

# **THE SUTRA ABOUT THE DEEP KINDNESS OF PARENTS AND THE DIFFICULTY OF REPAYING IT (Filial Piety Sutra)**

*Translated by: Upasika Terri Nicholson*

*Reviewed by: Bhikshuni Heng Tao*

*Edited by: Bhikshuni Heng Ch'ih and*

*Upasika Susuan Rounds*

*Certified by: Venerable Abbot Hua and Bhikshuni Heng Tao*

Thus I have heard, at one time, the Buddha dwelt at Shravasti, in the Jeta Grove, in the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary, together with a gathering of great Bhikshus, twelve hundred fifty in all, and with all of the Bodhisattvas, thirty-eight thousand in all.

At that time, the World Honored One led the great assembly on a walk toward the south. Suddenly they came upon a pile of bones beside the road. The World Honored One turned to face them, placed his five limbs on the ground, and bowed respectfully.

Ananda put his palms together and asked the World Honored One, "The Tathagatha is the Great Teacher of the Triple Realm and the compassionate father of beings of the four kinds of births. He has the respect and reverence of the entire assembly. What is the reason that he now bows to a pile of dried bones?"

The Buddha told Ananda, "Although all of you are my foremost disciples and have been members of the Sangha for a long time, you still have not achieved far-reaching understanding. This pile of bones could have belonged to my ancestors from former lives. They could have been my parents in many past lives. That is the reason I now bow to them." The Buddha continued speaking to Ananda. "These bones we are looking at can be divided into two groups. One group is composed of the bones of men, which are heavy and white in color. The other group is composed of the bones of women, which are light and black in color."

Ananda said to the Buddha, "World Honored One, when men are alive in the world they adorn their bodies with robes, belts, shoes, hats and other fine attire, so that they clearly assume a male appearance. When women are alive, they put on cosmetics, perfumes, powders, and elegant fragrances to adorn their bodies, so that they clearly assume a female appearance. Yet, once men and women die, all that is left are their bones. How does one tell them apart? Please teach us how you are able to distinguish them."

The Buddha answered Ananda, "If when men are in the world, they enter temples, listen to explanations of Sutras and Vinaya texts, make obeisance to the Triple Jewel, and recite the Buddha's names, then when they die their bones will be heavy and white in color. Most women in the world have little wisdom and are saturated with emotion. They give birth to and raise children, feeling that this is their duty. Each child relies on its mother's milk for life and nourishment, and that milk is a transformation of the mother's blood. Each child drinks one thousand two hundred gallons of its mother's milk. Because of this drain on the mother's body whereby the child takes milk for its nourishment, the mother becomes worn and haggard and so her bones turn black in color and are light in weight."

When Ananda heard these words, he felt a pain in his heart as if he had been stabbed and wept silently. He said to the World Honored One, "How can one repay one's mother's kindness and virtue?"

The Buddha told Ananda, "Listen well, and I will explain it for you in detail. The fetus grows in its mother's womb for ten lunar months. What bitterness she goes through while it dwells there! In the first month of pregnancy, the life of the fetus is as precarious as a dewdrop on grass: how likely that it will not last from morning to evening but will evaporate by mid-day!

"During the second lunar month, the embryo congeals like curds. In the third month it is like coagulated blood. During the fourth month of pregnancy the fetus begins to assume a slightly human form. During the fifth month in the womb, the child's five limbs--two legs, two arms, and a head--start to take shape. In the sixth lunar month of pregnancy, the child begins to develop the essences of the six sense faculties: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. During the seventh month, the three hundred sixty bones and joints are formed, and the eighty-four thousand hair pores are also complete. In the eight lunar month of the pregnancy the intellect and the nine apertures are formed. By the ninth month the fetus has learned to assimilate the different nutrients of the foods it eats. For example, it can assimilate the essence of peaches, pears, certain plant roots and the five kinds of grains.

"Inside the mother's body, the solid internal organs, used for storing, hang downward, while the hollow internal organs, used for processing, spiral upward. These can be likened to three mountains which arise from the face of the earth. We can call these mountains Mount Sumeru, Karma Mountain, and Blood Mountain. These analogous mountains come together and form a single range in a pattern of upward peaks and downward valleys. So, too, the coagulation of the mother's blood from her internal organs forms a single substance, which becomes the child's food.

During the tenth month of pregnancy, the body of the fetus is completed and ready to be born. If the child is extremely filial, it will emerge with palms joined together in respect and the birth will be peaceful and auspicious. The mother will remain uninjured by the birth and will not suffer pain. However, if the child is extremely rebellious in nature, to the extent that it is capable of committing the five rebellious acts, then it will injure its mother's womb, rip apart its mother's heart and liver, or get entangled in its mother's bones. The birth will feel like the slices of a thousand knives or like ten thousand sharp swords stabbing her heart. Those are the agonies involved in the birth of a defiant and rebellious child.

To explain more clearly, there are ten types of kindness bestowed by the mother on the child:

The first is the kindness of providing protection and care while the child is in the womb.

The second is the kindness of bearing suffering during the birth.

The third is the kindness of forgetting all the pain once the child has been born.

The fourth is the kindness of eating the bitter herself and saving the sweet for the child.

The fifth is the kindness of moving the child to a dry place and lying in the wet herself.

The sixth is the kindness of suckling the child at her breast and nourishing and bringing up the child.

The seventh is the kindness of washing away the unclean.

The eighth is the kindness of always thinking of the child when it has travelled far.

The ninth is the kindness of deep care and devotion.

The tenth is the kindness of ultimate pity and sympathy.

## **1. THE KINDNESS OF PROVIDING PROTECTION AND CARE WHILE THE CHILD IS IN THE WOMB**

*The causes and conditions from accumulated kalpas grows heavy,  
Until in this life the child ends up in its mother's womb.  
As the months pass, the five vital organs develop;  
Within seven weeks the six sense organs start to grow.  
The mother's body becomes as heavy as a mountain;  
The stillness and movements of the fetus are like a kalpic wind disaster.  
The mother's fine clothes no longer hang properly,  
And so her mirror gathers dust.*

## **2. THE KINDNESS OF BEARING SUFFERING DURING BIRTH**

*The pregnancy lasts for ten lunar months  
And culminates in difficult labor at the approach of the birth.  
Meanwhile, each morning the mother is seriously ill  
And during every day is drowsy and sluggish.  
Her fear and agitation are difficult to describe;  
Grieving and tears fill her breast.  
She painfully tells her family  
That she is only afraid that death will overtake her.*

## **3. THE KINDNESS OF FORGETTING ALL THE PAIN ONCE THE CHILD HAS BEEN BORN**

*On the day the compassionate mothers bears the child,  
Her five organs all open wide,  
Leaving her totally exhausted in body and mind.  
The blood flows as from a slaughtered lamb;  
Yet, upon hearing that the child is healthy,  
She is overcome with redoubling joy,  
But after the joy, the grief returns,  
And the agony wrenches her very insides,*

## **4. THE KINDNESS OF EATING THE BITTER HERSELF AND SAVING THE SWEET FOR THE CHILD**

*The kindness of both parents is profound and deep,*

*Their care and devotion never cease.  
Never resting, the mother saves the  
sweet for the child,  
And without complaint she swallows the  
bitter herself.  
Her love is weighty and her emotion  
difficult to bear;  
Her kindness is deep and so is her  
compassion.  
Only wanting the child to get its fill,  
The compassionate mother doesn't speak  
of her own hunger.*

#### **5. THE KINDNESS OF MOVING THE CHILD TO A DRY PLACE AND LYING IN THE WET HERSELF**

*The mother is willing to be wet  
So that the child can be dry.  
With her two breasts she satisfies its  
hunger and thirst;  
Covering it with her sleeve, she protects  
it from the wind and cold.  
In kindness, her head rarely rests  
on the pillow,  
And yet she does this happily,  
So long as the child is comfortable,  
The kind mother seeks no solace for herself.*

#### **6. THE KINDNESS OF SUCKLING THE CHILD AT HER BREAST AND NOURISHING AND BRINGING UP THE CHILD**

*The kind mother is like the great earth.  
The stern father is like the encompassing  
heaven  
One covers from above' the other supports  
from below.  
The kindness of parents is such that  
They know no hatred or anger toward  
their offspring,  
And are not displeased, even if the  
child is born crippled.  
After the mother carries the child in  
her womb and gives birth to it,  
The parents care for and protect it  
together until the end of their days.*

#### **7. KINDNESS OF WASHING AWAY THE UNCLEAN**

*Originally she had a pretty face and a  
beautiful body,  
Her spirit was strong and vibrant.  
Her eyebrows were like fresh green  
willows,  
And her complexion would have put a  
red rose to shame.*

*But her kindness is so deep she will  
forego a beautiful face.  
Although washing away the filth injures  
her constitution,  
The kind mother acts solely for the  
sake of her sons and daughters  
And willingly allows her beauty to fade.*

#### **8. THE KINDNESS OF ALWAYS THINKING OF THE CHILD WHEN IT HAS TRAVELLED FAR**

*The death of loved ones is difficult  
to endure.  
But separation is also painful.  
When the child travels afar,  
The mother worries in her village.  
From morning until night, her heart is  
with her child,  
And a thousand tears fall from her eyes.  
Like the monkey weeping silently in  
love for her child,  
Bit-by-bit her heart is broken.*

#### **9. THE KINDNESS OF DEEP CARE AND DEVOTION**

*How heavy is the parents' kindness and  
emotional concern!  
Their kindness is deep and difficult to  
repay.  
Willingly they undergo suffering on their  
child's behalf.  
If the child toils, the parents are  
uncomfortable.  
If they hear that he has travelled afar,  
They worry that at night he will have  
to lie in the cold.  
Even a moment's pain suffered by  
their sons or daughters  
Will cause the parents sustained distress.*

#### **10. THE KINDNESS OF ULTIMATE PITY AND SYMPATHY**

*The kindness of parents is profound and  
important.  
Their tender concern never ceases.  
From the moment they awake each day,  
their thoughts are with their children.  
Whether the children are near or far away,  
the parents think of them often.  
Even if a mother lives for a hundred  
years,  
She will constantly worry about her  
eighty-year-old child!  
Do you wish to know when such kindness  
and love ends?*

*It doesn't even begin to dissipate  
until her life is over.*

The Buddha told Ananda, "When I contemplate living beings, I see that although they are born as human beings, nonetheless, they are stupid and dull in their thoughts and actions. They don't consider their parents' great kindness and virtue. They are disrespectful and turn their backs on kindness and what is right. They lack humaneness and are neither filial nor compliant.

For ten months while the mother is with child, she feels discomfort each time she rises, as if she were lifting a heavy burden. Like a chronic invalid, she is unable to keep her food and drink down. When the ten months have passed and the time comes for the birth, she undergoes all kinds of pain and suffering so that the child can be born. She is afraid of her own mortality, like a pig or lamb waiting to be slaughtered. Then the blood flows all over the ground. These are the sufferings she undergoes.

Once the child is born, she saves what is sweet for him and swallows what is bitter herself. She carries the child and nourishes it, washing away its filth. There is no toil or difficulty that she does not willingly undertake for the sake of her child. She endures both cold and heat and never even mentions what she has gone through. She gives the dry place to her child and sleeps in the dump herself. For three years she nourishes the baby with milk, which is transformed from the blood of her own body.

Parents continually instruct and guide their children in the ways of propriety and morality as the youngsters mature into adults. They arrange marriages for them and provide them with property and wealth or deviseways to get it for them. They take this responsibility and trouble upon themselves with tremendous zeal and toil, never speaking about their care and kindness.

When a son or daughter becomes ill, parents are worried and afraid to the point that they may even grow ill themselves. They remain by the child's side providing constant care, and only when the child gets well are the parents happy once again. In this way, they care for and raise their children with the sustained hope that their off-spring will soon grow to be mature adults.

How sad that all too often the children are unfilial in return! In speaking with relatives whom they should honor, the children display no compliance. When they ought to be polite, they have no manners. They glare at those whom they should venerate, and insult their uncles and aunts. They scold their siblings and destroy any family feeling that might have existed among them. Children like that have no respect or sense of propriety.

Children may be well taught, but if they are unfilial, they will not heed the instructions or obey the rules. Rarely will they rely upon the guidance of their parents. They are contrary and rebellious when interacting with their brothers. They come and go from home without ever reporting to their parents. Their speech and actions are very arrogant and they act on impulse without consulting others. Such children ignore the admonishments and punishments set down by their parents and pay no regard to their uncles' warnings. Yet, at the same time, they are immature and always need to be looked after and protected by their elders.

As such children grow up, they become more and more obstinate and uncontrollable. They are entirely ungrateful and totally contrary. They are defiant and hateful, rejecting both family and friends. They befriend evil people and under their influence soon adopt the same kinds of bad habits. They come to take what is false to be true.

Such children may be enticed by others to leave their families and run away to live in other towns, thus denouncing their parents and rejecting their native town. They may become salesmen or civil servants who languish in comfort and luxury. They may marry in haste and that new bond provides yet another obstruction which prevents them from returning home for long periods of time.

Or, in going to live in other towns, these children may be incautious and find themselves plotted against or accused of doing evil. They may be unfairly locked up in prison. Or they may meet with illness and become enmeshed in disasters and hardships, subject to the terrible pain of poverty, starvation, and emaciation. Yet no one there will care for them. Being scorned and disliked by others, they will be abandoned on the street. In such circumstances, their lives may come to an end. No one bothers to try to save them. Their bodies swell up, rot, decay, and are exposed to the sun and blown away by the wind. The white bones entirely disintegrate and scatter as these children come to their final rest in the dirt of some other town. These children will never again have a happy reunion with their relatives and kin. Nor will they ever know how their ageing parents mourn for and worry about them. The parents may grow blind from weeping or become sick from extreme grief and despair. Constantly dwelling on the memory of their children, they may pass away, but even when they become ghosts, their souls still cling to this attachment and are unable to let it go.

Others of these unfilial children may not aspire to learning, but instead become interested in strange and bizarre doctrines. Such children may be villainous, coarse, and stubborn, delighting in practices that are utterly devoid of benefit. They may become involved in fights and thefts, setting themselves at odds with the town by drinking and gambling. As if their own debauchery were not enough, they drag their brothers into it as well, to the further distress of their parents.

If such children do live at home, they leave early in the morning and do not return until late at night. Never do they ask about the welfare of their parents or make sure that they don't suffer from heat or cold. They do not inquire after their parents' well being in the morning or the evening, nor even on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month. In fact, it never occurs to these unfilial children to ever ask whether their parents have slept comfortably or rested peacefully. Such children are simply not concerned in the least about their parents' well being. When the parents of such children grow old and their appearance becomes more and more withered and emaciated, they are made to feel ashamed to be seen in public and are subjected to abuse and oppression.

Such unfilial children may end up with a father who is a widower or a mother who is a widow. The solitary parents are left alone in empty houses, feeling like guests in their own homes. They may endure cold and hunger, but no one takes heed of their plight. They may weep incessantly from morning to night, sighing and lamenting. It's only right that children should provide for ageing parents with food and drink of delicious flavours, but irresponsible children are sure to overlook their duties. If they ever do attempt to help their parents out in any way, they feel embarrassed and are afraid people will laugh at them. Yet, such offspring may lavish wealth and food on their own wives and children, disregarding the toil and weariness involved in doing so. Other unfilial offspring may be so intimidated by their wives that they go along with all of their wishes. But when appealed to by their parents and elders, they ignore them and are totally unfazed by their pleas.

It may be the case that daughters were quite filial to their parents before their own marriages, but that they become progressively rebellious after they marry. This situation may be so extreme that if their parents show even the slightest signs of displeasure, the daughters become hateful and vengeful toward them. Yet they bear their husband's scolding and beatings with sweet tempers, even though their spouses are outsiders with other surnames and family ties. The emotional bonds between such couples are deeply entangled, and yet those daughters hold their parents at a distance. They may follow their husbands and move to other towns, leaving their parents behind entirely. They do not long for them and simply cut off all communication with them. When the parents continue to hear no word from their daughters, they feel incessant anxiety. They become so fraught with sorrow that it is as if they were suspended upside down. Their every thought is of seeing their children, just as one who is thirsty longs for something to drink. Their kind thoughts for their offspring never cease.

The virtue of one's parents' kindness is boundless and limitless. If one has made the mistake of being unfilial, how difficult it is to repay that kindness!"

At that time, upon hearing the Buddha speak about the depth of one's parents' kindness, everyone in the Great Assembly threw themselves on the ground and began beating their breasts and striking themselves until all their hairpores flowed with blood. Some fell unconscious to the ground, while others stamped their feet in grief. It was a long time before they could control themselves. With loud voices they lamented, "Such suffering! What suffering! How painful! How painful! We are all offenders. We are criminals who have never awakened, like those who travel in a dark night. We have just now understood our offenses and our very insides are torn to bits. We only hope that the World Honored One will pity us and save us. Please tell us how we can repay the deep kindness of our parents!"

At that time the Tathagata used eight kinds of profoundly deep and pure sounds to speak to the assembly. "All of you should know this. I will now explain for you the various aspects of this matter.

"If there were a person who carries his father on his left shoulder and his mother on his right shoulder until his bones were ground to powder by their weight as they bore through to the marrow, and if that person were to circumambulate Mount Sumem for a hundred thousand kalpas until the blood that flowed out from his feet covered his ankles, that person would still not have repayed the deep kindness of his parents.

"If there were a person who, during the period of a kalpa fraught with famine and starvation, sliced the flesh off his own body to feed his parents and did this as many times as there are dust motes as he passed through hundreds of thousands of kalpas, that person still would not have repayed the deep kindness of his parents.

"If there were a person who, for the sake of his parents, took a sharp knife and cut out his eyes and made an offering of them to the Tathagatas, and continued to do that for hundreds of thousands of kalpas, that person still would not have repayed the deep kindness of his parents.

"If there were a person who, for the sake of his father and mother, used a sharp knife to cut out his heart and liver so that the blood flowed and covered the ground and if he continued in this way to do this for hundreds of thousands of kalpas, never once complaining about the pain, that person still would not have repayed the deep kindness of his parents.

"If there were a person who, for the sake of his parents, took a hundred thousand swords and stabbed his body with them all at once so that they entered one side and came out the other, and if he continued in this way to do this for hundreds of thousands of kalpas, that person still would not have repayed the deep kindness of his parents.

"If there were a person who, for the sake of his parents, beat his bones down to the marrow and continued in this way to do this for hundreds of thousands of kalpas, that person still would not have repayed the deep kindness of his parents.

"If there were a person who, for the sake of his parents, swallowed molten iron pellets and continued in this way to do this for hundreds of thousands of kalpas, that person still would not have repayed the deep kindness of his parents."

At that time, upon hearing the Buddha speak about the kindness and virtue of parents, everyone in the Great Assembly wept silent tears and felt searing pain in their hearts. They reflected deeply, simultaneously brought forth shame and said to the Buddha, " World Honored One, how can we repay the deep kindness of our parents?"

The Buddha replied, "Disciples of the Buddha, if you wish to repay your parents' kindness, write out this Sutra on their behalf. Recite this Sutra on their behalf. Repent of transgressions and offenses on their behalf. For the sake of your parents, make offerings to the Triple Jewel. For the sake of your parents, hold the precept of pure eating. For the sake of your parents, practice giving and cultivate blessings. If you are able

to do these things, you are being a filial child. If you do not do these things, you are a person destined for the hells."

The Buddha told Ananda, "If a person is not filial, when his life ends and his body decays, he will fall into the Spaceless, Avici Hell. This great hell is eighty thousand yojanas in circumference and is surrounded on all four sides by iron walls. Above, it is covered over by nets, and the ground is also made of iron. A mass of fire burns fiercely, while thunder roars and bright bolts of lightning set things afire. Molten brass and iron fluids are poured over the offenders' bodies. Brass dogs and iron snakes constantly spew out fire and smoke which burns the offenders and broils their flesh and fat to a pulp.

"Oh, such suffering! Difficult to take, difficult to bear! There are poles, hooks, spears, and lances, iron halberds and iron chains, iron hammers, and iron awls. Wheels of iron knives rain down from the air. The offender is chopped, hacked, or stabbed, and undergoes these cruel punishments for kalpas without respite.

Then they enter the remaining hells, where their heads are capped with fiery basins, while iron wheels roll over their bodies, passing both horizontally and vertically until their guts are ripped open and their bones and flesh are squashed to a pulp. Within a single day, they experience myriad births and myriad deaths. Such sufferings are a result of committing the five rebellious acts and of being unfilial when one was alive."

At that time, upon hearing the Buddha speak about the virtue of parents' kindness, everyone in the Great Assembly wept sorrowfully and addressed the Tathagata, "On this day, how can we repay the deep kindness of our parents?"

The Buddha said, "Disciples of the Buddha, if you wish to repay their kindness, then for the sake of your parents print this Sutra. This is truly repaying their kindness. If one can print one copy, then one will get to see one Buddha. If one can print ten copies, then one will get to see ten Buddhas. If one can print one hundred copies, then one will get to see one hundred Buddhas. If one can print one thousand copies, then one will get to see one thousand Buddhas. If one can print ten thousand copies, then one will get to see ten thousand Buddhas. This is the power derived when good people print Sutras. All Buddhas will forever protect such people with their kindness and can immediately cause the parents of such people to be reborn in the heavens, to enjoy all kinds of happiness, and to leave behind the sufferings of the hells."

At that time, Ananda and the rest of the Great Assembly--the asuras, garudas, kinnaras, mahoragas, people, non-people, and others, as well as the gods, dragons, yakshas, gandarvas, wheel-turning sage kings, and all the lesser kings--felt all the hairs on their bodies stand on end when they heard what the Buddha had said. They wept grievously and were unable to stop themselves. Each one of them made a vow saying, "All of us, from now until the exhaustion of the bounds of the future, would rather that our bodies be pulverized into small particles of dust for a hundred thousand kalpas, than to ever go against the Thus Come One's sagely teachings. We would rather that our tongues be plucked out, so that they would extend for a full yojana, and that for a hundred thousand kalpas an iron plough would run over them; we would rather have a hundred-thousand bladed wheel roll freely over our bodies, than ever go against the Tathagata's sagely teachings. We would rather that our bodies be ensnared in an iron net for a hundred thousand kalpas, than ever go against the Tathagata's sagely teachings. We would rather that for a hundred thousand kalpas our bodies would be chopped, hacked, mutilated, and chiselled into ten million pieces so that our skin, flesh, joints, and bones would be completely disintegrated, than ever go against the Tathagata's sagely teachings."

At that time, Ananda, with a dignity and a sense of peace, rose from his seat and asked the Buddha, "World Honored One, what name shall this Sutra have when we accord with it and uphold it?"

The Buddha told Ananda, "This Sutra is called **THE SUTRA ABOUT THE DEEP KINDNESS OF PARENTS AND THE DIFFICULTY OF REPAYING IT**. Use this name when you accord with it and uphold it."

At that time, the Great Assembly, the gods, humans, asuras, and the others, hearing what the Buddha has said, were completely delighted. They believed it, received it, and offered up their conduct in accord with it, and then bowed and withdrew.

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