanā) and ends with awakening (nībbāna). I conclude that adopting this approach allows us to reenvisage activities and relationships usually understood as “this-worldly” in the canonical and commentarial Pāli texts, and in contemporary feminist scholarship, as the embodiment of a soteriology based on interdependence and compassionate care for others.

Keywords: Pāli Buddhism; Motherhood; Mothering; Matricentric Feminism, Māyā, Mahāpajāpati, Visākhā, soteriological path

1 Introduction

Women’s traditional roles of wife and mother described in Buddhist texts have long been considered suspicious by feminist scholars who decry them as enabling roles in which women’s function is to support the men around them.1 Rita Gross, who identified forcefully as a Western Buddhist and a feminist, claimed that Western Buddhists had “the [unique] opportunity and the [heavy] responsibility to manifest Buddhism after patriarchy.”2 This claim follows a discussion of Asian Buddhism which she sees as deeply patriarchal,  

1 This article is based on three papers presented at the three international workshops on mothers, motherhood and mothering held at Erfurt in 2018 and 2019 and published in workshop proceedings. The papers have been overall reworked to form a coherent whole that offers a theoretical framework and brings together the different threads of the Buddhist “mothering path”, but some sections have only been lightly edited. The titles of the papers, workshops and subsequent proceedings appear at the beginning of each relevant section. Herein, I reference translations of the Pāli texts when relevant, and indicate in parenthesis the Pāli Text Society editions of the Pāli texts. I include the Pāli Text Society editions of the Pāli texts in the bibliography when it is my translation.

2 Gross, Buddhism, 27.
and of Buddhist Asian women’s roles as limited, remarking that, unlike Western women, they do not have a “full and complete participation” in Buddhism. The implicit assumption is that their participation is limited because they cannot become nuns. Setting aside the patronizing attitude towards millions of non-Western Buddhists and their culture, this claim reveals another implicit attitude that regards lay communities and roles as less worthy and valued than monastic communities and roles and focuses exclusively on the latter as “superior” and uniquely suited to developing “detachment, insight and freedom”. I am not claiming that Pāli Buddhist texts do not value the monastic lifestyle as more conducive to liberation, or that they do not usually describe the householder’s life as “crowded and dusty … not [conducive to] the holy life utterly perfect and pure”. Instead, I question any feminist project that seeks only to secure a seat at the patriarchal table rather than to overthrow it. As Gross and others recognize, Buddhism, in its many iterations and developments, is an androcentric and patriarchal tradition, in which male human beings are the norm, and the values and roles associated with them are considered superior to those associated with female human beings. In that, not unsurprisingly, Buddhism fully embraced the Brahmanical worldview in which it developed. However, any approach that considers monasticism superior to lay-life implicitly, but nonetheless entirely, embraces and reproduces the patriarchal hierarchy of values embedded in this model – a model which has historically been dominant, and which continues to be presented as the Buddhist path.

My project is to show that challenging the patriarchal hierarchy of values is made possible by providing an alternative Buddhist (and feminist) reading of the Pāli canonical, para-canonical and commentarial texts. Alongside the dominant soteriological path based on detachment, social separation and the focus on one’s own spiritual development as the ultimate good, the Pāli texts delineate a soteriological path based on compassion, interdependence and connection, embodied in what I call the “mothering path”. The androcentric tradition, which Rita Gross rightly denounces, paid little heed to this path, not because its values emphasize the symbiotic relationship between lay and monastic people, and the interdependent spiritual growth and development that ensues from such a relationship but, I argue, because the path and its values were, and continue to be, more closely associated with women and particularly with mothers in the texts and in practice.

Many feminist scholars unreflectively adopt the patriarchal hierarchy of values as the grounding of Buddhist thought and practice without questioning it. In an illuminating article, Karen Derris argues that “we have trained ourselves to read [in a way that] makes an interpretation that denigrates women expected”. According to her, feminist scholarly analyses of mothers in Buddhist texts that see them merely as enablers or “passive vessels” reveal the “unthought” that “mothering is an obstacle to Buddhist soteriological transformations”. She demonstrates that it is possible to interpret canonical stories of mothers, such as that of the Buddha’s stepmother and milk-mother, Mahāpajāpatī, or the well-known account of Kisāgotamī’s senseless and desperate search for a mustard seed that, the Buddha told her, would allow him to revive her dead son, in a way that does not “participate in continued oppression” and recognizes that the experience of mothering can serve as the grounding for the understanding of Buddhist truths such as impermanence.

Expanding on Karen Derris’s approach, I want to show that feminist scholarship on mothers suffers from the unthought that results from adopting the Buddhist patriarchal hierarchy of roles and values that

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3 Since, at the time of Gross’s writing, women in Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhism were still not allowed to seek higher ordination, whether in the West or in Asia, her claim that Western women, unlike Asian women, participate fully rests on her perception that Western women engage in intensive meditative practices, while Asian women do not (Gross, *Buddhism*, 25-6).
4 Gross, *Buddhism*, 31.
5 M I 179 for example. See also texts such as the *Dukkhinā Vibhanga Sutta* (M III 253) in which the Buddha lays out the benefits that result from making offerings to a range of beings with the best being the *sangha* (the Buddhist monastic community), or a *sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* that explains that monks and nuns are like excellent fields or waterproof pots, while lay men and women are like middling fields or leaking pots, so they cannot be taught the Dhamma in the same way as the monastic community (S IV 315). Other passages clearly rank the monastic community above the lay community in terms of spiritual capabilities and achievements (e.g., M I 466-8, D II 91-3).
6 Derris, “Interpreting”, 66.
7 Ibid., 65. Derris borrows Charles Taylor’s expression which he explains in a discussion of the ethical dimensions of interpretation as “one’s own framework, beliefs and values (that) can constrict one’s theoretical imagination.” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, 428, cited in Derris, “Interpreting”, 65).
8 Derris, “Interpreting”, 67.
ranks male monks engaged in isolated meditative practices at the top of the hierarchy and female lay-followers making food offerings at the bottom. This unthought, to use Derris’s words, “limit[s] interpretive possibilities” and, I contend, prevents us from highlighting, and drawing on, existing canonical narratives that do not support the dominant ideology, or leads us to dismiss these narratives as marginal. As a result, our scholarly work continues to devalue and dismiss laity’s roles and functions (and therefore women) in Buddhist communities and to overvalue and consecrate monastic roles and functions.

2 Mothers, Motherhood, and Mothering and the Pāli Buddhist Texts

Narratives focusing on women, especially mothers, are dismissed as irrelevant to the Buddhist discourse, especially the serious business of attaining nibbāna. Mothers are only “enablers” or “passive vessels” and their spiritual trajectory is rejected as a possible source for a “usable past for women” because they do not constitute “valued pursuits and leadership roles”. However, it must be asked: who values these pursuits? Who decides which leadership roles are more important or worthy than others? Questioning the patriarchal hierarchy of values may allow us to recognize different pursuits as valuable, and other roles as important and worthy, for example pursuits that seek to support and promote others’ spiritual development and well-being (is the Buddha not the prime role model in this regard?) which are encompassed in the lay and mothering roles. Care must be taken not to simply recognize them as such within the existing hierarchy of values, but to recognize them as equally important and worthy as others. In fact, it may even be argued that they are socially more important, because without people performing these functions, societies do not survive, or barely survive – in the case of Buddhism, the monastic community is institutionally dependent on lay support for its survival. The danger is that this approach may be construed as validating social structures in which female human beings assume these supportive functions. Actually, feminist scholars argue that narratives in which women’s traditional roles are praised, especially that of mother, are included in canonical texts because they legitimize and normalize the existing gender structures, and justify women’s position by providing them with an explanatory and satisfying soteriological scheme. Indisputably, these texts serve this purpose – when canonical or commentarial texts explain the result of making an offering of one’s only possession (a handful of rice-gruel or one’s old tattered garment for example) to the Buddha as rebirth in a deva-mansion, it illustrates the practice of generosity as the foundation of the Buddhist path, but also provides a strong incentive (and justification) for potential donors to donate to the Buddha’s heirs, the Buddhist monastic community. However, such an interpretation, entirely valid from a social-scientific perspective, risks denying agency to the donors from a hermeneutical perspective. In the same way, viewing women’s decision to become wives or mothers merely as the internalization of patriarchal oppression denies any agency to the women who make this choice.

However, I do not intend to contend that women’s roles as mothers and lay followers should be glorified, but rather that the roles themselves, and the values associated with them, must be recognized as valuable and crucial in the Buddhist tradition, not only because the discourse that devalues and dismisses them is a product of an oppressive and exploitative ideology and reflects its values, but because they are worthy Buddhist paths. When the focus is almost entirely on the monastic role, patriarchal values are implicitly endorsed and reproduced. There is further a failure to acknowledge that being a lay follower, or even a mother, may be a consciously chosen, valid and valuable, soteriological path, and that the values and practices associated with this path are not only deeply Buddhist, but the foundation of Buddhism itself.

9 Derris, “Interpreting”, 65.
10 In fact, it is also certainly true that these roles and functions are devalued and dismissed because they are usually performed by women.
11 Gross, Buddhism, 20, 22.
12 See, for example, Collins’s discussion of the renouncer status in the Pāli texts as the highest spiritual goal, but not accessible to, nor desirable for all (Collins, Nirvana, 33-5).
13 Although, historically and, at least for the foreseeable future, only female human beings can bear and give birth to offspring, every other aspect of mothering can be performed by human beings of any gender.
The Buddhist texts I focus on here are the canonical and commentarial texts of the Theravāda tradition, the form of Buddhism practiced in South and Southeast Asia. Scholars agree that the Pāli canon (named after the language in which it was transmitted) and its commentaries, as extant today, were for the most part closed by the 5th century CE in what is now Sri Lanka and, therefore, they provide a fairly accurate account of the first thousand years of what is now Theravāda Buddhism.14

The vast majority of the texts are concerned with male figures: the Buddha is a man who teaches primarily monks and laymen, with a few discourses directed to female lay disciples and, in certain sections of the canon, to nuns. These texts were composed and transmitted by males for males,15 and, as Stephanie Jamison notes in her study of women in Vedic texts, we have to face the fact that we are not going to hear an authentic woman’s voice ... because those preserved have no doubt [been subjected to] some processes of adaptation to conform better to orthodox norms and aims.16

How do we, then, shift the focus from male figures to, not only women, but mothers if there is not only a paucity of texts describing them, but also valid suspicions about their representing an authentic experience? As noted previously, feminist scholars are concerned that the narratives describing (and usually commending) women’s roles as mothers only serve to legitimize women’s status and restrict their roles in society. Jamison, however, also argues that it is possible to discern cultural patterns and realities through a close analysis of a tradition’s texts, and especially of those passages that are not explicitly concerned with women, (for my purposes, Mothers and mothering), because they “tell us things they do not know they are saying” which, taken together, “produce a remarkably telling conceptual portrait”.17

Adrienne Rich famously distinguished motherhood as an oppressive patriarchal institution from mothering as women’s authentic and lived experience of being mothers, in her path-breaking work, Of Women Born. She not only emphasized that the practice of mothering women engage in can be separated from the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood imposed on them, but she also recognized that the experience of mothering may bring joy and fulfillment to women.

Sara Ruddick further conceptualized mothering, first by identifying “mothers as anyone who “takes upon oneself the responsibility of childcare, making its work a regular and substantial part of one’s working life” and, secondly, by articulating the work of mothering as a distinctive practice, which she defined as “collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims”.18 This practice requires a form of “maternal thinking” distinct from that of other practices and specific to it (for example, she discusses how “maternal work” and “maternal thinking” are different from “caring work” and the form of thinking it entails).19 The three demands the practice of mothering places on those who engage in it are preserving the child’s life, promoting the child’s growth and socializing the child according to his or her social milieu, and, she argues, anyone committed to meeting these demands is undertaking maternal work, which can be performed by any human being regardless of their gender.

Adopting an interpretative approach that challenges the patriarchal hierarchy of values and recognizes women’s agency, and supposing that some of the descriptions of mothers, mothering behaviors, similes and metaphors found in the Pāli texts may not serve solely to legitimize motherhood as the institution but also reveal some aspects of women’s authentic and lived experience, I aim to outline a soteriological path whose faint shadow becomes clearer as we shrug off the patriarchal worldview, and shift our attention to less-well known texts, narratives and characters. Scholars in general, and feminist scholars in particular,

14 Collins, Nirvana, 58-59.
15 Very few are attributed to female figures (for example, the Therīgātha and the Itivuttaka, as well as some suttas, such as the well-known Cūḷavedalla Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya (M I 299)) – although it is noteworthy that, in a deeply patriarchal culture such as that of ancient South Asia, texts attributed to women were preserved and transmitted by male monastics.
16 Jamison, Sacrificed Wife, 8.
17 Ibid., 10.
18 Ruddick, Maternal Thinking, 13-4.
19 Ibid., 46-7.
have not examined how the female characters’ narrative arc over their many births is described in the texts (the Jātakas in particular, but also in the commentaries) as a soteriological path comparable to that of the Buddha told in the Jātakas, from the moment when, as Sumedha, he takes the “solemn vow” (patthanā) to become a fully enlightened being for the benefit of all to his life as Gotama Buddha. In this article, I focus on three main characters, whose soteriological paths are clearly delineated in the canonical and commentarial texts, and a few more minor characters, whose stories are not as developed, but still allude to some of the characteristics present in the more elaborate narratives. The three main characters, Māyā, Mahāpajāpati and Visākhā embody, each in their own way, what I call the Buddhist “mothering path”. This “mothering path” is not systematized in any sutta such as the famous Sāmaññaphala Sutta, “The Fruits of the Ascetic Life”, or the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta “The Foundations of Mindfulness”, usually presented as the references for the ascetic and meditative paths. On the other hand, suggestions of the “mothering path” are found in the numerous references to, and descriptions of mothers in the Pāli texts, as well as in the way mothering activities are given as the model for cultivating Buddhist virtues, such as loving-kindness (mettā), or diligence (vīriya). These, taken in the context of the narratives on Māyā, Mahāpajāpati and Visākhā, evoke a recognizable path that has been largely ignored by the tradition’s elites and scholars alike.

I use the term “soteriological path” as a shorthand to refer to an explicit or implicit framework for the development of Buddhist virtues deliberately chosen by an individual. These paths are usually modelled, more or less obviously, on the Buddha’s trajectory mentioned above, which formally starts when he makes a “solemn vow” (patthanā) in the presence of an earlier Buddha, to attain awakening, and ends with his becoming the Buddha. In both Māyā’s and Visākhā’s cases, the “solemn vow” is explicitly related to being a mother or to being like a mother. Mahāpajāpati’s vow is not expressed as such, but her role as the Buddha’s milk-mother is unquestionably related to its realization in the narrative. In fact, the three narratives highlight different aspects of what constitutes “mothering” in the Pāli texts.

An understanding of mothers as those who engage in the activities of mothering as conceptualized by Sara Ruddick provides a lens through which the Pāli texts can be examined and offers a radically new perspective, in a Buddhist context, on the role and status of women in general, and of mothers in particular. Although we may be wary of imposing a framework which, Sara Ruddick acknowledges, emerges out of a particular socio-historical setting (late 20th century urban white middle-class North America), she argues that the practice of mothering, and the maternal thinking it requires, are found in all societies, cultures and historical periods. She adds that the maternal work required to meet the three demands varies greatly depending on the society in which it is performed. Here, I aim to offer an application of this framework to a time and culture completely alien to it, as a way to highlight what such an approach reveals about that time and culture, keeping in mind Derris’s reminder about the impact that our interpretations may have on the world. Examining mothering in the Pāli texts as a practice requiring a specific form of maternal thinking offers a lens that radically challenges the patriarchal hierarchy of values that may otherwise be unthinkingly adopted.

Although it does not articulate it systematically, the Pāli canon betrays that its composers and transmitters had a clear notion of who a mother is, which extends beyond purely biological processes. Not unsurprisingly, a woman is a mother in the texts because she bears, births and nurses a child. In fact, being a mother is very nearly equated with being a woman as the texts claim that three of the five sufferings specific to women are menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth implying that a woman is, by definition, a mother. The most famous example I will examine in this article is Māyā, the Buddha’s birth mother, celebrated as the perfectly pure genitrix, but whose function, in her life as Māyā, was limited to gestation and delivery since she died, according to the tradition, seven days after the Buddha’s birth. However, I argue that her character shows an indubitable example of the mothering path when its narrative trajectory is examined over

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20 The best known metaphor comparing loving-kindness and a mother’s care is that of the Mettā Sutta from which the article’s title is excerpted (Sn 143).
21 Ruddick, Maternal Thinking, 20.
22 Ibid., 523.
23 Derris, “Interpreting”, 79.
24 S IV 239.
her many lives. The other related example, also based on biological function, is Mahāpajāpatī, the Buddha’s aunt and stepmother, described as the Buddha’s mother because she cared for him after his birth mother died. Her position as a mother to the Buddha therefore is based on her nursing and raising him. Finally, Visākhā Migāramātā exemplifies how the Pāli texts do not limit their understanding of the status of mother to the biological functions of gestation and breastfeeding. Several passages describe a mother in terms of a particular relationship in which one individual engages in certain types of activities toward another motivated by loving kindness (mettā) and compassion (karunā). This echoes Sara Ruddick’s description of a mother as anyone, regardless of gender, who engages in maternal thinking and in maternal work. Within a Buddhist worldview, this mothering relationship includes a soteriological dimension: Visākhā’s title, Migāramātā (the “mother of Migāra”) is owed not to a biological relationship to Migāra, but to her role in his conversion to Buddhism. Her position as “one who stands in the position of a mother” (mātuṭṭhāne) to the Buddha and the Sangha is explicitly related to her mothering work.

In order to expand the “interpretive possibilities” limited by the unthought that “mothering is an obstacle to Buddhist soteriological transformations” pointed out by Karen Derris, I unpack this unthought into three of the unthoughts that constitute it. The first unthought I challenge is that women have no agency when they choose to become mothers, an attitude that pervades most scholarly writings on Māyā, the Buddha’s birth mother. The second unthought, exemplified in Gross’s statement that “motherhood inevitably brings attachment, … the emotion that traps one in endless saṃsāra”, is that mothers’ role is inferior because it is this-worldly. Finally the third, related, unthought is that the Buddhist soteriological path is based entirely on the social isolation praised in such texts as the Khaggavisāṇa Sutta (The Rhinoceros Horn Sutta), disregarding the didactic aim of describing this-worldly activities in negative terms in order to foster detachment, and mistaking it for a description of inherent qualities. It further ignores the Buddha’s own path, which he undertook for the “sake of many”, and the social implications of his realization that the middle path between extreme ascetism and hedonistic indulgence is the path to liberation from saṃsāra. These social implications are acknowledged in texts such as the Bahukāra Sutta, which explicitly states that the monastic and lay communities are dependent on each other, and that this dependence is the “True Dhamma, the utmost relief from the yokes”. This interdependence is embodied in Mahāpajāpatī’s mothering of the baby Bodhisatta after Māyā had died and its soteriological significance exquisitely symbolized by her milk-giving – without which, needless to say, there would be no Buddha. Characters that “stand in the position of a mother” (mātuṭṭhāne), such as Visākhā, Khujjutarā and Mātikamātā eloquently exemplify the soteriological significance of the interdependence between the lay and monastic communities (for both parties) or, to put it in another way, how caring for others’ needs is as much a soteriological act and as necessary as practicing meditation.

3 Bearing and Birthing the Buddha as the Soteriological Path: Māyā

Māyā, the Buddha’s birth mother, is the representation of the ideal woman, beautiful, morally pure, who passively fulfills her reproductive function by bearing and giving birth to the Buddha. This customary

25 Derris, “Interpreting”, 65.
26 Gross, for example sees the character of Māyā, as an enabler, and women such as Visākhā, as “androcentric creation[s]”, “unlike the nuns of the Therīgāthā”, (Gross, Buddhism, 54). Ohnuma describes Māyā as “nothing more than an appropriate fetal container, strip[ped] of her autonomy, rationality and full subjectivity” (Ohnuma, Ties, 205).
27 Gross, Buddhism, 233. See also Ohnuma, Ties, especially the emphasis on mother’s particularistic love, and Sasson who describes a mother’s love for her child is the “lowest form of love because it is entrenched in particularistic attachment and human suffering” (Sasson, “Māyā”, 160).
28 The Rhinoceros Horn Sutta is often presented as the epitome of the Buddhist path: an ascetic who cut off all ties with society and “wander solitary as a rhinoceros horn” (Sn 35).
29 Masefield, The Itivuttaka, 105 (Iti 111-112).
30 This section is a condensed version of Engelmajer, “Mothering the Buddha”, a version of which was presented as “Māyā, a Passive Vessel or the Culmination of Mothering as the Buddhist Path?” at the International Workshop on Pregnancies, Childbirths and Religions: A Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective from Antiquity to the Present, Max-Weber-Kolleg, Erfurt University, Erfurt, Germany, January 31-February 1, 2019.
reading fails to see soteriological value in Māyā’s path from the moment, in a previous life, when she made the “solemn vow” to become the mother of the future Buddha to her life as Mahāmāyā, her perinatal death and, ultimately, her rebirth in the Tāvatimsa heaven. Māyā’s decision can be interpreted as a deliberate step on the soteriological path motivated by Buddhist values. Her path can be fruitfully compared to the Bodhisattva’s path: she made the choice to become the mother of a Buddha “for the sake of many”, and set out to perfect the qualities that allowed her to pursue her goal over countless lives.

According to the Jātaka-nidāna, the future Buddha selected Mahāmāyā, a woman entirely unlike any ordinary human woman, for her qualities of virtue and purity: she was “neither wanton, nor addicted to drink, she [had] fulfilled the perfections for a hundred thousand æons and her observance of the five moral vows [had] remained unbroken from birth” – a description evocative of descriptions of the Bodhisattva and illustrative of the parallels between their spiritual careers.31 Although Māyā’s pregnancy was extraordinary (she experienced no discomfort or pain, and her labor was equally painless and extraordinary) she died seven days after the baby’s birth upon which she was reborn in a divine realm.32

Māyā’s extraordinary qualities, together with her supernatural pregnancy and birth-giving, put her far above any other human woman and, therefore, some scholars argue, she does not provide a role model that can be readily emulated by Buddhist mothers, but merely represents the patriarchal ideal of what Rita Gross characterized as an “enabler”.33 Reiko Ohnuma has described her not only as a passive fetal container with no personal agency, but also as the “idealized mother” who, by her death, frees her son from any debt that he might have incurred for her care and affection.34

But these interpretations focus on the child rather than the mother and, following Liz Wilson, I re-examine Māyā’s narrative to shift from the traditional and scholarly “fetus-centered” approach that marginalizes mothers and mothers’ experience to a “mother-centered” (or, in the words of Andrea O’Reilly, a matricentric) approach.35 Vanessa Sasson also recognizes that it is possible to discern some agency in Māyā’s narrative if the Jātakas are taken into account, but she still views Māyā’s last life as the Bodhisattva’s mother as devoid of autonomy and agency: she is chosen by the Buddha, and serves merely as a “fetal container”.36 In that, Sasson appears to fall back into the dominant mode of understanding Māyā as a passive vessel. Yet, if we apply to Māyā Liz Wilson’s “mother-centered” approach, which she uses to read the story of Sīvali and Suppavāsā, and challenge the unthought that women who choose to be mothers have no agency, we can see that the life of the Buddha’s mother is the magnificent culmination of a long soteriological path: she is morally and physically perfect, her pregnancy is trouble-free and her unborn child is safe from any danger. These qualities, and her good fortune, are consequences of her spiritual “career”, which, according to the Jātakas and commentaries, started ninety-one æons ago, when Māyā made her initial vow. It is described in the Vessantara Jātaka, which recounts the penultimate incarnation of the Bodhisattva as Prince Vessantara, and Māyā’s penultimate incarnation as Queen Phusatī, Vessantara’s mother. The Jātaka starts when Phusatī is wed to Prince Sañjaya, and her “former connection with the world” is explained.37 During the time of Buddha Vipassi, ninety one æons previously, a king named Bandhuma received a gift of a golden wreath and precious sandal wood which he gave to his two daughters who, in turn, decided to offer them to Buddha Vipassi. The elder daughter ground the sandalwood to a powder and, as she sprinkled the body of the Buddha with it, she made the aspiration “Lord, in time to come, may I be the mother of a Buddha like you”.38 Her sister, on the other hand, had the gold wreath made into a necklet that she presented to Buddha Vipassi, wishing that “Lord, until I attain nibbāna, may this ornament never part from my body”. Both sisters were granted their wish by Buddha Vipassi. At the

31 Jayawickrama, The Story, 66 (Jātakas (hereafter J) I 149).
32 Jayawickrama, The Story, 69-70 (J I 52-3); 66 (J I 49) for her life span; D II 14 for lifespan and rebirth in Tusita heaven. In the Atthasālinī, Māyā is in the Tāvatimsa heaven (Pe Maung, The Expositor, 2 (Dhs-a 115); the passage is included in the introduction of the Atthasālinī, a commentary to the Abhidhamma (the third basket of the Tipiṭaka) compiled by Buddhaghosa in the 5th c. CE.
33 Gross, Buddhism, 51.
34 Ohnuma, Ties, 82.
35 Wilson, “Mother”, 169-188; O’Reilly, “Ain’t I a Feminist...” 1.
36 Sasson, “Māyā”, 147468.
37 Cone, The Perfect Generosity, 4 (J VI 480).
38 Ibid., 5 J VI 480.
time of Buddha Kassapa, the younger sister, who had been born with the skin around her chest golden as if she was wearing an ornament, attained **nibbāna**, while the elder sister, in her life as Sudhammā, “did good deeds and gave alms” and was eventually reborn in a heavenly rebirth, as the chief queen of Sakka, king of the gods. When her time in the heavenly realm was ending, Sakka granted her ten wishes. She chose to be reborn in King Sivi’s realm, and to become his queen, and she further aspired to have a son “open-handed in granting requests, and without avarice; who will have fame and good repute, and be honored by rival kings”. Sakka granted her these requests, and after she passed from the heavenly realm, she was reborn and became King Sivi’s queen. The only fitting candidate that Sakka could see for such an excellent son as Queen Phusatī had wished for, was the Bodhisattva, who was then in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven. Sakka then succeeded in convincing him to take rebirth in Queen Phusatī’s womb. At the joy of realizing she was expecting, Queen Phusatī had six alms-houses built so that she could give six hundred thousand pieces daily as acts of charity.

In these accounts from the *Vessantara Jātaka*, Māyā’s previous incarnations express wishes and act consistently with the goal she had aspired to. This inscribes her within the long arc of the *Jātakas’* traditional narrative of the Bodhisattva’s path, where she no longer needed to express her choice (since it is finally fulfilled). She, as the elder daughter of Bandhuma, explicitly vowed to become the mother of a future Buddha, and she continued to express this wish, as she was reborn, life after life. The *Vessantara Jātaka* allows us to flesh out Māyā as the end point of the relentless pursuit of this goal. In fact, in her previous incarnations, she always appeared as the mother of the Bodhisattva, their relationship established and strengthened from existence to existence. In a manner consistent with the Pāli canon’s attitude towards female figures, her role and the descriptions of her mothering activities remains limited: although she appears in nearly twenty *Jātakas*, her character is only fleshed out in ten stories. Often, she is merely mentioned as the Bodhisattva’s mother.

In her penultimate life, as Queen Phusatī, she again expressed the choice made ninety-one æons earlier in front of Buddha Vipassī when she wished for such a perfect son that only the Bodhisattva can fulfill her wish. Finally, even in her life as Māyā, the *Jātaka-nidāna*, recounting the Bodhisattva’s conception – which occurred during a festival – highlights that Māyā spent this time in a semi-ascetic practice, not partaking in the festivities, in particular not drinking alcohol, fasting and giving alms liberally. This description suggests that she was taking an active part by making herself physically and morally receptive to the conception, even intimating that the tradition recognizes her agency and reminds us that her vow to become the mother of the future Buddha was made long ago.

The soteriological significance of this choice and the path that it entails must be fully appreciated: Māyā’s “solemn vow”, as the elder daughter of King Bandhuma, and her subsequent path in countless lives, is comparable to the “solemn vow” and the path of the Bodhisattva. When, as King Bandhuma’s elder daughter, she made this vow, she made a soteriological choice, which was implicitly referred to in her younger sister’s narrative character.

In this earliest story, the younger sister wished for the highest Buddhist goal, while Māyā wished to become the mother of a future Buddha. Her sister’s character serves the purpose of expressing narratively the choice Māyā did not articulate explicitly. However, there is an explicit parallel in the well-known “solemn vow” made by Sumedha, the man who took the resolution to become Gotama, the Buddha of our time. Lying prostrate at the feet of Buddha Dīpaṅkara, Sumedha vowed: “if it be my wish, I could enter the city of Ramma as a novice in the Order [of Buddha Dīpaṅkara] extirpating all the defilements. But it does not serve my purpose merely to extirpate the defilements and attain **nibbāna** as a man of no consequence ... and taking [hu]mankind aboard the ship of the Dhamma, ford them across the ocean of *saṃsāra*”. This initial vow symbolizes the starting point of Gotama Buddha’s spiritual career: here, Sumedha clearly articulated the alternative and clearly rejected the opportunity of attaining **nibbāna** here and then as a lesser option. The juxtaposition with the vow made by her younger sister, brought into comparison with the resolution made by Sumedha, strongly suggests that Māyā’s former incarnation had a similar choice between aspiring

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39 Ibid., 7 (J VI 483).
40 Ibid., 8 (J VI 484).
41 Jayawickrama, *The Story*, 16-8 (J I 113-14)
to achieve nibbāna and that of becoming the mother of a future Buddha. It further suggests that aspiring to become the mother of a Buddha, instead of striving to attain her own awakening, is a momentous choice effectively of a higher level than the aspiration merely to achieve nibbāna, because it too would “take[.]” According to the Ceylonese chronology, arose in the 4th century BCE (Williams, Jayawickrama, 43).

Generosity is typically described as the paramount perfection, and the Vessantara Jātaka illustrates the perfection of that quality by the Bodhisattva. Māyā not only achieved the highest goal, but that she chose to do so, like the Bodhisattva, for the sake of all beings, herself included since, after her passing from the human realm, she was reborn in a position in which she could benefit from her son’s teachings. In addition, a rarely mentioned set of verses in the Therāgāthā reveals that indeed Māyā as a deva reached nibbāna. This supports the claim that the Bodhisattva’s mother reiterated his vow, the future Buddha’s mother reiterated hers over different lifetimes.

As I suggested, this spiritual career is comparable to that of the Bodhisattva, which it parallels and sometimes interacts with, since they are often mother and son in different Jātakas. The future Buddha’s mother cultivated the qualities that culminated in being a perfect mother for a Buddha, just as the Bodhisattva cultivated the qualities that culminated in Buddhahood. The tradition also recognizes this: the Jātaka-nidāna declares that Māyā has “fulfilled the perfections (pāramitās) for a hundred thousand æons” and has not broken the five precepts since birth. Similarly, just as the Bodhisattva reiterated his vow, the future Buddha’s mother reiterated hers over different lifetimes.

Yet, there is still one point that, as Vanessa Sasson notes, is disturbing: Māyā dies shortly after the Bodhisattva’s birth, and she does not mother the Bodhisattva. This further contributes to her being perceived as a mere “fetal container”. The Pāli commentarial literature gives two unrelated explanations: one is that a Buddha’s mother cannot bear another child after having borne the future Buddha as it would imply sexual activity and would mar her purity. The other explains that Māyā dies prematurely because she would not have been able to bear the grief of seeing her son become a renouncer. This jars with our modern sensibilities, but the second explanation must be examined within the context of a tradition whose highest goal is to escape saṃsāra, the round of rebirths characterized by suffering, and whose intermediary goals are rebirths in heavens in which there is no such suffering. In this light, Māyā’s early death is doctrinally sound: she achieved the goal she had set forth to reach countless lives ago: not only there is no further point in living a life that will be marked by suffering, as all human lives are, but her meritorious actions warranted a rebirth in a heavenly realm. Reborn as a deva in the Tāvatimsa heaven, she watched over her son as he pursued his path and she finally welcomed him when he succeeded. In the Atthasālinī, we are told that the Buddha, after his awakening, ascended to the Tāvatimsa heaven to teach his mother the Abhidhamma, the “highest teachings”. This is the logical coda to her spiritual career: just as the Bodhisattva made the vow to become a fully enlightened Buddha for the sake of all beings, Māyā made the vow to become the mother of such a being for the sake of all beings, herself included since, after her passing from the human realm, she was reborn in a position in which she could benefit from her son’s teachings. In addition, a rarely mentioned set of verses in the Therāgāthā reveals that indeed Māyā as a deva reached nibbāna. This supports the claim that challenging the unthought that women do not have agency when they choose to be mothers makes it clear that Māyā not only achieved the highest goal, but that she chose to do so, like the Bodhisattva, for the sake of many.

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42 Generosity is typically described as the paramount perfection, and the Vessantara Jātaka illustrates the perfection of that quality by the Bodhisattva.
43 Jayawickrama, The Story, 66 (J 149). The five precepts are commonly observed by more devout lay followers. They entail (1) refraining from harming living beings; (2) refraining from taking what is not given; (3) refraining from wrong speech (including harmful or useless speech); (4) refraining from sexual misconduct and, (5) refraining from intoxicating substances. For a detailed discussion of the five precepts, see Harvey, An introduction, 66-70.
44 This explanation is given in the Mahāvastu (2.3), a text of the Lokottaravāda school, a branch of the Mahāsamghikas that, according to the Ceylonese chronology, arose in the 4th century BCE (Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism, 16-8). For a more detailed discussion of the traditional explanations of Māyā’s death, see Vanessa Sasson, “Māyā”, 156-7.
45 Pe Maung, The Expositor, 2 (Dhs-a 1 15)
46 Norman, Elders’ Verses I, 54 (Therāgāthā vs. 533). It must be noted that, in this passage, the deva recognized as Māyā is male, the only time that she does not appear as a female being.
4 Giving Milk: Mahāpajāpatī

The character of Mahāpajāpatī also appears in a new light when the second unthought that mothers’ role is this-worldly and therefore inferior is rejected.47 Mahāpajāpatī is mainly recognized in Buddhist traditions as the founder of the Buddhist nuns’ order.48 However, she is also described as the Buddha’s aunt and stepmother and, crucially for my purpose, as the woman who breastfed and raised the infant Bodhisatta. Here, I wish to focus on her relationship to the Buddha and, in particular, to the way the texts present her functionally as his mother.

The most explicit and detailed account of their relationship is found in the Gotamī Apadāna, a canonical text that recounts Mahāpajāpatī’s last days.49 Her interaction with the Buddha started with a strong affirmation of their relationship when she exclaimed: “O well-gone one, I am your mother… it was I, O well-gone one, who raised you, flesh and bone… I suckled you with mother’s milk”.50 The Buddha acknowledged her in the same vein, referring to her as “my mother” and the text emphasizes that she was his wet-nurse for her whole life.51 This clear link between her milk-giving and her status as the Buddha’s mother also appears in two other passages in which Mahāpajāpatī met with the Buddha. The best-known passage is her request to the Buddha to allow women to be ordained as nuns,52 and the other passage is a lesser known sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya, in which Mahāpajāpatī was still a lay-woman wishing to make a gift to the Buddha.53 In both these passages, the description of their relationship is the same, emphasizing that she has “done much for the Buddha, … has taken care of him, nourished him, and given him milk, [and] gave him milk when his mother died”.54 A nearly identical description is found in the Anguttara Nikāya to explain that children owe a debt to their parents because they “do much for [their] children, they take care of them, nourish them and show them the world”.55

Three terms (bahukārā ..., āpādakā posakā), which qualify Mahāpajāpati, are the same as those qualifying parents in the passage just quoted. However, in the Mahāpajāpati passages, there is an emphasis on the particular function of giving milk, with the repetition of her giving milk to the baby Bodhisatta. The repetition obviously emphasizes milk-giving as establishing her status as the Bodhisatta’s mother. The commentary to that passage even describes how Mahāpajāpati, after her own son was born, gave him to a wet nurse and nursed the future Buddha herself, in effect exchanging her son for the Bodhisatta.56

Many stories attest to the life-giving and healing powers of maternal milk in the Pāli literature.57 The milk-giving motif highlights how, in a context in which maternal replacement milk does not exist, the giving of milk through breastfeeding is the only way for an infant to survive and this, paired with the care Mahāpajāpati provided him, allowed the baby Bodhisatta to become the Buddha.58 Another example of the life-giving quality associated with breast-milk is found in the Majjhima Nikāya, in a sutta that describes mothers’ threefold burden of bearing children, giving them birth and nursing them, mother’s milk is referred to as “blood” (lohita) in the Noble One’s Discipline (ariya vinaya).59

47 This section is based on “Breast-milk and Dhamma-milk: Mothers as Spiritual Teachers” International Workshop on Breastfeeding(s) and Religions: A Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective, Max-Weber-Kolleg, Erfurt University, Erfurt, Germany, July 11-12, 2018, published as Engelmajer, “Breast-milk and Dhamma-milk: Giving Life, Giving the Dhamma”.
48 See for example, Ohnuma, Ties.
49 See Walters “A Voice” and “Gotami’s Story”.
50 Walters, “Gotami’s Story”, 121 (Ap. 532-3).
51 Ibid., 134 (Ap. 541) & 137 (Ap. 543); 129 (Ap. 537).
52 A IV 274 (repeated almost identically at Vin II 253).
53 M III 253.
54 Hare, Gradual Sayings IV, 183 (A IV 276: bahūpakāra ... mahāpajāpati gotamī bhagavato mātucchā āpādikā posikā khīrassa dāyikā, bhagavantaṃ janettiyā kālakatāya thanṇaṃ pāyesi). Also at M III 253 and Vin II 255.
55 Woodward, Gradual Sayings I, 115 (A I 132: bahukāra ... mātāpitāro puttānaṃ, āpādikā posakā imassa lokassa dassetāro). Also at A II 70.
56 M-a V 69.
57 For a detailed discussion of these stories, see Watson-Andaya, “Localising the Universal”, 21.
58 For a discussion of the relationship between blood and milk in early Indian medical thought, see Engelmajer, Women in Pāli Buddhism, 63-64.
59 M I 266: lohitam hetam ... ariyassa vinaye yaddidam mātuthaṇṇaṃ.
This passage spans the life of the individual starting from the conception to reaching arahantship (i.e. nibbāna), suggesting that the mother transmits the vital principle (symbolized by the milk/blood) that allows the child not only to live, but to become acquainted with the Buddha’s teachings, and therefore indicating that the giving of life also gives the possibility of the Dhamma. This giving of the possibility of the Dhamma, and therefore nibbāna, is a highly significant act, comparable to the Buddha’s act of teaching. Mother’s milk allows the infant to flourish and realize the potential of a human life, which is necessary to attain nibbāna and is described as an exceedingly rare occurrence in the Pāli texts. In fact, in a well-known simile, it is lamented that it is less likely for a being to be reborn in a human life than for a blind turtle to put its neck through a yoke with a single hole when it comes to the surface of the ocean once in a century.

Weaving these different ideas about breast-milk together, and possibly going out on a limb, I suggest that breast-milk in the Pāli texts plays a crucial role as the substance that transmits life, both in the material sense – as transformed blood that transmits the vital element, a notion present in early Indian medical thought – and in a spiritual sense, because it allows one to encounter the Dhamma by sustaining the rare human life one has obtained. This role meshes well with the description, discussed above, of parents as those who show the world to their children (dassetāro), which the commentary glosses as those who allow the child to see “pleasant and unpleasant sense-objects”, because they support his or her physical life.

Indeed, beyond the purely physical value of maternal milk, Mahāpajāpati’s (and mothers’) giving of milk is paired with her caring for, or being of great help (bahukāra) to, her child. In addition to descriptions of Mahāpajāpati and parents, this term occurs in several contexts and, while its meaning as “being of service” in a material and concrete way is foremost, its connotations always include the idea that this concrete support brings its recipients where they can pursue their soteriological path. This is well illustrated in the famous simile of the raft in the Alagaddūpama Sutta, which describes a man who builds a raft to cross the “great expanse of water” (i.e. saṃsāra), and who, upon reaching the other shore (i.e. nibbāna), exclams that “this raft has been of great service to me”. In the same way, mothers are “of great service” to their children since, by giving them their milk, they allow them to survive and therefore give them the possibility of the Dhamma.

Moreover, breast milk, beyond its life-giving properties, is further linked with the Dhamma itself: breast-milk gives life and the Dhamma gives the “deathless” (i.e. nibbāna). Two passages further establish a parallel between breast milk and the Dhamma, and especially between giving breast milk and teaching the Dhamma.

The most explicit passage is the Gotamī Apānada briefly discussed above. In this text, Mahāpajāpati claimed her mothering of the Buddha, detailing how she nursed him, and “raised [him] flesh and bones … and suckled [him] with mother’s milk”. But she also recognized the Buddha as her “father” who gave her “Dhamma-milk” and who, by his “nurturing, raised [her] flawless Dhamma-body”. The reciprocity between breast-milk and Dhamma-milk is here explicitly established: breast milk gives life on a physical, material plane, and Dhamma-milk gives life on a spiritual plane. While some scholars, such as Reiko Ohnuma, see this comparison as devaluing mothers’ role as this-worldly and therefore inferior, such an attitude results from the unthought of viewing motherhood as an obstacle to spiritual realization, and fails to acknowledge that sustaining life is indispensable to allow spiritual development. In fact, as already mentioned, without Mahāpajāpati nursing the infant Bodhisatta, there would have been no Buddha.

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60 M I 266-270.
61 E.g. M III 170 and S V 455.
62 Weiss, “Caraka Samhitā”, 98-9.
63 A-a II 122.
64 M I 130 ff.
65 M I 135: bahukāro me ayaṁ kullo.
66 Walters, (“Gotami’s Story”, 121 (Ap. 532:3)
67 Walters, (“Gotami’s Story”, 121 (Ap. 532:3) – this reversal is also found in Christianity with iconographic representations of Christ suckling Mary (Walker Bynum, Holy Feast, 272).
68 Ohnuma, Ties, 107, in particular the idea that “spiritual fatherhood trumps worldly motherhood”.
69 Derris, “Interpreting”, 65.
The Pāli texts’ emphasis on repaying the filial debt, especially to one’s mother, acknowledges just as much: without a mother’s nurture and care, of which breast milk is the symbol, a child does not survive.\(^\text{70}\)

Furthermore, the middle path, as the Buddhist path is known, is itself a prime illustration of this recognition – the Buddha rejected the self-indulgence of the householder, but he also rejected the extreme austerities of the ascetic as not conducive to liberation, fully appreciating that spiritual achievement cannot occur without a modicum of physical health. Actually, he gave up extreme asceticism when realizing that he was about to die from starvation by drinking the rice-milk offered by Sujātā.\(^\text{71}\) This is an apt illustration of the symbolism of milk in the Pāli texts. There is another evocative parallel here: just as mother’s milk allowed him to survive as an infant, rice-milk allowed him to survive as an ascetic and attain nibbāna. Examined from this perspective, the mothering work of giving milk (and the related care and nurture implied by the symbol) is no longer dismissed by the second unthought that mothering work is inferior, but it reveals itself the generous and compassionate act par excellence that allows and supports the soteriological path, not only of the milk giver but of its recipient.

### 5 Standing in the Position of a Mother: Visākhā

The third unthought I seek to reject here can be summed up as the attitude that considers that activities not focused on one’s own spiritual development are merely enabling to others and of no spiritual benefit to oneself.\(^\text{72}\) This is related to the previous unthought that mothers’ role is this-worldly and thus inferior, but extends beyond maternal activities based on biological functions (such as child-bearing, birth-giving and breast-feeding) to include these activities which Sara Ruddick calls “mothering work” and which are usually seen as merely enabling others rather than as consisting of the path itself. When this unthought is challenged, it is clear that the Pāli texts have developed a concept of what constitutes “mothering work” expressed with the term “mātuṭṭhāne” to refer to women who “stand in the position of a mother” to unrelated individuals and for whom this “standing in the position of a mother” constitutes the soteriological path, embodying its highest virtues and culminating in its highest goal. The expression is relatively unusual and is only used in the commentaries as far as I can gauge. A significant character to be referred to as mātuṭṭhāne is Visākhā Migāramātā, a prominent lay follower who appears relatively frequently in the suttas, often speaking directly to the Buddha. The other two figures to be called mātuṭṭhāne are Khujjuttarā, and Mātikamātā, two more minor figures, of which little is known besides their actions as women who “stand in the position of a mother”.\(^\text{73}\)

Visākhā owes her title as the mother of Migāra, not because she gave birth or nursed Migāra, but because she was the crucial mediator who introduced the elderly Migāra to the Buddha’s teachings, when she came to his house as his son’s young bride. The commentary to the canonical text explained that Migāra was so grateful to her that “he went forward and, taking in his mouth the breast of his daughter-in-law, he adopted her as his mother, saying, ‘To-day henceforth you are my mother.’ And thenceforth she was called Migāra’s mother.”\(^\text{74}\) Turning to the Buddha, he added “… through my daughter-in-law, I have come to know of [the Buddhist path] and have obtained release from suffering … when my daughter-in-law came to my house, she came for my welfare and salvation.”\(^\text{75}\)

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70 Engelmajer, *Women in Pāli Buddhism*, 66-9.
71 J 169
72 This section draws partly from “The Mothering Path as Buddhist Path: Narratives in the Pāli canon” presented at the *International Workshop on Mothering(s) and Religions: Normative Perspectives and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Approach from Antiquity to the Present*, Max-Weber-Kolleg, Erfurt University, Erfurt, Germany, July 16-17, 2019, and to be published as Engelmajer, “The Mothering Path as Buddhist Path: Narratives in the Pāli canon”. It also draws on the unpublished paper “Visākhā Migāramātā: Mothering as the Spiritual Path” presented at the *Panel on Multiple religious and maternal identities: othermothers, self-conceptions, conformity and non-conformity*, 16th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion, Bern, Switzerland, June 17-21, 2018.
73 Khujjutarā is proclaimed at A I 26 as the foremost among lay women for her great learning because she had heard much (bahussutā), and the *Itivuttaka*, from the Khuddaka Nikāya, is said, in the *Paramatthadīpanī*, to have been compiled from her recollection of the Buddha’s discourses (Woodward, *As It Was Said*).
74 Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends II*, 75 (Dh-a 1406).
75 Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends II*, 75 (Dh-a 1407).
Visākhā’s status as Migāra’s mother was explicitly validated by Migāra suckling on Visākhā’s breast, highlighting milk-giving as the archetypal mothering activity and symbol discussed above. Visākhā’s story further tacitly equates the act of providing spiritual opportunities to the nurturing and life-giving properties of the act of giving milk, a comparison which, as I showed in the previous section, the Gotāmi Apadāna makes explicitly when Mahāpajāpatī refers to the Buddha’s teachings as Dhamma-milk.

Visākhā does not only stand in the position of a mother to Migāra but also, and most crucially, to the Buddha and his sangha. Her status as such is explained in the commentaries as the result of a “solemn vow” in a previous life to become a disciple of the future Buddha in the “position of a mother”, clearly framing her decision as a choice to undertake this as a soteriological path in its own right, just as Māya’s vow and path to become the mother of the future Buddha were.

Of interest here are the types of activities encompassed by the expression mātuṭṭhāne. Although Visākhā’s activities are described in various passages in the Pāli texts, the expression itself occurs only in the commentaries, to explain the “eight boons” Visākhā requested from the Buddha in the Vinaya. These summarize her mothering activities well, and the explanations she gave for each clearly demonstrate “maternal thinking” and directly resulted from vowing “to become the disciple in the position of a mother to the benefit of the Buddha and the monastic community”. This entailed providing several items to them during her lifetime: in particular, giving food, such as a continuous supply of rice-milk, to monks and nuns, and medicine to those who were sick. She also bought land on which she had a monastery built for the Buddha and the monks. In addition, she caused new rules to be established to ensure monks and nuns’ proper public conduct. She explained her motivation for providing these material goods to the monks and nuns and regulating their public behavior, not for their material well-being but for their spiritual welfare, clearly acknowledging that spiritual achievement cannot be achieved without material support.

The other times mātuṭṭhāne occurs in the earliest commentaries outside of passages mentioning Visākhā describe Khujjuttarā and Mātikamātā. The story of Khujjuttarā highlights the spiritual dimension of the expression. Khujjuttarā is a servant to Queen Sāmāvatī, who entrusted her to buy flowers every day. One time, the gardener from whom Khujjuttarā procured the flowers had invited the Buddha to preach and suggested that Khujjuttarā take the opportunity to attend. As she heard the Buddha’s discourse, she attained the fruit of stream-entry and, when she returned to the palace, the Queen asked her to share her insight, treating her with high honors by having a scented bath prepared and offering her fine garments, which Khujjuttarā assembled on herself like monastic robes. She then sat down on the seat prepared by the Queen, and addressed her and her retinue “[teaching] the Dhamma just as the Teacher had taught it”. At the conclusion of her teaching, all the women honored her and requested that she “stand in the position of a mother to them, in the position of a teacher” (mātuṭṭhāne, ācariyaṭṭhāne) drawing an explicit parallel between the two functions that the story of Visākhā only implied.

Finally, a most striking example of the spiritual relationship evoked by the expression mātuṭṭhāne is that of Mātikamātā (Mātika’s mother), a lay disciple of the Buddha who supported a group of monks: she had a monastery built for them and gave them food daily. After learning from them the practice of meditation, she attained the “three paths and the three fruits”, the highest spiritual achievements before nibbāna. She also attained supernatural powers, one of which gave her the ability to perceive the minds of others. At this point in the text, Mātikamātā started calling the group of monks “my sons” (mayhaṃ puttānaṃ) and, pondering what spiritual achievements they had attained so far, she realized that they had not yet reached any. She then considered possible causes – from lack of appropriate dispositions to lack of adequate lodgings or proper food. When she perceived, through her supernatural power, that they did not have proper food, she gave them all kinds of food that allowed them to develop a “tranquil mind” which ultimately resulted in their reaching nibbāna.

I suggest that Mātikamātā’s reflection on the monks’ spiritual abilities and needs embodies what Sara Ruddick describes as “maternal thinking” – as mentioned above, she refers to the monks as “her sons”, and

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76 Horner, Discipline IV, 419 (Vin I 291).
77 Horner, Discipline IV, 419 (Vin I 292).
78 Burlingame, Buddhist Legends I, 281 (Dh-a 210).
79 Burlingame, Buddhist Legends I, 27 (Dh-a 290).
she fulfills their material needs from a place of ultimate knowledge to ensure that they reach awakening. Remarkably, her reflection is reminiscent of numerous descriptions of the Buddha in which he is depicted surveying the world and identifying individuals whose abilities and needs he discerns and addresses through a tailored intervention. The difference between the Buddha and Mātikamātā is that the Buddha provides the specific teachings that lead to awakening, and Mātikamātā provides the specific material necessities to do the same. This passage clearly shows that both are necessary to attain the ultimate goal.

When we examine the canon carefully, it opens itself to this radical matricentric feminist reading while remaining true to its Buddhist doctrinal premises, worldview and soteriology. When we further examine these vignettes through Ruddick’s framework of mothering as a practice informed by “maternal thinking”, we can glimpse a delicate tapestry that is easily overlooked, especially in a context that focuses almost exclusively on male characters and concerns. Mothering activities include traditional aspects of motherhood, such as providing food and fulfilling material needs, but the mothering relationship described in the texts also includes a soteriological dimension – one that fulfills material needs as the necessary condition for spiritual practice and growth, and further provides spiritual guidance and teaching which, in Sara Ruddick’s terms can be called religious socialization.

Like Visākhā, Khujjuttarā and Mātikamātā, those who stand in the position of a mother nourish both the body and the soul of those they mother. While they do so, they also practice their own soteriological paths and, as we can appreciate from the stories of Visākhā and Mātikamātā, the relationship between those who mother and those who are mothered is not as clear-cut as it is sometimes presented and goes much beyond a simple passive enabling role for mothers. Although they both address the material needs of those they mother in order for them to pursue the soteriological path, Visākhā and Mātikamātā not only develop their own path, but also intentionally foster spiritual development. What makes their soteriological path a mothering path is the combination of material and spiritual care not found in other canonical relationships, like those between monks and lay persons, or between the Buddha and his disciples.

6 Conclusion

In this article, I sought to emulate Karen Derris’s aspiration to offer a scholarly “reading” and hermeneutics of the Pāli texts that seek “not only to describe realities but also to bring about change in ways that promote justice”.

I argue that the mothering path is the hidden path that emerges when the deeply patriarchal traditional hierarchy of values is challenged, and the unthoughts related to mothers and mothering, which this hierarchy of values generates, are also challenged. This path clearly shows that women can have agency – the three I examine, Māyā, Mahāpajāpatī and Visākhā, explicitly chose to become mothers as a soteriological path. Māyā gave birth to, and cared for, over many lifetimes, the being who became the Buddha. Mahāpajāpatī nourished and cared for him. Visākhā materially supported him and the sangha during her entire life. Their mothering of the Buddha, in its different manifestations, is their spiritual practice undertaken for their own spiritual development and for the sake of many. Further, their maternal thinking and mothering work, rooted in “this world”, i.e., saṃsāra (because it can only be in this world that the path is practiced), embody the highest virtues of the path in each specific action they take. The core Buddhist virtues usually understood as “universal” must be continuously instantiated in particular occurrences day after day, if they are to be practiced and internalized at all instead of remaining abstractions. Māyā, Mahāpajāpatī and Visākhā show that mothering requires the development of those virtues on a day-to-day, time after time basis, and constitutes a specific soteriological path undertaken for the sake of many. Finally, as Visākhā explains, her support to the Buddha and sangha is not only for their spiritual development, but also for her own benefit. She describes it by using a well-known progression of the Buddhist path, which starts with her delight and joy at recollecting the positive impact of her gifts, and her developing a

80 Andrea O’Reilly argues for a matricentric feminism approach that “recognizes and embraces a feminism developed from the specific concerns/needs of mothers” (O’Reilly, “Ain’t I a Feminist…” 1).

81 Derris, “Interpreting”, 79.
calm, composed and contemplative mind. This, in turn, results in “growth as to the [understanding] of the sense-organs, growth as to the powers, growth as to the factors of enlightenment”.\(^{82}\) This clearly embodies generosity as the foundation of the path that leads to \(\text{nibbāna}\) and challenges the unthought that the path can only be a monastic path and that activities that support others’ spiritual development are only merely enabling.

Only when the patriarchal table is toppled, can we see clearly that without these three women choosing the mothering path, the Buddha, Dharma and sangha cannot exist. Unfettered by the unthoughts that women lack agency, that mothers’ virtues and actions are inferior and that caring for others is not a source of spiritual development, we realize that the mothering path is a Buddhist path. In a Buddhist soteriological context, mothering work, in its different iterations, is an intentional activity, repeated day after day for the sake of many. The motivations that it is based on, compassion and loving-kindness, are the foundation of the Buddhist path. It is fitting – I would dare say unsurprising even – that mothering activities serve not only as metaphors for the Buddha and his teachings, but as models for action and for the development of these virtues. In the words of the \(\text{Mettā Sutta}:\)

Just as a mother would protect with her life her own [child], her only [child], so one should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings, and loving-kindness towards all the world. One should cultivate an unbounded mind, above and below, and across, without obstruction, without enmity, without rivalry.\(^{83}\)

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\(^{82}\) Horner, \(\text{Discipline IV},\) 419 (Vin I 292).

\(^{83}\) Norman, \(\text{Group},\) 19 (Sn vss. 169-50).
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