

Contribution towards the Peace and Happiness of ASEAN Community through the Practice of Buddhist Filial Piety

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Introduction:

Filial Piety has ever been considered an indigenously Confucian teaching that governs the familial and intergenerational relationship of Chinese people. Some scholars even insist the filial features cited in the Mahayana Buddhism might be the results of the later influences by Confucianism during its evolution in China. Pointing to this argument, Ven. Guang Xing¹ suggests that the filial piety was not just practiced by the early Buddhists in India but also evidently, taught and encouraged by the Buddha, himself as one of primary ethical practices. The *Sigālovāda Sutta* and many other discourses of the Buddha highly esteem filial piety as a valuable quality of social Ethics. Duties and respects of the children towards their parents, shown in the *Sigālovāda-sutta* certainly reflect the highest form of filial piety in Buddhism. Respect for one's parents and ancestors are behind the spirit of the concept of filial piety.

Historically, there had been three waves of Chinese migration into Southeast Asia since the middle 17th century until the middle of the 20th century, with contributing estimated 20 million ethnic Chinese to the ASEAN community according to the survey conducted in 1990s.² In order to secure the prosperity of the family, the ethnic Chinese respectfully keep up the practice of filial piety in the lands of their diaspora where they heartily continued to support the elderly and carry on their family business. Beyond the family, they have extended their respects to the elderly in dealing with the interpersonal relationship. Undoubtedly this very practice has contributed those Chinese immigrants' success in their family-prosperity and social status throughout the entire ASEAN community. The practice of filial piety has gradually merged into the local religion, culture and customs, working as one of the primary social virtues to prosper and harmonize the whole ASEAN community; but along with the speedy modernization happening in the ASEAN region, the practice of filial piety has been deteriorating among the younger generations. As a result, the number of aging parents who do not get proper care and protection from their children increases widely in ASEAN where their minimal social welfare fails to cover the basic material needs of old folks. It is not a secret that when the aging parents are not looked after well by their children they suffer a lot physically as well as mentally to the extent that they are disgusted with their own life. Therefore, the practice of filial piety not only contributes as a factor for enabling a peaceful and harmonious society but also a necessary condition to build a healthy society that we all expect throughout ASEAN. The present article aims at a critical survey of possible contribution towards unity, peace and happiness of the ASEAN community, through the practice of the virtue of filial piety as taught in Buddhism.

¹ Ven. Guang Xing is the Assistant Professor of Buddhist Study Center, Hong Kong University.

² Suryadinata (1997):7, among them, 5.46 million in Indonesia (might be under estimation), 5.25 million in Malaysia, 4.81 million in Thailand, 2.52 million in Singapore, 0.96 million in Vietnam, 0.85 million in Philippines, 0.5 million in Cambodia and 0.46 million in Myanmar.

Conceptualization of Filial Piety in Confucianism:

Based on Hsiāo King³, the classics of filial piety, Yang (1997)⁴ delineates the following fifteen aspects of Confucian concepts on the filial piety, which have been kept up by the ethnic Chinese in the ASEAN community as the following:

1. to revere and love one's parents
2. to obey one's parents
3. to admonish one's parents with reasons and righteousness
4. to be near home and ready to serve one's parents
5. to treat and serve one's parents with politeness and etiquette
6. to fulfill one's parents' aspirations by join the same occupation or vocation
7. to promote the public prestige of one's kindred, to honor one's parents
8. to cherish the loving memory of parental affection
9. to entertain one's parents appropriately
10. to let parents live without worry and anguish
11. to look after one's parents with a spirit of the caring
12. to preserve one's body from injury
13. to bear sons and thereby continue the family line
14. to bury the deceased parents with ritual propriety
15. to offer sacrifices to the deceased parents with ritual propriety

Implicitly, these fifteen points clearly illustrate to younger generations to reciprocate what the parents have done for them⁵. In other words, the fifteen points can be considered as fifteen rules from Confucianism for the young generations to meditate as well as to apply in daily life to perfect the material and spiritual needs of the parents, and to one day portray and teach towards their own children through their own actions. Furthermore, Confucianism has extensively developed filial piety into loyalty towards the administration. In this sense the practice of filial piety, as a core social ethic, has pervaded beyond the intergenerational relations of families to interpersonal relations of society.⁶

Buddhist Filial Piety Is the Way to Requite the Debts to One's Parents:

Similarly as well as transcendently, the concept of filial piety in Buddhism was brought out in the early Buddhist texts. According to the categories designated by Ven. Guang Xing, which is cited in the introduction, filial piety is the way to requite the debts to one's parents. In *Kataññu Sutta* of *Āṅguttaranikāya*, it's said:

Monks, one can never repay two persons, I declare. What two? Mother and father. Even if one should carry about his mother on one shoulder and his father on the other, and so doing should live a hundred years, attain a hundred years; and if he should support them, anointing them with unguents, kneading, bathing and rubbing their limbs, and they meanwhile should even void their excrements upon him — even so could he not repay his parents.⁷

In the same *sutra* the Buddha continues to declare the reason why we should seek to repay the grace of parents, he says:

³ James Legge, tr. "The Hsiāo King." *The Sacred Books of the East*. Ed. F. Max Müller. (1996): 465-488.

⁴ Yang (1997):237.

⁵ Kwan (2000): 24.

⁶ Hwang (1999): 163.

⁷ Bodhi (2012): 153.

Monks, parents do much for their children: they bring them up, they nourish them, they introduce them to this world.⁸

Meanwhile in the *Mahīśasaka Vinaya*⁹, the similar discussions have been also recorded that the parents of *Bhikṣu Pīlinadavatsa* were poor and he wanted to offer them his robes but dared not do that. Then he approached to the Buddha for inquiries. Due to this actual occasion, the Buddha gathered the *Bhikṣu* and uttered them the above message, and laid down a new rule that the *Bhikṣu* should support their parents wholeheartedly as their life-spans. In his own words, the Buddha declares:

Thus, hereafter, (I) allow you, Bhikṣus, support your parents wholeheartedly your entire life. Anyone who does not do so commits a grave offence.¹⁰

It's quite possible to say that the Buddha taught filial piety by himself and even constituted the practice of filial piety as rule [*although not doing this himself, towards his own parents*], to ensure parents of monks can be supported by and through the efforts of their noble-sons. Meanwhile the Chinese version of *Ekottāgama* also records this very discourse yet with the slight change in which the one hundred year of carrying the parents on the shoulders has been replaced by one thousand year or ten thousand years.¹¹ Comparing with *Ekottāgama*, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* has not only reiterated the same “one hundred years” of repaying the parents, but singles-out a very important message about the definition of parents, the objects of which filial piety concerns. In the context, the *Bhikṣu* always contemplated to repay his father and even his step-mother who used to mistreat him badly during his household life.¹² In addition, in a parallel text, *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya-bhaisajyavastu* tells that Venerable *Maudgalyayana* always observed how to help parents to achieve their spiritual liberation rather than just offer advice to the living.¹³ In order to compensate parents, the Buddha continuously advises his assembly in the *Kataññu Sutta*:

Moreover, monks, whoso incites his unbelieving parents, settles and establishes them in the faith; whoso incite his immoral parents, settles and establishes them in morality; whoso incite his stingy parents, settles and establishes them in liberality; whoso incite his foolish parents, settles and establishes them in wisdom — such a one, just by so doing, does repay, does more than repay what is due to his parents.¹⁴

Based on this statement provided by the Buddha: faith, morality, liberality and wisdom are the spiritual foods that the young generations can prepare and actually give to parents. In another passage of *Āṅguttaranikāya* the Buddha encourages his monks to worship and venerate their father and mother as *Brahmā*.¹⁵

From the above-cited discourses of Buddha, we can see how parents become considered as be worthy of offerings, as *Brahmā*, as friends. Thus supporting them should become one's duty to perform well. The Buddha also mentions there are three

⁸ Ibid. Bodhi.

⁹ T22, no.1421, 140c.

¹⁰ Guang Xing (2006): 98, N.12.

¹¹ T2, no.125, 600c-601a: Personally I think both “ten thousand years” and “one hundred years” have no any different senses rather to emphasize the period is long according to the linguist habits.

¹² T23, no.1442, 658c.

¹³ T 24, no. 1448, 16a.

¹⁴ Bodhi (2012):153-5, see also T. 23, 642b, 658c, as well as T. 24, 16a.

¹⁵ Bodhi (2012):227.

duties praised by the wise and good, one of them is to support the parents.¹⁶ At the same time, in the well-known *Sigalovāda Sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, the Buddha suggests to lay followers to respect and support parents in five ways:

In five ways, young householder, a child should minister to his parents as the East¹⁷: having supported me I shall support them, I shall do their duties, I shall keep the family tradition, I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance, furthermore I shall offer alms in honor of my departed relatives.¹⁸

This very sutra is highly esteemed by Chinese Buddhists for performing duties towards their parents accordingly; furthermore, to add emphasis, this has been translated into Chinese five times¹⁹, throughout the different eras. Another important message worthy of our attention is that parents come after oneself in second position²⁰, for us to spend our righteous earnings according to the Buddha. Hereby old-folks undeniably have equal right rights as others' to receive social benefits. They might be put in the prior position of the five kinds of people to be venerated when the wealth is gained righteously, due to the discourse by the Buddha in *Āṅguttaranikāya*.²¹

Filial Piety as Primarily Ethical Good Deeds, a Field of Merit:

Moreover the merits of supporting one's parents are cherished by the Buddha in the vast teachings. The *Mātuposaka Sutta* which is collected in both Pāli *Samyuttanikāya* and Chinese *Samyuttāgama* tell of a *Brāhman* that came to see the Buddha and asked the latter about supporting his mother by begging for alms food. The Buddha did not only permitted the *Brāhman*'s request to support his mother, but also assured that this very deed of maintaining one's parents accumulates much merit.²²

Filial piety is a common teaching shared by both Buddhism and Confucianism to perfect oneself as a form of primary ethics that not just secures the well-being of the old folks but also facilitates communal harmony. From one who does not practice the virtue of filial piety (respect for one's own parents and ancestors), how can respect for others be expected? Peace and happiness, expected for the whole society would become unachievable, because the basis of Buddhist social ethics is none other than respect towards humanity.

Influences of Modernization upon Filial Piety in the ASEAN Community:

As cited above, wholeheartedly supporting one's parents with materials and spirituality is the duty, and is considered a meritoriously ethical practice along with the meditative dharma as has been historically widely applied. Even now, though the concept of filial piety among young people has eroded in some way, the duty of supporting one's parents is still carried out by younger generations. Comparing with history, the expressions of filial piety as well as the implementations of filial duties have been influenced by speedy modernization in diverse ways and in different

¹⁶ Bodhi (2012): 245-46.

¹⁷ In India, east is the most important direction. So when the parents are worshiped as the eastern direction, that means the parents are at the important position in the current Indian society, refers to Guangxing (2006), 88.

¹⁸ Walshe (2012): 466.

¹⁹ The five Chinese translations are: 1). T 1, no. 16, 251b: *Shi-jia-luo-yue-liu-fang-li-jing*; 2). *Da-liu-xiang-bai-jing*, lost; 3) T 1, no. 17, 254a: *Shan-sheng-zhi-jing*; 4). T1, no.135, 641a: *Shan-sheng-jing*; 5). T1,no.16, 71c: *Shan-sheng-jing*. It's very obvious that the first three had been brought out in Chinese quite early.

²⁰ Bodhi (2012):829, 1).Oneself; 2).Parents; 3).Wife; 4).Friends and companions; 5).Recluses and *Brāhman*s.

²¹ Bodhi (2012): 659.

²² Sn. I, 181, & T3, no. 174, 175a, 175b, 175c.

degrees.²³ For instance, cash payments and education have direct impact on the subjective part of filial activities.²⁴ At the same time, these two factors themselves are influenced by modernization which guarantees sufficient material for young generations to exercise their filial piety and provide the possibility for young generations to further their moral as well as vocational education or training.²⁵ Another beneficial factor attributing to the modernization is the steadfast economic growth has been enabling society to share filial duties from the young generations by producing long-term care policies towards old people, legitimately.²⁶ In personal view, the modernization has positively brought more material secure for the young generations and the whole society to practice filial piety with a diversity of ways whereas not only young generations gain more choices to express their supporting to their parents, but also old people themselves have been accessing more types of material and spiritual offerings.

On the other hand, along with the industrialization and urbanization, the increasing participation of women in the modern society has brought out undeniable changes on the social structure and filial concepts which had hardly weakened the people's initial acceptance of the norms of filial piety and their practice of its obligation.²⁷ In details, the availability of better-paid employment in cities led many waves of young people to work and live far away from their parents; and in some cases, even away from their own children. It's very normal to see old folks living with their grandchildren and waiting for the annual reunion with their children in the labor-exporting ASEAN countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, and so on.²⁸ This very geographical separation of successive generations has not only blocked the exercise of filial piety²⁹ but also weakened the parent's contributions to their young adult offspring. Due to the principle of reciprocity, it might also reduce the children's contributions to their parents in old age.³⁰ Furthermore, the high competitiveness, imbalance of income, and increasing concept of materialism in the modernization has changed modern people into some individualized personality whereas the individualism has successfully occupied collectivism as well as devotion-ism. A key aspect of this theory is that the people are increasingly pursuing their self-determination and personal tastes, rather paying attention to others even their parents. Resulted from these factors, the old folks could not be protected and cared as expected. Anyway the functional family pattern could not be sustained as before. Hereby the social stability and harmony have been discounted though the materials have enriched in modernization. Pointing to all the messages above, the practice of filial piety to maintain mutual responsibilities, respect, support and concern among the inter-generations and even inter-personas is still applicable and necessary.

Conclusion:

Buddhism, along with Confucianism, tells that wholehearted support towards one's parents is a duty, as a chief ethical action, and as the rules to follow in daily life. Buddhism though, transcends its concept of filial piety over limits of families and sovereignties to all the sentient beings, even non-beings with its unconditional loving-kindness as well as equanimity. In order to build a harmonious and happy society, the

²³ Cheung (2009): 179.

²⁴ Cheung (2009): 179.

²⁵ *Op.cit.*183.

²⁶ N Chow (2006): 31.

²⁷ Cheung (2009):181.

²⁸ *Op.cit.*182.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Cheung.

³⁰ *Op.cit.*184.

Buddha inspires people to respect and support one another as one respects one's parents. During many occasions, the Buddha directly declares that it's hard to find any sentient beings having not been one's parents, sisters, brothers, sons or daughters during one's dwelling in the incalculable eons of samsara.³¹ Thus, the filial piety in Buddhism is: loving-kindness where one pays sincere respects to others' right to attain happiness; the compassion where one wholeheartedly helps and is concerned with others if needed; appreciative joyousness where one pays heartfelt gratitude towards others' efforts and achievement; and the equanimity whereas one repays others the righteously earned as repaying to one's parents. In a few words: filial piety is just another designation for the brahma-viharas, or the four immeasurables, cited above.

In response to insufficient support to our elderly, care is urgent and necessary – and we must promote the practice of filial piety. This is not just a scheme to assure the welfare of the elderly, but also this transcends towards building a healthy society in which intergenerational or interpersonal relationships can be respected and harmonized. ASEAN has clearly demonstrated the seriousness of the endeavor through various proclamations, and it is necessary that we engage in this praxis. ASEAN has the Brunei Declaration on Strengthening Family Institution: Caring for the Elderly³², there is the idea that Thailand ranks 1st in ASEAN for elderly treatment³³, clearly there is room for improvement, as this is also a concern for the Asian Development Bank – as expressed through their report on the Impact of Population Aging on Asia's Future Growth.³⁴ Buddhist inspired filial piety possibly is the solution towards improving the lives of the aged, in our modern societies, and even within our Buddhist nations, we need to improve.

³¹ SN II, 189-90, & T24, no.1484, 1006b.

³² http://www.oppo.opp.go.th/info/BruneiDeclare7th_ENG.pdf - accessed on 23 March 2015

³³ <http://englishnews.thaipbs.or.th/thailand-ranked-first-asean-elderly-treatment> - accessed on 23 March 2015. Although Thailand is #1 in ASEAN, they rank 42nd in the World. The Philippines is 2nd in ASEAN, and 44th in the World, Vietnam is 3rd in ASEAN, and 53rd in the World, Indonesia is 4th in ASEAN, and 71st in the World, Lao PDR is 5th in ASEAN, and 79th in the World, and Cambodia is 6th in ASEAN, and 80th in the World. Singapore, Myanmar and Brunei were not ranked for this report. Clearly there is room for improvement.

³⁴ <http://www.adb.org/publications/impact-population-aging-asias-future-growth> - accessed on 23 March 2015

Abbreviations:

All references to the Pāli texts are to the edition of the PTS, Oxford. References are the volume and page number. For instance, SN II, 189-190 is the volume 2 of Saṃyuttanikāya, Page 189-190. All references to the Chinese Canonic texts are to the edition of Taishō Tripiṭaka (大正新脩大藏經), Japan. References are to the volume and page number.

AN Āṅguttaranikāya

DN Dīghanikāya

M Majjhimanikāya (figures: number of *Sutta*)

PTS Pāli Text Society

SN Saṃyuttanikāya

Sn Suttanipāta

T Taishō Chinese Tripiṭaka (大正新脩大藏經 figures: number of volume, for example, “T15, no.603, 1a” means the Taishō Tripiṭaka Vol 15, Number 603, Page1, col. a).

Tr Translation

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