

On Filial and Unfilial Conduct



I HAVE received your gift of a sack of rice, sent in donation for a memorial service on the anniversary of Ueno's passing. I will offer it in the presence of the Buddha and recite the verse section of the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

As for the meaning of filial piety, only by first knowing about unfilial behavior can we know what it means to be filial. As an example of unfilial conduct, a person called Yu-meng¹ once struck his father, and as a result was felled by a bolt of lightning. Because he cursed his mother, a person called Pan-fu² was attacked and devoured by a poisonous snake. King Ajatashatru killed his father, and as a result contracted white leprosy. And because he killed one of his parents, King Virudhaka was trapped in a burning boat on a river and fell alive into the hell of incessant suffering. In no case have such things befallen someone for killing an unrelated person. By considering the results of unfilial conduct, we can understand how great the benefit of filial conduct must be.

The more than three thousand volumes of non-Buddhist scriptures³ concern no other matters; they teach nothing but filial conduct toward one's father and mother. Yet though with these teachings one may fulfill one's duties to one's parents in the present

life, one will be unable to help them in their life to come. The debt of gratitude owed to one's father and mother is as vast as the ocean. If one cares for them while they are alive but does nothing to help them in their next life, it will be like a mere drop of water.

The more than five thousand volumes of Buddhist scriptures likewise concern nothing else; they simply set forth the merits of filial piety. However, though the Thus Come One's first forty years and more of teachings may seem to be about filial conduct, he did not reveal in them the true teaching on this matter. Therefore, though they appear to fall within the realm of teachings on filial conduct, they are in fact unfilial.

The Venerable Maudgalyayana rescued his mother from the suffering of the realm of hungry spirits.⁴ However, he was only able to lead her to the worlds of human and heavenly beings, and could not enable her to enter the path of attaining Buddhahood. The Thus Come One Shakyamuni, at the age of thirty, expounded a teaching to his father, King Shuddhodana, enabling him to reach the fourth and highest level of attainment.⁵ And at the age of thirty-eight, he enabled his mother, Lady Maya, to attain the stage of arhat.⁶ Yet while such deeds may resemble filial conduct, the Buddha was in fact

guilty of unfilial behavior, for though he freed his parents from the six paths, he caused them to enter a path that would never lead to Buddhahood.⁷ This is like reducing a crown prince to the status of commoner, or like marrying a princess to a man of lowly birth.

For this reason, the Buddha said, “[If I used a lesser vehicle to convert even one person], I would be guilty of stinginess and greed, but such a thing would be impossible.”⁸ Having given his parents a meal of boiled barley while begrudging them amrita, and having offered them unrefined spirits while denying them fine wine, the Buddha had become the most unfilial of persons. Like King Virudhaka, he should have fallen alive into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering, and like King Ajatashatru, his body should have been afflicted with white leprosy. However, forty-two years [after he attained enlightenment], he expounded the Lotus Sutra, saying: “Those disciples, though they have conceived an idea of extinction and entered into what they take to be nirvana, will in that other land seek the Buddha wisdom and will be able to hear this sutra.”⁹ Because Shakyamuni expounded the Lotus Sutra to repay the debt of gratitude he owed to his father and mother, Many Treasures Buddha, who had come from the World of Treasure Purity, praised him as a Buddha of true filial piety. And the Buddhas of the ten directions assem-

bled and declared him to be the most filial among all the Buddhas.

Considering matters in this light, we can see that the people of Japan are all unfilial. In a passage of the Nirvana Sutra, the Buddha taught that unfilial persons would be more numerous than the dust particles of the land.¹⁰ Thus, the sun, the moon, and the eighty-four thousand stars in heaven each grow enraged and glare down furiously at the country of Japan. This is what today’s divination masters are reporting to the ruler as frequent disturbances in the heavens. And with strange happenings on earth occurring day after day, the country is like a small boat tossed about on the great sea. This is the reason why the children of Japan have lost their vitality, and why the women are vomiting blood.¹¹

You are the most filial person in all of Japan. Brahma and Shakra will descend from heaven to serve you as left and right wings, and the gods of the earth in the four directions will support your feet, revering you as their father and mother. There is still much that I would like to say, but I will conclude here.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The eighth day of the third month
in the third year of Koan (1280)

Reply sent to Ueno.



Background

This letter was written at Minobu to Nanjo Tokimitsu in response to his request that Nichiren Daishonin offer memorial prayers on the anniversary of the death of his father, Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro. Tokimitsu’s father died on the

eighth day of the third month, the same date that this letter was written, in 1265. In this letter, the Daishonin explains the true meaning of filial conduct. First, by citing examples from the Chinese and Indian traditions of the

retribution befalling notoriously unfilial people, he suggests the great merit that accrues from acting with filial piety.

The Daishonin then considers which teaching enables one to fulfill one's obligation to one's parents. The doctrines of Confucianism, he says, teach how one should care for one's parents while they are alive. But because these doctrines do not penetrate to the true eternal nature of life, they give no indication of how to benefit one's parents after

they have died. Thus, they do not teach filial piety in the deepest sense.

Next, even the Buddhist teachings of Hinayana and provisional Mahayana do not fully reveal the ultimate truth. The Daishonin says that they cannot enable one's deceased parents to attain Buddhahood, and concludes that only through faith in the Lotus Sutra, which leads all people equally to Buddhahood, can one enable one's deceased parents to attain Buddhahood and so fully repay one's filial obligations to them.

Notes

1. A figure in Chinese legend.
2. Another figure in Chinese legend.
3. Here, those of Confucianism and Taoism.
4. According to the Service for the Deceased Sutra, Maudgalyayana perceived with his divine eyesight that his deceased mother was suffering in the realm of hungry spirits. He tried to send her food by means of his transcendental powers, but it turned into flames and burned her. Accordingly, he sought the advice of Shakyamuni, who urged him to make offerings to the monks for her sake on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. Maudgalyayana made offerings of food to the Buddhist Order as instructed, and his mother was relieved of her agony.
5. This refers to the highest of the four stages that the voice-hearers of Hinayana Buddhism aim to attain. In ascending order, they are the stages of the stream-winner, the once-returner, the non-returner, and the arhat.
6. Lady Maya was the wife of King

Shuddhodana and mother of Shakyamuni. The source alluding to her having attained the stage of arhat when Shakyamuni was thirty-eight years old is uncertain. According to the Maya Sutra, Shakyamuni used his mystic powers to ascend to the heaven of the thirty-three gods where he expounded his teachings to his mother Maya, who had been reborn there.

7. This statement reflects the viewpoint, set forth in the provisional Mahayana teachings, that people of the two vehicles can never attain Buddhahood.

8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2. "A lesser vehicle" here refers to the provisional teachings.

9. *Ibid.*, chap. 7.

10. The Daishonin probably refers to a passage in the Nirvana Sutra that likens those who believe in the correct teaching to the specks of dirt that can be placed on a fingernail, and those who practice erroneous teachings, to the dust particles of the land.

11. Probably a reference to epidemics.