

1.1 Missinona Warnakulasuriya of Dodanduwa: My Compassionate Mother

Why a piece on my mother when this work is on my Father? The answer is simple. And twofold. First, while I have written on my father in the newspapers (see this volume), I have never written on my mother. In fact, it is after reading my father's piece on Amma in this volume that the thought even occurred to me to write on her. At age 80, I am not sure there will be very many opportunities to write about her. So why not now? Second, as you'll read in Taatta's piece on Amma, she was the wife behind the successful husband! So why not see her from another angle?

I'll begin with what my father says about her (see below):

"My wife was so dear to me that I was put into the mindset of thinking that there was no other wife in the whole wide world that was as loving, chaste, respectful of her husband and reliable. ... I was also made to think that this was the heavenly beauty (*suravamiya*), the best wife to be had, sent to me by the flowering my past merit."

She was also the one who controlled the purse string of the family. As a Principal, Taatta was more away from home than at home. So it was Amma who ran the show, from managing the finances to having healthy, and colourful, meals on the table, to looking after us.

A particular skill Amma had was the ability to wake up in the morning, often around 4 am, with no alarm clock. Busy with his social work, it was a common practice for Taatta to leave home early in the wee hours of dawn to catch a train in Matara. And to get there, he had to leave Tangalla earlier. And as far as I can recall, there was never a day that Taatta missed the bus. How she did it still a puzzle, and a reason for admiration, of her. May be it was an internal alarm clock it looks that was at work, possibly part of the same dedication machinery within her when it comes to taking care of us all, but Taatta in particular. Needless to say, a breakfast was also ready on the table for Taatta before he took off.

I remember one time when our whole family got the chicken pox. And happily, Amma didn't. With windows shut, and no outside contact, everything fell on Amma. And one day, boiling some water, she burnt herself. But she was not the one to take time to look after herself. In great pain, I'm sure she continued to whatever she had to do to look after Taatta and my two sisters, Sunanda and Chitra. And she was to pay for it later in terms of pain.

But her boundless concern and care was not only for me and the family. It was to Amma that a neighbor brought a hapless woman roaming around the streets scouring the garbage for the day's food. And she was to live with us until she died, this after I'd left for overseas.

When a sister of hers, married to a fairly well to do person, became widowed, it was to our home she came. The rest of the family apparently helping themselves to her personal and other belongings, she'd been rendered poor and helpless. But her younger sister my Amma she knew she could rely on.

She was the *iskola hamine* (School Madam) who was sought after by the neighbourhood in any and all family events – weddings, coming of age ceremonies for girls (*kotahalu mangula*), deaths, etc. It was her habit to share the treats made at home during events like the New Year.

Now to add my own experience, one of the first things that comes to my mind is how I cried out my heart when the coffin bearing her dead body was being removed from home (keeping the body at home being the standard social practice, although my father's, in the city, was at a funeral home). I've never ever cried as much or as long since then, or ever before! She bid goodbye to this world in the middle of the night, in my own home in Jayantipura, Battaramula. I had brought Amma and Taatta (in retirement) to Colombo. I had gone, in my uncle MJ Maama's car, to all our relatives through the night, and made all the funeral arrangements, contacting relatives far and wide. Not once did I have a sense of grief enough to outpour. My focus must have been the funeral arrangements. But once the job was done, and the load taken off my chest, I must have allowed myself to be the son, and not the funeral Director! And there was good reason for my crying out my heart. It was how dear and close she was to me. Like no other mother?

So then, how close was I to her, and vice versa? Following our daily Homage to the Buddha, it was our practice to pay homage at the feet of our parents, known in Sinhala Buddhism as *gedara budun* 'The Buddha at home'. Even as I continue the practice today in Canada, in my mind, following my daily meditation, that's an image of Amma that readily comes to my mind. If it was a ritual, to me it meant a lot, for she was that ideal mother.

Jumping into mind innocently is me squatting beside her, watching, but mind you, not helping, as she cooked. I can also visualize how colorful the dinner table was, and how tasty, and looking back, how balanced in nutrition, the food was. The whole family sitting for dinner was a regular practice at home, the servants always around. And there were the any number of visitors that would drop by to meet Taatta. And you could be sure they'll soon be at the table. [I remember myself being the beneficiary of such Sinhala Buddhist largesse of heart when, visiting Mr Martin Wickremasinghe, the Doyen of Sinhala Literature (creative and critical), I would be invited to join him at the table with him.]

Taking me to Colombo by train, the train stopping somewhere, she takes me to her and says, "Here we're, puta (son). We're in Colombo", although, of course, looking around I saw nothing special. But that was my entry to my studies in Colombo, along with my sisters.

Leaving home to return to Colombo after a school holiday, she would stand as far as her eyes could go, simply to take a last look at me before turning the street corner. And it was the same with me when I kept on turning back and back and back any number of times just to have that final look at her, albeit in the distance.

Of course, Amma loved all us children, no doubt, but without trying to put a score on it, her's was an unbounded love for me. The years 1962 to 1964 was when my involvement with the theatre and ballet peaked. This meant that often I was late for dinner. But, despite the fact that Amma was ill, and on medication, she was sure to be waiting for me to have dinner. And this was under my repeated protests!

Falling into a coma for three months, she survived it, as if taunting medical opinion that death was inevitable. And in my speculative thought, I'd like to believe that it was that she refused to leave this world until she'd seen with her own eyes me settled into a family life. My reason for the thought? Even though Amma had been in and out of the Ayurveda Hospital and the Govt. western hospital during the last 15 years of her life, not knowing when. But she passed away a mere three months after my marriage.

If I'm late for something or the other, the common joke that went around was that I was helping unwilling elderly women across the street! If this you'll say is reflective of penchant for other-care, i.e., , looking after the interests of others, and a kindness on my part, I know from whom I inherited it. It is undoubtedly from Amma (if also from Taatta (see his story below)). I know that the attitude of mind was absorbed through a sort of osmosis even before I was born, while still in her womb. Contemporary research shows how language is learned while still in the womb. So it was from a womb to tomb kindness that has made me kind. And the physical transfer of her values was to continue through breast-feeding me up until I was around seven!

These are the random thoughts that come to me in relation to my mother. And, sorry, in no particular order.

So Amma, may you attain Nibbana!

Putta Sugunasiri

(Writing from Canada, in April 2016, over fifty years after her passing away.)