

Filial Piety: A Form of Spiritual Cultivation

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)] In learning to be like the Buddha, we have to first nurture filial piety, which is to respect and take care of our parents. A heart of filial piety is fundamental to spiritual cultivation. This sutra story is about a young beggar and his dilemma of cultivation.

During the Buddha's time, there was a poor young man who had neither land nor money, but had aged and ill parents to look after. He dedicated all his time toward caring for his parents and begging for food to keep them nourished. He heard that the Buddha gave teachings on spiritual cultivation and charitable giving, and he pondered where he was heading in life, "I have no skills to make a living. I beg on the streets to keep myself and my parents alive. I spend all my time caring for my parents; I have no time and energy for spiritual cultivation, let alone finding the means to give. What will my future be like?"

So one day, he went to the Buddha for guidance. He bowed reverently and told him of his dilemma, "All my time is spent taking care of my parents. They are weak and ill, and I need to make sure that they have enough to eat. Oh Buddha, I have no time for spiritual cultivation, and no means of giving, how do I create blessings when I have nothing to give?"

Hearing his dire situation, the Buddha comforted him. "You are already creating blessings!"

The young man, who had been depending on the generosity of others to feed his parents, was puzzled. He asked doubtfully, "How could that be? I can't even work to support my parents. I've been supporting them through begging."

The Buddha then explained, "Besides begging, you spend all your time with your parents, caring for them with respect and affection: this, in itself, is a form of spiritual cultivation. Unlike some who might abandon their parents in such a situation, you have not abandoned them. You are accumulating merits. Also, by begging from people to feed your parents, you have shown them what filial piety is. You brought out their sympathy and gave them a chance to give. When you beg for food, you also form good affinities with people."

"So," the Buddha further convinced the young man, "in showing everyone how you practice being filial, which is your way of spiritual cultivation, you are creating great blessings for your future lives. That's why in your future lives, not only will you be wealthy, you'll have the means to help others and do charitable deeds. If you care for those in need the way you care for your parents now, you'll be able to help even more people. That's walking the Bodhisattva Path, which leads to a bright future. Right now, you're paving your Bodhisattva Path with your filial piety."

The young man was very happy to learn that he was already engaged in spiritual cultivation, and creating blessings. He finally understood that even begging for food can bring others joy and an opportunity to give. He felt comforted in knowing this, and, encouraged to continue

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caring for his parents, he would continue to beg for food with respect as he had done in the past.

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If we want to cultivate spiritually, we need to practice filial piety toward our parents. By doing so, we develop respect for everyone, which is essential for spiritual cultivation. When we have the wealth or the strength to help people in need, we strive to care for them with the same kind of respect we would show our parents. This is how one walks the Bodhisattva Path.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks

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