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# FILIAL PIETY IN CHINESE BUDDHISM

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BUDDHISM started in India as a religion advocating departure from household life and abandonment of family, but it ended in China praising the virtue of filial piety. Such a transformation in China was engendered to a considerable extent by the desire of the religion to accommodate itself to the Chinese scene, and it furnishes another illustration of the remarkable ability of this religion to adapt itself to new conditions in order to win the minds and hearts of mankind.

The traditional Chinese emphasis on the family and filial piety is too well known to necessitate any extended discussion here. Many examples may be found in Chinese literature extolling the feats of filial sons carried out for the welfare and comfort of their parents. For instance, a certain Wang Hsiang 王祥 in the Chin 晉 period reclined on ice without any clothing so that his bodily warmth would melt a hole in the ice through which he could catch fish for his mother. There is also the story of the eight-year-old Wu Meng 吳猛 who slept naked in order to draw the mosquitoes away from his parents. Probably the extreme example concerns a certain Kuo Chü 郭巨 of the Han dynasty, who contemplated taking the life of his own son in order to save food for his mother.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For Wang Hsiang and Wu Meng, see *Ku hsiao-tzu chuan* 古孝子傳 (*Ts'ung-shu chü-ch'eng* ed.), pp. 18, 33; for Kuo Chü see *Hsiao-tzu chuan* (*Shih-chung ku-i-shu* 十種古逸書 ed.), 1ab and *Fa-yüan chu-lin* 法苑珠林, *chüan* 49 (*Taishō Tripitaka* [hereafter *TT*] 53.658c). See also Chao Meng-chien 趙孟堅, *Chao Tzu-ku erh-shih-ssu hsiao shu-hua ho-pi* 趙子固二十四孝書畫合璧 (Peiping, 1933).

This article is part of a larger study of the role of Buddhism in Chinese life, carried out in 1964-1965 in Kyoto under research fellowships from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the United States Educational Commission in Japan. The author is greatly indebted to previous studies by the following Japanese scholars: Michihata Ryōshū, Miyamoto Shōson, and Ogasawara Shensū.

Buddhism in India had its face turned in the opposite direction; it extolled the virtues of the celibate life, and it magnified the misery and suffering inherent in family life with its attachment to wife and children. When this religion was introduced into China where filial piety was the dominant virtue, it was inevitable that opposition would arise.

From the beginning, Buddhism was attacked by the Chinese as being unfilial. In chapter 117 of the Taoist work, *T'ai-p'ing ching*, probably compiled by Yü Chi 于吉<sup>2</sup> in the latter half of the Hou Han dynasty, we read that there are four types of nefarious conduct that defile the divine way. These are 1) unfilial conduct, 2) celibacy, resulting in no descendants, 3) eating faeces and drinking urine as medicine, and 4) mendicancy. It is obvious that the Buddhists were the object of this attack since they were guilty of all the practices enumerated.

Scattered through various parts of the *Mou-tzu li-huo lun* 牟子理惑論 (*Treatise on the Settling of Doubts*) are several passages reflecting this criticism. In one section, for instance, the critic charged that the Buddhists were unfilial in that they shaved their heads, thus violating the teachings of the *Hsiao ching*, or *Classic on Filial Piety*, which stressed the duty to return our body, skin, and hair intact to our ancestors.<sup>3</sup> In succeeding centuries such charges of unfilial conduct were levelled by Hsün Chi 荀濟 in the sixth century, Fu I 傅奕 in the seventh, and Han Yü 韓愈 in the ninth.<sup>4</sup>

The Buddhists were quick to realize that instead of merely refuting the Chinese charges, they must adopt a positive approach and emphasize their own ideas about piety if they were to gain a favorable hearing among the Chinese. They sought to impress the Chinese that they too were filial, and they did this first by pointing to the numerous sutras in the canon that stress filial piety, and second by contending that the

<sup>2</sup> For Yü Chi, see *Hou Han shu* 60B.24ab.

<sup>3</sup> There is a large body of literature on the date of composition of this *Mou-tzu*, some scholars dating it as early as the end of Later Han and others as late as the fifth century. It is likely that the work as it exists now consists of materials which go back to Later Han time with later accretions. For pertinent bibliography on this problem, see K. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton, 1964), p. 509.

<sup>4</sup> Hsün Chi's attack on Buddhists may be found in *Kuang Hung-ming-chi* 廣弘明集 [hereafter *KHMC*], *chüan* 7 (*TT* 52.128c-131b); *Ch'üan Hou-Wei wen* 全後魏文 51.12a-14b. For Fu I's criticisms, see *KHMC*, *chüan* 7 (*TT* 52.134a-135b) and *chüan* 11 (*TT* 52-160a-c); *Chiu T'ang-shu* 79.6a-9a; *Hsin T'ang-shu* 107.1a-3b. Han Yü's memorial against Buddhism is found in *Ch'ang-li hsien-sheng chi* 昌黎先生集 39.3a-6a.

Buddhists had developed a concept of piety that was superior to that of the Confucians.

Of the numerous examples of filial conduct mentioned in the Buddhist sutras, I shall refer to only two, Shan-tzu 睒子 (Syāma in Sanskrit, Sāma in Pāli) and Mu-lien 目連 (Maudgalyāyana in Sanskrit, Moggallāna in Pāli). The story of the former is told in the *P'u-sa Shan-tzu ching* 菩薩睒子經.<sup>5</sup> This sutra was first translated by an unknown monk during the Western Chin dynasty and was first mentioned in the catalogue of Tao-an, now preserved in the *Ch'u san-tsang chi-chi* 出三藏記集, *chüan* 3 (*TT* 55.17c). The Chinese title has *ching* 經 (sutra), but there is no doubt that it is based on the Sāmājātaka in the Pāli collection of the Jātaka stories.<sup>6</sup> In this story, a bodhisattva, scanning the world, saw an old blind couple who had no children and who wanted to retire into the forest to lead the life of recluses. Sensing that the old couple would be confronted with all kinds of dangers in the forest, the bodhisattva chose to be reborn as their son in order to serve them. As the son, who was named Shan-tzu, grew up, he devoted himself entirely to the service and support of his blind parents, and the latter soon forgot their desire to retreat into the forest. One day Shan-tzu reminded them of their former wish and assured them that he would serve them just as before if they retired to a life of seclusion. With this assurance, the blind couple sold their earthly possessions and retired into the forest. In the new surroundings, Shan-tzu served his parents as before, helping them build a hut of grass and branches and tying ropes to guide them from one place to another. He became such a familiar figure in the forest that all the animals and birds accepted him as one of them and did not harm him or his parents. In going to the spring for water, he would don a covering of deerskin so as not to disturb the deer at the watering place.

In this disguise, he was one day accidentally shot by the king of the land while hunting. Knowing that he was mortally wounded, Shan-tzu cried out that in killing him, the king had killed three persons, for his blind parents were entirely dependent upon him for food. Hearing a human voice, the king hurried to where Shan-tzu was, asked him

<sup>5</sup> *TT* 3.436b-438b.

<sup>6</sup> For the Pāli version, see V. Fausbøll, *Jātaka* (London, 1896), vi, 68-95. The English translation is in E. B. Cowell and W. H. D. Rouse, *Jātaka Stories* (London, 1957), vi, 38-52.

who he was, and why he was wearing the deerskin. Shan-tzu explained everything, saying that he had lived in the forest for twenty years and yet never once had been harmed by wild animals. Now he had been shot by a man.

With death about to strike down such a virtuous and filial son, the heavens burst forth with rain and wind, and the birds and animals of the forest cried out in grief. The king, now frightened, assured Shan-tzu that he had shot him by mistake. Shan-tzu reassured the king, however, that his own karma was responsible for his fate and not the king's fault, but that he was worried about the plight of his blind parents. The king was so moved by this attitude of piety that he promised to look after the old couple if Shan-tzu should die and asked for directions to their hut. Shan-tzu gave the directions and died.

When the parents heard the sad news from the king, they were overcome with grief and asked to be taken to the corpse. This the king did. The father embraced Shan-tzu's legs, while the mother embraced his head. She then licked the wound, hoping to suck out the poison so that Shan-tzu would live at the cost of her life. In their agony, they uttered "the act of truth,"<sup>7</sup> that if it were true that Shan-tzu was the paragon

<sup>7</sup> Sanskrit *satyakriyā*, Pāli *saccakiriya*; also *satyādhiṣṭhānaṃ* in Sanskrit, meaning "truth command." For a discussion of this idea, see W. Norman Brown, "The Basis for the Hindu Act of Truth," *Review of Religion*, November, 1940, pp. 36-45; E. W. Burlingame, "The Act of Truth," *JRAS*, July, 1917, pp. 429-467. According to Burlingame, "An Act of Truth is a formal declaration of fact, accompanied by command or resolution that the purpose of the agent shall be accomplished" (p. 429).

Numerous examples of acts of truth may be found in Buddhist literature. In one birth story, for instance, the Buddha was a blind master mariner sailing a ship that was approaching a whirlpool. At the moment of disaster, the bodhisattva decided to save the ship by an act of truth. He had the sailors bathe him with scented water, clothe him in new garments, and place him in the bow, and then said, "As long as I can remember, since I became one with knowledge, I am not conscious of having killed one living being intentionally. With this act of truth, may this ship return to safety." The ship immediately returned to port, making a four months' journey in one day. See *Jātaka* No. 463 in Fausbøll, IV, 139-143. In the *Milindapañha* (121-123) occurs the story of the courtesan Bindumati who caused the waters of the Ganges to flow upstream. King Aśoka asked how a woman of such loose morals could perform such a feat. She admitted that although a wicked sinner, she possessed the power of the act of truth. When asked how she had acquired this power, she replied, "Whosoever, O King, gives me gold, be he a noble or a brahman or a tradesman or a servant, I regard them all alike. When I see he is a noble I make no distinction in his favor. If I know him to be a slave, I despise him not. Free alike from fawning and from dislike do I do service to him who has bought me. This, Your

of sincerity and filial piety, then let this arrow be plucked out, the poison eradicated, and Shan-tzu restored to life. As soon as Sakka heard this act of truth and saw what was happening, he descended with his retinue of deities and forced medicine into Shan-tzu's mouth. Immediately the arrow flew out, the poison was eradicated, and Shan-tzu was restored to life.<sup>8</sup>

Judging from the frequency with which this story is mentioned in the Chinese Buddhist canon, it is obvious that Shan-tzu's exemplary conduct was just the kind of filial piety which the Buddhists felt would impress the Chinese. Two other translations were made, one by the monk Sheng-chien 聖堅 of the Western Chin dynasty (*TT* 3.438b-440a) and one by K'ang Seng-hui 康僧會 of the kingdom of Wu and included in the *Liu-tu chi-ching* 六度集經 (*TT* 3.24b-25a). A synopsis is found in the Buddhist encyclopedia, the *Fa-yüan chu-lin* 法苑珠林, *chüan* 49 (*TT* 53.656ff.) and in the *Ching-lü i-hsiang* 經律異相, *chüan* 10 (*TT* 53.51b-52c). Reference to the story was also made by Hsüan-tsang 玄奘 in his *Ta-T'ang Hsi-yü chi* 大唐西域記, *chüan* 2 (*TT* 51.881b).<sup>9</sup>

Such an example of filial piety in Buddhist literature is obviously no different from what the Confucians advocated, and it comes as no surprise to find that by the Sung dynasty it was accepted in the popular literature as one of the twenty-four standard models of piety in China. Minor changes crept into the story during the transition. Shan-tzu became Yen-tzu 劔子, a subject of the Chou dynasty.<sup>10</sup> His parents were

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Majesty, is the basis of the Act of Truth by the force of which I turned the Ganges back" (T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda* [Dover: New York, 1963], I, 184).

The basis of the act is the sincerity and singleness of purpose with which one performs the duties incumbent upon his station in life. Different people occupy different stations, and different stations have different duties. Each should perform his duties in conformity with the best traditions of his profession. By so doing, he achieves personal integrity and conforms to the cosmic purpose. When the conditions for the act of truth are met, the wishes of the agent of the act must be accomplished.

<sup>8</sup> The Pāli version contains variations from the Chinese translation. First, the couple became blind later through the poisonous gas emitted by a snake in the forest. Second, when Sāma was wounded by the king's arrow, there was no storm, no cries of birds and animals. Third, a goddess, the mother of Sāma in a previous rebirth, joined in uttering the act of truth. Finally, when Sāma regained his life, his parents regained their sight.

<sup>9</sup> See Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* (London, 1904), I, 217.

<sup>10</sup> The change was probably a deliberate one and not a scribal error. The characters *shan* 睽 and *yen* 劔 both contain a conspicuous common element. The Chinese scribe

blind, and they wanted to drink some deer milk. Hence Yen-tzu donned a covering of deerskin and went into the forest to obtain it, where he was almost killed by the hunter.<sup>11</sup>

Even more famous is the story of Mu-lien, whose filial piety toward his mother is told in the *Yü-lan-p'en ching* 孟蘭盆經, translated by Dharmaraksha during the Western Chin dynasty. Before we consider the contents of this sutra, a discussion of its title may be of some value. The expression *yü-lan-p'en* is usually sanskritized as *ullambana*.<sup>12</sup> This is, however, a hypothetical word, for it is not found in the Sanskrit dictionaries. St. Julien has suggested *avalambana*.<sup>13</sup> The word *ullambita*, a past participial form of *ud-lamb*, does exist,<sup>14</sup> meaning "suspended," as does *avalambana*, which means "hanging down, support." The Japanese scholar, Takakusu Junjirō, has suggested another word for *yü-lan-p'en*, *ullumpana*, a Pāli word meaning "salvation, saving, full of mercy," and derived from *ullumpati*.<sup>15</sup> Johannes Rahder has made a similar suggestion.<sup>16</sup> The form *ullumpati* is found in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* 1.177 (Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Dīghanikāya*), where the Buddha is said to be "indifferent to worldly pleasures, mild-hearted, with a mind full of mercy." Again, in the *Paramatthadīpanī*, p. 35 (Commentary to the *Petavatthu* by Dharmapāla), we read *ullumpana-sabhāva-saṅṭhitā*, "Of helpful disposition, full of mercy."

According to Hsüan-ying 玄應 (seventh century), who compiled the *I-ch'ieh ching yin-i* 一切經音義 in 25 *chüan*, the transcription *yü-*

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probably substituted *yen* for *shan* in the hope that later readers would be thrown off the scent and would not know of the Buddhist origin of the story.

<sup>11</sup> In none of the versions of the *Ku Hsiao-tzu chuan* preserved in the *Shih-chung ku-i-shu* is Shan-tzu mentioned. However, in Chao Meng-chien's *Erh-shih-ssu hsiao shu-hua ho-pi* he is included in the list of twenty-four models. Yen-tzu is again mentioned in the *Erh-shih-ssu hsiao* of Kuo Chü-ching 郭居敬 of the Yüan dynasty. See Morohashi Tetsuji, *Dai Kanwa jiten*, I, 430; Michihata Ryōshū 道端良秀, *Tōdai bukkyōshi no kenkyū* 唐代佛教史の研究 (Kyoto, 1957), pp. 284, 287-288.

<sup>12</sup> See J. Eitel, *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism* (Hongkong, 1888), 185; B. Nanjō, *Catalogue of the Chinese Translation of the Buddhist Tripitaka* (Oxford, 1883), 78.

<sup>13</sup> *Méthode pour déchiffrer et transcrire les noms Sanscrits* (Paris, 1861), 65.

<sup>14</sup> See Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 219.

<sup>15</sup> See P. T. S. *Pāli-English Dictionary*, 156. For Takakusu's theory, see Ashikaga Insho, "Notes on Urabon," *JAOS* 71 (1951).72.

<sup>16</sup> See M. W. de Visser, *Ancient Buddhism in Japan* (London, 1935), 65.

*lan-p'en* is wrong and should be *wu-lan-p'o-na* 烏藍婆拏 which means "hanging upside down." Deceased ancestors with no descendants to sacrifice to them, if guilty of some offense, suffered the misery of hanging upside down among the hungry ghosts. Offerings made to the Buddha and the monks on the last day of the rainy season would rescue these ancestors from their suspended state. Hsüan-ying concluded that the prevalent interpretation of this term as a vessel to hold foodstuffs was wrong.<sup>17</sup> If Hsüan-ying is correct, then there is no idea of a vessel involved at all in the term, since the whole term is a transcription of a foreign word. Be that as it may, the tradition that the term is in some way connected with a vessel (*p'en*) 盆 cannot be dismissed so easily. Dharmaraksha's translation of the *Yü-lan-p'en ching* makes it clear that a vessel is meant, for one passage reads, "to put all the sweet and tasty food and drink in the world inside a vessel" (以百味飲食安孟蘭盆中).<sup>18</sup> Tsung-mi 宗密 (780-841) in his commentary on the term wrote: "Yü-lan is a term of Central Asiatic origin and means 'to hang upside down.' P'en is a Chinese word meaning 'vessel.' If we follow the colloquial, we would say that the entire term means 'a vessel for rescuing those in a suspended state.'" <sup>19</sup>

Notices in various other sources record the making of such vessels: 造佛盆 (*Fa-yüan chu-lin, chüan* 62 [*TT* 53.750a]), 造孟蘭盆 (*Chiu T'ang-shu* [T'ung-wen ed.] 118.10b); and the presenting of such vessels: 送盆 (*Fa-yüan chu-lin, chüan* 62 [*TT* 53.750b]), 進孟蘭盆 (*Ta-T'ang liu-tien, chüan* 22), 賜孟蘭盆 (*Ts'e-fu yüan-kuei* 冊府元龜, *chüan* 52), 內出孟蘭盆賜章敬寺 (*Tzu-chih t'ung-chien* [*SPPY* ed.] 224.12b). The commentary by Hu San-hsing 胡三省 on the last passage contains the following: "assemble all kinds of goods and fruit and place them inside the vessels."

A Sung writer adds a further explanation of the term. According to Yü-jung 遇榮, "The term *yü-lan-p'en*, following the authority of the translators of the Sung dynasty, is the wrong abbreviation of a Sanskrit word. The correct reading is *wu-lan-p'o-na* 烏藍婆拏, which means 'filial piety, obedience, offering, affection, hanging upside down, or a state of suspension.' The character *p'en* is also a wrong abbreviation, for the old reading was *p'en-tso-na* 盆佐那. The new read-

<sup>17</sup> See *TT* 54.535b; *Chi-sha-tsang* 積砂藏 (Commercial Press ed.), (*ts'e* 459), 55a.

<sup>18</sup> *TT* 16.779c.

<sup>19</sup> *TT* 39.506a.



ing is *men-tso-lo* 門左羅, also *men-tso-nang* 門左囊. In Chinese this means 'a rescue vessel.' The meaning of the entire expression should be 'a vessel for saving those in a state of suspension.'"<sup>20</sup> Now the Chinese term *men-tso-lo* or *men-tso-nang* could be a transcription of *muñcana* or *muccana*, but these words do not mean "vessel"; they mean "release" or "deliverance." If, however, we take the old reading, *p'en-tso-na*, we can find a good Sanskrit and Pāli word, *bhājana*, similar in sound and meaning "vessel" or "receptacle."<sup>21</sup>

To recapitulate, Hsüan-ying defined *wu-lan-p'o-na* as "hanging upside down, suspended." Tsung-mi considered only *yü-lan* to be the transcription of a foreign word, and defined it as "hanging upside down." Yü-jung of the Sung dynasty did likewise. All these explanations would connect the word with a derivative, either *avalambana* or *ullambita*, from the root *ud-lamb* (to hang). Takakusu and Rahder would connect the term with *ullumpana*, derived from *ud-lump* (to save, rescue). The Pāli form *ullumpati* is found in *Vinaya* 2.279, where we read, *ullumpatu bhavaṃ Gotamo Brahmaṇiṃ pajan* ("let the Blessed Gotamo rescue the Brahman world").<sup>22</sup> Thus, *ullumpana* (rescue, deliverance) would appear to be preferable to *ullambana* or *avalambana* (hanging upside down), since the original purpose of the service carried out by Mu-lien was to rescue his mother. It is true that Hsüan-ying and Tsung-mi included the idea of rescue in their discussions of the term, but Hsüan-ying did not state that *wu-lan-p'o-na* included this idea. Tsung-mi linked the idea of rescue with the character *p'en*, saying it was a vessel for deliverance.

I am inclined to think that the idea of being suspended or hanging upside down probably represents a mistaken reading by the Chinese, who confused some form of *ud-lamb* (to hang down) with *ullumpana* (rescue, deliverance). It might well be that when Dharmaraksha made his translation, he used *yü-lan-p'en* for *ullumpana*. With the passage of time, however, Chinese Buddhist monks, reading the term *yü-lan-p'en*, thought that it referred to some form derived from *ud-lamb*, such as *avalambana* or *olambana*, and hence interpreted it to mean "hang-

<sup>20</sup> *Yü-lan-p'en ching shu hsiao-heng-ch'ao* |||| 疏孝衡鈔, *chüan* 1, *Hsü-tsang-ching* 1/87/4/375a.

<sup>21</sup> Monier-Williams, *Dictionary*, p. 752; *P. T. S. Pāli-English Dictionary*, p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> See also *Mahāvīyūtpatti*, 8704, *s.v.* *ullumpatu nāṃ*; Edgerton, *A Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, p. 149.

ing down, suspended upside down." Both Hsüan-ying and Tsung-mi thought that this was so. As vessels were used to hold the offerings during the service, some Chinese, not knowing the origin of the term *yü-lan-p'en*, mistakenly interpreted *p'en* to be a separate character meaning "vessel." Hsüan-ying protested against this, saying that *p'en* is not a separate character but part of the whole transcription and that the correct transcription should be *wu-lan-p'o-na*. In spite of Hsüan-ying's objections, Tsung-mi persisted in considering *p'en* as a Chinese term meaning "vessel." In this, it appears to me, he was in error. Moreover, there also exists the possibility that *p'en* is an abbreviation of *p'en-tso-na* (*bhājana*) mentioned by Yü-jung, and here again *p'en* cannot be considered a Chinese term. If there were a Sanskrit or Pāli original for *yü-lan-p'en*, I am inclined to think it could well be *ullumpāna-bhājana*.

After this long digression into the meaning and origin of the term *yü-lan-p'en*, we can return to the contents of the sutra, *Yü-lan-p'en ching*. Mu-lien after attaining arhatship wished to repay his parents for their love and kindness. With his divine vision he surveyed the three worlds to see where they were, and to his disappointment, he found his mother reborn as a hungry ghost, famished and emaciated. He took pity on her and brought a bowl of food, but as soon as she raised the food to her mouth, it turned into charcoal. Sorely grieved, he returned in tears to report to the Buddha.

The Buddha told Mu-lien that his mother's offenses were indeed serious and could not be alleviated by Mu-lien's individual efforts, even though his piety was sufficient to move heaven and earth. What was required for her release, the Buddha suggested, was the divine power of all the monks in the ten quarters. The Blessed One then instructed Mu-lien to have prepared a sumptuous offering of the hundred delicacies, fruits, utensils, and sweet-scented oil, and on the fifteenth day of the seventh month present them to the monks of the ten quarters on behalf of the present and deceased parents for seven generations back. On this day, all the monks of great virtue, no matter where they were, must accept the offerings and observe the commandments. The virtue of the multitude of monks was indeed vast, and through the power of such virtue, the present parents and relatives would escape from the three evil modes of existence. If the parents were still living, they would live up to a hundred years, and deceased

ancestors for seven generations back would be reborn as deities in heaven.<sup>23</sup>

When Mu-lien carried out these instructions, his mother was rescued from her evil existence as a hungry ghost. The monks then asked the Buddha whether or not it was permissible for pious and filial sons in the future to hold such a feast, called the *yü-lan-p'en*, for the purpose of saving parents and ancestors. The Blessed One answered in the affirmative and urged his followers to celebrate such a festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. He closed with these words of exhortation: "Those disciples of the Buddha who are filial and obedient to their parents should constantly remember their parents in their thoughts and make offerings to them back to the seventh generation. Every year on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, they should remember their parents and ancestors with piety and compassion and should repay their parents for their care and love by preparing a *yü-lan-p'en* feast for offering to the Buddha and the monks."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> This notion of an offering for the hungry ghosts or *peta* (Sanskrit *preta*) is already found in the Pāli canon. In the *Khuddakapatha*, translated by Ñānamoli, *The Minor Readings* (London, 1960), pp. 7-8, appear the following verses:

As water showered on the hill  
Flows down to reach the hollow vale,  
So giving given here can serve  
The ghosts of departed kin.

As river-beds when full can bear  
The water down to fill the sea,  
So giving given here can serve  
The ghosts of departed kin.

He gave to me, he worked for me,  
He was my kin, friend, intimate.  
Give gifts, then, for departed ones,  
Recalling what they used to do.

No weeping, nor yet sorrowing,  
Nor any kind of mourning, aids  
Departed ones, whose kin remain  
(Unhelpful to them acting) thus.  
But when this offering is given  
Well placed in the community  
For them, then it can serve them long  
In future and at once as well.

<sup>24</sup> *TT* 16.779a-779c.

On account of its unequivocal emphasis on filial piety, this sutra was welcomed by the Chinese and became exceedingly popular not only among the Buddhists but also among the common people. In the latter case, it took the form of popular stories recited at temple fairs or festivals by story-telling monks or ballad-singers. Such popular stories have been preserved in a style of literature known as *pien-wen* 變文 or texts of marvellous events, samples of which have been discovered among the Tun-huang manuscripts. The presence of such *pien-wen* as the *Mu-lien pien-wen* 目連變文,<sup>25</sup> the *Mu-lien yüan-ch'i* 緣起,<sup>26</sup> and the *Ta Mu-kan-lien ming-chien chiu-mu pien-wen ping-t'u* 大目乾連冥間救母變文并圖<sup>27</sup> attests to the popularity of this story among the masses.

In these *pien-wen* versions, the story is told in greater detail. Before going on a trip, Mu-lien gives money to his mother to provide alms for monks. The mother is avaricious, however, and keeps the money for herself. When Mu-lien returns, she tells him that she has spent the money as he requested. For her greed and deception, she is reborn in the deepest of Buddhist hells, the Avīci hell, there to suffer the most intolerable tortures. Mu-lien, after attaining arhatship, goes to search for her and finally finds her in her pitiful condition. He reports her fate to the Buddha, who decides to rescue her himself. Through his efforts, she is freed from the Avīci hell, but she is reborn in the woeful state of a hungry ghost. Mu-lien now arranges for a *yü-lan-p'en* service, which results in her escaping that state only to be reborn as a dog. Mu-lien next recites the Mahāyāna sutras diligently and thus enables

<sup>25</sup> A manuscript of this *pien-wen* is now kept in the Peking Metropolitan Library and designated as *Ch'eng* 成 96, with the text edited and published in Yang Chia-lo 楊家駱, *Tun-huang pien-wen* 敦煌變文 (Taipei, 1964), II, 756-760. What is preserved here is only a fragment of the entire text, consisting of the first part which tells why Mu-lien's father was reborn in Trāyastriṃśa heaven, while his mother was reborn in the deepest Avīci hell.

<sup>26</sup> Ms. in Paris, designated as Pelliot, No. 2193; text published in Yang, *op. cit.*, II, 701-713.

<sup>27</sup> Many copies of this version were found at Tun-huang. The text of the copy now in the British Museum (Stein No. 2614) is published in *TT* 85.1307a-1314a; Yang, *op. cit.*, II, 714-755. Another copy in London is designated Stein No. 3704. In the Bibliothèque Nationale are four mss. (Pelliot 2319, 3107, 3485, 4988) while in Peking may be found three mss. (*Ying* 盈 76, *Li* 麗 85, *Shuang* 霜 89). An English résumé may be found in A. Waley, *Ballads and Stories from Tunhuang* (London, 1960), 216-235.

his mother at last to be reborn as a human being and after that as a deity in the Trāyastriṃśa heaven.

The popularity of the *Yü-lan-p'en ching* was accentuated by the commentary of the famous Hua-yen master, Tsung-mi, at the beginning of which appears a most significant statement: "That which began during the primordial chaos and now saturates heaven and earth, unites man and deity, connects the high and the low, and is revered alike by the Confucians and Buddhists, is none other than filial piety."<sup>28</sup> To bolster this remarkable thesis he boldly wrote that "Prince Siddhārtha did not assume the kingship, but left family and country because he wished to cultivate the way and become enlightened, so as to repay the love and benefactions of his parents."<sup>29</sup> Siddhārtha thus became a filial son entirely acceptable to the Chinese. Furthermore, Tsung-mi contended that Mu-lien joined the monastic order with the same motive in mind. "Because Mu-lien was filial and wished to convert his parents for their efforts in bringing him up, he left the household life to become a monk and became foremost in the exercise of extraordinary powers."<sup>30</sup>

Tsung-mi acknowledged that some differences existed between the Confucian and Buddhist observance of filial piety. For instance, he pointed out that the pious Confucian was mainly interested in leaving behind a good name for posterity, whereas the Buddhist was more concerned with assistance to others in this life. Again, he noted that the Confucians sacrificed while observing memorial services for departed ancestors, while the Buddhists were concerned with preserving life. However, he contended that the similarities in observing filial piety far outweighed the differences. In both instances, the filial son is respectful toward his parents, derives great joy from supporting them, is worried over their illness, and is deeply grieved at their death.<sup>31</sup> All in all, we may say that this commentary by Tsung-mi represents the most serious effort by a Buddhist monk to convince the Confucians that the Buddhists were just as filial as they.

Due to the wide acceptance of the *Yü-lan-p'en ching* among the populace, the Yü-lan-p'en festival was one of the most popular cele-

<sup>28</sup> *TT* 39.505a.

<sup>29</sup> *TT* 39.505a.

<sup>30</sup> *TT* 39.505ab.

<sup>31</sup> *TT* 39.505c.

brations during the T'ang dynasty. Ennin, the Japanese monk, witnessed these celebrations during his travels in China; and in 844, when he was in Ch'ang-an, he wrote in his diary, "On the fifteenth day of the seventh moon, the various monasteries of the city made offerings [for the All-Souls' Festival]. The monasteries made flowery candles, flowery cakes, artificial flowers, fruit trees, and the like, vying with one another in their rarities. Customarily they spread them all out as offerings in front of the Buddha halls, and [people of] the whole city go around to the monasteries and perform adoration. It is a most flourishing festival."<sup>32</sup>

Not only the populace but the imperial household took an active interest in the festival. This interest was manifested by the support given by the state to the festival, consisting of financial assistance and material goods presented to the monasteries by government officials. In some instances, the imperial interest was shown by direct participation. Concerning the celebration of the festival in 768, the dynastic history reads:

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, Tai-tsung had vessels made for the celebration of the Yü-lan-p'en festival in the imperial chapel. These vessels were decorated with gold and jade and were worth over a million cash. Ancestral tablets for seven generations back, beginning with Kao-tsu, were also created, covered with pennants and dragon parasols, and on the pennants were inscribed the names of the ancestors. These tablets were carried out from the imperial precincts to be displayed in the monasteries. On that day, the host of officials with their paraphernalia was arrayed at the Kuang-shun Gate to await the tablets and the vessels. With the multitudes carrying pennants and flowers, dancing and shouting in the streets, the celebration was an annual affair.<sup>33</sup>

The two foregoing sutras, *Shan-tzu ching* and *Yü-lan-p'en ching*, constitute the major Buddhist scriptures stressing this theme of filial piety, although there is a host of others that also touched upon the virtue.

We now come to the second contention of the Buddhists, that their conception of piety is superior to that of the Confucians. First of all, the Buddhists contended that the Buddha taught the filial son not just to attend and serve his parents, as the Confucians stressed, but also to

<sup>32</sup> E. O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Diary* (New York, 1955), p. 344.

<sup>33</sup> *Chiu T'ang-shu* 118.10b; see also *Fo-tsu t'ung-chi* 佛祖統紀 *chüan* 41 (TT 49.378c); *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien* 224.16b-17a.

convert the parents to Buddhism, so that they would enjoy all the benefits that come from being followers of the Buddha. In *Mou-tzu*, the critic of Buddhism criticized the action of Sudāna<sup>34</sup> in giving away his father's wealth, including the sacred white elephant that produced rain, charging that this was unfilial. Mou-tzu answered that after the Buddha attained deliverance, his parents were converted and also achieved emancipation. "If this is not filial piety and humanity, then what is piety and humanity?"<sup>35</sup> Hui-yüan expressed the same idea when he wrote that if one person leaves the household life and becomes virtuous, then all the six relationships, father and son, older and younger brother, husband and wife, will be benefited.<sup>36</sup> Sun Ch'ò 孫綽 (ca. 300–380) in his treatise *Yü-tao-lun* 喻道論 (*Elucidation of the Way*) also wrote that the Buddha after enlightenment "returned and illuminated his native country, and widely spread the sound of the doctrine. His father the king was stimulated to understand, and likewise ascended the place of enlightenment. What act of filial piety could be greater than such a glorification of his parents?"<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the best expression of this viewpoint is contained in a sutra entitled *Fo-shuo hsiao-tzu ching* 佛說孝子經 (*Sutra on a Filial Son*), said to have been translated during the Western Chin dynasty, although the name of the translator is lost. The concluding portion of the sutra reads, "Only this is piety in a world without piety, that is, to lead the parents to forego evil for good, so that they will embrace the five precepts and resort to the threefold refuge. If one cannot convert the parents with the aid of the Three Jewels, then even though one supports his parents with piety, he will not be considered to be filial."<sup>38</sup>

In the eyes of the Confucians, departure from the household life to become a monk, thus cutting off all ties with parents and family, was an unfilial act to be thoroughly condemned, but the Buddhists argued that this was not so. By joining the monastic order, they claimed, the monk was now in a position to convert his own parents, so that they

<sup>34</sup> 須大拏, the Buddha in one of his previous rebirths. See *Liu-tu chi-ching* 六度集經, *chüan* 2 (*TT* 3.7c–11a). For the Pāli account, see the *Vessantara-jātaka*.

<sup>35</sup> *Hung-ming-chi* 弘明集, *chüan* 1 (*TT* 52.4a).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, *chüan* 5 (*TT* 52.30b).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, *chüan* 3 (*TT* 52.17c), translated in E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden, 1959), p. 284.

<sup>38</sup> *TT* 16.781a.

would attain salvation and escape repeated misery in the endless cycle of transmigration. This was the greatest boon that a monk could confer on his parents, and surely this must be acknowledged as filial.

The Chinese Buddhist pursued this line of argument further by contending that Buddhist monks aimed not merely at salvation of their parents but at universal salvation for all living creatures. In this role, they would be fulfilling what is designated as the *ta-hsiao* 大孝 or great filial piety, to be considered far superior to the Confucian piety, which is confined to one family and limited to serving only one's parents, whereas the Buddhist piety is universal and all-inclusive in that it embraces all living beings.

According to the Buddhist theory of rebirth, living beings are continuously revolving in the various modes of existence as deities, men, animals, hungry ghosts, and denizens of hell. It is possible, therefore, that our ancestors and parents may be living in any one of these modes of existence. This is what Fa-lin 法琳, the T'ang cleric, had in mind when he wrote, "All forms of life in the six modes of existence may be my parents. Within this cycle of rebirth, how can we distinguish between enemies and loved ones?"<sup>39</sup> Upon assuming the monastic robe, the monk looks upon all forms of life as equal, and he vows to deliver all of them from misery to the other shore of enlightenment. When he accomplishes this, he is confident that some of his ancestors are included in the group. At the same time, the parents and ancestors of others are also saved. The Chinese Buddhists argue that such an achievement in bringing about universal salvation not only to one's own parents and ancestors but to the parents and ancestors of others can only be characterized as an expression of great filial piety.

As early as the fifth century, Hui-yüan had written that when one individual is converted, his beneficial influence would flow throughout the world.<sup>40</sup> After Wei Yüan-sung 衛元嵩<sup>41</sup> had attacked Buddhism

<sup>39</sup> *Pien-cheng lun* 辯正論 (TT 52.529b). Instead of the five modes of existence, Buddhist sources sometimes speak of six modes by adding *asura* to the list. An *asura* is usually taken to mean a fallen angel or a Titan, a class of beings often engaged in battle against the deities. Rebirth as an *asura* is considered woeful. See Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten* 31c-34b.

<sup>40</sup> TT 52.30b.

<sup>41</sup> For Wei Yüan-sung, see Yü Chia-hsi 余嘉錫, "Pei-Chou hui-fo chu-mou-che Wei Yüan-sung" 北周毀佛主謀者衛元嵩, *Fu-jen hsieh-chih* 輔仁學誌 2.2 (1931).1-25; K. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton, 1964), 187-194.



in a memorial in 567, a Buddhist layman, Wang Ming-kuang 王明廣, wrote a refutation which contained the following: "As for the piety of monks, first they obey the various Buddhas, next they repay for the loving care bestowed on them by their parents, living beings, the ruling prince, and the three jewels, and finally they work on behalf of all sentient beings. When these three endeavors are carried out ceaselessly and tirelessly, then they are considered as expressions of great filial piety."<sup>42</sup>

During the early years of the T'ang dynasty, in 621 to be exact, a Taoist, Fu I 傅奕, presented a strong anti-Buddhist memorial in which he charged among other things that the Buddhists were negligent in serving their parents.<sup>43</sup> He was answered by a monk, Ming-chi 明槩, who wrote:

It is said that if one wishes to seek for loyal ministers and filial sons, one needs only look among those who read the *Classic on Filial Piety* and the two chapters in *Lao-tzu*, and that there is no need to consider those who read widely in the Buddhist sutras. If we examine the *Classic on Filial Piety* and *Lao-tzu*, we find that they throw light only on worldly loyalty and piety and do not touch on loyalty and piety beyond this world. How is this? Those who remain in the world do their best to cultivate the fields and serve their parents. Those who leave the household life practice the way and honor the law in order to promote loving compassion. Those who do their best to serve their parents are merely repaying for immediate small favors, while those who promote loving compassion are requiting for great virtue in the future. Even though the latter may for the moment appear to be deficient in reverence and contemptuous of their parents, in the end they are able to save and rescue them. This is really the great filial piety.<sup>44</sup>

In outward behavior, Ming-chi admits that the conduct of the monk is contrary to the usual practice of piety, but in reality he is pursuing a course that will result in the greatest benefit to his parents, namely, their salvation. This theme is also expressed by Fa-lin in his *P'o-hsieh lun* 破邪論 (*Treatise on the Destruction of Heresies*): "Although in outward appearance the monk may appear to be lacking in deference to parents, within his bosom he is filial to them. In the ceremonies, he

<sup>42</sup> *KHMC, chüan 10 (TT 52.158c)*.

<sup>43</sup> For Fu I's charge, see *KHMC, chüan 11 (TT 52.160c)*. See also Arthur Wright in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12(1951).33-47; Ogasawara Senshū 小笠原宣秀, 唐の挑佛論者傅奕について ("Fu I, An Anti-Buddhist in the T'ang"), *Shina bukkyō shigaku* 支那佛教史學 1.3(1937).84-93.

<sup>44</sup> *KHMC, chüan 12 (TT 52.175b)*.

may be deficient in his obedience to the ruler, but in his heart he shelters the imperial favor. With the beneficial influences embracing enemies and relatives, he completes the great obedience."<sup>45</sup> In another treatise, the *Pien-cheng lun* 辯正論, he wrote:

Buddhism teaches filial piety in order that its followers will reverence all parents under Heaven. It teaches loyalty in order that its followers will reverence all the ruling princes under Heaven. To civilize the myriad countries, that is the highest form of benevolence of the enlightened ruler. To serve as an example within the four seas, that is the greatest piety of the sage-king . . . The Buddhist sutra says, "When ignorance covers the eye of wisdom, living beings continually revolve in the cycle of rebirth, committing all sorts of deeds, so that fathers and sons interchange positions, enemies become friends, and friends become enemies. Therefore, the monk abandons secular life to pursue the true religion . . . and considers all sentient beings as equal to his own parents."<sup>46</sup>

And further on in the same treatise, he wrote, "To broaden benevolence and rescue widely, these are the acme of loyalty and filial piety."<sup>47</sup>

What the Buddhists are saying in these passages is of course clear. The Confucians think of filial piety entirely in terms of human relations on this earthly level, between parents and children. The Buddhists, on the other hand, consider piety in terms of something spiritual which extends into the future. When the faithful Buddhist converts his parents, he makes it possible for them to attain rebirth in a happy state of existence in one of the Buddhist heavens or in nirvana. When he works for the salvation of all sentient beings, then he is helping not only his own ancestors but also the ancestors of all others. Herein, they claim, lies the superiority of the Buddhist piety over that of the Confucians. This accommodation by the Buddhists to Chinese ethics is probably one of the chief reasons why the foreign religion was so readily accepted by the Chinese despite many features that were opposed to Chinese culture.

<sup>45</sup> *TT* 52.489bc.

<sup>46</sup> *TT* 52.529b.

<sup>47</sup> *TT* 52.531b.