

VERSE 7 = Sn 149

**mātā yathā niyam puttam
āyusā ekaputtam anurakkhe,
evam pi sabbabhūtesu
mānasam bhāvaye aparimānam.**

**Just as a mother would watch over her
Son—her one and only son—with her life,
In just the same way develop a mind
Unbounded toward all living creatures.**

Analysis - VERSE 7

mātā yathā

The word **yathā** is used to introduce an illustration of some sort, meaning “just as...” or “as...” Early Buddhist literature is particularly rich because of the large number of such similes, metaphors, and illustrative stories used to communicate important teachings. The image of a loving mother (**mātā**) is now invoked to describe the quality of loving kindness mentioned so far in the poem. It is an ideal everyone can understand, even if unfamiliar with it personally. The different sorts of motherly love are also used to describe the nuances of the other three **brahma vihāras** or divine qualities of heart: compassion (like a mother for a sick child), appreciative joy (like a mother for a child going off into the world), and equanimity (like a mother hearing of the affairs of a grown child).

niyam puttam

It is further specified that the quality of love described here is that which a mother would have for her own (**niyam**) son (**puttam**), rather than the generalized affection a woman might naturally feel for any child. Reminiscent of Jesus’ injunction to love one’s enemies as oneself, this specifying word is meant to emphasize the power and intensity of feeling that one normally manifests only for one’s own family or clan members. If we could all bring as much care to strangers as we bestow upon our own kin, the mechanisms for doing harm to one another would be entirely disabled.

āyusā

This is the general word for life (**ayu**), recognizable to many people in the ancient Indian medical tradition known as **ayurveda** (knowledge of life). Rendered in the instrumental case, “by means of life,” it implies that quality of selfless sacrifice in which one would willingly lay down one’s own life for the sake of protecting or preserving another’s. It has an amplifying effect upon the message of this verse, suggesting a love of such force that it overcomes even the deepest instincts for self-preservation in its devotion to the well-being of another.

ekaputtam

As if further amplification were needed, the verse adds the additional factor of how a mother might feel about her only (**eka**) son. Although a somewhat outdated notion, sons were immensely cherished in ancient Indian society, and were for a woman a principle means of defining and augmenting her standing in the community. Singularity also brings with it a sense of uniqueness, and this term further points to a quality of mind that cherishes every creature as if it were one’s own, as if it were special, and as if it were of irreplaceable intrinsic value.

anurakkhe

The final verb of this phrase means to protect, guard or watch over. The prefix (**anu-**) suggests “following along with” things rather than of interfering or dominating. The quality of mind is not analogous to a guard watching over his prisoners, but of a shepherd protecting his flock. It is possible to watch over beings and wish them safety from harm without interfering in their own nature or their natural range of activities.

Loving kindness meditation requires caring without smothering, concern without obstruction, and the deep intention that all beings thrive in whatever ways are uniquely suited to themselves.

evam pi

This is the other half of the illustration mechanism. It begins above with “just as...” (**yatha**) and now concludes with “so too..” or “in just such a way...”

sabbabhūtesu mānasam bhāvaye aparimānam

Reverting again to the optative form, the verb **bhāvaye** also adds a causative dimension to the now familiar verbal root “to be.” This yields the expression “May you cause to be...,” “May you make become...,” or simply “May you develop...,” which then concludes with “a boundless mind toward all beings.” At the heart of the word **aparimāna** is the sense of measurement. Something can be measured (**māna**) when one is able to conceive of it or “get one’s mind (**māna**) around it.” This can happen completely (**pari-**) with some things, perhaps, as one might fully measure the **peri-**meter of a circle, but some things, such as universal love for all beings, are just not (**a**) capable of being measured in such a way. Indeed the boundlessness or limitless quality of loving kindness is a major theme of its practice as a meditation.