Teaching Buddhist Doctrines to Parents as Filial Piety

Word count: 3530 words (including footnotes)

Abstract

Filial piety is an extremely important virtue in traditional Chinese thought. Despite the popularity of Buddhism in China, it being considered one of the ‘Three Pillars’ of Chinese thought along with Confucianism and Daoism, early Buddhists were criticised for shaving their heads, which was seen as damaging something that came from one’s parents; for not producing male offspring, which was seen as the greatest unfilial act; and for leaving their family to lead a life which renounced worldly ties, which meant that they would not be able to look after their parents.

In this paper, I examine three basic concepts in orthodox Buddhist doctrine: the teaching of dukkha, the true nature of suffering; the teaching of karma and rebirth; and the teaching of happiness and nirvana. After exploring these concepts in some detail, it will be shown that compared to traditional acts of filial piety, such as being respectful to one's parents and serving their physical needs, teaching one's parents Buddhist doctrines and enlightening them as to the true nature of suffering, rebirth and ultimate happiness could be seen as a higher form of filial piety.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism; Dukkha; Karma; Nirvana; Filial Piety
I. Introduction

Despite the popularity of Buddhism in China, it being considered one of the ‘Three Pillars’ of Chinese thought along with Confucianism and Daoism, Buddhism was originally an Indian religion. During the early years of Chinese Buddhism, there were controversies between Buddhism and Confucianism, especially in the area of filial piety, which is a very important virtue in Confucianism and also Chinese society. For example, Buddhists were criticised for shaving their heads, which was seen as damaging something that came from one’s parents; for not producing male offspring, which was seen as the greatest unfilial act;\(^1\) and for leaving their family to lead a life which renounced worldly ties, which meant that they would not be able to look after their parents.\(^2\)

In face of these criticisms, Buddhists of those eras used various ways to defend Buddhism and dispel misconceptions, including writing treatises refuting the criticisms, the creation of apocryphal sutras, and the telling of popular stories incorporating elements of Buddhism and filial piety.\(^3\) Of particular note for the purposes of this essay is the position advocated by some Buddhists that not only is the practice of Buddhism a demonstration of filial piety, the Buddhist concept of filial piety was even greater than the Confucian version.\(^4\) For example, Master Minggai wrote in 《廣弘明集》 that: 「竭力者答現前之小恩, 興慈者報將來之大德。雖暫乖敬養, 似若慢親, 終能濟拔, 方為至孝。」\(^5\)

Many scholars have written on the topic of filial piety and Buddhism, demonstrating for example that filial piety is not something that came to influence Buddhism only after its entrance into China, but was present as an important teaching in early Indian

\(^1\) 「不孝有三，無後為大」.
\(^2\) For examples of other criticisms, see for example Mouzi Lihuolun.
\(^5\) A rough translation would be: ‘Those who serve their parents merely do a small service; those who spread the dharma and compassion [ie Buddhist monastic members], although they are not by their parents’ side, help their parents achieve a greater happiness, and therefore demonstrate a higher form of filial piety.’ See 釋明概, 《廣弘明集》卷 12, 175 頁 上－中, cited in 尹富, 《中國地藏信仰研究》 (成都:巴蜀書社, 2009), 280 (section titled 「佛教與孝道的關係簡介」).
Buddhism. In this essay, I would like to explore specifically the concept that Buddhist filial piety may be greater than the traditional Confucian filial piety, through the idea of teaching parents Buddhist doctrines as an example of this. It is impossible to cover all aspects of Buddhist teachings, but I would like to first outline three teachings I find relevant, which will be examined in Parts II, III and IV of this essay respectively: the teaching of the true nature of suffering; the teaching of karma and rebirth; and the teaching of happiness and nirvana. In Part V I will discuss in what ways the teaching of the Buddhist doctrines covered above could be seen as a higher form of filial piety compared to Confucian filial piety by discussing the implications of the teachings. Part VI will conclude the essay.

II. The Teaching of Dukkha

Suffering, or dukkha, is one of the three fundamental characteristics of this world, along with impermanence and no-self. It is also the one of the Four Noble Truths, which relate to suffering and its cessation: the first is suffering; the second is the arising of suffering; the third is the cessation of suffering; and the fourth is the way to cessation of suffering. Although the Four Noble Truths are part of Buddhist teachings, by dukkha being a ‘fundamental characteristic’ of the world it is meant that dukkha is not Buddhist ‘dogma’ to explain their propositions, but the reality of life, as observed by the Buddha as he achieved Enlightenment.

The reason why dukkha is a reality of life is because it covers a wider variety of concepts than merely ‘suffering’ in its English sense. Physical suffering such as disease and death are obviously covered, but dukkha also covers mental suffering such as sorrow, grief and states of distress. Furthermore, as noted by Dr Walpola Rahula, dukkha includes far deeper concepts such as impermanence and emptiness. In terms of impermanence, we can similarly observe in life that the constant change in both physical conditions (for example, health, or the possession of something) and mental conditions (eg happy feelings) are not permanent and will change or disappear sooner or later. When one understands the nature of impermanence and dukkha as caused by it, one can move on to the philosophical understanding of dukkha, in terms

8 Ibid.
of conditioned states.

From a Buddhist perspective, as mentioned above, everything is ever-changing. One result of this is that not only is the world impermanent, as the concept of ‘I’ is impermanent as well, there is in actuality no ‘I’ (therefore the doctrine of no-self); instead, we are a combination of ever-changing forces called ‘aggregates’, of which there are five. As this part is mainly on dukkha but not the Five Aggregates, I will not go into detail on them, but suffice it to say that it is the Five Aggregates subject to clinging that is the root of dukkha. Humans are creatures with emotions, feelings and desires, but however one may want good emotions and feelings and the fulfilment of desires, our constitution as aggregates are all impermanent, and the want of and grasping at permanence therefore leads to suffering.

Buddhism starts with the discussion of dukkha not because it is pessimistic, but because it is realistic in the fact that dukkha can be eliminated through human means, without reliance on outside agents. The reason why the teaching of dukkha is important is not only because of how fundamental the concept is, it is also because in the Four Noble Truths, the fourth one (which is the Noble Eightfold Path) actually allows one to eliminate suffering altogether. A person first needs a correct understanding of the nature and reality of life (dukkha, impermanence and no-self) and also that it is clinging which leads to suffering. The clinging due to self-centred desire can be further separated into craving for something impermanent, hatred for something one dislikes, and most importantly, the cause of these which is ignorance of the above two and also the true nature of the world.

With the understanding as outlined above, one can then embark on the road to actually eliminating suffering. As Buddhism is a religion supremely concerned with human life and the analysis of its problems, herein lies its importance and value. When one teaches one’s parents the nature of dukkha, it is not merely a teaching of an observable fact, but it also includes ways to eliminate it.

III. The Teaching of Karma

Another important Buddhist teaching is that of karma and rebirth. In contrast to

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11 Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, 17.
Confucianism, in which filial piety is the highest ethical norm, in Buddhism the value of filial piety is respected but its ethical basis lies in the teaching of karma and rebirth.\textsuperscript{12}

Karma is defined as the volition or mental effort behind any act, including thought, word, and deed.\textsuperscript{13} When looked through the lens of karma, acts can be divided into three types: first, those which are motivated by wholesome factors such as generosity, compassion and wisdom are good karmic acts, while those motivated by unwholesome factors such as greed, hatred and ignorance (the Three Poisons) are bad karmic acts. The former generates good karma, while the latter generates bad karma,\textsuperscript{14} but acts which are not volitional (not motivated by mental factors) are neutral and do not produce karma.

As an ethical law, Buddhism teaches us to do proper acts as motivated by proper factors, or one may reap bad consequences which are wholly due to oneself. However, this idea is not as simple as ‘an eye for an eye’: it does not mean that, for example, if a person kills an animal in this life, in the next life that person must turn into an animal and be killed. Rather, the law of karma is a more general one of ‘good begets good, evil begets evil’. To a person of a generally good character who inadvertently does a bad deed of a minor nature, the (similarly relatively minor) consequences may manifest in this life, instead of having to wait until after rebirth.

The teaching of karma is important in the sense that it recognises the fact that we are the masters of our own fate. Of course, some karmic forces from previous life may result in fruits in this life, but it is the acts of a person in the current life which have the most power in influencing the course of our life and change it for the better – both in the present and in future.

This leads onto the concept of rebirth, which is one of the very important consequences of karma. When a sentient being dies, it may be reborn into any of the six realms depending on its karma, as karmic forces drive the process of rebirth. In


\textsuperscript{13} Sayadaw U. Silananda, \textit{Volition: An Introduction to the Law of KAMMA} (Penang: Inward Path Publisher, 1999), 11.

Buddhism, it is said that there are six realms of being, namely the heavenly realm, the asura realm, the human realm, the animal realm, the realm of the hungry ghosts, and the hell realm.\textsuperscript{15} Usually, the first three realms are called the Three Good Realms, while the latter three are called the Three Evil Realms. However, due to their fighting nature, the asura are considered to be unfortunate in rebirth. Therefore, the truly good rebirths are only the heavenly realm and the human realm.

It is said that gods and humans admire each other’s rebirths. This may seem to be strange, since gods can enjoy generally long and pleasurable lives in heaven. However, they are actually still within the cycle of rebirth, are not free from suffering, and will eventually die and be reborn in a lower realm. On the other hand, in the human realms there is both pain and happiness. But crucially, only human actions are capable of creating karma, whether good or bad. Therefore, it is in the human realm which one is most likely to be able to be reborn in a better realm, or even escape the cycle of rebirth altogether, as will be discussed in the next section.

The teaching of karma and rebirth is important not only because it relates to Buddhist cosmology and is an ethical guideline, but also it relates back to what was said in the previous section about self-determinism (karma is self-determined, and also dukkha can be reduced through one’s own efforts), and in addition, through an understanding of dukkha and the law of karma, one may ultimately be able to achieve nirvana, or supreme happiness.

**IV. Happiness and Nirvana**

Nirvana is sometimes called the Buddhist concept of happiness.\textsuperscript{16} As filial sons and daughters, we would of course want our parents to achieve this state. However, the concept of nirvana is far from simple, and there are many ways in which we can understand it.

First and foremost, the concept of nirvana is different from this-worldly concepts of happiness. To humans, sensory pleasure may easily result in clinging, and this would


lead to suffering and not happiness, because the sensory pleasure will eventually pass. Therefore, nirvana is usually described in negative terms. Specifically, nirvana is the absence of craving, hatred and delusion, and therefore an absence of suffering. Beings who have achieved nirvana are happy in the sense that they are free from suffering. (However, since Buddhism is focused on the mind, this means that such beings are free from mental suffering. They may still be subject to physical illnesses.)

Nirvana is characterized as this form of ‘happiness due to absence of suffering’ for two reasons. Firstly, this helps avoid misconceptions such as seeing nirvana as worldly happiness, because nirvana is not a this-worldly experience and people may easily get incorrect ideas about it. Secondly, seeing nirvana as absence of suffering helps combat the problem of attachment. When one hears that nirvana is happiness, they may easily get attached to this concept. However, as demonstrated above, attachment leads not to happiness but instead suffering. This is why nirvana is better explained using negative terms.

Secondly, once we characterize nirvana as the cessation of suffering, we can connect this idea to the Four Noble Truths, as outlined in Part III of this essay. This means that through the proper understanding of the nature of dukkha, we can proceed on to eliminate it, and this can result in nirvana. Furthermore, the presence of the fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Noble Path, means that nirvana is actually achievable in this very life. Therefore, one would do well to study and understand Buddhist teachings in relation to suffering.

Thirdly, because nirvana is the cessation of suffering, of which greed, hatred, and ignorance are the roots, it also means that when one achieves nirvana, one will be free from negative emotions and mentalities, and therefore achieve psychological freedom. By letting go of one’s idea of self, one can achieve true freedom within his or her mind, by not being affected or limited by negative thoughts, and instead live in the freedom of compassionate joy towards all beings.

There are also other analyses of nirvana, such as it being moral perfection, highest wisdom, and the ultimate truth. However, in relation to teaching one’s parents about nirvana, I believe the aspect of nirvana as supreme happiness is the most relevant

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when compared with Confucian filial piety which does not relate much to ‘highest wisdom’ or ‘ultimate truth’, and in which moral perfection is achieved through filial piety, as opposed to the understanding of dukkha and karma. With this, I now turn to an analysis of how the Buddhist concepts covered above may relate to filial piety.

V. The Practice of Filial Piety through Teaching of Buddhist Doctrines?

After the brief overview of the relevant Buddhist doctrines, I will now try to argue that by teaching one’s parents the above doctrines, this not only be an act of filial piety, furthermore it may be even greater than the Confucian filial piety.

Traditionally, the Confucian concept of filial piety lies in revering and respecting one’s parents, taking care of them, and generally putting one’s parents above oneself. For example, there are many stories collected in Twenty-four Acts of Filial Piety which demonstrates filial piety. Some striking examples include a son sleeping naked during summertime such that mosquitoes would bite the son instead of his parents, and a filial son melting a frozen river with his body warmth in order to catch fish for his mother during wintertime.

Indeed, from Indian Buddhism, to the entrance of Buddhism into China with filial piety being equated with the Buddhist precepts, Buddhism is and has never been against the concept of filial piety. Traditional acts of filial piety such as looking after parents’ well-being are definitely commendable from a Buddhist point of view. However, it is contended that these acts are merely on a physical level; or, if acts related to one’s parents’ morality and reputation are taken into account, these are still this-worldly and relatively superficial.

In contrast, it is my view that the teaching of Buddhist doctrines achieves a more fundamental act of filial piety. Firstly, looking at the teaching of dukkha, outlined in Section II, it goes to the fundamental nature of this world (as being full of suffering), and, building upon this concept, outlines ways of actually eliminating suffering (through the Noble Eightfold Path). The knowledge gained not only leads to a result gained on a higher, mental level, as opposed to merely the satisfaction of physical needs, it goes to the very root of suffering, as opposed to, for example, getting rid of

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19 See generally Guang Xing, “Filial Piety in Early Buddhism,” 82-106.

suffering and defilements only superficially and temporarily.

Secondly, the doctrine of karma and rebirth, as outlined in Section III, can also demonstrate that it may be more fundamental and superior to the Confucian practice of filial piety. If one believes in the literal view of reincarnation, then the Buddhist practice of filial piety is more than merely this-worldly: it may help prevent one’s parents from being reborn in the unfortunate realms after this life. Indeed, for example the story of Dizang Bodhisattva’s previous incarnation being a girl who saved her mother from suffering in the deepest level of hell is often cited as a story of filial piety. On the other hand, even if one does not believe in the literal view of reincarnation, teaching parents Buddhist doctrines may nevertheless allow them to achieve higher and better states of mind, and possibly even lead to nirvana, as opposed to the Confucian practice of filial piety which may merely lead to a good life for the parents in their present life.

Thirdly, as demonstrated above in Section IV, nirvana is the form of supreme happiness which is the absence of suffering. Although one can bring happiness to parents by revering them and taking care of them, and doing so is definitely commendable, the happiness that is brought through these actions are only temporary and will cease. I believe it is good to take care of one’s parents physically, but it would be even better if one can at the same time teach parents Buddhist teachings, so that they can embark on the journey to nirvana. In this way, in addition to looking after the physical aspects of one’s parents’ life, one can furthermore help parents achieve a state of perfect mental health and happiness.

VI. Conclusion

It has not been my objective to say that the Confucian concept of filial piety is wrong or should not be practised. Rather, as demonstrated in Part I, Buddhists have always treated filial piety as something commendable. What I have tried to point out, however, is that by analyzing several Buddhist doctrines, namely dukkha, karma, and nirvana, not only is it (in my view) that Buddhism is not contrary to filial piety, but by teaching one’s parents these doctrines, it may be an even better practice of filial piety. This is because through understanding of Buddhist doctrines, one can achieve a life that is imbued with a superior form of happiness, with a more fundamental understanding of life.

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Master Nyanaponika Thera writes that the highest manifestation of love is ‘to show to the world the path leading to the end of suffering’.\textsuperscript{22} Of course, he was writing about metta, which is a form of universal love towards all sentient beings. However, I believe when this is applied towards one’s parents, this can show that the teaching of Buddhist doctrines, leading to the end of suffering, is a form of love and can be called filial piety.

\textsuperscript{22} Nyanaponika Thera, \textit{The Four Sublime States: Contemplations on Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, and Equanimity} (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008), 8.
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