

The Yulanpen Sūtra: An Apocryphal Scripture on Filial Piety

One of the earliest and most trenchant criticisms of Buddhism was on moral and cultural grounds, particularly that Buddhism did not teach the cardinal Chinese virtue, filial piety. Not only did Buddhist monks leave their families and disregard their obligations to their parents, but Buddhist teachings on rebirth even allowed that one's parents might be reborn as a "hungry ghost" or even an animal (!) Buddhist responses to this criticism varied from the rarefied (Buddhist monks strive to liberate all beings from suffering) to the more direct assertion that the Buddha did indeed teach methods for honoring ones parents, as is proclaimed in this apocryphal (i.e., written in China) scripture from as late as the sixth century, in which the Buddha teaches a way to deliver one's parents from suffering as an act of filial piety. The Yulanpen sūtra was highly popular in China and became the basis for the Ghost Festival, celebrated today by both Buddhists and Daoists throughout China on the 15th night of the seventh month. On that day, the gates of the hells are opened and offerings are made to one's suffering ancestors.

Thus have I heard.

At one time the Buddha was staying at Anāthapiṇḍika's Jetavana Monastery in Śrāvastī, when Mahāmaudgalyāyana [a disciple of the Buddha] attained the six supernatural powers. He desired to deliver his deceased parents from an evil realm of rebirth in order to repay his debt to them for raising and nurturing him. As he viewed the world of transmigration with his supernatural eyes, he discovered that his deceased mother had been reborn in the realm of hungry ghosts (*pretas*), and as there was nothing to eat there she had wasted away to skin and bones. Stricken with grief, Mahāmaudgalyāyana filled a bowl with rice and approached his mother to offer it. His mother held the bowl in her left hand and took some rice with her right hand, but before the rice reached her mouth it turned into a piece of burning charcoal, and she could not eat it at all. Crying loudly in anguish, Mahāmaudgalyāyana hurriedly returned to the presence of the Buddha and related to him in detail what had happened.

The Buddha said to him, "Your mother's evil karma is so deep-rooted that it is beyond your individual power [to alleviate it]. Although you are filled with filial piety and your cries shake heaven and earth, even the gods of heaven and earth, evil spirits, brahmans, bodhisattvas, and the Four Gate Guardians can do nothing about it. But she can be delivered through the divine power of [all] the monks in the ten directions.

"Now I shall teach you the way of deliverance. I shall enable all suffering beings to be freed from pain and anxiety and from the consequences of their evil karma."

The Buddha said to Mahāmaudgalyāyana, "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when the monks end the summer retreat, for the sake of your parents of the past seven generations and your present suffering parents, you should fill a tray with the world's finest delicacies, together with foods of rich variety and taste and five kinds of greens and cereals, and offer it to the monks in the ten directions. You should also offer them ladles, kettles, basins, perfumed oil, lamps, carpets, and bedding . . .

"Those who make offerings to the monks after the retreat will enable their present parents, their

parents of the past seven generations, and their six close relatives (i.e., fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, wives, and children) to be delivered from the suffering of the three evil realms of rebirth [*the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals*]. Their relatives will in due course be liberated—food and clothing will be given to them spontaneously. If their parents are still alive, they will enjoy the blissful lifespan of one hundred years. If their parents are deceased, their parents of the past seven generations will be born in heaven. They will freely transform themselves to be born in the light of heavenly flowers and receive infinite pleasure.” . . .

The Buddha enjoined men and women of good families, “Disciples of the Buddha who practice filial piety should constantly think of their parents and make offerings to their parents of the past seven generations. Every fifteenth day of the seventh month, out of filial piety recall your parents of the past seven generations and prepare a tray of offerings for the Buddha and the monks in order to repay your debt to your parents. All disciples of the Buddha should uphold this teaching.”

Upon hearing this discourse of the Buddha, Bhikṣu Mahāmaudgalyāyana and the four groups of followers (monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen) were delighted and paid reverence to him.