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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 as well, but he asserted that it is "a Buddhist compromise with the Brahmanical 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 definite support from the early Buddhist textual sources. In this essay, from my investigation in the early Buddhist texts and analysis of the relevant passages it 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 for 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 Brahmanical ethics of filiality" but as an important virtue 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 when 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."<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> But Strong asserted that this practice is "a Buddhist compromise with the Brahmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level towards which the *jātakas* were geared."<sup>3</sup> Then he cited the *Sāma Jātaka* and the *Mātuposaka Sutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya* to support his argument. On the other hand, Gregory Schopen, in his article "Filial Piety and The Monks in The Practices of Indian Buddhism: a question of sinicization viewed from the other side," mainly used Indian Buddhist epigraphical material and concluded his research on the filial piety in Indian Buddhism by saying that "although it (the practice of filial piety) receives no very definite support from 'early' textual sources, it is nevertheless a demonstrable fact."<sup>4</sup> Gregory Schopen further pointed out that this practice was popular amongst lay people as well as

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In the preparation of this paper, Venerable Professor K Anuruddha has given me valuable suggestions, particularly concerning the quotations from the Pāli literature. Professor Y Karunadasa has also taken the trouble of going through the entire paper and made many corrections. Here I express my sincere thanks to them both.

<sup>1</sup> Jan Yun-huan, 1991, 27. For Ryoshū Michihata's idea, see *Bukkyo to Jukkyo*, Kyoto: Heirakuji Shuden, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Strong, 1983, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Strong, 1983, 177.

<sup>4</sup> Schopen, 1984, 124.

monks, amongst, what is more, it was practiced not only by “the average village 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 *Dharmakathika*.”<sup>5</sup> 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 mention 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.”<sup>6</sup> But we think that Jan Yun-hua has misinterpreted Nakamura’s idea 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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 demanded 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.”<sup>8</sup>

Here it is very clear by “the supreme virtue”, Nakamura referred to filial piety in the context of Confucianism not that of Chinese Buddhism. In the Chinese translation of the *\*Madhyamāgama*, the *\*Dhānañjāni Sutra*, 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.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Schopen, 1984, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Yun-hua, 1991, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Nakamura, 1993, 269.

<sup>8</sup> Nakamura, 1993, 269. The italics are mine.

<sup>9</sup> T1, 456c-457a. The translation of the paragraph in the Pāli *Dhānañjāni Sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* reads:

“*What do you think, Dhānañjāni? Suppose someone here were to behave contrary to the Dhamma, to behave unrighteously for the sake of his parents, and then because of such behaviour 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*

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, 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 that filial piety is indeed one of the important virtues in Buddhist ethical teachings. However, scholars who have made studies on Buddhist ethics have missed it. Second, on the basis of the first point, that the early Indian Buddhists practiced filial piety was neither as “a compromise with the Brahmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level” as asserted by Strong, nor as Jan Yun-hua who misinterprets Nakamura that “filial piety was a minor virtue in Buddhist ethics of India”, but as an important ethics taught by their master himself.

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 evidences are 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 categorise these material into the following three aspects:

1. Filial piety practiced as a way of requiting for 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.

### **1. Filial piety as a way of requiting for the debt to one's parents**

There are at least three important suttas which teach filial piety in the Pali *Nikāyas*. The first one is the *Kataññu Sutta* of the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, the sutta reads thus:

*“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*

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*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, 186-7)*

The translation is adopted from Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli's rendering, *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, p.792-3.

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>10</sup>

According to the \*Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, the parents of Pilindavatsa bhikṣu<sup>11</sup> 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 whole-heartedly and throughout their life.<sup>12</sup>

This passage is quite explicit that the Buddha taught filial piety. This *sutta* is also found in the Chinese translation of the \*Ekottāgama, with the same message but the wording is slightly changed.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that the passage must come down from a very old source before the

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<sup>10</sup> A. I. 61. The translation is adopted from *the Book of the Gradual Sayings*, I. 56-7.

<sup>11</sup> The name Pilindavatsa Bhikṣu is also mentioned in the Introductory chapter of *The Dafangbianfo-baoen-jing* (Sūtra of the great skilful means [mahopaya] by which the Buddha requites for the debt to his parents) together with others such as Subhuti, Kaunḍinya, Pūrṇamaitrāyaṇīputra, karashima(?), Śāriputra, Mahākātyāyana, Ananda, Rahula etc. T3, 124a. This Pilindavatsa Bhikṣu must be different from the well known Pilindavaccha Bhikkhu mentioned in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, (A.i.24) that he was the chief among such monks who were loved by devas. According to the *Paramattha-dīpanī*, Pilindavaccha was from a Brahmin family in Sāvattihī and was well known for his mastery of Iddhi power. (Ud.iii.6; DhA.iv.181f). However, later on when he met the Buddha, his spells were rendered powerless, and he became a disciple of the Buddha. According to the *Ekottarāgama* (T2, 558b), Pilindavatsa Bhikṣu was an arahant who spoke rough words regardless of men of noble or humble origin, but mastered the samādhi of golden light. The name of a monk is also mentioned in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra* (T25, 71a-b), and he is cited as an example of an arhat who had eliminated the *kleśas*, but who still possessed the remaining habit energies of the *kleśa* of pride, and therefore dared to talk down the river-god.

<sup>12</sup> T22, 140c. In order for those who cannot read Chinese and also for the web purposes, I translate the Chinese passage as follows (hereafter the same principle will be followed):

*At that time, the parents of Pilindavatsa (bhikṣu) were poor and he wanted to offer them his robes but dare not to do so. So he told the Buddha this matter. The Buddha, on this occasion, assembled the bhikṣu Saṅgha and taught them: Even if one should carry about his father on the right shoulder and his mother on the left shoulder, and so doing should live a hundred years, and they meanwhile should even void their excrements upon him; he offers them with rare cloth and food taken from allover the world, even so could he not repay his parents' debt rendered for a moment. Thus, hereafter, (I) allow you, Bhikṣus, support (lit: feed) your parents wholeheartedly in your entire life. If 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*. In the chapter nine of the text, it 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 adopted from the *Sacred Books of the East*, Volume 3, translated by James Legge.

<sup>13</sup> In both the Pāli *sutta* and the \*Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, ‘a hundred years’ is mentioned 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 heard, at a time, the Buddha who was in the Anāthapiṇḍaka’s park in Śrāvastī told the Bhikṣus thus: There are two people to whom 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 supports them with) clothes, food, blankets, beds and medicine when ill; and (they*

split of Buddhism into different schools since it is common to both Theravāda and Mahāyāna. Hajime Nakamura, in his endnotes 38 of the chapter 23 “Esteem for Hierarchy” in 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 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>15</sup>

This passage, however, with the same message, appears three times in the *\*Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* translated by Yijing at the beginning of eighth century.<sup>16</sup> In this passage the Buddha recommended four ways of requiting for the debts to one’s parents, which are all for spiritual progress: faith, morality, liberality and wisdom in contrast to the ways through material and service 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.

The second *sutta* is also found in the same *Anguttaranikāya*, according to which 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. The *sutta* reads:

*“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*

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*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 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) the (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, 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 with ‘a thousand or ten thousand years’ in the *\*Ekottāgama*.

<sup>14</sup> Hajime Nakamura, 1993, 638. These are the references of filial piety in the Pāli canon which 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*.

<sup>15</sup> A.I.61. The translation is adopted from *the Book of the Gradual Sayings*, I. 56-7.

<sup>16</sup> T23, 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 advice, persuade and encourage their parents in this way, make them live peacefully, then this is a way of repaying their debts (to parents).*

*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.'*<sup>17</sup>

In the *Itivuttaka*, the same sutta is found again, however, with one more addition: mother and father are venerated as “the early devas”.<sup>18</sup> In the Chinese translation of the \**Samyuktāgama*, the same sutta is also found but apart from parents are worshipped as Brahmā, teachers, all devas, another two items are added: (1) parents are also worshipped as Mahādeva, and (2) the family is also respected by others if parents are supported with all kinds of things.<sup>19</sup> Then the Chinese \**Samyuktāgama* explains further:

*“Brahmā, the king of all gods, is able to be born into 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.”*<sup>20</sup>

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 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 \**Samyuktāgama* is the same that parents should be honoured, 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.

The third sutta is named *Mahāyañña* (Great Sacrifice) also found in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, in which a Brahmin 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 honour, instead of worshipping the actual fire, which was considered as heretic practice.

The first fire is parents who should be honoured 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 Brahman: “these three fires, when esteemed, revered, venerated, respected, must bring best happiness.”<sup>21</sup>

This *sūtra* is also found in both Chinese translations of the \**Samyuktāgama*, the first is named

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<sup>17</sup> The same passage is found twice in the *Anguttaranikāya*, i, 132; ii, 70. The translation is adopted from *the Book of the Gradual Sayings*, I, 114-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Itivuttaka*, 109-111. In the *Taittirīyaka Upanishad*, we find the following saying, advice of an Upanishad 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 Upanishad*, II, p.52) Here we can see that both mother and father are treated as gods.

<sup>19</sup> T2, 404a.

<sup>20</sup> T2, 404a.

<sup>21</sup> A. IV. 44.

the root fire because all children are born from parents. Therefore the root should be respected and honoured and supported and should be made happy. The second is named family fire because a good man lives in a family sharing both the 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 Brahmins are the field of merit and should be offered with necessities by family men.<sup>22</sup>

Thus both Pāli and Chinese versions of the *sūtra* parents are considered the first ‘fire’ which should be maintained, honoured and respected by good family men and then followed by other members of the family and religious men.

Apart from the above three suttas, filial piety is also mentioned in many different places in the Pāli canon. In the *Samyuttanikāya*, it says: “Mother is the good friend dwelling in the home.”<sup>23</sup> The same expression is also found in the other Chinese translation of the *\*Samyuktāgama*.<sup>24</sup> However, Guṇabhadra’s translation of the *\*Samyuktāgama*, the expression is quite different. “A good faithful virtuous wife is the good friend dwelling in the home.”<sup>25</sup>

Then in the *Vasala Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*, which is also found in the Chinese *\*Samyuktāgama*, the Buddha discusses what consisted of an outcast with a fire worshipping Brahmin. The Buddha says that not by birth but by ethical conduct does one become an outcast or a Brāhmaṇa. Supporting and venerating one’s parents are factors amongst many other ethical conducts which consist of Brahma caste. This of course is a reinterpretation of caste system by the Buddha.

*“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.”*<sup>26</sup>

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, to set the wheel of Dharma in motion, second, to save his parents, third, to establish those who have no faith in the faith, fourth, to awaken the bodhisattva mind in those who have not awakened it yet, and fifth, to prophesy the appearance of another future Buddha.<sup>27</sup>

This, of course, shows some Mahāyāna influence, as the bodhisattva mind is mentioned, what is significant to note here is that amongst the five things to do on earth by a Tathāgata 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

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<sup>22</sup> T2, 24c-25a; T2, 464c.

<sup>23</sup> S. I, 37.

<sup>24</sup> T2, 427b.

<sup>25</sup> T2, 262b.

<sup>26</sup> Sn. Verse nos. 123-124. T2, 29a.

<sup>27</sup> T2, 699a; 703b.



*Āṅguttaranikāya* 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>28</sup>

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 they do not ask for 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 the worldly ties and they should do it voluntarily with any force.

In the *Dhammika Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*, advising the lay people the Buddha says that “Let him dutifully maintain his parents, and practice an honourable trade; the householder who observes this strenuously goes to the gods by name, Sayampabhas.”<sup>29</sup>

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.”<sup>30</sup>

This sutta is so important to the Chinese Buddhists that it has been translated into Chinese for 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*.<sup>31</sup> According to Indian tradition, the east is the most important direction.<sup>32</sup> Rhys Davids also points out that there is a symbolism deliberately chosen: as the day in the East, so life begins with parents’ care.<sup>33</sup> So when parents are worshipped as the east direction that means parents are considered very important. This becomes clear when we look at the Buddha’s teaching on economics.

According to the *Āṅguttaranikāya*, 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 Brāhmen. The last category is for making merits for a happy life hereafter, ripening to happiness, leading heavenward.<sup>34</sup> Here

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<sup>28</sup> A. I. 151.

<sup>29</sup> Sn. Verse no. 403.

<sup>30</sup> D. III. 189.

<sup>31</sup> The 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 during 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 third century. The fourth one is found in the *\*Madhyamāgama* entitled *Shan-sheng-jing* (T1, 641a) which is translated by Gautama Saṅghadeva in between 391-398. The last translation is found in the *\*Dīrghāgama* named *Shan-sheng-jing* (T1, 71c) translated by Buddhayasas and Zhi Funian in between 403-413. Thus, we can see that the first three are independent translations and were introduced into China quite early.

<sup>32</sup> Professor K Anuruddha told me this personally when I met him.

<sup>33</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha*, III. 180, note 4.

<sup>34</sup> A. III. 259. This passage is found in many places in the Chinese *Āgamas*: the *\*Madhyamāgama*, T1, 615a-c;

parents come in 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 honour and venerate the following five kinds of people when wealth is righteously earned: (1) parents, (2) wife, children, slaves, workfolk and men, (3) labourers in his fields and those whose business is with the boundaries, (4) gods and (5) recluses.<sup>35</sup>

In the second list of five kinds of people one should support with wealth, honouring 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 honour 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 the only child stayed at home and led a bachelor's life in order to serve his blind and aged parents although he wished to renounce the world.<sup>36</sup>

When King Kikī of Kāsi asked Buddha Kassapa to spend the rain 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 the chief supporter who was virtuous in many ways as he observed the five precepts and was free from doubt about the four noble truths etc. Amongst 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 got 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 in the Pāli version.<sup>37</sup> The Chinese versions start with a bodhisattva name All Wonderful took birth in a family of blind parents who wanted to follow ascetic life in 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

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the *\*Saṃyuktāgama*, T2, 337b; the second translation of the *\*Saṃyuktāgama*, T2, 422a.

<sup>35</sup> A. III. 76.

<sup>36</sup> M. II. 52; T1, 499a-503a.

<sup>37</sup> T3, 436b-443c. Taisho number 174, 175a, 175b, 175c.

parents to look after and then he died. Moved by Shanzi's compassion, the king promised to look after Shanzi's parents whom were taken to the corpse. Shanzi's parents uttered: "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 restore to life." By the utterance of this truth, Shanzi's life was restored and what is most surprising, his parents also restored their sights. The story ends with Sāma preaching a sermon to the king on the advantages of filial piety.

Apart from the above, the establishment of the Bhikṣuni order is, as convincingly argued by Reiko Ohnuma, is the Buddha's repaying his "debt to the mother".<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most significant manifestation of filial piety is the three-month sojourn the Buddha in heaven preaching the *Abhidharma Piṭaka* to his mother Māyā (who has been reborn there as a deity).<sup>39</sup> The same story is also found in the extant Chinese translation of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* (T. 383). Although this story is later than the Nikāya and Agama traditions, but it is still very early since it is found in both the northern and southern traditions of Buddhism which transmitted separately.

## 2. 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 Pali *Samyuttanikāya* and the Chinese *\*Samyuktāgama* tells a Brahmin who came to see the Buddha and asked the latter about supporting his mother by begging alms food.

The Brahmin 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, Brahmin, in so doing do what ought to be done. Whoso, Brahmin, seeks alms after the normal manner, and so seeking maintains his parents, engenders much merit.*"<sup>40</sup>

Here the Brahmin was not sure whether he practiced in the right way in supporting of 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 the Buddhists practiced filial piety as a "compromise with the Brahmanical ethic of filiality operating at the popular level".<sup>41</sup> But we think that his suggestion is not correct because, as we have demonstrated above, the practice of filial piety amongst the Indian Buddhists is not a "compromise with the Brahmanical ethic of filiality" but an important ethical teaching taught by the master himself. Further more, the Buddhist practice of filial piety is not only "operating at the popular level" but also amongst the educated monks as well 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 above mentioned three

<sup>38</sup> Reiko Ohnuma, "Debt to the Mother: A Neglected Aspect of the Founding of the Buddhist Nuns' Order", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2006, Vol.74, No.4, pp.861-901.

<sup>39</sup> The *Dhammapadāṭṭhakathā*'s version of this story is translated in Burlingame (1921: 3, 47-56).

<sup>40</sup> S. I. 181. The English translation is adopted from *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, I, 230. T2, 22b.

<sup>41</sup> John Strong, 1983, 177.

important suttas in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* that directly teach filial piety.

The Chinese *\*Saṃyuktāgama* 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 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 *\*Saṃyuktāgama* and once in the second Chinese translation of the *\*Saṃyuktāgama* and once in an independent translation of some *sūtras* from the *\*Saṃyuktāgama*.<sup>42</sup> This is also found in the Pali *\*Samyuttanikāya*.<sup>43</sup> Thus it shows 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 the Anāthapindika'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 mindful, support and obedient to your parents.”*<sup>44</sup>

Although we do not find a corresponding passage in the Pāli canon, but 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 his 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 his parents, brothers and kinsmen and also makes offerings to them, one will be reborn into a rich family.<sup>45</sup> 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 amongst many losers, one is the person who does not support his parents.<sup>46</sup>

According to the Chinese translation of the *\*Dasuttara Sūtra* of the *\*Dīrghāgama*, respecting parents is one of the six ways or dharmas that cause to increase in practice. While not respecting parents is one of the six ways or dharmas that cause to decline in practice.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The *\*Saṃyuktāgama*, T2, 290b; c; 291a; the second translation of the *\*Saṃyuktāgama*, T2, 384b; the independent translation of some *sūtras* from the *\*Saṃyuktāgama*, T2, 498a.

<sup>43</sup> S. II. 2.

<sup>44</sup> T2, 600c.

<sup>45</sup> T2, 595a.

<sup>46</sup> “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 *\*Saṃyuktāgama* (T2, 352b) and the corresponding verses are as follows: “if parents are old and are not supported in time, one is not generous if he is wealthy, then (he is) a losing man. If one scolds and beats one's parents and brothers, and does not pay respect to elders, then (he is) a losing man.”

<sup>47</sup> T1, 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

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 amongst them.<sup>48</sup>

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 & 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 Tathagata 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 & incurable.”*<sup>49</sup>

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. So when Ajātasattu became his disciple, the Buddha said that he was done for with his fate sealed as he had killed his father.<sup>50</sup> Buddhaghosa further explained in his commentary to the *Dighanikāya*, that no good karma can avert such a rebirth in the next life.<sup>51</sup>

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.<sup>52</sup> This rule is also found in five Vinaya texts in Chinese translations: the *\*Sarvāstivāda-vinaya*,<sup>53</sup> the *Sarvāstivādanikāyavinaya-māṭṛkā*,<sup>54</sup> the *\*Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*,<sup>55</sup> the *\*Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya*,<sup>56</sup> and a Vinaya text not known its school affiliation.<sup>57</sup>

### 3. Filial piety as Dharma, the social order

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*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*.

<sup>48</sup> T2, 800a.

<sup>49</sup> A. III. 146. These five gravest kinds of bad karma are mentioned in many places in the Chinese *Āgamas*, the *\*Saṃyuktāgama*, T2, 205a; the *\*Madhyamāgama*, T1, 769a, 724a.

<sup>50</sup> D I, 85.

<sup>51</sup> *Aṭṭhasālinī*, 358.

<sup>52</sup> Vinaya, I. 297.

<sup>53</sup> 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.*

<sup>54</sup> T23, 566c.

<sup>55</sup> T22, 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 admitted into the Order and has also obtained the higher precepts, he should be expelled. .... the killer of father ..... should be expelled.*

<sup>56</sup> T22, 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.*

<sup>57</sup> T24, 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.

Respecting parents is seen the first thing amongst other ethical conducts in early Buddhism as Dharma, the way of things should be or the social order. If parents are not respected there will be more bad things to happen such as fighting. This idea is found in many places in Chinese translations of the \**Samyukāgama*, the \**Dīrghāgama* and the \**Ekottarāgama*, as well as the Pali *Āṅguttaranikāya*.

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 Brahmins, and show deference to the elders of the clan, and do good work.<sup>58</sup>

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 ruler of 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 *Pali-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.<sup>59</sup> While gods represent righteousness as the Pāli passage informs us that even the assembly hall of 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 ...”<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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 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.”<sup>62</sup> The *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* also explains that the Hall of Brahmā is made of seven precious stones and is named the Hall of Righteousness.<sup>63</sup> Even in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the assembly hall of Gods is mentioned as Sudharmā, which is translated by Conze as “Maintaining Justice”.<sup>64</sup> So the above passage implies that if many folk do not pay reverence

<sup>58</sup> The \**Samyukāgama*, T2, 295c-296a; the second translation of the \**Samyukāgama*, T2, 389a; the \**Dīrghāgama*, T1, 134b-135a; the \**Ekottarāgama*, T2, 624b-625a; *Āṅguttaranikāya*, I. 142.

<sup>59</sup> PTS *Pali-English Dictionary* (p.89), the fighting of gods with 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.

<sup>60</sup> A. I. 143. The English translator is adopted from *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, I. 126. The italic is mine.

<sup>61</sup> The 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).

<sup>62</sup> T23, 442a.

<sup>63</sup> T22, 568a-b.

<sup>64</sup> See Edward Conze tr. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verses Summary*, Sri Satguru

to mother and father, to recluses and Brahmins, there will be increasing of fighting since Asuras love fighting while gods maintain peace. So according to this passage, whether human folk respect parents or not is the source of the ethical practices that directly affect the peace of the world.

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

It is said in the text that when the lifespan of people decreases to two hundreds and fifty years, these things grew: lack of filial piety to mother and father, lack of religious piety to holy men, lack of regard for the head of the clan. So the lifespan decreases to a hundred years.<sup>65</sup>

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” etc. What people do are only the ten bad deeds, the ten good deeds are not heard of.<sup>66</sup>

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 they will increase the length of life, as a result, their sons will live forty years of age.<sup>67</sup>

So whether parents are respected and honoured 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 the early Buddhist ethics. This fills the gap reported by Gregory Schopen who says that “it (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 Brahmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular level.”

#### **4. Filial Piety in Mahayana 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 the Buddhist ethics became universalized and is applied to all sentient beings when Mahāyāna arose in India. As is well

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Publications Delhi India, p.116. The translation of the term is found in the glossary, p.323.

<sup>65</sup> D III. 70-71. In the Chinese translation of the *Madhyamāgama* (T1, 523a), it is said when people’s lifespan is five hundreds years, these things grew: not respecting parents, śramaṇas and Brahmins and not performing meritorious deeds. Thus, the lifespan of their sons decreases to either two hundreds and fifty years or two hundred years.

<sup>66</sup> D III. 71-73. The English translation is adopted 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).

<sup>67</sup> D III. 74-5. But the Chinese translation of the *\*Madhyamāgama* (T1, 524b) says when the lifespan of people is forty thousands 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.

known, bodhisattva ideal is a major doctrine in Mahāyāna teaching, so filial piety also comes under this ideal. This means that the bodhisattvas consider all sentient beings as their parents because from numerous past lives in aeons of times 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 skilful means [mahopaya] by which the Buddha requites for the debt to his parents) is an early Mahāyāna text which is registered in the list of *sūtras* translated under the Eastern Han dynasty A.D. 25-220 in the Buddhist catalogues, but 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 for the debt of 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 the 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.<sup>68</sup>

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.”*<sup>69</sup>

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.”*<sup>70</sup>

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*

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<sup>68</sup> T3, 127c.

<sup>69</sup> S. II, 189-90. The English translation is adapted from *the Book of the Kindred Sayings*, II, 128.

<sup>70</sup> Vsm. IX, 36. The translation is adopted from Nyanamoli's translation *The Path of Purification*, p.331.



*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.”*<sup>71</sup>

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 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 perhaps 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. 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 *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.

## WORKS CITED

### Abbreviations

- \* Indication of a reconstructed Sanskrit title from an ancient Chinese translation of Buddhist text whenever the original Sanskrit is lost.
- A *Āṅguttaranikāya*
- D *Dīghanikāya*
- M *Majjhimanikāya*
- PTS Pali Text Society
- S *Samyuttanikāya*
- Sn *Suttanipāta*
- T Taisho Tripiṭaka.
- tr Translation

### Primary with English and Chinese translations

*Āṅguttaranikāya*, Vol. I-V, Oxford: PTS. English translation: *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Vol. I, II, V, by F.L. Woodward, Vol. III & IV by E.M. Hare.

*Dafangbianfo-baoen-jing* (Sūtra of the great skilful means [mahopaya] by which the Buddha requites for the debt to his parents), T3, No.155, translator lost registered under the Eastern Han dynasty A.D. 25-220.

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<sup>71</sup> T24, 1006b. There is a controversy amongst the 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.

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