

# Buddhist Ideals and Practice for Ageing Welfare: With Reference to the *Sūtra of Filial Piety*

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*In this article, Buddhist Sūtra of Filial Piety is introduced. The sūtra explains the manner in which we can repay our parents' loving kindness, as well as the difficulty in doing this. Generally speaking, modern welfare systems are concerned primarily with provision of services to ensure physical well-being. Buddhist welfare, on the other hand, addresses welfare of the mind as well as satisfaction of physical desires.*

*Traditionally, concept of filial piety was Confucian value. But its pivotal point is bound to one's own family. Historically Buddhists have accepted and re-interpreted the concept of filial piety with their own world-view in East Asia. The Buddhist approach is to recognize the nature of the human condition which is subject to karmic and social problems. Therefore, Buddhism emphasizes practice of filial piety towards all people beyond the limit of family. Hence the sūtra may well be evaluated as a model which shows dialogue and*

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*consensus of different faiths.*

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 Buddhist Sūtra of Filial Piety, Buddhist Welfare.

## I. Introduction

In this article I will introduce the Buddhist *Sūtra of Filial Piety*,<sup>1</sup> which is about the importance of understanding a parent's loving kindness, particularly a mother's loving kindness, and the duty of offspring to repay this loving kindness. This sūtra explains the manner in which we can repay our parents' loving kindness, as well as the difficulty in doing so. Buddhism considers humans to be independent beings, possessing free will bestowed to them by nature. But the true nature of human beings is suffering because of egoistic desires which arise from spiritual ignorance.

Buddhism provides a remedy to this suffering in the doctrine of 'co-dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*),' and this doctrine also offers an alternative perspective on dealing with social problems and issues of ageing.

In general, modern welfare systems are concerned primarily with the provision of services to ensure physical well-being. Buddhist welfare, on the other hand, refers to not only the satisfaction of physical desires, but also the health and welfare of the mind. The Buddhist approach to problems associated with the welfare of the ageing population is to recognize the nature of the human condition, which is

1 Full title of this sūtra is pronounced as *Bulseol-daebo-bumo-eunjung-gyeong* 佛說大報父母恩重經 in Korean. It is usually abbreviated as *Bumo-eunjung-gyeong* 父母恩重經, and different from *Fo-shuo-fu-mu-en-nan-bao-jing* (佛說父母恩難報經; T.16, No.684) or *Fo-shuo-fu-mu-en-zhong-jing* (佛說父母恩重經; T.85, No.2887).

common to all people. That is, suffering incurred by way of birth, sickness, ageing and death. The gradual deterioration of the human body is often accompanied by social problems such as poverty, sickness, loneliness and inactivity (Kwon: 313-316).

In Korean culture, filial piety and family support are fundamental, traditional values. Traditionally, it is this filial piety that has ensured unconditional family responsiveness to the provision of voluntary care for ageing relatives in the society.

Generally speaking, the concept of filial piety was a traditional Confucian value which gained immense importance in Korea during the periods of Confucian political and social dominance. But if we consider the concept of filial piety in a Buddhist sense, we find that the main related characteristic is compassion, which is developed through the *Bodhisattva's* practice of gratitude.

Buddhism teaches the importance of exercising filial piety towards all people. Indeed, the central tenet of Mahāyāna Buddhism is not only a concern for parents or immediate human family but also salvation of all sentient beings. And it is perhaps this very compassionate notion of filial piety that may be able to make a step towards an enlightened approach to ageing welfare in our contemporary society.

## II. Comparison of Filial Values in Confucian and Buddhist Thought

It is said that the heart of Confucian thought is Benevolence (*ren*), meaning basic humanity. The Chinese character for perfect virtue is the character for 'person' but with two more strokes, indicating two or more people acting together and hence, representing interdependent human life.

In other words, the principle of benevolence is at the very core of human social life. The practice of this principle is called filial piety and is considered a central value of Confucianism. These Confucian filial ideas are the dominant ethical values that underpin Korean thoughts

and culture.

Filial ideas are also emphasized in Buddhist the doctrine, which teaches that righteous existence of human beings is based on a recognition of the interdependence of all things, and hence an awareness of how our own good fortune and benevolence is a dependent condition, reliant on other's generosity and mercy. This is why the bodhisattva path of saving all beings is important to our own salvation and enlightenment and hence, for repaying favors of parents and humankind generally.

The core moral values or ideals in Buddhism are 'wisdom and compassion' which manifest in qualities of 'brightness and warmth.' Wisdom and compassion are the fruits of attaining an independent self-consciousness or enlightened nature.

Hence, expressions of filial piety flow from an enlightened being's realized wisdom and mercy, and so, above of all in Buddhism, filial ideas are principally concerned with the filial duty of realizing an enlightened 'Consciousness.'

In Buddhist thought, suffering or hardship, is regarded as an inevitability of sentience, and knowledge of this suffering is what hastens us to seek to awaken ourselves from ignorance and thus to realize our true nature and duty in life, which is to attain happiness and overcome unnecessary suffering. In reality, the suffering mind is a false view, only covering on an inherent brightness. This brightness can be perceived by momentary concentration of mind (*kṣāna*) which leads to rapid progress in the spiritual life. This is the ideal world of Buddhism.

But it is not necessary to wait until we attain complete awakening before we are able to fulfill our filial duties. Through practicing filial piety and thus repaying old debts to parents and to all living things, because we are already on the Bodhisattva path towards becoming Buddha.

It is said that in repaying our parents' favor we are able to

achieve a state of peace (tranquility) and non-suffering, and to finally become Buddha, which is the highest human attainment and is the greatest gift we can give to our parents in repayment for their favor of us.

Buddhism teaches that, even after the death of parents, one should be devoted to them as if they were alive, always conducting oneself in a moral way and never forgetting the parents' favor.

In today's educational environment, it would be a precious value for young people to be encouraged in an attitude or willingness to serve those other than oneself. When instructing on the value of filial piety, it should be emphasized that the roots of this value are embedded in the flowering of consciousness which is an awakening to eternal Oneness, Wholeness or Buddhahood.

It is an awakening of Mind to universal identity, surpassing time and space, and embracing eternity and infinity.

In this regard, both Confucianism and Buddhism consider filial piety to be the most important, and although the form and methods are somewhat different in the two traditions there are, nevertheless, many things which have a mutual correspondence with each other. However, as already discussed, filial piety in Buddhist understanding is concerned primarily with a function of embracing eternity and infinity, in comparison with the earthly Confucian concern for family.

### **III. Reviewing the *Sūtra of Filial Piety***

The *Filial Piety Sūtra* encapsulates great parental love. It speaks of filial piety, which is an invocation of the basic human ethic of repaying one's obligations.

This sūtra gives emphasis on the filial mind which tries to repay the unconditional love of parents in the same manner as that of a Buddha.

The *Filial Piety Sūtra* is one of the best known sūtras, it expresses

filial mind from a Buddhist point of view as possessing deep love and sorrow, like the parental mind expresses for their child.

The sūtra goes on to say that every impiety that is plainly expressed to a parent, leads to the suffering in Hell, and the rewards or boon for acts of piety are recorded in the Ten-Great-Boons. Towards the end of the sūtra we find that Ānanda, and all the disciples who were present, took a Vow of filial piety to parents and willed that this Sūtra be everlasting in the hearts of all Sentient Beings.

The sūtra is made up of five parts: the first part illuminates the mother's loving kindness, the second describes the difficulty of repaying her loving kindness, the third is a discourse on un-filial children, the fourth explains the hell into which un-filial children will fall, and the fifth teaches about the Buddhist way to repay the mother's loving kindness. The discourses proceed in the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and Ānanda.

### 1. Loving Kindness of the Mother

The Buddha explained to Ānanda that there are ten types of loving kindness bestowed by a mother on her child. The following are excerpts from the dialogue between the Buddha and Ānanda about these ten types of loving kindness:

A. The First Loving Kindness is providing protection and care while the child is in the womb.

Human birth is not easy to attain in the countless cycles of rebirth but when a child finds its way into a mother's womb, it is because of a karmic connection with his/her parents. During the passing months of embryonic life in the womb the five vital organs gradually develop. Within seven weeks the six sensory organs start to grow. As the child develops the mother's burden becomes greater and the

movements of the fetus are like frightening earthquakes and hurricanes inside the mother. With her mind only on her child, the mother is too tired to worry about her own appearance. She forgets to apply make up, and her fine clothes are discarded, while her mirror gathers dust.

B. The Second Loving Kindness is bearing suffering during birth.

The pregnancy lasts for nine months and culminates in a difficult labor. Meanwhile, every morning the mother may feel ill, or drowsy and sluggish while her fear and anxiety are beyond description. Grief and tears fill her heart. She painfully tells her family that she is afraid that death will befall to her baby.

C. The Third Loving Kindness is forgetting the pain when the child is born.

The day of the birth the mother's five organs all open wide, leaving her totally physically and mentally exhausted. She may faint several times and bleed profusely, as if she is slaughtered. Yet, after the ordeal, upon regaining consciousness, her first concern is for the well-being of the child. Upon hearing news of the child's well being she is redoubled with joy, but after the initial joy the physical pain returns and agony wrenches at her insides.

D. The Fourth Loving Kindness is eating the bitter fruit herself and saving the sweetest for the child.

The loving kindness of parents is more profound and deeper than the ocean. Their care and devotion never cease. Never resting or complaining, parental love is, indeed, deeply indescribable. As long as their children receive their fill, parents are prepared to bear hunger and cold. As long as the children are happy, parents are satisfied.

E. The Fifth Loving Kindness is moving the child to a dry place and lying in the wet herself.

Only wanting the child to have enough in its belly, the mother does not speak of her own hunger. The mother is willing to be wet, so that the child can be dry. With her two breasts she satisfies the child's hunger and thirst, giving it health. Covering the baby with her sleeve, she protects it from the wind and cold. So long as the child is comfortable and happy the kind mother seeks no solace for herself.

F. The Sixth Loving Kindness is suckling the child at her breast and nourishing and rearing the child.

The mother is like the great earth, supporting and nourishing the child's life. The stern father is like the encompassing heaven that covers from above, while the mother supports from below. The loving kindness of all parents is the same it despises no offspring even when born ugly. It knows no hatred or anger. Parents are not displeased even if the child is born crippled. The parents together care for and protect their children until the end of their days, simply because the children are their offspring. Such is the greatness of parental love.

G. The Seventh Loving Kindness is washing away the unclean.

Originally, she had a pretty face and a beautiful body. Her spirit was strong and vibrant. Her eyebrows were like fresh green willows. And her complexion was more reddish than a red lotus. But her loving kindness is so deep she will forgo her beauty, while having to constantly wash away the filth of her children and taking care of their injures her constitution. The kind mother acts solely for the sake of her sons and daughters without conditions, willingly allowing her beauty to



fade.

H. The Eighth Loving Kindness is thinking always of the child when it has traveled afar.

The death of a loved one is difficult to endure. But separation is also painful, such as when a child travels afar and the mother is worrying at home. From dawn till dusk, her heart is always with her child, praying for an early return. Some children leave for years without a message while their aged parents wait day and night, shedding a thousand tears. Like an old monkey weeping silently in love for her child, bit by bit her heart is broken.

I. The Ninth Loving Kindness is deep care and devotion.

How heavy parental loving kindness and emotional concern can be. This loving kindness is deep and difficult to repay, even just a fraction. Willingly, they wish to undergo suffering on their children's behalf. If the child toils, the parents feel uncomfortable. If they hear that she has traveled afar, they worry that at night he might lie in the cold environment. Even a moment's pain suffered by the children will cause the parent sustained distress.

J. The Tenth Loving Kindness is ultimate pity and sympathy.

The loving kindness of parents is profound and important. Their tender concern never ceases. From the moment they wake each day their thoughts are with their children. Even if a mother has lived for a hundred years she will still worry about her grown up child. Do you wish to know when such loving kindness and love ends? It doesn't even begin to dissipate until life is over.

## 2. A Mother's Sacrifice for Her Child

The sūtra stresses the importance of a mother's loving kindness by reiterating the care and aid she provides to her child and the sacrifice she makes on behalf of her child, during pregnancy and after delivery.

## 3. Consequences of Un-filiality

The sūtra also speaks of the un-filiality of some children and paints scenes of the hell into which un-filial children are doomed to fall after death.

## 4. The Difficulty of Repayment and the Buddhist Way of Repayment

“If there were a person who carried his father on his left shoulder and his mother on his right shoulder until his bones were ground to powder by the weight of his parents as they bore through to the marrow and if that person circumambulated Mount Sumeru for a hundred thousand *kalpas* until the blood that flowed out from his feet covered his ankles, that person would still not have repaid the loving kindness of his parents.”

The Buddha said, “Disciples of the Buddha, if you wish to repay your parent's loving kindness, write out this sūtra on their behalf. Recite this sūtra on their behalf. Repent of transgressions and offenses on their behalf. For the sake of our parents, make offerings to the Three Treasures in Buddhism. For the sake of our parents, maintain the precepts for moral life. For the sake of our parents, practice giving and cultivate blessings. If you are able to do these things, you become a filial child. If you do not do these things, you are a person destined for the hells.”

#### IV. Buddhist Filial Piety

The sūtra teaches us that we should be grateful for the loving kindness of our parents. When we have become aware of the loving kindness of our own parents, we can extend feelings of love and gratitude, generated by this awareness, to all other parents and sentient beings. Here, the awareness of the loving kindness of a parent is treated as one facet of the awareness of the Buddha's greater grace.

This practice is based on the Buddhist understanding of *karma*, according to which each person has been reborn an infinite number of times, each lifetime determined and conditioned by past actions (Cutin and Curtin). Good deeds are rewarded with meritorious rebirths, and evil deeds with rebirth in one of the suffering realms of existence. Because past rebirths are innumerable, and because future rebirths are also innumerable, a Buddhist can conclude that he or she has been in every possible relationship with other sentient being, and that every sentient being has been his or her mother, father, best friend, etc. In these ceaseless cycles, all existences are mutually related and mutually dependent. The next step is to realize that one owes each sentient being a great debt of gratitude for past loving kindness. Thinking in this way, one resolves to repay not only one's parents but also, all parents.

The repaying of a parent's loving kindness is known as filial piety. The Buddha clearly prescribed in the sūtra that children should provide ageing parents with food and drink of delicious flavors. In this way, the issue of support for parents is directly addressed. Furthermore, as part of the requital of a parents' loving kindness, one has to protect the helpless parents of others as well.

The Buddhist notion of filial piety extends further (Ch'en). In Confucian ideology, severing all ties with parents and siblings, thus terminating the family line in order to become a monk was considered damnable and un-filial conduct. However, Buddhists view this conduct

differently, by joining the monastic order the monk is able to teach parents with Buddhism so that they can attain salvation and avoid the endless cycle of transmigration. This was considered the greatest filial act that a monk could confer on his parents in the past. Chinese Buddhists further contended that the monk would be fulfilling an even greater filial piety far superior to Confucian filial piety, which is confined to one family and is limited to serving only one's own parents, whereas Buddhist filial piety is all-inclusive, embracing all living creatures, and is universal (Lancaster).

The sūtra on parents' loving kindness became an important teaching for common people to practice filial piety, and the teaching on parents' loving kindness, particularly the mother's loving kindness, is deeply engrained in the hearts of East Asian people.

### **V. Practice: The Precept of Filial Piety**

The *Filial Piety Sūtra* extols the mother's profound, boundless grace and stresses the obligation of children to repay her loving kindness. The Buddha explains the suffering and sacrifices that a mother endures in the course of her pregnancy, delivery, and raising her child. Her loving kindness ranges from providing protection for the baby in her womb, to deep devotion and unsurpassed concern and sympathy for the child right up until her life ends. The Buddha states that the virtue of parent's loving kindness is boundless and limitless. A profound feeling of gratitude lies at the very heart of the Buddha's discourse, which helps people to understand the importance of parents' loving kindness, as it is profound and fathomless.

The sūtra clearly says that children should provide ageing parents with repayment, including food and drink of delicious flavors. Furthermore, in order to, in someway, repay a parent's loving kindness, one must protect the frail and needy parents of others as well. Thus, this sūtra directly addresses the issue of care and support for all elderly

parents. However, the sūtra also explains how difficult it is to repay the loving kindness shown by parents: “If a person were to circumambulate Mount Sumeru for a hundred thousand *kalpas*, that person would still not have repaid the loving kindness of his parents.”

In Confucian teachings, un-filiality is the worst crime a child can commit. Also in this sūtra, the gravity and severity of un-filiality are even more sternly and punitively drawn in the description of a terrible hell where un-filial children face torture, suffering, and eventual *karma* which would transform them into beasts. This belief is in harmony with the Confucian ideal of filial piety.

According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhārtha Gautama is said to have set out on the search for realization that led him to become the Buddha, the Enlightened One, after having witnessed four disturbing sights. The first of these was an old man in a decrepit condition from advanced age. This was the first time the innocent Gautama had seen the consequences of ageing, and it was a crucial turning point for him. The next two sights were of a sick man and a dead man thereafter both these encounters further awakened Gautama’s awareness to the reality of suffering. The fourth and final sighting which greatly affected the young prince, was of a holy man, and Gautama immediately recognized that the holy life of a *sramaṇa* was a skillful alternative way to engage the limited resources and possibilities of a human lifetime (Rinpoche). Not long after he had witnessed these sights he left his father’s palace, where he had led a very sheltered existence up until then and went into the forest to practice the life of an ascetic. After about six years he attained perfect enlightenment and thus, became a Buddha. He then set out to teach the fruits of his own realizations and to enlist disciples for a new monastic community that was open to all who agreed to follow the basic rules of discipleship. The incisive image of old age in his formative years, in terms of its pain and suffering, had been significantly instrumental in leading the prince Gautama, to seek his own enlightenment, as well as vowing to assist in liberating all

sentient beings. Thus, ageing is a fundamental issue in the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhism emphasizes ways that are oriented toward awakening people to an understanding of parents' loving kindness and thus, encouraging them to practice Dharma (Rinpoche). Material support alone cannot repay all sentient beings. Such support will benefit some for a short time in this life, but in order to attain an enlightened state and therefore be in a position to help all sentient beings, one must practice the Dharma, not only to help the relatives of this lifetime, but also for parents in lives to come (Lancaster). Awareness of parents' loving kindness is treated as one facet of the larger issue of universal liberation.

This practice is based on the Buddhist understanding of *karma*. According to theory of *karma*, each person has been reborn an infinite number of times, and each lifetime has been determined and conditioned by past actions. Because past and future rebirths are also innumerable, a Buddhist can conclude that he or she has been in every possible relationship with every sentient being, and that every sentient being has been his or her mother, father, best friend (Cutin and Curtin). From this comes the realization that one owes each sentient being a great debt of gratitude for past loving kindness, and so resolves to repay the debt to all. Buddhists believe that the person being best able to help others is Buddha, a fully enlightened being who has perfected wisdom and compassion to the highest degree, and who then uses this wisdom and supernatural powers to help others.

The sūtra is a graceful vehicle that awakens children to an understanding of parents' loving kindness and it also benefits all mothers and parents through the wisdom, compassion, and power of the Buddha.

## VI. Conclusion

In the *Sūtra of Filial Piety* the Buddha speaks about the deep loving kindness of parents and the difficulty associated with repaying this loving kindness. This sūtra explains ten types of loving kindness given by the mother on the child:

The first is the loving kindness of providing protection and care while the child is in the womb.

The second is the loving kindness of bearing the pain of childbirth.

The third is the loving kindness of forgetting all the pain once the child has been born.

The fourth is the loving kindness of eating the worst herself and saving the best for the child.

The fifth is the loving kindness of moving the child to a dry place while she lies in the wet herself.

The sixth is the loving kindness of nursing the child, nourishing and bringing up the child, at the expense of the mother's own health.

The seventh is the loving kindness of being willing to clean the soil of her child.

The eighth is the loving kindness of always thinking of her children no matter where they may be.

The ninth is the loving kindness of great care and devotion, and her willingness to suffer in the place of the child.

The tenth is the loving kindness of ultimate compassion and sympathy.

Concerning the Buddhist approach to welfare for ageing people, I have focused on ideas of filial piety, and I recommend that Buddhism suggests a fundamental solution to the problem of the four sufferings of ageing, that is, poverty, disease, solitude, and idleness.

The concept of filial piety in Buddhism comes from compassion, based on the principle of dependent arising, with the ultimate goal of

attaining Buddhahood through the practice of Bodhisattva action.

Buddhism's sincere goal, in respect of filial piety, is not only to save one's own parents but also to help all sentient beings and it is this approach that can perhaps offer some potential solution to the problems associated with the needs of the ageing population through developing a contemporary understanding of filial piety that copes with the needs of modern societies.

### Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, S=Sanskrit)

Bodhisattva (S) 菩薩

Bulseol-daebo-bumo-eunjung-gyeong (K) 佛說大報父母恩重經

Dharma (S) 法

Karma (S) 業

Kṣāṇa (S) 一念

Pratityasamutpāda (S) 緣起法

Ren (C) 仁

Samsāra (S) 輪迴

Śramaṇa (S) 沙門

Sumeru (S) 須彌山

### Abbreviation

T *Taishyō-shinsy-daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經: Japanese Edition of Chinese *Tripitaka*). Tokyō: Taishō-Issaikyō-Kankōkai.

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