Filial Piety

In many cultures, filial piety is ranked at the top or near the top of human virtues. Religious and cultural writings have long identified filial piety as a basic and important character trait.

The question is: is this trait inborn in all humans, or does it need to be cultivated? If we all agree that little babies are greedy and selfish beings who scream and cry to express their needs (“ Waaah… change my diapers!.... Waaaahhh! Feed me!..... Waaaah…. Hold me!.... etc” ) then we know for sure that kindness to parents is certainly not inborn.

Therefore children must be taught how to be kind to their parents. I have yet to see any school include Filial Piety Training in their character education curriculum, if they have one. So I am afraid, Dear Parents, that this is something you will have to do yourself. This is a very counter-intuitive task, because mothers, who shoulder the majority of instructional duties in the home, tend to “love” through nurturing. This means providing food, security feelings, hygiene and so on. Mothers have a very hard time withholding these from their children, especially in their toddler years. This by the way, has led to the frazzled mother syndrome, a syndrome featuring a mother who claims the child is eating nothing, when you can see a very healthy toddler running around happily while the mother seems haggard and overwrought with nerves.

When training your child to be filial, you need to not only teach the theoretical ideas but also practice constantly the principle that his/her parents always come first.

Let’s take for example the case of a mother peeling an orange for her little girl. She finishes peeling the orange, pulls open the entire orange to make it easy to pull out slices, and hands the whole thing to the little girl. Now, normally, a child will then pull out a slice from the orange and start eating. If the mother is constantly on the alert about teaching filial piety, then at this point, she should stop the child and ask, “Who should get the first slice?” Once the child has responded correctly (with hints or correct answers if needed) that her mother should get the first slice, then the child is to actually give a slice to her mother.

Here is where you have to work even harder. The mother must accept the slice of orange, and actually eat it. We all know you can easily get and peel yourself another orange. That is not the point. The child must realize that offering the first slice is not a symbolical gesture but a real one. Her own orange will be diminished by one slice and that is a fact she must accept. If the father or a grandparent is present, then she must go according to age and position and offer a slice to all. Too bad if she is left with half an orange only for herself.

Now, the final step is to reward the child for this correct good deed by giving her what she yearns for the most: parental love and appreciation. Give her a hug, a smile, a kiss, or whatever conveys the message.

It’s really very easy, but this needs to happen constantly, 24/7. Apply the principle to any activity. Never start eating lunch/dinner until the oldest person eats first. If you are attending a buffet style dinner function, the children have the job of bringing a plate to the elders. If you are walking uphill, getting on a bus, or crossing the street, the children cannot run ahead but must help the elders by holding their arms.

If you give proper training on filial piety, then when they grow up, they will not expect life or other people to hand them everything on a silver platter. They will respect elders and superiors, and never take anything or anyone for granted.