

THE TEACHING AND PRACTICE OF FILIAL PIETY IN BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist scholars like Kenneth Ch'en have argued that the teaching of filial piety was a special feature of Chinese Buddhism as a response to the Chinese culture. Others, among them John Strong and Gregory Schopen, have shown that filial piety was also important in Indian Buddhism, but Strong does not consider it integral to the belief system and Schopen did not find evidence of it in early writings he examined. In this article, through an analysis of early Buddhist resources, the Nikāyas and Āgamas, I demonstrate that the practice of filial piety has been the chief good karma in the Buddhist moral teaching since its inception, although it is not as foundational for Buddhist ethics as it is for Confucian ethics. The Buddha advised people to honor parents as the Brahmā, the supreme god and the creator of human beings in Hinduism, as parents have done much for their children. Hence, Buddhism teaches its followers to pay their debts to parents by supporting and respecting them, actions that are considered the first of all meritorious deeds, or good karma, in Buddhist moral teachings. Moreover, according to the Buddhist teaching of karma, matricide and patricide are considered two of the five gravest bad deeds, and the consequence is immediate rebirth in hell. Mahāyāna Buddhism developed the idea of filial piety further and formulated the four debts to four groups of people—parents, sentient beings, rulers, and Buddhism—a teaching that became very popular in Chinese Buddhism and spread to other East Asian countries.

KEYWORDS: filial piety, parents, kings, four debts

Supporting parents is a great blessing.

—*Mahāmaṅgala Sutta*¹

Buddhist scholars like Kenneth Ch'en have argued that the teaching of filial piety was a special feature of Chinese Buddhism as a response to the Chinese culture.² But others, among them John Strong, who has employed “popular Buddhist stories,” and Gregory Schopen, have shown that filial piety was also important in Indian Buddhism as well. However, Strong asserts that it is “a Buddhist compromise with the Brahmanical ethics of filiality operating at the popular

1 The *Suttanipāta*, verse no. 262. My translation from the Pāli language is based on that of R. L. Soni, *Life's Highest Blessings: The Mahāmaṅgala Sutta* (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1987), 15.

2 See Kenneth Ch'en, “Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 28 (1968): 81–97.

level,”³ and Schopen, who mainly used Indian Buddhist epigraphical material in his research, was unable to find definite support from the early Buddhist textual sources.⁴

In this article, through analysis of early Buddhist resources, the Nikāyas and Āgamas, I demonstrate that the practice of filial piety has been the chief good karma in the Buddhist moral teaching since its inception, although it is not as foundational for Buddhist ethics as it is for Confucian ethics.⁵ In fact, the Buddha advised people to honor parents as the Brahmā, who is the supreme god and the creator of human beings in Hinduism, as parents have done much for their children. Hence, Buddhism teaches its followers to pay their debts to parents by supporting and respecting them, actions that are considered the first of all meritorious deeds, or good karma, in Buddhist moral teachings. Moreover, according to the Buddhist teaching of karma, matricide and patricide are considered two of the five gravest bad deeds, and the consequence is immediate rebirth in hell.⁶ Mahāyāna Buddhism developed the idea of filial piety further and formulated the four debts to four groups of people—parents, sentient beings, rulers, and Buddhism—a teaching that became very popular in Chinese Buddhism and spread to other East Asian countries.

I start with an analysis of the textual sources for the teaching of filial piety in early Buddhism and argue that it clearly shows that filial piety has been one of the important aspects of the early Buddhist ethical teachings. I then discuss filial piety in Mahāyāna Buddhism, with a focus on China, because filial piety has been taught and practiced especially there, as Confucianism also emphasizes it. I also supplement my arguments with findings from studies of art, archaeology, and even folk festivals. Although some modern scholars may think that because there are many different practices in Buddhism, scriptures and books have a limited role, as a textual scholar I have found that scriptures played—and still play—a vital role in Buddhism, as demonstrated by the so-called Buddhist councils in which Buddhist monks recited the scriptures.⁷

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- 3 John Strong, “Filial Piety and Buddhism: The Indian Antecedents to a ‘Chinese’ Problem,” in *Traditions in Contact and Change*, ed. Peter Slater and Donald Wiebe (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), 171–86.
 - 4 Gregory Schopen, “Filial Piety and the Monks in the Practices of Indian Buddhism: A Question of ‘Sinicization’ Viewed from the Other Side,” *T’oung Pao* 70, no. 1/3 (1984): 110–26, at 124. It also appears in Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 56–71.
 - 5 According to the *Xiaojing*, one of the five Confucian classics, Confucius said to his disciple Zengzi, “Now filial piety is the root of (all) virtue, and (the stem) out of which grows (all moral) teaching.” Thus Confucianism considers filial piety as the foundation of ethics. The English translation is from *The Hsiao King*, trans. James Legge, in the *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 3 (London: Clarendon Press, 1879), 494. The publication may be outdated, but the translation is faithful to the original. In contrast with Confucianism, the foundation of Buddhist ethics is karma and rebirth. See Guang Xing, “Early Buddhist and Confucian Concepts of Filial Piety: A Comparative Study,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 4 (2013): 846.
 - 6 The five kinds of gravest bad karma are killing one’s mother, one’s father, and a worthy one (*arahant*), causing the blood of a *Tathāgata* (the One Thus Come and Thus Gone) to flow, and causing a split in the Buddhist community (*Sangha*). They are mentioned in many places, such as the *Āṅguttaranikāya*, ed. Richard Morris and E. Hardy, 6 vols. (1897; reprint Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1979), 3:146; the Chinese *Samyuktāgama* (792), *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* [《大正新脩大藏經》], eds. Takakusu Junjirō [高楠順次郎] and Watanabe Kaigyoku [渡邊海旭], 100 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932), vol. 2, no. 99, 205a (hereafter references to the works within the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* [Taishō Tripitaka] will be in the standard abbreviated form of T[volume], no. [sutra number (sutra number within larger collection, where appropriate)], [page and column]. For instance, the *Dīrghāgama*, T1, no. 1 (27), 107a, the *Ekottarāgama*, T2, no. 125 (20.11), 601a; and the *Madhyamāgama*, T1, no. 26 (200), 769a, 724a.
 - 7 Some modern scholars argue that Buddhism is not all about scriptures but includes many different practices, such as rituals, miraculous stories, objects, and images of different types. For instance, Stanley Tambiah criticized scholars like Rhys Davids for what Tambiah described as the “Pali Text Society mentality,” which “essentialized Buddhism in terms of ‘pristine’ teachings.” Stanley Tambiah, introduction to *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in Northeastern*

FILIAL PIETY IN EARLY BUDDHISM⁸

In these earliest collections of Buddhist literature, the Pali Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas, filial piety is taught and practiced in three ways: first, as a way of repaying the debts to one's parents; second, as a chief ethical good action, good karma, or field of merit; and third, as a part of dharma, the social order.⁹ In the first category, repaying debts, there are three discourses that particularly focus on the teaching and practice of filial piety, and therefore demonstrate its importance.

Three Discourses on Filial Piety

The first, and also the most important, discourse on the teaching of filial piety is the *Discourse on Knowing the Debts (Kataññu Sutta)*, which is short enough to quote here in its entirety:

Bhikkhus, there are two persons that cannot easily be repaid. What two? One's mother and father. Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and [while doing so] should have a life span of a hundred years, live for a hundred years; and if one should attend to them by anointing them with balms, by massaging, bathing, and rubbing their limbs, and they even void their urine and excrement there, one still would not have done enough for one's parents, nor would one have repaid them. Even if one were to establish one's parents as the supreme lords and rulers over this great earth abounding in the seven treasures, one still would not have done enough for one's parents, nor would one have repaid them. For what reason? Parents are of great help to their children; they bring them up, feed them, and show them the world.

Thailand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 7; see also Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3 (discussing "Pali text puritans"). This unfair criticism ignores the important contributions made by great scholars to the study of Theravāda Buddhism. See Charles Hallisey, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 34; see also Justin T. McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). In his review, Patrick Jory summarizes McDaniel's ideas, stating,

In the world of Thai Buddhism that McDaniel describes, the canonical scriptures are only one element of a complex, heterogeneous, ever-changing religious cacophony of vengeful ghosts, charismatic monks, protective amulets, incantations conveying supernatural powers, personal child ghost servants, magical corpse oil, tree spirits, *yantras*, continually changing rituals and liturgies, and a pantheon of gods, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, and ancestral spirits. McDaniel even questions whether it makes any sense to use the term "Theravada Buddhism" to refer to the contemporary religious scene in Thailand at all. Instead, he uses the concept "religious repertoires" to make sense of a religious sphere that seems to defy systematic description.

Patrick Jory, review of *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, by Justin T. McDaniel, *Journal of Religion* 93, no. 1 (2013): 126.

8 I use the term *early Buddhism* to describe the teachings found in both the Pali Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas, which are over 90 percent the same, although they were transmitted from different early Indian Buddhist schools that split roughly one hundred years after the *parinirvāṇa* of Gautama Buddha. These writings are considered by all modern Buddhist scholars as the earliest Buddhist resources. I have adopted Hirakawa Akira's chronology of Indian Buddhism. According to Hirakawa, "Indian Buddhism may be divided into the following five periods: (1) Early Buddhism, (2) Nikāya or Sectarian (often called Hīnayāna) Buddhism, (3) Early Mahāyāna Buddhism, (4) Later Mahāyāna Buddhism, and (5) Esoteric Buddhism. Although the five periods are arranged in the chronological order in which the traditions arose, they are also based on a categorization of types of Buddhism as much as historical criteria." Akira Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, ed. and trans. Paul Groner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 7.

9 See Guang Xing, "Filial Piety in Early Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 12 (2005): 82–106.

But Bhikkhus, if, when one's parents lack faith, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in faith; if, when one's parents are immoral, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in virtuous behavior; if, when one's parents are miserly, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in generosity; if, when one's parents are unwise, one encourages, settles, and establishes them in wisdom: in such a way, one has done enough for one's parents, repaid them, and done more than enough for them.¹⁰

This text is an essential discourse on the teaching of filial piety, and it is quoted by many texts from different Buddhist schools and traditions developed later.¹¹ This suggests that the idea of filial piety has been an important ethical teaching of Buddhism since its inception, continued with strong emphasis even within Indian Buddhism after the arising of Mahāyāna in the first century CE. The text emphasizes children's gratitude towards their parents as well as the difficulties in repaying their debts to their parents only by providing them with material support and comfort, as well as honor, since they have done much for their children. Instead, four ways of repaying debts to one's parents are recommended, all of which lead to spiritual progress: faith, virtuous behavior, the practice of generosity, and wisdom. (It is particularly interesting to note that bad parenting is specially mentioned in this context: children have a duty to correct their parents if they are on the wrong path.) These four ways of repaying filial debt are considered the path to a future happy life, as taught in the *Discourse to Dīghajāṇu* (*Dīghajāṇu Sutta*), in which Dīghajāṇu was a lay Buddhist leading a family life.¹² Here *faith* means faith in the enlightenment of the Buddha; *virtuous behavior* means observation of the five precepts;¹³ *generosity* means avoiding the stain of miserliness and being freely openhanded; and *wisdom* means discerning the patterns of arising and passing away, which is noble and penetrative and leads to the complete destruction of suffering. This text reflects the deeper thinking in the Buddhist teaching of karma, that it is only when parents perform good deeds that they can enjoy the fruits or consequences of their good behaviors in this world and the next. In other words, helping one's parents in their spiritual progress

10 The *Āṅguttaranikāya* (2.31), 1:62. The translation is from *The Numerical Discourse of the Buddha, A Translation of the Āṅguttaranikāya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 153–54. This *sutta* is also found in the Chinese translation of the *Ekottarāgama* (20.11), with the same message, but the last paragraph, about four ways of paying the debts to parents, is missing.

11 I use *sutta* when the original sources is in Pali language; otherwise, I use *sūtra*. This *sutta* must have been quite popular in India as it is quoted in at least ten Chinese translations of Indian texts, such as (1) the *Dharmapada* T4, no. 212, translated by Zhu Fonian in 374; (2) the *Sengjialuocha Suoji Jing* [sūtra compiled by Saṅgharakṣa] T4, no. 194, translated by Saṅghabhūti in 385; (3) the *Mahīśāsakavinaya* T22, no. 1421, translated by Buddhajīva and Zhu Daosheng in 423 or 424; (4) the *Abhidharmavibhāṣā Śāstra* T28, no. 1546, translation by Buddhavarman and Daotai in 437–439; (5) the *Foshuo Asuda Jing* [Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha to Asuda], T2, no. 141, translated by Gunabhadra in 435–443; (6) the *Zabaozang Jing* (*Samyuktāratna Sūtra*) T4, no. 203, translated by Kekaya and Tanyao in 472; (7) the *Itivṛttaka Sūtra* T17, no. 765, translated by Xuanzang in 650; (8) the *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra* T27, no. 1545, translation by Xuanzang in 656–659; (9) the *Zuisheng Foding Tuoluoni Jingchu Yezhangzhou Jing* (*Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra*) [sūtra of the most excellent Buddha's heads Dhāraṇī which purifies all the obstacles of karma] T19, no. 970, translated by Divākara in 676–688; and (10) the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* T23, no. 1442; and (11) the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya Bhaiṣajya* T24, no. 1448, both translated by Yijing in 700–711. All the dates of Chinese translations of Indian texts in this essay are according to Lewis R. Lancaster and Sung-bae Park, eds., *The Korean Buddhist Canon: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). All references to dates are to the common era (CE).

12 It is found in the *Āṅguttaranikāya* 8.54, 4:281. Also named the *Vyagghapajja Sutta*, it teaches the things leading to the happiness of a lay Buddhist in this life and the future life.

13 The five precepts are abstaining (1) from the destruction of life, (2) from taking what is not given, (3) from sexual misconduct, (4) from false speech, and (5) from liquor, wine, and intoxicants.

as a way to pay the debt owed to them is considered much more important than helping them in a material or physical way. However, as I discuss below, this does not mean that Buddhism emphasizes *only* the spiritual aspect in the practice of filial piety.

The second discourse that focuses on filial piety, *With Brahmā (Sabrahmā Sutta)*, reads as follows:

(1) Bhikkhus, those families dwell with Brahma where at home the mother and father are revered by their children. (2) Those families dwell with the first teachers where at home the mother and father are revered by their children. (3) Those families dwell with the first deities where at home the mother and father are revered by their children. (4) Those families dwell with the gift-worthy where at home the mother and father are revered by their children.

“Brahma,” bhikkhus, is a designation for mother and father. “First teachers” is a designation for mother and father. “First deities” is a designation for mother and father. “Gift-worthy” is a designation for mother and father. And why? Mother and father are very helpful to their children: they raise them, nurture them, and show them the world.

Mother and father are called “Brahma,”
and also “first teachers.” They are worthy of gifts from their children,
for they have compassion for their offspring.
Therefore a wise person should revere them
and treat them with honor.

One should serve them with food and drink,
with clothes and bedding,
by massaging and bathing them,
and by washing their feet.

Because of that service
to mother and father,
the wise praise one in this world
and after death one rejoices in heaven.¹⁴

In the first and second paragraphs, the text contains a pun: it is better to pay your filial duty to your parents, who are the real creators of you as they give birth to you, rather than paying filial duties to the Brahmā, who created human beings according to the teachings of Brahmanism.¹⁵ The text also emphasizes the idea of parents as educators of their children in their early years, and thus the parents’ role in building their characters and temperaments. That is why parents are called those who deserve gifts. In other versions of the same discourse, mother and father are also respected and

14 *Numerical Discourse of the Buddha*, 453–54. The sutta in fact appears twice: once in the Threes (3.31), *Aṅguttaranikāya*, 1:132, and once in the Fours (4.63), *Aṅguttaranikāya*, 2:70. I have quoted the longer version in the Fours (4.63), which is the same as no. 106 in the *Itivuttaka*, ed. Ernst Windisch (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1975), 109–11. The difference between the two suttas is that the longer version adds one more item: “Those families dwell with the first deities where at home the mother and father are revered by their children.”

15 Brahmanism refers to those forms of Hinduism that revolve primarily around the mythic vision and ritual ideologies presented by the ancient Indian religious texts called Vedas. According to Jan C. Heesterman, “Brahmanism developed as the Vedic Indians moved further into the subcontinent to settle in the regions drained by the Ganges River and then southward to the tip of India. It is loosely known as Brahmanism because of the religious and legal importance it places on the *brāhmaṇa* (priestly) class of society.” Heesterman, “Vedism and Brahmanism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005).

honored as the Worthy Ones and Buddhas.¹⁶ This reflects some Brahmin teachings that mother and father are considered as gods together with teachers and guests in the *Taittirīya Upanishad*.¹⁷

The teaching on respecting one's parents was important when Buddhism was introduced to China, where Confucianism was the dominant ideology. According to the Confucian teachings, children's respect for their parents in the practice of filial piety is emphasized much more than their material and physical support. As the *Analects* says, "Nowadays 'filial' means simply being able to provide one's parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you are not respectful, wherein lies the difference?"¹⁸ In such a circumstance, this Buddhist text *With Brahmā* is quite important in that it shows Chinese people that Buddhism also teaches children to pay respect and reverence to their parents.

The third discourse is the *Scripture on Great Sacrifice (Mahāyāñña)*, in which a Brahmin asks the Buddha about a sacrifice that involves killing many cows and other animals. The Buddha describes, with sacrificial terminology, three types of fires that should be attended with care and honor, instead of worshipping the actual fire. The first fire is mother and father, who should be honored and cared for as they are worthy of gifts; the second fire is one's wife and children, employees, and dependents; and the third fire represents religious persons who have either attained the goal of Buddhist training or have embarked on a course of training for the elimination of negative mental traits.¹⁹ The Buddha said to the Brahmin, "these three fires, when esteemed, revered, venerated, respected, must bring best happiness."²⁰ It is quite clear that instead of worshipping actual fire and performing sacrifice, Buddhism advises people to venerate and support parents, family members, and religious people, which is considered more beneficial and meaningful.

Thus, the Buddha advises lay followers to respect and support their parents in five ways:

There are five ways in which a son should minister to his mother and father as the eastern direction. [He should think:] Having been supported by them, I will support them. I will perform their duties for them. I will keep up the family tradition. I will be worthy of my heritage. After my parents' deaths I will distribute gifts on their behalf.²¹

16 In the shorter version of the Chinese translation of the *Samyuktāgama* T2, 404a, the same sūtra is also found. In addition to parents being worshipped as Brahmā, teachers, and 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. The last item means that people will think that this is a good family with loving supportive children. The same sūtra is also quoted in the *Samyuktaratnapitaka Sūtra* T4, 455b (translated by Kekaya and Tanyao in 472), where mother and father are worshipped as Worthy Ones and Buddhas.

17 In the Max Müller translation of the *Taittirīya Upanishad*, the above passage reads, "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 Upanishad 2.52," in *Sacred Books of the East*, trans. Max Müller (London: Clarendon Press, 1879), 14:494. Here we can see that both mother and father are treated as gods.

18 *The Analects* 2.7. The English translation is from *Confucian Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Cambridge: Hackett, 2003), 10.

19 This sūtra is also found in both Chinese translations of the *Samyuktāgama* 93, T2, 24c–25a and T2, 464c, where the first is named the root fire because all children are born from parents. Therefore, the root should be respected, honored, supported, and made happy.

20 The *Anguttaranikāya* (7.47), 4:44. The translation is from *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Anguttaranikāya)*, trans. E. M. Hare, vol. 4 (1935; repr. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), 26.

21 J. Estlin Carpenter, ed., "The Sigālovāda Sutta," in *Dighanikāya* vol. 3 (1911; repr. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1976), 189. This sūtra 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. For an

Karma and Filial Piety

Whereas these three essential Buddhist scriptures suggest that Buddhism upholds a gratitude theory in the teaching of filial piety and hence honor and respect are important in repaying one's debt to one's parents, filial piety is also practiced as a chief ethical good action under the teaching of karma and the consequences of practicing filial piety is rebirth in one of the Buddhist heavens.

The merit of supporting one's parents is praised by the Buddha in many places in the early texts. It is said in the Buddhist scriptures that a young Brahmin who was not sure about his practice of supporting his mother with the alms food begged from householders asked the Buddha whether his action was what should be done by an ascetic.²² According to the Indian tradition, alms food collected from householders is thought to be only for religious people, such as ascetics. The Buddha categorically told him, "For sure, brahmin, in doing so you are doing your duty. One who seeks alms food righteously and thereby supports his mother and father generates much merit."²³ Then the Buddha said that such an action is praised by the wise in the present world and will have heavenly rebirth after death.

The scripture named the *Vows (Vatapada Sutta)* says that supporting one's parents is the first of the seven ethical good deeds performed by Sakka when he was a human, and as a result, he was born in the heaven of Brahmā world and became the chief of the gods.²⁴ The other good deeds are respecting elders; using good words, no harsh words, and no slandering talk; speaking the truth; and being generous. The important idea is that supporting parents is the first of the seven good deeds. 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 enlightenment.²⁵ This bodhisattva is considered in Buddhism as at the very high level of practice near Buddhahood.

The importance of filial piety in Buddhism is also reflected in the five grave crimes. According to the Buddhist teachings, there are five kinds of gravest bad karma, and matricide and patricide 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.²⁶

English translation, see Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 467.

22. The *Mātuṃposaka Sutta* is found in both the *Samyuttanikāya*, ed. L. Feer, vol. 1. (1884; repr. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2006), 181, and the *Samyuktāgama*, T2, no. 99 (88). It is also found in the shorter version of the *Samyuktāgama*, T2, no. 100 (88).

23. Feer, *Samyuttanikāya*, 1:181. For an English translation, see Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyuttanikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 277.

24. *Samyuttanikāya*, 1:228; see also *Samyuktāgama*, T2, no. 99, at 1104, 1105, 1106; *Samyuktāgama*, T2, no. 100, at 33. There are seven good deeds of Sakka: "(1) As long as I live may I support my parents. (2) As long as I live may I respect the family elders. (3) As long as I live may I speak gently. (4) As long as I live may I not speak divisively. (5) As long as I live may I dwell at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing. (6) As long as I live may I speak the truth. (7) As long as I live may I be free from anger, and if anger should arise in me may I dispel it quickly." The translation is from the *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 329.

25. *Ekottarāgama*, T2, no. 125, 600c.

26. *Āṅguttaranikāya*, 3:146. The translation is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Access to Insight (1997), <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/an/ano5/ano5.129.than.html>. These five kinds of gravest bad karma are mentioned in many places in the Chinese Āgamas, *Samyuktāgama*, T2, no. 99 (792), 205a; *Madhyamāgama*, T1, no. 26 (200), 769a, 724a.

According to this passage, those who have committed these five kinds of bad deeds are immediately destined for hell and agony. Thus, it is clear that filial piety occupies an important place in Buddhist ethics and spiritual progress.

Together with other meritorious deeds, respecting and supporting parents is also seen as dharma, the way things should be, or the social order and peace, in the Buddhist scriptures. If parents are not respected and supported, more bad things will happen, such as fighting. This idea is found in many places in Chinese translations of the *Samyuktāgama*, the *Dirghāgama* and the *Ekottarāgama*, as well as the Pāli *Āṅguttaranikāya*.

Stories of Practicing Filial Piety

The Buddha not only taught the teaching of filial piety as an important moral conduct as part of the teaching on karma, as discussed above, but also practiced it together with his disciples as found in Buddhist scriptures. We can classify it into three groups: (1) the stories of the Buddha who practiced filial piety in the present life, (2) the stories of the Buddha, who practiced filial piety in his previous lives, and (3) the stories of his disciples who practiced filial piety.²⁷

There are three stories that tell the Buddha's practice of filial piety to his birth mother, Mahāmāyā; his father, Suddhodana; and his stepmother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, respectively. According to the Buddhist tradition, Mahāmāyā died and was reborn in heaven after giving birth to the Bodhisattva. It is a well-known story: the Buddha ascended to the Tāvātimsa heaven and preached to his mother a few years after his enlightenment.²⁸ This is a typical story illustrating the Buddha's practice of filial piety.²⁹

In another story, according to the Theravāda tradition of South and Southeast Asia, the Buddha went back to see his father Suddhodana several times.³⁰ First Suddhodana sent Kāludāyī to invite the Buddha, and he went back and visited his home town Kapilavatthu. Then, in the fifth year after his enlightenment, the Buddha came back home from Vesāli to see his father before his death and

27 See Guang Xing, "Chinese Translation of Buddhist Sutras Related to Filial Piety as a Response to Confucian Criticism of Buddhists Being Unfilial," in *Buddhism in East Asia: Aspects of History's First Universal Religion Presented in the Modern Context*, ed. Anita Sharma (New Delhi: Vidyandhi Prakashan Press, 2012), 75–85.

28 The story is found in the *Samyuktāgama*, sūtra no. 506, and the *Ekottarāgama*, section 36, sūtra no. 5. It is also found twice in the Pāli commentary of the Theravāda tradition: the *Atthasālinī: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dhammasaṅgāṇī*, ed. E. Muller, vol. 1 (1897; repr. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1979), 15; the *Dhammapada Atthakathā* (Commentary to the *Dhammapada*), ed. H. C. Norman, vol. 3 (1912; repr. London: Pali Text Society 1993), 216f. For an English translation, see E. W. Burlingame, *Buddhist Legend: Translated from the Original Pali Text of the Dhammapada Commentary*, iii, 47. "The Buddha visited Tāvātimsa immediately after the performance of the Twin-Miracle at the foot of the Gaṇḍamba tree, on the full moon day of Āsāḷha, and there, during the three months of the rainy season, the Buddha stayed, preaching the Abhidhamma Piṭaka to his mother (who came there to listen to him), seated on Sakka's Paṇḍukambala-silāsana, at the foot of the Pāricchattaka-tree. (It is said that, during this time, at certain intervals, the Buddha would return to earth, leaving a seated image of himself in Tāvātimsa to continue the preaching while he attended to his bodily needs, begging alms in Uttarakuru and eating his food on the banks of Anotatta, where Sāriputta waited on him and learnt of what he had been preaching to the devas.)" G. P. Malalasekera, ed., *The Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (1937; repr. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2003), 1:609 (citing the *Atthasālinī*, ed. E. Müller, 1897 [repr. London: Pali Text Society, 1979], i.15; the *Dhammapada Atthakathā*, iii.216f).

29 As early as in Western Jin dynasty (265–316), Dharmarakṣa already translated the *Foshengdaolitian Weimushuofa Jing*, which can be translated as the "sūtra of the Buddha's ascension to the trāyas-triṃśa heaven to preach the Dharma to his mother." According to *The Korean Buddhist Canon*, it was translated in 280–290 in Chang'an. However the Chinese translation of the text seems to teach filial piety from its title, but it, in fact, concentrates on the discussion of Mahāyāna ideas similar to the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*.

30 *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, s.v. "Suddhodana."

preached dharma to him, and Suddhodana became an arahant and died.³¹ According to the northern tradition, the Buddha came back home and attended his father Suddhodana's funeral ceremony as a way of practicing filial piety.³² Attending one's father's funeral ceremony is particularly true in the context of Chinese Confucian tradition, in which attending parents' funeral ceremonies is part of filial practice. Unlike the Western traditions, filial practice in both Indian and Chinese cultures as well as cultures influenced by these two great traditions also includes ancestor worship and people are required to make offerings to the deceased parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents, and so on, as the notion of past lives are numerous.³³

In the third story, according to Buddhist tradition, Mahāpajāpatī Gotami, the younger sister of the Buddha's mother, who was married to King Suddhodana, nursed Siddhartha Gautama after Mahāmāyā died. Mahāpajāpatī Gotami became a nun after her husband died and she developed insight and quickly achieved the goal of Buddhist training after the Buddha's instructions.³⁴ According to Buddhist scholar Reiko Ohnuma, it was the Buddha's practice of filial piety by allowing Mahāpajāpatī Gotami, his stepmother, to become a nun.³⁵ When Mahāpajāpatī Gotami became ill, there were no monks to visit her and preach to her because it was against the rule, but the Buddha himself visited her with great love and delighted her with a dhamma talk.³⁶ As a result, the Buddha even amended and changed the rule by allowing monks to preach to nuns.³⁷ The Chinese translation of the *Foshuo Daaidao Bannianhuan Jing* by Bai Fazhu during the Western Jin dynasty (290–307) also tells the story of how Mahāpajāpatī Gotami died and the Buddha came and collected her ashes as a practice of filial piety.³⁸

The stories of the Buddha who practiced filial piety in his previous lives are found in many large collections of Buddhist scriptures. The first and most important story is that the Buddha in his former life as a filial son named Śyāma supported his blind parents who practiced ascetic life in their old age.³⁹ In order to fulfill his objectives, Śyāma led a bachelor's life and single-mindedly served his parents without any complaints. The story was very popular in Buddhist circles in India and is

31 Ibid., s.v. "Gotama."

32 The story is found in the *Jingfamwang Banniepan Jing*, T14, no. 512, translated by Juqu Jingsheng in 455.

33 Ancestor worship is an important part of human life in both India and China. There are two traditional occasions in China during which people make offerings to their deceased parents or ancestors: the Qingming Festival in spring and the Ghost Festival in summer. The first is a native Chinese tradition and the second is a Buddhist-inspired festival. For detailed discussion of Chinese ancestor worship, see William Lakos, *Chinese Ancestor Worship: A Practice and Ritual Oriented Approach to Understanding Chinese Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010). For Buddhist practice of ancestor worship in China, see Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). In India, ancestor worship is part of the *śrāddha* rite, a central aspect of domestic religiosity in many Indians' lives. See Matthew R. Sayers, *Feeding the Dead: Ancestor Worship in Ancient India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

34 *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, s.v. "Gotami."

35 See Reiko Ohnuma, "Debt to the Mother: A Neglected Aspect of the Founding of the Buddhist Nuns' Order," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2006): 861–901.

36 I use the *dhamma* when the sources are from the Pali canon and *dharma* in all other cases.

37 This story is found in both the northern and southern traditions. *Mahāsāṃghikavinaya*, T22, no. 1425, 347a. I. B. Horner, trans., *The Book of Discipline* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), 2:277.

38 This text was again translated by Huijian in 457 as the *Fomu Bannihuan Jing* [sūtra of the passing away of the Buddha's mother]. The story is also found in the Chinese translation of the *Ekottarāgama*, the first sūtra of the 52nd vaggā: Mahāpajāpatī Gotami's *parinirvāna* and in the Theravāda tradition of the Therī-Apadāna.

39 The Pāli version *Sāma Jātaka* (no. 540) is in the Pāli *Jātaka*. See also J. J. Jones, trans., *Mahāvastu: Translated from the Buddhist Sanskrit* (London: Luzac and Company, 1952), 2:199–231. The Chinese translation is the *Foshuo Pusashanzi Jing*, T03, no. 174.

found in the relief carvings in Gandhara made in the second to third centuries⁴⁰ on the west doorway of Sānchi Stupa, in caves no. 2 and no. 10 of Ajanta, which are roughly made in the first century.⁴¹ The Śyāma story became so popular in China that it was even included in the Confucian tradition of the twenty-four stories of filial piety.⁴²

The Buddha's disciples also practiced filial piety, and the well-known story of Maudgalyāyana's saving his mother from hell is the best example.⁴³ Maudgalyāyana, one of the chief disciples of the Buddha, saw his mother suffering in hell for her bad deeds. He tried to save her through his magic power but failed. So he asked the Buddha for help, and the latter told him that it was only through the collective merit of the Sangha that his mother could be saved. Thus, Maudgalyāyana, according to the Buddha's instruction, made a great offering to the Sangha just after the rains retreat and his mother was saved. This story became very popular in China and a Buddhist festival called *Yulanpenhui* (Ullambana), popularly known as the Ghost Festival, was established in China in the sixth century CE in accordance with this story. And this festival is still celebrated in the Chinese communities outside mainland China today. The story of Maudgalyāyana and his mother was even adapted for the stage and performed as a drama to teach filial piety during the festival. This festival is so popular that it even influenced Daoism, which established the Zhongyuan festival celebrated on the same day.

From Indian inscriptions we know that Indian Buddhists also practiced filial piety by dedicating their donations and merits to their mother and father.⁴⁴ For instance, the inscription from Bhārhut reads "The gift of Saṅgharakhita, for the benefit of (his) mother and father."⁴⁵ Here the donor is a Buddhist monk who dedicated his donation for the benefit of his parents (we do not know whether the parents are deceased). It is also found in the Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions of the first century BCE that the majority of the donors dedicated their religious activities to their parents. Gregory Schopen says, "It is clear then that 'benefiting' one's parents, both living and dead, was, in the Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, the most frequently mentioned purpose for religious giving. It was, it seems, a

40 There are two pieces of artifacts of the the Śyāma jātaḥ story in the British Museum. "The Śyāma Jātaka," no. 1880-54, The British Museum Collection Online, accessed August 2, 2015, https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=182320&partId=1&searchText=syama; and "The Śyāma Jātaka," no. 1880-55, accessed June 8, 2016, https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=182319&partId=1&searchText=syama&page=1.

41 B. Subrahmanyam, *Jataka in Buddhist Thought and Art* (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2009), 2:286-93. In cave no. 10 (Ajanta) four incidents of Jataka tale are extant: (1) the king with his retinue shooting an arrow towards Sama; (2) the king grievously repentant on his accidental mistake; (3) Sama's blind parents wailing upon the wounded body of their son in the hermitage; (4) Sama's resurrection to life.

42 For detailed study of the *Foshuo Pusa Shanzi Jing*, see Ch'en, "Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism." The *Śyāma Sūtra* was first translated by an unknown person as early as in the Western Jin dynasty (265-316) and was mentioned in Daoan's catalogue, which is preserved in the *Chu Sanzang Jiji*, a collection of the records of translations of the Tripiṭaka compiled by Sengyou in 518. The sūtra was again translated by Shengjian in 388-409 as an independent text, *Foshuo Shanzi Jing* (*Śyāma Sūtra*). The story is also found in other large collections, such as the Chinese translations of the *Sengjialuocha Suoji Jing* (Sūtra Compiled by Saṅgharakṣa) translated by Saṅghabhūti in 385 as the *Śyāma Jātaka*, T4, no. 194, 116c-117a; the *Liuduji Jing* (*Śaṭpāramitā-saṅnipāta Sūtra*), translated by Kang Senghui in 251 as the birth story of the ascetic Śyāma, T3, no. 152, 24b-25a; and in the *Zabaozang Jing* (*Samyuktaratna Piṭaka Sūtra*) as the third vignette in the story "Prince Who Saves His Parents with His Own Flesh."

43 See Dharmarakṣa, trans., *Foshuo Yulanpen Jing* (*Ullambana Sūtra*). According to *The Korean Buddhist Canon*, the *Ullambana Sūtra* was translated between the second year of Tai Xi and the first year of Jian Xing, Western Jin dynasty (266-313).

44 For a detailed study, see Schopen, "Filial Piety and the Monk in the Practice of Indian Buddhism."

45 *Ibid.*, 113.

major pre-occupation of those who engaged in such activities.”⁴⁶ In the Mathura inscriptions, of the thirty-nine inscriptions, one-quarter indicate that the donation was made for the donors’ parents by saying that this is an “act of puja for his mother and father and all living beings.”⁴⁷

FILIAL PIETY IN MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

Mahāyāna Buddhism developed the teaching and practice of filial piety further and formulated the four debts that one should pay: the debt to parents, the debt to sentient beings, the debt to rulers, and the debt to the Buddha or Buddhism, which became very popular in Chinese Buddhism and spread to other East Asian countries.⁴⁸ Buddhism faced much challenge and criticisms when it was transmitted to China during the Han dynasty, which had a highly developed culture, particularly the Confucianism that focuses on filial piety in its moral teachings. As a result, the Chinese Mahāyāna teaching of filial piety pays special emphasis on gratitude to these four groups of people.

We find in the *Zhengfa Nianchu Jing*, a text translated into Chinese by Gautama Prajñāruci in 538–541, that one should pay four debts to a group of four people: one’s mother, one’s father, the Buddha, and one’s dharma teacher.⁴⁹ The text does not explain much the four debts. But two hundred and fifty years later, the *Dasheng Bensheng Xindiguan Jing* (Mahāyāna Discourse on the Concentration of Mind), a text translated into Chinese by Prajñā in 790, speaks of paying four debts to four groups of people: parents, sentient beings, rulers, and Buddhism.⁵⁰ In this text, the entire second chapter is devoted to a detailed explanation of the four debts.

We do not know whether this development in the practice of filial piety by paying four debts was popular in India, but the idea of paying four debts to the four people or four groups of people must be inspired by the Brahmin tradition as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* already speaks of four debts: the debt of studentship to the seers (*Rṣis*), the debt of sacrifice to the gods, the debt of offspring to the fathers and the debt of hospitality to men.⁵¹ The move from four people to four groups of people between the first and second texts suggests that the idea was not yet fixed. But paying four debts to

46 Ibid., 114. Filial practice to the dead is ancestor worship, which is very important in Asian societies, particularly in China and India. The activities are various, such as making offerings to the dead, feeding hungry ghosts, and transferring merits by doing good deeds in the name of one’s parents.

47 Ibid., 115.

48 Buddhist scholars generally agree that Mahāyāna is a developed form of Buddhism and its literature is later than the Pāli Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas. The four debts are explained by the great Buddhist master Yongming Yanshou (904–975) as debts to teachers, parents, kings, and donors.

49 The *Zhengfa Nianchu Jing* reads, “There are four debts that are difficult to pay. What are four? First is mother, second is father, third is Tathāgata and fourth is one’s Dharma teacher. If one makes offerings to these four people one obtains much merits and will be praised in this life by people and be attaining enlightenment in the future.” See T17, no. 721, 359b. The translation is mine.

50 The *Dasheng Bensheng Xindiguan Jing* says, “There are four debts: debt to parents, debt to sentient beings, debt to kings and debt to Buddhism.” See T3, no. 159, 297a. The translation is mine.

51 See Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46–53, which contains a detailed discussion of the four debts in Brahmin tradition: The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (6.3.10.5) mentions only three debts: “A Brahmin, at his very birth, is born with a triple debt—of studentship to the seers, of sacrifice to the gods, of offspring to the fathers. He is, indeed, free from debt, who has a son, is a sacrificer, and who has lived as a student. This (debt) he satisfies ... by these cuttings ... That is how the cuttings get their name” (page 47). But the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.7.2.1–6) adds a fourth debt: “Now, whoever exists is born indeed as a debt at his very birth to the gods, to the seers, to the fathers, and to men” (page 48). These texts are much older than Buddhism.

four groups of people became popular in China and other East Asian countries as it includes kings and all sentient beings.

It is thought that including kings as one group to whom a debt should be paid in the second text is a Chinese creation, not an Indian tradition, as in ancient times Indian kings always respected and honored religious mendicants.⁵² In India the reigning ideology supported the independence of religious groups because religious people were considered to work for the spiritual welfare while the rulers were to work for the material welfare, and spiritual welfare was considered to be higher and nobler than material welfare. The caste system in India reflects this understanding as Brahmins, the priests, are the highest caste, higher than kings. But in China, kings or emperors were the supreme heads of states, and no subject could exceed the king's authority in any realm. As the Chinese classic *Shijing* says, "Under the vast heaven there is no land which is not the king's, within the sea-borders of the realm there is none who is not the king's subject."⁵³ As a result there were no independent organized religious groups in ancient China and all religions were under the supervision of the state.

When Buddhism was first introduced into China, it faced many challenges and criticisms from local Chinese people, particularly Confucian scholars. The criticisms of Confucian scholars were mainly on ethical grounds, because the Buddhist way of life primarily focuses on individual liberation through moral perfection, which is very different from Confucianism, which chiefly focuses on family life and society. In particular, the life of Buddhist monks, who were required to be celibate, shave their heads, and leave their homes and families, was incompatible with Confucian practices of filial piety as found in the Confucian *Xiaojing* (Classic of Filial Piety).⁵⁴ This became a political issue in the Eastern Jin dynasty (265–420), when Yu Bing, who became the regent, first suggested that Buddhist monks should follow the Chinese etiquette of paying homage to the emperor by kneeling before him or his representatives, otherwise *Li* or social propriety would be interrupted.⁵⁵ Thus the question of whether monks should pay homage to the emperor became a political issue and continued for several hundred years till the Tang dynasty (618–907).⁵⁶ What

52 The *Samaññāphala Sutta* of the *Dighanikāya* gives a simile that even a slave who worked for a king and who became a recluse (*samana*) would be respected by the king when he visits the king's palace. See "The *Samaññāphala Sutta*," in *Dighanikāya*, 60–61; see also *The Dialogues of the Buddha*, trans. T. W. Rhys David, *Sacred Texts of the Buddhists* 2 (1899; repr., Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2002), part 1, 77; *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 61–62. The simile is also found in the Chinese translation of the *Dirghāgama*, T1, no. 1, 109a.

53 My translation of this passage is based on those of James Legge, trans., *The Book of Poetry* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 2:360, and Wang Rongpei, trans., *The Book of Poetry*, trans. Wang Rongpei (Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 2008), 2:431.

54 The *Xiaojing* basically discusses filial piety with a political purpose, dividing filial piety into five categories according to social status: the son of the heaven, the princes of states, high ministers and great officials, inferior officials, and common people. The practice of filial piety in each of these categories is different. See Lo Yuet Keung, "On the Dearth of Filial Daughters in Pre-Tang China," *Zhongguo Wenzhe Yanjiu Jikan* [Journal of Chinese Culture and Philosophy] vol. 24 (2004): 293–330 [中國文哲研究集刊]. See also Henry Rosemont, Jr., and Roger T. Ames, trans., *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

55 See E. Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 281–85; Kung-chuan Hsiao, *History of Chinese Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 1:658–62.

56 See Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the Tang* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 32–34. The issue of monks bowing to the throne was still controversial during the Tang dynasty and different emperors expressed different attitudes toward the practice. However, even Emperor Tang Taizong faced difficulty when he issued his edict requiring monks to bow to the throne and parents, as Buddhists supported by eminent people protested.

Yu Bing emphasized is Chinese traditional ritual handed down from ancient times, with reinforcement from Confucian teaching.

The debate about whether Buddhist monks should pay homage to the emperor is actually a continuation of the criticism of filial piety. The Confucian text *Xiaojing* discusses filial piety with a focus on politics: “service to the lord with *filial piety* is loyalty; service to elders with filial piety is compliance.”⁵⁷ Thus, filial piety is called loyalty when the object of respect is the emperor instead of parents. Chinese Buddhists, both the laity and monastics such as the eminent monk Huiyuan (334–416), supported by some government officers and also lay Buddhists such as Wang Mi (360–408), debated and argued that monks had also paid their homage to the emperors in their heart and mind, but not in a manifested way.⁵⁸ The proposals asking monks to pay homage to the rulers never materialized because the Buddhists, both monastic and lay, were against it.

Buddhism also transformed itself into a Chinese religion with many Chinese characteristics through the interaction with Chinese philosophy and culture by the end of sixth century. Chinese Buddhist monastics fully paid their homage to the emperors with various ritual activities and services to the emperors and the states. That is why we find in the scripture entitled *Zhufo Jingjie Shezhenshi Jing*, also translated by Prajñā in Tang dynasty, that emperors are placed first amongst the four debts, followed by parents, donors, and sentient beings.⁵⁹ Of course, this list did not become the standard. The standard four debts are still parents, sentient beings, rulers, and Buddhism, which became a regular practice in monasteries throughout China in the Tang dynasty. The monks also taught their disciples the teaching of paying four debts to the four groups of people. Since that time, the Chinese Buddhists have recited a verse of dedication of merits at the end of the morning and evening chanting and also at virtually every ceremony:

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn the Buddha’s Pure Land,
repaying the four kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of those
on the three paths below.⁶⁰

As a consequence, in later dynasties there was no such debate as to whether the monks should pay homage to the emperor.

The Chinese Buddhists also created the *Discourse on the Difficulty in Paying the Debt to Parents* based on the *Discourse on Knowing the Debts* discussed above during the early Tang Dynasty to teach people to practice filial piety.⁶¹ This text was and is still quite popular in Buddhist monasteries in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. It is printed for free distribution to everyone who comes

57 The translation is from Rosemont and Ames, *Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 107.

58 See Guang Xing, “A Buddhist-Confucian Controversy on Filial Piety,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (2010): 248–60.

59 The *Zhufo Jingjie Shezhenshi Jing*, T18, no. 868, 284b.

60 The verse continues: “May those who see or hear of these efforts / generate Bodhi-mind, / spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma, / and finally be reborn together in / the Land of Ultimate Bliss. / Homage to Amita Buddha!” Inside cover, *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*, trans. Minh Thanh and P. D. Leigh, 2nd. ed. (Taipei: Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2001), http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/medbudustra.pdf.

61 See Guang Xing, “A Study of the Apocryphal Sūtra: *Fumu Enzhong Jing*,” *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 11 (2008): 105–46. “Difficulty” in the context of paying parents’ debt means that parents’ compassion and dedication to their children is so great that children can never pay back their debts by ordinary

to a monastery and is also referred to in dharma talks whenever it is necessary. The stories about parents bringing up their children discussed in the text are also presented in painting illustrations. We find six illustrations of the above text in Dunhuang: four are mural paintings, in caves 156 and 238, made during the Tang dynasty, and caves 170 and 449, made during the Song dynasty; and two are silk paintings stored in British and Gansu museums, respectively.⁶² The central theme in these illustrations is the Buddha's preaching and the contents of the text are painted around the center figure, Buddha. The carvings of illustrations of the text are also found in Dazu Rock Carvings in Chongqing Municipality in southwest China, made during the Song dynasty by a Buddhist monk named Zongze. The emphasis of these carvings is different from those described above: the difficulties of parents in bringing up children are much appreciated, in particular the mother's virtue.⁶³ Today such illustrations of the *Discourse on the Difficulty in Paying the Debt to Parents* are still found in many Buddhist monasteries as wall paintings.

Thus in China and other East Asian countries, filial piety was and is still taught in dharma talks and other occasions and practiced as a very important virtue around paying the four debts with an emphasis on parents and the country where they live. As a consequence, Buddhism is generally regarded as a religion teaching filial piety, just as is Confucianism.

CONCLUSION

Filial piety is an essential moral teaching in Buddhism as it is the chief good karma that is the foundation of Buddhist morality. The ancient teaching of filial piety is still taught and practiced in Buddhist countries in Asia today as it is a very important part of moral education for children and Buddhist practice for adults. In South and Southeast Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, where Theravāda Buddhism is practiced, Buddhist monks and lay people teach filial piety to children with selected suttas and passages such as the *Discourse on Knowing the Debts (Kataññu Sutta)* and the *Discourse to Sigālaka (Sigālaka Sutta, or Advice to Lay People)* from the Pali Buddhist texts in religious education settings and other occasions. In East Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan, where Mahāyāna Buddhism is practiced, monks teach filial piety by drawing material from the Mahāyāna texts such as the *Discourse on the Difficulty in Paying the Debt to Parents* and the *Ullambana Sūtra*, which are more compatible with the Confucian teachings of filial piety. These ancient Buddhist teachings of filial piety focus on human nature and feeling towards one's parents, with an emphasis on the difficulties and compassion involved for parents in bringing up their children. Teaching filial piety is still relevant and important in modern Asian societies, particularly in caring for the elderly people, as there are no good social welfare systems in most of the developing countries. Buddhism plays an important role in teaching young people to take care of their elderly parents in the South and Southeast Asian countries where Buddhism is the major religion, while in East Asian countries, the situation of teaching children filial piety is different as Confucianism still plays an important role and filial piety is the core of Confucian ethical teaching. Buddhism aligns harmoniously

means of supporting and honoring them. That is why the *Kataññu Sutta* mentions four different ways to repay the debt to parents.

62 See Guang Xing, "Popularization of Stories and Parables on Filial Piety in China," *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 8 (2010): 129–37.

63 See Hu Wenho, "A Re-study of the *Stone Carving of Parental Love* at Paoding, Dazu," *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 15 (2002): 115–40 [in Chinese].

with Confucianism in the teaching and practice of filial piety in these societies as the two religions share many similarities in their philosophy of life.⁶⁴

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64 See Guang Xing, "Buddhist and Confucian Attitudes toward Life: A Comparative Study," *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 23 (2014): 7–48.