

Following the Rules and Expanding Our Love

by Upasika Men Yi-ping

I've been invited to come and speak at Gold Buddha Monastery. Actually I'm a person lacking in virtue, but because the Venerable Master is very kind to me, therefore I've been given this opportunity to share what little I know with you. This afternoon we were in a press conference with a news reporter, and many topics were brought up which gave me food for thought, particularly the issue of people following the rules.

It was said that if people follow the rules, then they won't have any problems like abortions, AIDS, or any of the other kinds of unwholesome trends in today's society. Complying with the rules means abstaining from killing, theft, and sexual misconduct. In fact, if people keep all five of the moral precepts well, then they won't have any of the problems just mentioned. Today I want to discuss this topic: "What's meant by following the rules and what's meant by not following the rules? I also want to discuss the issue of love, because there's a proper kind of love and an improper kind of love.

Confucius said that a human being must embody the quality of humaneness (仁). Humaneness means cherishing everyone with equal affection. It's said that if you respect others, others will respect you; if you cherish others, others will cherish you. How should you love and cherish others? By basing your love on a great spirit of righteousness. Those who are mothers will understand what I mean. A kind mother's love for her children is boundless; it knows no limit. That is a very natural and true kind of love. That love is a very powerful force, and when extended to its fullest potential is able to encompass all living beings.

Lao Dz once said that heaven and earth can be so long-lasting because there is no thought in them for their own survival. Heaven and earth don't think about themselves, rather they generate all things. That's why they can be long-lasting. Parents are also like that in a sense; and if they are able to extend their parental love to encompass all living beings, then that love will be even greater still. But that kind of love has to be very pure. There is also another kind of love, the kind in which one doesn't follow the rules and which is defiling.

I want to dwell longer on a mother's love. A mother's kindness is very profound. When pregnant with child, she carries the baby for nine months. Once the child is born, she suckles the infant for up to three years. During the nine months of the pregnancy a woman never feels comfortable. She's often sick and can't move about easily. Often she can't even eat and drink. And yet once she gives birth to her child, all of her afflictions dissolve, because she rejoices at the birth of this new baby. This is a very natural kind of joy.

As the child grows up, at all times the mother thinks of her child and wants to give him the best of everything. Even when the child goes off to school, the mother pines for her child. The father also works very hard in order to rear his children. Our parents' kindness is deep, indeed!

How do we repay Our parents' kindness? The ancients said, "If you are able to cherish your parents as much as you cherish your children, then you are practicing filial conduct on a large scale." Think of how much you dote on your children. Do you dote on your parents in the same way? Do you remember them in the same way as you care for your own children? If you don't, then you haven't fulfilled your filial duty. There's a common saying:

The seeds of chili peppers are always hot;

The fruit of sour plums are always sour.

If you are filial, you will have filial children. But if you are disrespectful to your parents, your children will be disrespectful to you. It's all connected.

Yesterday we were reciting the *Earth Store Sutra*, because it was that Bodhisattva's birthday. Earth Store Bodhisattva was able to save his mother, who had fallen into the hells. But how do you plan to save your parents? This is a critical question. Take a good look at yourself and ask yourself: "Why do I have a temper? Why do I have afflictions and get fiery and agitated?" You say, "It's the nature I inherited from my father and mother." Yes, it's inherited from your present set of parents, but it's also inherited from your ancestors reaching back to beginningless time. Our souls are like pieces of cloth, very white to begin with. But with each rebirth we undergo, our souls get more and more tainted, just as a white cloth gets darker and darker after each use.

This means that we become more and more defiled by the unwholesome traits and character flaws that we develop through successive rebirths. Even identical twins have distinct personalities, but although they look very much the same, no twins are exactly alike. That's because each person comes with his own set of circumstances. From former causes come about present results, and for each person they are different. If we wish to rescue our parents who might be suffering, we have to understand this point very thoroughly.

The only way to truly save our parents is to actually transform the unwholesome aspects of our own characters. When we manage to clean up our own characters, we will then be able to save our parents. It's not known where our parents are. Can you guarantee that they are not suffering in the unintermittent hell? That hell is called unintermittent because it's crowded at all times. There's no interruption in time or space. One person fills that hell; ten thousand people fill the same hell. How do we know that our parents from beginningless time are not suffering in that hell? Therefore we should bring forth the resolve to pull our parents out of suffering. If we have forgotten our parents, then we have forgotten our roots--our foundation. But if we always remember our parents and bring forth the resolve to save them, we can expand that kind of affection. It is said that filiality is the root of virtue, and the teaching is born from that.

The Classic of Filiality, one of the major Confucian texts, has eighteen chapters, and it tells chapter by chapter how to practice filial piety. It begins like this: Confucius was having a conversation with his disciple Dzend Shen, who was standing by his side. Confucius said, "The kings of old had an essential path. Do you know what it is?"

Dzend Shen knelt down and said, "I am very stupid. How could I know what it is?"

Then Confucius said, "Filiality is the root of virtue, and the teaching springs from it."

In teaching, filiality should be used as the foundation. Everyone in the world can be taught by using the principle of filiality.

Then Confucius goes on to explain what filiality implies. He says, "My body, my hair, and my skin were given me by my parents. I wouldn't dare to damage them. That is the beginning of filial conduct."

What does it mean not to damage your body? Does it simply mean not to fall and twist your ankle? No. It means you don't want to damage your virtue in the least bit. You want to keep an immaculate reputation and value your own person. You do not want to become sullied in any way. Regarding women, this means being chaste. It means following the rules. People must honor their own characters. This is like using a grid to follow--a set standard not to be deviated from. You must be incorruptible

and clean. You don't want to be greedy for other people's money, not even a single dollar. You don't want to give people cause for pointing their finger at you saying, "This person's got a big problem." You want to be flawless, so that they won't find any mistakes in you. And you pursue this process of self-purification by daily examining yourself. You search your conscience and find where you are at fault, and then you go on to change those mistakes.

For example, we could all ask ourselves, are we really taking care of our bodies? If people engage in promiscuous behavior, they are damaging their bodies, and thus they are not being filial. If we can maintain our bodies and conduct ourselves with integrity, then at least we will be able to face our parents. We start by being filial; then we progress to serving our rulers; and we culminate in being able to stand firm, thus establishing our own destiny.

Filiality starts with not damaging one's person and culminates in honoring one's family, enabling one's parents to be pleased with one and one's family to be honored by one's conduct. If you want to liberate your parents from beginningless lives past, you have to do it with a cheerful attitude. If you are always angry at other people or at your own children, you are not being filial.

This seems like a difficult problem, but actually it isn't. The freeway looks so large, and there are so many cars going on it, however the cars stay in their own lanes. If they didn't, then the cars would collide into one another. Cars always keep to their own lanes. They stick to the rules of the road. It's the same way when it comes to walking the Path. If you know what rules apply to you, and you stick to them, fulfilling your present responsibilities by perform-your duties, you will be following the rules. We are not talking about anything esoteric or beyond human understanding here. If you want to walk the path, it is right there before you.

And so, you should always reflect upon the kindness of your parents. Even when you are in your seventies, you should still reflect upon this. Ask yourself: "Am I trying to fulfill my filial duty? Am I only thinking about my own children, without considering my parents?" If the answer to that question is yes, then it won't work. If you are sixty years old and you feel you haven't fulfilled your filial duty, you still have to change yourself. If you are fifty, forty, all the way down to if you have just begun to understand things, you still have to renew yourself. We reform ourselves by keeping our bodies pure and our characters lofty. In order to develop an excellent personality, we must get rid of all our greed, anger, and stupidity. Greed, anger, and stupidity are the stains that taint the white cloth of our character. Every time we go through another rebirth, our souls get more stained by greed, anger, and stupidity. If we really wish to save our ancestors from beginningless time past, we have to pull the flaws in our characters out by the roots. Get rid of our anger, our tempers, at the most basic level. Then we will be truly filial to our parents. That is called "extensive filiality".

Everyone's disposition is different, but each of us needs to bring forth a transformation in our inherited nature and get rid of our bad habits. If we have a big temper, we need to learn to be more gentle and yielding.

The Doctrine of the Mean says, "That which heaven confers is called the nature." This refers to our intrinsically good nature. "To guide that nature, is to walk the Path." How do you get rid of greed, anger, and stupidity? You do it by owning up to your debts. Whatever you encounter in your everyday life, even the most unpleasant experiences, you should realize is your paying back of debts. These are good tests for you to see whether you will allow your mind to be upset.

Confucius stood firm when he was thirty. At the age of forty, Mencius did not allow his mind to move. His mind simply was not thrown off in the face of external conditions. Ask yourself, "Do I still get angry? Do I still get disturbed?" Getting angry is a small thing, but if because of your anger you cause your parents not to be saved--that is an important matter. For that reason, we should quickly get rid of

our anger. When you are faced with a test, immediately snap yourself out of the rut you are usually in--the temper that you are trapped in.

For example, if you complain about your children not being filial, you should understand that you brought that upon yourself. All of our experiences, whatever they are, are brought about by ourselves. Think it over, when you were carrying your child in your womb, what were you like? And what has your own filial conduct towards your parents been like? If you were not filial to your parents, don't expect your children to be filial to you. Look for the deficiencies in yourself, not in other people. Confucius said that everyone has his or her own role. A parent, a father or mother, should abide in kindness, whereas a child should abide in filial conduct. Even if your parents are crochety and irritable, still you have to be patient with them. Think back to the times when you were a child having a temper tantrum. Your parents were able to tolerate you and were very patient with you. Now, as your parents are growing old, maybe sometimes they have little idiosyncracies. Are you going to get irritated with them? To be filial means not getting angry--not at anyone, not only not at your parents. "Even if someone spits in my face, I just let it dry. This way I will save my own energy, and the other person won't get upset. This kind of paramita is, the jewel within the wonderful. Once we have heard this good news, why worry about not accomplishing the Way?"