

# Filial Piety in Buddhism



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## ABSTRACT

Buddhism started in India and arrived in China in the country which praises filial piety. In China filial piety is considered like a virtue. However, Buddhism encourages departure from household life and abandonment of family in the early Buddhism period. So how this transformation was possible, from India to China? And filial piety was only a virtue among Chinese Buddhism or it was also present in Indian Buddhism?<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords:* Buddhism, filial piety in China

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth.C. (1968). Filial piety in chinese buddhism. Harvard journal of Asiatic studies, 28, p.81.

## Introduction

### Buddhism and filial piety in China

Traditional Chinese focus on the family and filial piety. For instance, Wang Hsiang in the Chin era reclined on ice without any clothing so that his bodily warmth would melt a hole in the ice through which he could catch fish for his mother. There are several stories which talk about filial piety, like the one of Wu Meng who slept naked in order to draw the mosquitoes away from his parents. However Buddhism in India, encourages the virtues of the celibate life and it magnified the misery and suffering inherent in family life with its attachment to wife and children. So because of this opposition of characters, when Buddhism was introduced into China where filial piety was the dominant virtue, it was inevitable that opposition would arise. Actually, since the beginning Buddhism was attacked by Chinese as being unfilially. For instance, in the chapter 117 of the Taoist work T'ai-p'ing ching probably compiled by Yu Chi in the latter half of the Hou Han dynasty, there is four types of nefarious conduct which defile the divine way: 1) unfilially conduct 2) celibacy, resulting in no descendants 3) eating faeces and drinking urine as medicine 4) mendicancy. The Buddhists were the objects of this attack since they were guilty of all the practices enumerated. Also, in the treatise on the settling of doubts, several passage reflecting critics which charged the fact that Buddhists were unfilially because they shaved their heads, and violated the teaching of the Hsia Ching or classic on filial piety which stressed the duty to return our body, skin and hair intact to our ancestors<sup>2</sup>. In this way, Buddhists realized that they have to adopt a positive approach and emphasize their own idea about piety to get a favorable hearing among the Chinese. In fact, the goal was to impress the Chinese to demonstrate that they were filial. How? By focusing about sutras in the canon which stress about filial piety and by contending that Buddhism had developed a concept of piety that was superior to that of the Confucians<sup>3</sup>.

There is an example of filial piety in the sutra Shan-Tzu. In this sutra, there is a blind couple who had no children and wanted to go live in the forest. But, a bodhisattva saw a danger and decide to be reborn as son in order to serve them. So they decided to go to the forest and Shan-Tzu served them. One day, he was shot by a king. Shan-Tzu

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p.82.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.p.83.

said to the king that he killed three persons because the parents were blind. The king was very emotional about his piety and he promised to look after the old couple. As we can see through this sutra, Buddhists try to impress Chinese about their filial piety.<sup>4</sup>

In the sutra Mu-Lien we can also observe the topic of filial piety. Mu-Lien after attaining arhantship wished to repay his parents. He found that his mother reborn as hungry ghost. To do that all monks gathered to express virtues. After the monks asked the Buddha whether or not it was permissible for pious and filial sons in the future to hold such events for the purpose of saving parents and ancestors. The Blessed one answered in the affirmative and urged his followers to celebrate such a festival on the fifteenth days of the seventh month.<sup>5</sup> Buddha said: *“thoses disciples of the Buddha who are filial and obedient to their parents should constantly remember their parents in their thoughts and make offerings to them back to the seventh generation.”* Because of that, this sutra was welcomed by the Chinese and became very popular not only among the Buddhists but also among the common people. We have to notice that such popular story have been preserved in a style of literature known as pien-wen or texts of marvellous events, samples of which have been discovered among the Tun-Huang manuscripts. The presence of such pien-wen as the Mu-Lien pien wen attests to the popularity of this story among the masses. Beside, the popularity of the Yu-lan-p'en ching was accentuated by the commentary of the famous Hua-yen master, Tsung-mi: *“Prince Siddharta did not assume the kingship, but left family and country because he wished to cultivate the way and become enlightened so as to repay the love and benefactions of his parents”*. In this way, Siddharta became a filial son entirely acceptable to the Chinese.<sup>6</sup>

The second contention of the Buddhist is that their conception of piety is superior to that of the Confucians. First of all, the Buddhists contended that the Buddha taught the filial son not just to attend and serve his parents as the Confucians stressed but also to convert the parents to Buddhism, so that they would enjoy all the benefits that come from being followers of the Buddha. The Chinese Buddhist pursued this line of argument further by contending that Buddhists monks aimed not merely at salvation of their parents but at universal salvation for all living creatures. In this role they would be fulfilling

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p.85.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.p.90.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p.92.

what is designated as the ta-hsiao or great filial piety, to be considered for superior of the Confucian piety which is confined to one family and limited to serving only one's parents whereas the Buddhist piety is universal and all-inclusive in that it embraces all living beings. The Confucians according Buddhists think of filial piety entirely in terms of human relations on this earthly level, between parents and children. The Buddhists on the other hand consider piety in terms of something spiritual which extends into the future. When the faithful Buddhist converts his parents, he makes it possible for them to attain rebirth in a happy state of existence in one of the Buddhist heavens or in nirvana. So they claim, lies the superiority of the Buddhist piety over that of the Confucians.<sup>7</sup>

## Content

### Filial piety, unique feature of Chinese Buddhism?

Scholars like Gregory Schopen and John Strong pointed out that filial was important to Indian Buddhists as well and therefore could not be regarded as a unique feature of Chinese Buddhism. We can rely on suttas found in the Pali Nikayas to demonstrate that, especially the *Katannu Sutta* of the *Anguttaranikaya*:

*“Monks one can never repay two persons, I declare. What two? Mother and father. Even if one should carry about his mother on one shoulder and his carry about his father on the other and so doing should live a hundred years, attain a hundred years and if he should support them, anointing them with unguents, kneading, bathing and rubbing their limbs and they meanwhile should even void their excrements upon him, even so could he not repay his parents. Moreover monks, if he should establish his parents in supreme authority, in the absolute rule over this mighty earth abounding in the seven treasures, not even this could he repay his parents. What is the cause for that? Monks parents do much for their children: they bring them up, they nourish them, they introduce them to this world”.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p.97.

<sup>8</sup>Guan Xing. (2005). Filial piety in early Buddhism. Journal of Buddhist Ethics, volume 12. p.4. <https://hub.hku.hk/bitstream/10722/44176/1/content.pdf>

As we can see with this passage, it's quite explicit that the Buddha taught filial piety. We have to notice that this sutta is also found in the Chinese translation of the Ekottagama with the same message but the wording is slightly changed. This suggests that the passage must come from a very old source before the split of Buddhism into different schools since it is common to both Theravada and Mahayana. Actually, the Chinese translation of the sutra stop here but the Pali version continues with the Buddha's advice on how to repay parents debt.

*“Moreover monks whose incite his unbelieving parents, settles and establishes them in the faith whoso incite his immoral parents, settles and establishes them in morality, whoso incite his stingy parents, settles and establishes them in liberality, whoso incite his foolish parents, settles and establishes them in wisdom, such an one, just by so doing, does repay, does more than repay what is due to his parents”.*<sup>9</sup>

In this passage the Buddha recommend four ways of requiting for the debts to one's parents which are all for spiritual progress: faith, morality, liberality and wisdom. Apart from this suttas, filial piety is also mentioned in many different places in the Pali canon. In the Samyuttanikaya it says: *“Mother is the good friend dwelling in the home”*.<sup>10</sup>

The Buddha says in *Anguttaranikaya* that there are three duties that have been praised by the wise and good, one of them is supporting parents.

*“Monks, these three things have been enjoined by the wise and good. What three? Charity, going forth (from the home to the homeless life), supporting of mother and father. These are the three duties.”*<sup>11</sup>

So the above observation bring us to the fact that filial piety is not a special and particular feature of Chinese Buddhism. It has also been taught and practiced in Indian Buddhism as an important virtue together with other ethical teachings from its very inception. What is special with regard to filial piety in Chinese Buddhism perhaps is that the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p.5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.8.

Chinese Buddhists singled out the Buddhists teachings on filial piety as a special group taught and practiced one generation after the other with a strong emphasis. This is due to the obvious reason: the influence of Confucian emphasis on filial piety which is considered the supreme virtue. On the other hand, it was also to show that Buddhism also teach filial piety in order to response to the Confucian accusation of Buddhist monks being not filial. As a result of this the Sutra about the deep kindness of parents and the difficulty of repaying it and the Ullambana Sutra became very popular and were painted and carved in caves such as Dunhuang, Dazhu and other place.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

As we saw in this essay, Buddhism made a kind of accommodation to Chinese ethics. Actually, it's probably one of the chief reasons why the foreign religion was so readily accepted by the Chinese despite many features that we were opposed to Chinese culture. To be accepted, the goal was to demonstrate that Buddhism was concern about filial piety and they did it through the scriptures as we saw with different sutras. In addition, this essay demonstrated through some sutras that filial piety was not only a topic for Chinese but it was also the case in Indian Buddhism. Some scholars have been misunderstood as Dr Guang Xin noticed. Like the way to be accepted by the Chinese society, Buddhism relied on sutras to prove their filial piety and it was the same to prove that filial piety was also concern for Indian Buddhism. In this way, the sutras as we saw above demonstrated that this question about filial piety has been raised by the Buddha. The difference between the two society which are Chinese and Indian is that the Chinese society focus about filial piety generation after generation due to the influence of Confucian because filial piety is considered as a supreme virtue.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.p.16.

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