

FILIAL PARAGONS

CHUNG T' IEN WHO CARRIED LOADS OF GRAIN ON HIS BACK FOR HIS PARENTS

translated by Upasika Kuo Ts'an Nicholson

reviewed by Bhikshuni Heng Tao

edited by Bhikshuni Heng Ch'ih

During the Chou dynasty, there lived a person named Chung T'ien who was of excellent character. His pseudonym was Tzu Lu. He was one of Confucius' most competent disciples.

Chung T'ien came from a very poor family and when his parents grew old, they were entirely dependent upon him alone. Since Chung T'ien had no money, he wanted to work for someone so that he could buy rice for his parents. But since everyone was poor at that time, no one had the money to hire him.

The period of the Warring States (722-484 B.C.) during which he lived was one of much disorder and chaos. There were many wars among the various countries and the people underwent extreme suffering and difficulty. Most of Chung T'ien's neighbors were just as poor as he was and all of them tried to live on wild fruit and vegetables. Rice was very scarce and expensive.

Chung T'ien's family, too, was so poor they didn't even have the money to buy rice. Still, they had to have food to eat, so Chung T'ien went out each day and gathered wild vegetables and fruit for his parents and himself to eat. After a while, though, his parents grew tired of this kind of food and didn't want to eat it at all. They longed for some white rice to eat. It really upset Chung T'ien to see his parents growing thinner and more emaciated each day. He knew he must be filial to his parents and he was beginning to fear for their health and well-being. If they didn't eat, they would soon die.

So Chung T'ien went out and gathered great bunches of wild vegetables and fruit. He set them to dry in the sun and when they were cured, he put the house in order and bade farewell to his parents. He had heard that a hundred miles from where they lived there was someone who would hire him. So, having provided as best he could for his parents, he left them alone and went to find a job.

When he had made enough money, he bought a bag of rice and carried it home on his back to his parents. Seeing what their son had brought them, his parents were very happy and seeing their happiness made Chung T'ien happy too. So he regularly traveled those hundred miles, working until he had enough money for the rice and then bringing to home to his parents--the bag upon his back. Although the journey totally exhausted his strength, he never considered it suffering. When he saw his parents happily eating the rice, his heart was filled with joy.

After several years, one after another, his parents passed away. Looking back on the time he had spent working for money and buying rice to take home to his parents, he felt sad that it was over. Painfully, he left his home and traveled south until he reached the state of Ch'u.

In the beginning, he sold calligraphy to make a living. Each time he spread out his work, scholars praised his skill. Many people had heard the story of his filial conduct in caring for his parents. Even the king respected his learning and virtue and invited him to be an official in the government.

As an official, Chung T'ien was quickly promoted through the ranks. He was well-respected and had elegant clothes to wear and fine food to eat. His entourage alone boasted of over a hundred splendid carriages which surrounded him back and front. With his salary he amassed overflowing storehouses. He had no worries about money any more. Still, even though he had everything anyone could want, he constantly longed for his parents. Each time he entertained guests or hosted a banquet, the tables were filled with delicious food and drink. But he always explained to his friends that it had no flavor for him.

"Although now I have plenty of food to eat and clothes to wear, I would rather my parents were still alive and that I was carrying rice on my back a hundred miles home to them. The joy of that time was full-flavored. Never again will I be able to experience that kind of happiness."

His friends would always try to comfort him saying, "When your parents were alive, you exhausted your strength in filial devotion. Now that they have left this world you are still thinking of them as before. You can truly be praised as a filial son!"

A poem was written to praise his filial devotion, which says:

He carried grain to offer as a delicacy, from a distance of a hundred miles.
Though surrounded by glory now, his parents have long gone.
Yet how fondly he remembers them!

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