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Filial Piety in Early Buddhism

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Filial Piety in Early Buddhism

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Abstract

Buddhist scholars like Kenneth Ch'en thought that filial piety was a special feature of Chinese Buddhism. Later, John Strong employed "popular Buddhist stories" to show that filial piety was also important in Indian Buddhism, but he asserted that it was "a Buddhist compromise with the Brāhmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level." On the other hand, Gregory Schopen, who mainly used Indian Buddhist epigraphical material in his research, pointed out the same idea but he could not find definitive support from the early Buddhist textual sources. My investigation of the early Buddhist texts and analysis of the relevant passages clearly shows that filial piety is one of the important aspects of the early Buddhist ethical teachings. Filial piety was practiced by the early Indian Buddhists (1) as a way of requiting the debt to one's parents; (2) as a chief ethical good action; and (3) as Dharma, the social order. And on this basis it also shows that the early Indian Buddhists practiced filial piety not as a "compromise with the Brāhmanical ethics of filiality" but as an important teaching taught by the master.

As Jan Yun-hua points out, early Buddhist scholars such as Kenneth K. S. Ch'en and Ryoshū Michihata thought that "filial piety occupied a special place in Chinese Buddhism." This remained unchanged for some time, until scholars like "Gregory Schopen and John Strong pointed out that filial piety was important to Indian Buddhists as well, and therefore could not be regarded as a unique feature of Chinese Buddhism."¹ In his "Filial Piety and Buddhism: The Indian Antecedents to a 'Chinese' Problem," John Strong employed, to use his own words, "popular Buddhist stories taken from canonical and non-canonical Pāli and Sanskrit sources" to show that filial piety was practiced by Indian Buddhist monks as well.² But Strong asserted that this practice was "a Buddhist compromise with the Brāhmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level towards which the *Jātakas* were geared."³

Then he cited the *Sāma Jātaka* and the *Mātuposaka Sutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya* to support his argument. Gregory Schopen, on the other hand, in his article “Filial Piety and the Monks in the Practices of Indian Buddhism: A Question of Sini-cization Viewed from the Other Side,” mainly used Indian Buddhist epigraphical material, and concluded his research on filial piety in Indian Buddhism by saying that “although [the practice of filial piety] receives no very definite support from ‘early’ textual sources, it is nevertheless a demonstrable fact.”⁴ Gregory Schopen further pointed out that this practice was popular among lay people as well as monks, among whom, what is more, it was practiced not only by “the average vil-lage monks,” but also by the educated monks who appear to have been the teachers and transmitters of official Buddhist scripture. He found three such monks in his epigraphical material: “one is called a *Trepidaka*, one is called a *Dharmakathika*, and a third either a *Vinayadhara* or ‘co-resident’ of a *Vinayadhara*, and a *Dhar-makathika*.”⁵ It seems that Schopen was not aware of John Strong’s article, which was published in 1983, a year earlier than his, since he did not refer to, or men-tion, the latter’s research in his paper. However, Schopen’s article suggests that filial piety was practiced in India not only by ordinary monks but by the educated monks as well.

Jan Yun-hua, on the issue of filial piety, agrees with Nakamura and says that “Nakamura’s position is more realistic, namely, that filial piety was a minor virtue in Buddhist ethics of India, but became a supreme virtue in China.”⁶ But we think that Jan Yun-hua’s interpretation of Nakamura’s idea is somewhat misleading for the latter just says: “the virtue which corresponding to the idea of filial piety is, of course, taught in the original Buddhist *sūtras*, but only as one of the virtues and not as the supreme virtue.”⁷ When we read this statement in its context, what Nakamura referred to as “the supreme virtue” is not filial piety in the context of Chinese Buddhism, but in the context of Confucianism. In other words, Chinese Buddhists never consider filial piety as “the supreme virtue” and it was only the Confucian thinkers and scholars who made it the fundamental practice. Here is what Nakamura said before he made the above statement:

Buddhists were forced to teach filial piety to the common people in China just because the most important virtue in Confucianism was filial piety, which de-manded a one-sided obedience from children, the younger people, to their parents, the venerated elders. This idea, however, did not exist in Indian Buddhism, as can be seen in the original Sanskrit texts where there is no such term corresponding to the idea of *hsiao*, filial piety, found frequently in Chinese translations of *sūtras*. The translators must have added this term.⁸

Here it is clear that by “the supreme virtue”, Nakamura referred to filial piety in the context of Confucianism not that of Chinese Buddhism. In the Chinese trans-lation of the **Madhyamāgama*, the **Dhānañjāni Sūtra*, which is the counterpart

of the *Dhānañjāni Sutta* in the Pāli *Majjhimanikāya*, preaches that all comes under the law of karma. Even if a person does bad deeds for the sake of his parents he will not escape from the consequences of that karma.

Thus, Śāriputra said: Tuoran, I will ask you and please answer me (according to your understanding). What do you think, Tuoran? Suppose a person does bad deeds for the sake of his parents, and as a result of the deeds, he is born into hell after the breaking up of his body. After taking birth in hell and when the guards of hell drag him for punishment, suppose he says to the them: guards, please do not punish me because I have done the bad deeds for the sake of my parents. What do you think, Tuoran? Would he be able to free himself from the guards' punishment? Answer: no.⁹

Although Chinese Buddhism laid much emphasis on filial piety and even selected the *sūtras* that teach filial piety as a special group for preaching, it still upholds, as Indian Buddhism does, that karma is the supreme principle.

In this paper, with relevant data from the Pāli *Nikāyas* and *Vinaya* and the Chinese translation of *Āgamas* and *Vinayas*, I propose to show that, first, the textual sources suggest filial piety is indeed one of the important aspects in Buddhist ethical teachings. Scholars who have studied Buddhist ethics, however, have missed it. Second, on the basis of the first point, the early Indian Buddhists practiced filial piety not as “a Buddhist compromise with the Brāhmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level” as asserted by Strong, but as an important ethics taught by their master himself. Filial piety was not, as Jan Yun-hua interpreted Nakamura, “a minor virtue in Buddhist ethics of India.”

In the following discussion, I will mainly use the Pāli sources as my evidence with the support of Chinese *Āgamas* in order to avoid the possible accusation that the latter may have been influenced by the Chinese emphasis of filial piety so that the translators may have adjusted their translations as Nakamura pointed out. If the evidence is found in both the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese *Āgamas* and they are identical, then it is quite significant that they most probably came down from a common source before the split of Buddhism into different doctrinal schools.

While teaching, I have collected much material concerning the teaching of filial piety from both the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese *Āgamas*. After a careful analysis, I have categorized these materials into the following three aspects:

1. Filial piety practiced as a way of requiting the debt to one's parents;
2. Filial piety practiced as a chief ethical good action, field of merit;
3. Filial piety practiced as Dharma, the social order.

Filial Piety as a Way of Requiring the Debt to One's Parents

In the *Kataññu Sutta* of the *Āṅguttaranikāya* it is said:

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 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.¹⁰

According to the **Mahīśāsaka Vinaya*, the parents of Pilindavatsa (Bhikṣu)¹¹ were poor and he wanted to offer them his robes, but he was not sure whether he was doing the right thing. So he went to the Buddha and asked for advice. The Buddha, on this occasion, assembled the *bhikṣus* and taught them the above message, and also made it a rule that *bhikṣus* should support their parents wholeheartedly and throughout their life.¹²

In this passage, it is quite explicit that the Buddha taught filial piety. This passage is also found in the Chinese translation of the **Ekottāgama*; the same message is given, although the wording is slightly changed.¹³ This suggests that the passage must have come down from a very old source before the split of Buddhism into different schools since it is common to both Theravāda and Mahāyāna. Hajime Nakamura, in his endnotes 38 of chapter 23 “Esteem for Hierarchy” of his book *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, listed many references to the idea of filial piety in the Pāli canon, but he missed this single important passage.¹⁴ As a result, Jan Yun-hua misinterprets that filial piety was a minor virtue in Buddhist ethics of India. The Chinese translation of the *sūtra* stops here, but the Pāli version continues with the Buddha's advice on how to repay parents' debt.

Moreover, monks, whoso incites 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 a one, just by so doing, does repay, does more than repay what is due to his parents.¹⁵

This passage, however, with the same message, appears three times in the **Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* translated by Yijing at the beginning of the eighth century.¹⁶ In this passage

the Buddha recommended four ways of requiting the debts to one's parents, which are all for spiritual progress: faith, morality, liberality and wisdom, in contrast to the material and physical ways discussed in the previous passage. So in other words, helping one's parents in their spiritual progress is considered much more important than helping them in a material or physical way. However, this does not mean that Buddhism emphasizes only the spiritual aspect in filial piety. This will be clear as we progress in our discussion.

In another passage of the same *Aṅguttaranikāya*, the Buddha told the monks that mother and father should be worshipped and venerated as Brahmā, as the teachers of old, and that they are worthy of offering.

Monks, those families where mother and father are worshipped in the home are reckoned like unto Brahmā. Those families where mother and father are worshipped in the home are ranked with the teachers of old. Worthy of offerings, monks, are those families where mother and father are worshipped in the home. 'Brahmā,' monks, is a term for mother and father. 'Teachers of old,' monks, is a term for mother and father. 'Worthy of offerings,' monks, is a term for mother and father. Why so? Because mother and father do much to children, they bring them up, nourish and introduce them to the world.¹⁷

In the *Itivuttaka*, the message is found again, however, with one more addition: mother and father are venerated as "the early *devas*."¹⁸ In the Chinese translation of the **Saṃyuktāgama*, the same message is also found but mother and father are worshipped, apart from as Brahmā, teachers and all *devas*, as Mahādeva, and the family is also respected by others if parents are supported with all kinds of things.¹⁹ Then the Chinese **Saṃyuktāgama* explains further:

Brahmā, the king of all gods, was able to be born into the Brahmā world because he supported his parents righteously (in the past). If one wishes to make offerings to teachers, one should make offerings to parents because parents are teachers. If one wishes to worship one should first worship parents. If one wishes to worship fire one should first worship parents. If one wishes to worship gods one should first worship parents because parents are gods.²⁰

The Bhagavat continues: "If one wishes to worship Brahmā, the god of fire, teachers and other gods, one should support parents. (Because in doing so) one will obtain a good name in this life and will be born into heaven in the next life."

Here we can see that the message in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, the *Itivuttaka* and the Chinese translation of the **Saṃyuktāgama* is the same: that parents should be honored, respected and worshipped as Brahmā, as teachers and as gods and that they are worthy of offerings although new items have been added in the latter two texts.

In the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, a Brāhman asks the Buddha about sacrifice that involves a lot of killing of cows and other animals. The Buddha describes, with sacrificial terminology, three types of fires: parents, family members and religious men, which should be attended with care and honor, instead of worshipping the actual fire, which was considered a heretic practice.

The first fire is parents who should be honored and cared for; the second fire is one's wife and children, employees and dependents; the third fire represents religious persons who have either attained the goal of arahantship or have embarked on a course of training for the elimination of negative mental traits. The Buddha said to the Brāhman: "these three fires, when esteemed, revered, venerated, respected, must bring best happiness."²¹

This *sūtra* is also found in both Chinese translations of the **Saṃyuktāgama*; the first is named the root fire because all children are born from parents. Therefore the root should be respected, honored and supported, and should be made happy. The second is named family fire because a good man lives in a family sharing both happiness and difficulties with all other family members. A man should support all family members and make them happy. The third is named field fire because religious men such as śramaṇas and Brāhmanas are the field of merit and should be offered necessities by family men.²²

Thus in both the Pāli and Chinese versions of the *sūtra*, parents are considered the first fire that should be maintained, honored and respected by good family men, followed by other members of the family and religious men.

In the *Saṃyuttanikāya*, it says: "Mother is the good friend dwelling in the home."²³ The same expression is also found in the other Chinese translation of the **Saṃyuktāgama*.²⁴ However, in Guṇabhadra's translation of the **Saṃyuktāgama*, the expression is quite different. "A good faithful virtuous wife is the good friend dwelling in the home."²⁵

Then in the *Vasala Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*, which is also found in the Chinese **Saṃyuktāgama*, the Buddha discusses what an outcast consists of with a fire-worshipping Brāhman. The Buddha says that not by birth but by ethical conduct does one become an outcast or a Brāhmaṇa. The Brāhman caste consists of many ethical conducts, among which are supporting and venerating one's parents. This of course is a reinterpretation by the Buddha of the caste system.

Whosoever being rich does not support mother or father when old and past their youth, let one know him as an outcast. Whosoever strikes or by words annoys mother or father, brother, sister, or mother-in-law, let one know him as an outcast.²⁶

In two places in the Chinese translation of the **Ekottarāgama*, it is said that a *Tathāgata* will do five things when he appears in the world: first, set the wheel of Dharma in motion, second, save his parents, third, establish those who have no faith in the faith, fourth, awaken the *bodhisattva* mind in those who have not

awakened it yet, and fifth, prophesy the appearance of another future Buddha.²⁷

This, of course, shows some Mahāyāna influence, as the *bodhisattva* mind is mentioned. What is significant to note here is that among the five things a *Tathāgata* will do on earth, the second is to save his parents. So we can see that filial piety is much more emphasized in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The duty of supporting one's parents

Since parents are considered to be worthy of offerings, as Brahmā, as gods and as teachers, so supporting one's parents becomes one's duty to be performed. The Buddha says in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* that there are three duties that have been praised by the wise and good, one of which 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."²⁸ In the Vinaya, it is said that if one of a monk's parents was ill, the monk should go and see them even if he is not asked, since it is the duty of monks. So it is explicit that filial piety should be practiced by monks as well although they have renounced worldly ties and they should do it voluntarily, without any force.

In the *Dhammika Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*, advising the lay people the Buddha says: "Let him dutifully maintain his parents, and practice an honorable trade; the householder who observes this strenuously goes to the gods by name, Sayampabhas."²⁹

In the well-known *Sigālovāda Sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, the Buddha advises lay followers to respect and support their parents in five ways:

In five ways, young householder, a child should minister to his parents as the East: having supported me I shall support them, I shall do their duties, I shall keep the family tradition, I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance, furthermore I shall offer alms in honor of my departed relatives.³⁰

This *sutta* is so important to Chinese Buddhists that it has been translated into Chinese five times. The first three are independent translations and the last two are included in the *Āgamas*. The five points in supporting parents are one's duty, and they are also found in the four extant Chinese translations of the *sūtra*.³¹ According to Indian tradition, the east is the most important direction.³² So when parents are worshipped as the eastern direction, that means parents are considered very important. This becomes clear when we look at the Buddha's teaching on economics.

According to the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, when one righteously earns wealth, one should spend it on five kinds of people: (1) oneself; (2) one's parents; (3) one's wife, children, slaves, work-folk and men; (4) friends and companions; and (5)

recluses and Brāhmins. The last category is to make merit for a happy life hereafter, ripening to happiness, leading heavenward.³³ Here parents come second since one has to be alive in order to do all these things.

But in another place of the same *Āṅguttaranikāya*, the text says that one should honor and venerate the following five kinds of people when wealth is righteously earned: (1) parents; (2) wife, children, slaves, workfolk and men; (3) laborers in the fields and those whose business is within one's boundaries; (4) gods; and (5) recluses.³⁴

In the second list of five kinds of people one should support with wealth, honoring and venerating parents comes first. This is because, in the first list, the Buddha advises how riches are spent while in the second, what kinds of people one should revere when one has wealth. So in the first list, wealth is the main object while in the second those to whom veneration should be paid is the object. Thus, parents are considered the first and most important people one should honor and venerate.

Example of filial piety

The early Buddhist texts not only teach filial piety as a duty, but also show some examples of it. In the *Ghaṭikāra Sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, which is also found in the Chinese **Madhyamāgama*, the Buddha tells the story of *Ghaṭikāra*, the potter and chief supporter of the past Buddha Kassapa, who was an only child and stayed at home, leading a bachelor's life in order to serve his blind and aged parents although he wished to renounce the world.³⁵

When King Kikī of Kāsi asked Buddha Kassapa to spend the rains retreat in a residence built by him, the latter declined. Then the king asked Buddha Kassapa whether he had a better supporter. The Buddha Kassapa replied that he had *Ghaṭikāra* as his chief supporter, who was virtuous in many ways as he observed the five precepts and was free from doubt about the Four Noble Truths. Among the virtues praised by Buddha Kassapa, one is supporting his blind and aged parents.

Then another example, as pointed out by John Strong, is found in the *Sāma Jātaka*, which is divided in two parts. In the first part, the son of a wealthy couple became a monk and their unfaithful serfs robbed his aged parents of wealth. As a result, the old couple became beggars. The son, who heard the bad news and wanted to return to lay life to support his parents, came and consulted the Buddha who told him that he could support his parents with alms food while being a monk. Then the Buddha preached the *Mātuposaka Sutta*, which will be discussed in the second section. Soon Sāma's practice of feeding his parents with alms food became known to a certain number of monks who reported the matter to the Buddha. In such an occasion, which is the second part of the *Sāma Jātaka*, the Buddha told a *Jātaka* story to the monks that long ago he himself supported his parents while

going round for alms.

We find four Chinese translations of the *Sāma Jātaka*, but without the first part as it is in the Pāli version.³⁶ The Chinese versions start with a *bodhisattva* named All Wonderful who took birth in a family of blind parents and wanted to follow the ascetic life in the forest. When the child, who was named Shanzi, was about ten years they all went into a forest and practiced there. One day, the king came to the forest where the family were for hunting and mistakenly shot Shanzi who was in deer hide. Fatally wounded, Shanzi was sorry to tell the king that he had aged blind parents to look after and then he died. Moved by Shanzi's compassion, the king promised to look after Shanzi's parents who were taken to the corpse. Shanzi's parents said: "If it were true that Shanzi is pious and filial, heaven and earth know, then let this arrow be plucked out and the poison eradicated, and Shanzi restored to life." By the utterance of this truth, Shanzi's life was restored and what is most surprising, his parents also had their sight restored. The story ends with Sāma preaching a sermon to the king on the advantages of filial piety.

Filial Piety as a Chief Ethical Good Action

The merit of supporting one's parents is praised by the Buddha in many places in the early texts. The Mātuposaka Sutta which is found in both the Pāli *Samyuttanikāya* and the Chinese **Samyuktāgama* tells of a Brāhman who came to see the Buddha and asked the latter about supporting his mother by begging for alms food.

The Brāhman says:

"Of a truth, Master Gotama, I seek my alms after the normal manner, and so seeking them I maintain my parents. Am I not sir, in so doing, doing what ought to be done?" The Buddha replies: "Yes, verily you, Brāhman, in so doing do what ought to be done. Whoso, Brāhman, seeks alms after the normal manner, and so seeking maintains his parents, engenders much merit."³⁷

Here the Brāhman was not sure whether he practiced in the right way in supporting his parents with alms food. The Buddha assured him by saying that he was not only doing the right thing, but also acquired much merit by supporting his parents. John Strong, essentially on the basis of this *sutta*, thinks that Buddhists practiced filial piety as a "compromise with the Brāhmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level."³⁸ But we think that his suggestion is not correct because, as we have demonstrated above, the practice of filial piety among the Indian Buddhists is not a "compromise with the Brāhmanical ethics of filiality," but an important ethical teaching taught by the master himself. Furthermore, the Buddhist practice of filial piety is not only "operating at the popular level" but also among the educated monks, as demonstrated by Gregory Schopen. John Strong missed the

point since he utilized only the “popular Buddhist stories” and had not made a thorough investigation of the early Buddhist canonical texts, namely the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese *Āgamas*, except the *Mātuposaka Sutta*. Therefore, he missed the important *suttas* that teach filial piety such as the *Kataññu Sutta*, and the passages about parents being worshipped as Brahmā, as gods and as teachers found in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* and other places in the canon, as we mentioned above.

The Chinese **Samyuktāgama* says that supporting one’s parents is the first of the seven ethical good deeds performed by Brahmā, the chief of the gods, when he was a human, and as a result, he was born in the heaven of the Brahmā world. The other good deeds are respecting elders, good words, no harsh words, no slandering talk, speaking the truth and being generous.

This passage is found in three places in the Chinese **Samyuktāgama*, once in the second Chinese translation of the **Samyuktāgama*, and once in an independent translation of some *sūtras* from the **Samyuktāgama*.³⁹ It is also found in the Pāli **Samyuttanikāya*.⁴⁰ Thus it is clear that the passage is quite old.

In the Chinese *Ekottarāgama*, it says that making offerings to parents is equal to making offerings to the *bodhisattva* who has one more birth to bodhi.

Thus, I heard, once the Buddha was staying at Anāthapiṇḍika’s park in Jeta’s grove in Śrāvastī. The Blessed One said to the monks: ”There are two dharmas for ordinary people to obtain great merit, attain great reward, taste the flavor of liberation and reach the unconditioned state. What are the two? Making offerings to parents who are the two persons, one can obtain great merit and attain great reward. If one makes offerings to the *bodhisattva* who has one more birth to bodhi, he also obtains great merit and attains great reward. Thus, monks, through making offerings to these two kinds of people, one obtains great merit, attains great reward, tastes the flavor of liberation and reaches the unconditioned state. Hence, monks, you should always be mindful, support and be obedient to your parents.⁴¹

Although we do not find a corresponding passage in the Pāli canon, the message is clear that one can obtain great merit by supporting one’s parents.

It is thus said in the *Ekottarāgama* that if one does not respect one’s parents and other elders and also does not continue the family business, one will be reborn into a poor family. On the other hand, if one respects one’s parents, brothers and kinsmen and also makes offerings to them, one will be reborn into a rich family.⁴² The same idea is also expressed in the *Parābhava Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta* when a deity asks the Buddha about the kinds of losers. The Buddha replies that among many losers, one is the person who does not support his parents.⁴³

According to the Chinese translation of the **Dasuttara Sūtra* of the **Dīrghāgama*, respecting parents is one of the six ways or dharmas that cause increase in practice,

while not respecting parents is one of the six ways or dharmas that cause decline in practice.⁴⁴

In the *Ekottarāgama*, it is said that there are eleven kinds of people who cannot attain the Noble Eightfold Path and the killer of parents is among them.⁴⁵

On the other hand, it is a grave evil if one harms one's parents. According to the Buddhist teachings, there are five kinds of gravest bad *karma*, killing mother and father are two of them.

There are these five inhabitants of the states of deprivation, inhabitants of hell, who are in agony and incurable. Which five? One who has killed his/her mother, one who has killed his/her father, one who has killed an arahant, one who — with a corrupted mind — has caused the blood of a *Tathāgata* to flow, and one who has caused a split in the sangha. These are the five inhabitants of the states of deprivation, inhabitants of hell, who are in agony and incurable.⁴⁶

According to this passage, those who have committed these five kinds of bad *karma* are wayward down to hell with immediate effect and are in agony and incurable. Thus we can see that filial piety occupies an important place in Buddhist ethics and spiritual progress.

According to the Pāli Vinaya, a killer of parents should not be admitted into the Order and if admitted he should be expelled from the Order.⁴⁷ This rule is also found in five Vinaya texts in Chinese translations: the **Sarvāstivāda-vinaya*,⁴⁸ the *Sarvāstivādanikāyavinaya-mātrkā*,⁴⁹ the **Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*,⁵⁰ the **Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya*,⁵¹ and a Vinaya text whose school affiliation is not known.⁵²

Filial Piety as Dharma, the Social Order

Respecting parents is seen in early Buddhism as Dharma, the way things should be, or the order of nature. If parents are not respected, more bad things will happen, such as fighting. This idea is found in many places in Chinese translations of the **Saṃyuktāgama*, the **Dīrghāgama* and the **Ekottarāgama*, as well as the Pāli *Aṅguttaranikāya*.

These texts say that on the eighth day of each month, the ministers who are councilors of the Four Great Kings perambulate this world to see whether many folk among men pay reverence to mother and father, to recluses and Brāhmins, and show deference to the elders of the clan, and do good work.⁵³

Then on the fourteenth day of each month, the sons of the Four Great Kings perambulate this world to see whether many folk among men pay reverence to mother etc. Then on the fifteenth day of each month, the Four Great Kings in person perambulate this world to see whether many folk among men pay reverence

to mother etc. The texts say that if few be those among men who do these things, the Four Great Kings report the matter to the gods of the Thirty-Three as they sit in the Hall of Righteousness. The gods of the Thirty-Three are displeased, saying "Surely, sirs, the god-hosts will diminish and the *asura*-hosts will be increased." If the Four Great Kings report in positive terms then the gods of the Thirty-Three are pleased, saying "Surely, sirs, the god-hosts will be increased and the *asura*-hosts will decrease."

Asuras are known for their fighting with gods in the Buddhist scriptures. According to the PTS *Pāli-English Dictionary*, "The fight between Gods *Asuras* is also reflected in the oldest books of the Pāli Canon and occurs in identical description under the title of *devāsura-sangāma*" in many places.⁵⁴ The gods represent righteousness, as the Pāli passage informs us that even the assembly hall of the gods is named *Sudhammā*, the Hall of Righteousness: "the Four Great Kings report the matter to the Devas of the Thirty-Three, as they sit in conclave in the Hall of Righteousness (*Sudhammā*), saying . . ." ⁵⁵ This is supported by the Chinese translations of the **Samyukāgama*, the **Dīrghāgama* and the **Ekottarāgama*, according to which the gods assemble in the Hall of Righteousness to discuss the matter after they have inspected the world.⁵⁶ According to the *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya*, Maudgalyāyana told the *bhikṣus*:

In the thirty-third heaven, there is a Hall of Righteousness, which has five hundred pillars, and amongst which there is a precious pillar like a hair. There is also a majestic mansion, which is the seat of the ruler of the thirty-three heavens, decorated with various flowers and around are the seats for other gods also decorated with various flowers.⁵⁷

The *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* also explains that the Hall of Brahmā is made of seven precious stones and is named the Hall of Righteousness.⁵⁸ Even in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the assembly hall of Gods is mentioned as *Sudhammā*, which is translated by Conze as "Maintaining Justice."⁵⁹ So the above passage implies that if many folk do not pay reverence to mother and father, to recluses and Brāhmins, there will be an increase of fighting since *asuras* love fighting while gods maintain peace. So according to this passage, whether human folk respect parents or not is the boast of the ethical practices that directly affect the peace of the world.

According to the *Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta* which is found in the Pāli *Dīghanikāya* and in both Chinese **Dīrgha* and **Madhyama Āgamas*, whether parents are respected and honored or not is one of the factors leading to either increase or decrease of people's lifespan respectively.

It is said in the text that when the lifespan of people decreased to two hundred and fifty years, these things grew: lack of filial piety for mother and father, lack of

religious piety for holy men, lack of regard for the head of the clan. So the lifespan decreased to a hundred years.⁶⁰

When the lifespan of people is only ten years,

among the humans keen mutual enmity will become the rule, keen ill-will, keen animosity, passionate thoughts even of killing, in a mother towards her child, in a child towards its mother, in a father towards his child, and a child towards its father . . .

What people do are only the ten bad deeds, the ten good deeds are not heard of.⁶¹

On the other hand, the lifespan of people increases when they respect their parents, religious men and heads of clans. The Pāli version says that this happens when the lifespan of people is twenty years, and because of the good they do, the length of their life will increase; as a result, their sons will live forty years of age.⁶²

So whether parents are respected and honored or not is one of the important factors leading to either increase or decrease of people's lifespan. This again suggests that filial piety is an important ethical practice and affects the order of nature.

Thus, as evidenced from the above textual quotations and teachings, it is clear that filial piety is one of the important aspects of early Buddhist ethics. This fills the gap reported by Gregory Schopen who says that "[the practice of filial piety] receives no very definite support from 'early' textual sources." It also goes against the assertion made by John Strong that the early Indian Buddhists practiced filial piety as "a Buddhist compromise with the Brāhmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level."

Filial Piety in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Before concluding this paper, we will take a brief look at filial piety taught in early Mahāyāna *sūtras* to see the development of the idea. Filial piety as part of Buddhist ethics became universalized, and was applied to all sentient beings, when the Mahāyāna arose in India. As is well known, the *bodhisattva* ideal is a major doctrine in Mahāyāna teaching, and filial piety also comes under this ideal. This means that *bodhisattvas* consider all sentient beings as their parents because from numerous past lives in eons of time all sentient beings have been their parents and so they support and respect all beings and work for their salvation.

The *Dafangbianfo-baoen-jing* (*Sūtra of the Great Skillful Means [mahopāya]* by which the Buddha Requisites the Debt to his Parents) is an early Mahāyāna text, registered in the list of *sūtras* translated under the Eastern Han dynasty A.D. 25-220 in the Buddhist catalogs (the name of the translator is lost). In the *Sūtra*, the second chapter is particularly devoted to the exposition of filial piety. In the text, the Buddha says that all sentient beings have been the parents of the *Tathāgata* and

the *Tathāgata* also has been the parent of all sentient beings. Therefore, in order to requite the debt to his parents, the *Tathāgata* often practiced the kind of asceticism that others could not practice, abandoned what others could not abandon, such as his eyes, head, country, wife and all the other luxuries. He diligently practiced the six perfections (*pāramitā*) and thus he attained full enlightenment. It is for this reason that all sentient beings can fulfill the original vow of the *Tathāgata*; the *Tathāgata* has a great debt to all sentient beings. Thus, the *Tathāgata* would never abandon any sentient being.⁶³

We can trace the idea that all sentient beings have been one's parents in some past lives in the early Buddhist texts as well. In the *Samyuttanikāya*, the Buddha says to his disciples:

Bhikkhus, it is not easy to find a being who has not formerly been your mother . . . your father . . . your sister . . . your son . . . your daughter. How is this? Incalculable is the beginning, Bhikkhus, of this faring on. The earliest point is not revealed of the running on, the faring on of beings cloaked in ignorance, tied to craving. S. II, 189-90. The English translation is adapted from *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, II, 128.

In Theravāda Buddhism the same idea is found in the *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaghosa says the following when he describes how to extend loving-kindness to one's parents:

Consequently he should think about that person thus: this person, it seems as my mother in the past carried me in her womb for ten months and removed from me without disgust as if it were yellow sandalwood my urine, excrement, spittle, snot, etc., and played with me in her lap, and nourished me, carrying me about at her hip. And this person as my father went by great paths and paths set on piles, etc., to pursue the trade of merchant, and he risked his life for me by going into battle in double array, by sailing on the great ocean in ships and doing other difficult things and he nourished me by bringing back wealth by one means or another thinking to feed his children.⁶⁴

The *Mahāyāna Brahmajāla Sūtra*, a *Sūtra* teaching *bodhisattva* precepts, expresses the same idea:

A disciple of the Buddha should have a mind of compassion and cultivate the practice of liberating sentient beings. He must reflect thus: throughout the eons of time, all male sentient beings have been my father, all female sentient beings my mother. I was born of them, now I slaughter them, I would be slaughtering my parents as well as eating flesh that was once my own. This is so because all elemental earth, water, fire and air — the four constituents of all life — have previously been part of my body, part of my substance. I must therefore always cultivate the practice of liberating sentient beings and enjoin others to do likewise — as sentient beings are forever reborn, again and again, lifetime after lifetime.⁶⁵

It is probably on this philosophical basis that *bodhisattvas* vow to save all sentient beings since they are considered their past parents. Of course, compassion plays a major role in the *bodhisattva* ideal, but taking all sentient beings as their parents adds force to their motivation to save all sentient beings.

The above observations bring us to the conclusion 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. But what is special with regard to filial piety in Chinese Buddhism is that the Chinese Buddhists singled out the Buddhist teachings on filial piety as a special group taught and practiced, one generation after the other, with a strong emphasis. The reason for this is obvious: the influence of the Confucian emphasis on filial piety, which is considered the supreme virtue. On the other hand, it was also to show that Buddhism teaches filial piety in order to respond to the Confucian accusation of Buddhist monks being not filial. As a result of this, the *Fumu eizhong nanbao Jing* (The *Sūtra* about the Deep Kindness of Parents and the Difficulty of Repaying It) and the *Ullambana Sūtra* became very popular and were painted and carved in caves such as Dunhuang, Dazhu and other places. This will be discussed in detail in another paper.

Notes

¹Jan (1991: 27). For Michihata’s idea, see *Bukkyo to Jukkyo*. Kyoto: Heirakuji Shuden, 1978. (2) Strong (1983: 173)

²Strong (1983: 173)

³Strong (ibid: 177)

⁴Schopen (1984: 124)

⁵Schopen (ibid: 123)

⁶Jan (1991: 27)

⁷Nakamura (1993: 269)

⁸Nakamura (ibid: 269). The italics are mine.

⁹T1, 456c-457a. The translation of the paragraph in the Pāli *Dhānañpāni Sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* reads:

What do you think, Dhānañpāni? Suppose someone here were to behave contrary to the Dhamma, to behave unrighteously for the sake of his parents, and then because of such behavior the wardens of hell were to drag him off to hell. Would he be able [to free himself by pleading thus]: “It was for the sake of my parents that I behaved contrary to the Dhamma, that I behaved unrighteously, so let not the wardens of hell [drag me off] to hell”? Or would his parents be able [to free him by pleading thus]: “It was for our sake that he behaved contrary to the Dhamma, that he behaved unrighteously, so let not the wardens of hell [drag him off] to hell”? No, Master Sāriputta. Even while he was crying out, the wardens of hell would fling him into hell.(M. II, 186-187)

The translation is adapted from Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli’s rendering, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p.792-793.

¹⁰A. I. 61. The translation is adapted from *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, I. 56-57.

¹¹The name Pilindavatsa Bhikṣu is also mentioned in the Introductory chapter of the *Dafangbianfo-baoen-jing* (*Sūtra of the Great Skilful Means [mahopāya]* by which the Buddha Requisites the Debt to his Parents) together with others such as Subhūti, Kaundinya, Pūrṇamaitrāyaṇīputra, Karashima(?), Śāriputra, Mahākātyāyana, Ānanda, Rāhula etc. T3, 124a.

¹²T22, 140c. I translate the Chinese passage as follows:

At that time, the parents of Pilindavatsa (*Bhikṣu*) were poor and he wanted to offer them his robes but dared not do so. So he told the Buddha this matter. The Buddha, on this occasion, assembled the *bhikṣu sangha* and taught them: even if one should carry about one's father on the right shoulder and one's mother on the left shoulder, and so doing should live a hundred years, and they meanwhile should even void their excrements upon one; one offers them rare cloth and food taken from all over the world, even so could one not repay one's parents' debt rendered for a moment. Thus, hereafter, (I) allow you, *bhikṣus*, support (lit: feed) your parents wholeheartedly your entire life. Anyone who does not do so commits a grave offence.

It should be noticed that in all the Chinese translations, father is always mentioned first while in the Pāli literature, mother is mentioned first. This is perhaps due to the influence of the Chinese Classic of Filial Piety. Chapter nine of the text says:

The Master (Confucius) replied, "Of all (creatures with their different) natures produced by Heaven and Earth, man is the noblest. Of all the actions of man there is none greater than filial piety. In filial piety there is nothing greater than the reverential awe of one's father. In the reverential awe shown to one's father there is nothing greater than the making him the correlate of Heaven. The duke of Zhou was the man who (first) did this."

The translation is adapted from the *Sacred Books of the East*, Volume 3, translated by James Legge.

¹³"A hundred years" is mentioned in both the Pāli *sutta* and the **Mahīśāsaka Vinaya*, but the Chinese **Ekottāgama* changes it to "a thousand or ten thousand years." (T2. 600c-601a) The Chinese text in the *Ekottāgama* is as follows:

Thus have I heard, at one time, the Buddha who was in Anāthapiṇḍaka's park in Śrāvastī told the *bhikṣus* thus: there are two people to whom for service rendered [one] should not ask for repay. Who are they?

They are parents. Even if a *bhikṣu* should carry about his father on the left shoulder and his mother on the right shoulder, and [if he should support them with] clothes, food, blankets, beds and medicine when ill; and [they meanwhile] should even void their excrements upon him, and so doing should he live a thousand or ten thousand years — even so could he not repay his parents. You should know, *bhikṣus*, parents' kindness [to their children] is so great, they raise, educate and protect them at all times according to the changes of seasons (lit: not fall behind the seasons by looking at the sun and moon). So by this way, [you should know] that [parents'] kindness is difficult to repay. Thus, *bhikṣus*, you should support and attain your parents according to the changes of seasons. Hence, *bhikṣus*, you should learn in this way. At the time, the *bhikṣus* heard and delighted in the Buddha's teaching.

This passage is again found in a similar fashion in another two places in the Vinaya texts: one in the **Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, T23, 658c and the other in the **Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya-bhaiṣajyavastu*, T24, 16a. These two texts also mention only “a hundred years” in contrast to “a thousand or ten thousand years” in the **Ekottāgama*.

¹⁴Nakamura, 1993, 638. These are the references to filial piety in the Pāli canon that Nakamura listed: *Itivuttaka* 106 *Gāthā* — A. I, 132; S. I, 178; *Dhammapada*, 332; *Suttanipāta*, vv.98, 124, 262; D III, 191f. The scholar did not list the corresponding references in the Chinese *Āgamas*.

¹⁵A.I.61. The translation is adapted from *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, I, 56-7.

¹⁶T23, 642b, 658c, T24, 16a. The Chinese text is as follows:

If parents do not have faith, [children should] establish them in right faith, if [parents] are immoral, [children should] establish them in morality, if [parents] are miserly, [children should] establish them in liberality and if [parents] are ignorant, [children should] establish them in wisdom. If children could give advice, persuade and encourage their parents in this way, make them live peacefully, then this is a way of repaying their debts [to parents].

¹⁷A. I. 131. The translation is adapted from *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, I, 114-5.

¹⁸*Itivuttaka*, 109-111. In the *Taittirīyaka Upaniṣad*, we find the following advice from an *Upaniṣad* teacher to his pupils:

Do not neglect the (sacrificial) works due to the Gods and Fathers! Let thy mother be to thee like unto a god! Let thy father be to thee like unto a god! Let thy teacher be to thee like unto a god! Let thy guest be to thee like unto a god!

(*The Sacred Books of the East*, vol.XV, *The Upaniṣad*, II, p. 52) Here we can see that both mother and father are treated as gods.

¹⁹T2, 404a.

²⁰T2, 404a.

²¹A. IV. 44.

²²T2, 24c-25a; T2, 464c.

²³S. I, 37.

²⁴T2, 427b.

²⁵T2, 262b.

²⁶Sn. Verse nos. 123-124. T2, 29a.

²⁷T2, 699a; 703b.

²⁸A. I. 151.

²⁹Sn. Verse no. 403.

³⁰D. III. 189.

³¹The first ever translation of the *Sigālovāda Sutta* entitled *Shi-jia-luo-yue-liu-fang-li-jing*, (T1, 251b) is by An Shigao in the second century. The second translation named *Da-liu-xiang-bai-jing*, which is lost, is by Dharmarakṣa (active in China A.D. 266-313). The third one, named *Shan-Sheng-zhi-jing* (T1, 254a), is by Zhi Fadu who probably came from Central Asia by the end of the third century. The fourth one is found in the **Madhyamāgama*, entitled *Shan-sheng-jing* (T1, 641a), translated by Gautama Sanghadeva between A.D. 391 and A.D. 398. The last translation is found in the **Dīrghāgama*, named *Shan-sheng-jing* (T1, 71c),

and translated by Buddhayasas and Zhi Funian in between A.D. 403 and A.D. 413. Thus, we can see that the first three are independent translations and were introduced into China quite early.

³²Professor K. Anuruddha told me this personally when I met him.

³³A. III. 259. This passage is found in many places in the Chinese *Āgamas*: the **Madhyamāgama*, T1, 615a-c; the **Samyuktāgama*, T2, 337b; the second translation of the **Samyuktāgama*, T2, 422a.

³⁴A. III. 76.

³⁵M. II. 52; T1, 499a-503a.

³⁶T3, 436b-443c. Taishō number 174, 175a, 175b, 175c.

³⁷S. I. 181. The English translation is adapted from *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, I, 230. T2, 22b.

³⁸Strong (1983: 177)

³⁹The **Samyuktāgama*, T2, 290b; c; 291a; the second translation of the **Samyuktāgama*, T2, 384b; the independent translation of some *sūtras* from the **Samyuktāgama*, T2, 498a.

⁴⁰S. II. 2.

⁴¹T2, 600c.

⁴²T2, 595a.

⁴³”He who being rich does not support mother or father who are old or past their youth — that is the cause [of loss] to the losing [man].” Sn, no.97. This *sūtra* is also found in the Chinese translation of the **Samyuktāgama* (T2, 352b) and the corresponding verses are as follows:

If parents are old and are not supported in time, if one is not generous when one is wealthy, then [one is] a losing man. If one scolds and beats one’s parents and brothers, and does not pay respect to elders, then [one is] a losing man.

⁴⁴T1, 54a.

What are the six Dharmas that cause decline? They are not respecting the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the Vinaya, the *samādhi* and the parents. What are the six Dharmas that cause increase? They are respecting the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the Vinaya, the *samādhi* and the parents.

However, this passage is not found in the correspondent *Dasuttara Sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*.

⁴⁵T2, 800a.

⁴⁶A. III. 146. These five gravest kinds of bad karma are mentioned in many places in the Chinese *Āgamas*, the **Samyuktāgama*, T2, 205a; the **Madhyamāgama*, T1, 769a, 724a.

⁴⁷Vinaya, I. 297.

⁴⁸ T23, 154a, 397b. The Chinese text is as follows: "As the Buddha said, the killer of parents should not be admitted into the Order and if admitted and ordained, he should be expelled from the Order."

⁴⁹T23, 566c.

⁵⁰T22, 813a. The Chinese text is as follows:

The Buddha said: the killer of mother cannot obtain benefit in my Dharma. If the person has not renounced the world, he should not be admitted into the Order and should not be ordained, if the person has already been admitted into the Order and has also obtained the higher precepts, he should be expelled. . . . The killer of father . . . should be expelled.

⁵¹T22, 417b.

The Buddha said: this person who killed his mother and committed crimes is a bad man, he will not generate good karma in the righteous Dharma and thus he should not be admitted into the Order.

⁵²T24, 871b-c. This Vinaya is one of the earliest texts of monastic discipline introduced into China. According to Daoan's preface to the translation, the text was

brought to China by a monk named Kumārabuddhi from Central Asia. Kumārabuddhi wrote down the Sanskrit text, Fonian translated it into Chinese and Tanjing wrote it down in Chinese.

⁵³The **Samyukāgama*, T2, 295c-296a; the second translation of the **Samyukāgama*, T2, 389a; the **Dīrghāgama*, T1, 134b-135a; the **Ekottarāgama*, T2, 624b-625a; *Aṅguttaranikāya*, I. 142.

⁵⁴PTS *Pāli-English Dictionary* (p. 89): the fighting of the gods with the asuras is mentioned in the following passages: D II. 285; S I. 222 (cp. 216 sq.), IV.201 sq., V. 447; M I. 253; A IV. 432.

⁵⁵A. I. 143. The English translation is adapted from *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, I. 126. The italics are mine.

⁵⁶The Chinese term found in the **Ekottarāgama* is *Shanfajiang tang* which means "Good Dharma Teaching Hall" (T2, 624b). The Chinese **Samyukāgama* mentions only fatang which means "Dharma Hall" (T2, 295c).

⁵⁷T23, 442a.

⁵⁸T22, 568a-b.

⁵⁹See Edward Conze tr. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines Its Verses Summary*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, reprint 1994, p. 116. The translation of the term is found in the glossary, p. 323.

⁶⁰D III. 70-71. In the Chinese translation of the *Madhyamāgama* (T1, 523a), it is said that when people's lifespan is five hundred years, these things grow: not respecting parents, śramaṇas and Brāhmins and not performing meritorious deeds. Thus, the lifespan of their sons decreases to either two hundred and fifty years or two hundred years.

⁶¹D III. 71-73. The English translation is adapted from the *Dialogue of the Buddha*, tr. Rhys Davids, 70. The same description is also found in the Chinese translation of the **Dīrghāgama* (T1, 41a).

⁶²D III. 74-5. But the Chinese translation of the **Madhyamāgama* (T1, 524b) says that when the lifespan of people is forty thousand years, people respect their parents, religious men and heads of clans. As a result of the good they do, the lifespan of people increases to eighty thousand years.

⁶³T3, 127c.

⁶⁴Vsm. IX, 36. The translation is adapted from Ñāṇamoli's translation *The Path of Purification*.

⁶⁵T24, 1006b. There is a controversy among scholars concerning the authenticity of this text. Some say that this *sūtra* is an apocryphal text written in China, while others do not accept this view.

Abbreviations

All references to the Pāli texts are to the edition of the Pāli Text Society, Oxford. References are to the volume and page number.

A *Āṅguttaranikāya*
D *Dīghanikāya*
M *Majjhimanikāya*
PTS Pāli Text Society
S *Samyuttanikāya*
Sn *Suttanipāta*
T *Taishō Tripiṭaka*
tr Translation

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