

MIN TZU-CH'IENT WAS FILIAL TO HIS STEPMOTHER EVEN WHEN HE HAD ONLY A THIN COAT

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Three thousand years ago in China during the Ch'ou dynasty, there lived a man named Min Tzu-Ch'ien. He lived in the state of Lu, and he was a disciple of Confucius. He underwent a lot of suffering in his childhood. His mother died and his father, being a merchant, had to travel frequently. So, in order to have someone care for his son, his father remarried.

Since he had a new mother, Min Tzu-Ch'ien thought that his days would be happy again. He tried to be very obedient and helpful, but he couldn't please her. His stepmother was narrow-minded, stingy, and mean. She blamed him for everything that went wrong even though it wasn't really his fault. Still, Min Tzu-Ch'ien knew that one had to be filial to one's parents and so he suffered the bitterness without complaining or getting angry about the injustices.

Whenever Min Tzu-Ch'ien's father returned from a business trip, the stepmother would praise the boy, saying what a respectful child he was. But as soon as his father left the house, she would immediately resume her nasty manner towards the boy.

After a while, Min Tzu-Ch'ien's stepmother gave birth to two sons of her own. Of course she was extremely loving to her own two children and treated Min Tzu-Ch'ien even more like a thorn in her side. When winter came, she made coats for the boys to keep them warm in the cold weather. This made Min Tzu-Ch'ien very especially happy. However, although she filled her own sons' jackets with down, she only filled Min Tzu-Ch'ien's coat with grass and rushes. So the garment looked warm, but it wasn't. When winter came, it wasn't much help in keeping out the cold. Still, Min Tzu-Ch'ien didn't say anything.

One morning in the dead of winter, his father was about to leave on a business trip and he asked Min Tzu-Ch'ien to help him drive the carriage. Because Min Tzu-Ch'ien was wearing such a thin coat, he was so cold that he couldn't keep himself from shaking. He couldn't even grasp the reins with his stiff fingers. When his father saw his body trembling he was very disgusted and said, "You're wearing nice warm clothes. Why are you so afraid of the cold that you can't even drive the carriage?" Min Tzu-Ch'ien tried even harder to grasp the reins, but his hands still wouldn't respond, and he began to tremble even more.

Seeing this, his father realized that something strange was going on and decided there must be some reason why Min Tzu-Ch'ien was acting so cold. Then he noticed that the

boy's face was blue from the cold and his fingers were inflexible. When he grabbed onto Min Tzu-Ch'ien's coat, it felt very thick, but as he examined it more closely, he discovered the problem.

"So, it's only stuffed with rushes. How can you stay warm that way!" he yelled in anger. Being a father and realizing that his son was being mistreated caused him a great deal of pain. Shaking with anger, he went to confront his wife.

He examined the coats of the other sons and saw that they were stuffed with warm down. It was all too clear what had been done. He hadn't known that his wife was partial towards her own two sons but continually mistreated her stepson Tzu-Ch'ien. Suddenly it was perfectly evident to the father that during the long periods of time when he was away from home that his son's maltreatment must have been much worse. He was so outraged that he ordered his second wife to leave immediately.

But, when Min Tzu-Ch'ien heard that his stepmother had to leave, he was extremely upset and knelt before his father, pleading, "Father, please don't be angry with our mother. If she stays, only one son will freeze, but if you make her leave, all three sons will not only freeze, we will starve as well! I am only one person. It doesn't matter what happens to me."

His father realized that there was some principle in what his son was saying, and so he agreed to forgive his wife if she would change her ways. The stepmother, after hearing the conversation between father and son, felt very ashamed and repented to her husband. She promised that from that time on she would give her sons and her stepson equally good care and love. From then on the family lived very happily together.

A verse in praise of Min Tzu-Ch'ien's filial conduct says :

The Ch'ien family had a worthy son
And yet he had such a cruel stepmother!
Before the cart he pleaded that his stepmother be allowed to stay,
So that all three children could be protected from the wind and frost.

BUDDHIST SUTRAS

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