


Liaofan's Four Lessons

Yuan Liaofan

Translated by Silent Voices

Revised 3rd Edition



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The First Lesson: Learning to Change Destiny

My father passed away when I was young. My mother persuaded me to learn medicine instead of studying and passing the imperial examinations because it would be a good way to support myself while helping others. Perhaps, I could even become famous through my medical skills; thus fulfilling my father's aspiration for me.

One day, I met an elderly but distinguished looking gentleman at the Compassionate Cloud Temple. He had a long beard and the look of a sage. I immediately paid my respects to him. He told me: "You are destined to be a government official. Next year, you will attain the rank of Learned First Level Scholar.

Why are you not studying for the examination?” I told him the reason.

I asked the elderly gentleman for his name and where he was from. He replied: “My family name is Kong and I am from Yunnan province. I have inherited a very sacred and accurate text on astrology and prediction. The text, written by Shaozi, is called the *Imperial Standard of Governing the World*. By my calculations, I am supposed to pass it on to you and teach you how to use it.”

I invited Mr. Kong to my home and told my mother about him. She said to treat him well. As we tested Mr. Kong's ability at prediction, we found that he was always correct whether it was for big events or for minor everyday matters. I became convinced of what he had said and again began to think of studying for

the examinations. I consulted my cousin who recommended Mr. Yu Haigu, who was teaching at the home of a friend, and became Mr. Yu's student.

Mr. Kong then did some more calculations for me. He told me that as a scholar, I would be placed fourteenth in the county examination, seventy-first in the regional examination, and ninth in the provincial examination. The following year, I placed exactly where Mr. Kong had said for all three examinations.

I then asked him to make predictions for my entire life. Mr. Kong's calculations showed that I would pass such and such a test in such and such a year, the year that I would become a civil scholar, and the year that I would receive a promotion to become an Impe-

rial Scholar. And lastly, I would be appointed as a magistrate in Sichuan province.

After holding that position for three and a half years, I would then retire and return home. I would die at the age of fifty-three, on the 14th day of the eighth month between one to three o'clock in the morning. Unfortunately, I would not have a son. I carefully recorded and remembered everything that he said.

The outcome of every examination turned out exactly as predicted. Mr. Kong had also predicted that I would only be promoted after receiving a ration of ninety-one *dan* and five *dou* of rice. However, I had received only seventy *dan* when the Commissioner of Education, Mr. Tu, recommended me for a promotion. I secretly began to doubt the

prediction. Nevertheless, it turned out to be correct after all, because Mr. Tu's replacement reversed the approval for my promotion.

It was not until some years later that a new Education Commissioner, Mr. Yin, reviewed my old examination papers and exclaimed: "These five essays are as well written as reports to the emperor. How can we bury the talents of such a great scholar?" The new Commissioner wanted the magistrate to issue an order for me to become a candidate for Imperial Scholar under his authority. After undergoing this eventful promotion, my calculations showed that I had received exactly ninety-one dan and five dou of rice. From then on, I deeply believed that promotion or demotion, wealth or poverty all came about in due time and that even the length of one's life is pre-

arranged. I began to view everything in a detached manner and ceased to seek gain or profit.

After being selected as an Imperial Scholar, I was to attend the University at Beijing. During my yearlong stay in the capital, my interest in meditation grew and I often sat in silence, without giving rise to a single thought. I lost interest in books and stopped studying.

The following year I went to Nanjing. Before I was to enter the National University there, I paid a visit to Master Yungu, a venerable Zen master at Qixia Mountain. We sat in meditation, face to face in the Zen hall for three days and nights without sleep. Master Yungu said: “The reason why ordinary people cannot become sages is because of all their wandering thoughts. In our three-day

meditation, I have not observed a single thought arise in you. Why?”

I replied that Mr. Kong had clearly predicted the entire outcome of my life. I had seen that the time of life, death, promotion, and failure are destined so there was no need for me to think of anything. The master smiled and replied: “I thought you were someone of remarkable capabilities! Now I realize you are an ordinary person!”

Feeling confused by what Master Yungu had said, I asked him to explain. He told me that an ordinary person’s mind is forever occupied by wandering and imaginary thoughts, so naturally his or her life is bound by the mathematics of destiny. We cannot deny the fact that destiny exists, but only ordinary people are bound by it. Destiny cannot

bind those who cultivate great kindness or those who have committed flagrant wrongdoings. Since I had lived my life just as Mr. Kong had predicted and done nothing to change it, I had been bound by destiny. Thus, I was a typical ordinary person.

Taken aback, I asked Master Yungu if we could change our destiny. He answered: “We can re-create our own destiny and seek good fortune. It is the true teaching and is found in the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of History*. In the Buddhist teachings, it is written that if we wish for and seek wealth, a high position, a son, a daughter, or long life, we can attain it. Since the Buddha told us that lying is one of the greatest transgressions, we can be assured that Buddhas and bodhisattvas would not deceive us.”

I told Master Yungu that I had heard that Mencius once said: “Whatever is sought can be attained. The seeking is within ourselves.” This refers to inner qualities such as virtue, integrity, and kindness. These are all values we can work toward. However, when it comes to outside factors such as wealth, fame, and prestige, how can we seek to attain them?

The master replied that Mencius was right, but that I had misunderstood his meaning. Master Yungu said that Master Huineng, the sixth Patriarch of the Zen school, taught: “All the fields of merit are within one’s own heart. If one seeks from the true mind within, one can be in touch with all that one wishes for.” By seeking within ourselves, we will not only attain the inner qualities of virtue, integrity, and kindness; we will also

attain [external benefits such as] wealth, fame, and prestige. To be able to attain both inner qualities and external benefits is invaluable.

Master Yungu then told me that if one does not reflect inside one's own heart; but, instead blindly seeks fame, fortune, and long life from outside sources, no matter how one schemes to pursue them, one can only attain, at most, what had been destined. Seeking from the outside, one might lose both inner purity and what one was destined to have; thus, the seeking would have been in vain.

Master Yungu next asked about Mr. Kong's predictions for the rest of my life. I honestly told him everything. He asked if I felt that I deserved imperial appointments or a son. Reflecting on my

past deeds and attitudes, I answered no I did not. Those who received imperial appointments all had the appearance of good fortune but I did not. I also did not work towards accumulating virtues to build up my good fortune. I was very impatient and narrow-minded, and would show off my intelligence and abilities by putting others down. I behaved as I pleased and spoke without restraint. These were all signs of scant good fortune and virtue. How could I possibly receive an imperial appointment?

There is an old saying that “Life springs from the dirt of the earth while clear water often harbors no fish.” The first reason why I felt that I did not deserve a son was that I was obsessive about cleanliness. The second reason was that while harmony is the cultivator of life, I was quick-tempered. Third,

although loving-kindness is the cause of fertility and harshness the cause of sterility, I was selfishly concerned about my reputation and would not sacrifice anything for others.

The fourth reason was that I talked too much and this wasted a lot of energy. Fifth, I drank too much. And sixth, I did not have a son because I often stayed up all night and wasted my energy. Aside from these, I had many other faults that were too numerous to mention.

Master Yungu said: “According to you then, there are many other things in life you do not deserve, not only fame and a son! Those who have millions of dollars in this life cultivated the good fortune worthy of that amount in the past. Those who have thousands of dollars must also have the good fortune

worthy of that sum. Those, who die of starvation, were in fact meant to die in that manner. The karmic result today is simply the fruit of their own deeds and has nothing to do with external powers.

“For example, if a person has accumulated enough merits and virtues to last a hundred generations, then he or she will have a hundred generations of descendants. One who accumulates enough merits and virtues to last ten generations will have ten generations of descendants to live out that good fortune. The same applies to three or two generations. Those who have no descendants had too little merits and virtues.

“Now that you recognize your shortcomings, you need to do all that you can to change and correct your misdeeds

that caused you not to have a child or not to become an imperial official. You need to cultivate virtue and tolerance, and to regard others with good will and compassion. You also need to care for your health and conserve your energy and spirit. Live as if everything in the past dissolved yesterday and a brand-new future begins today. If you can accomplish this, then you are a person born anew, a person of virtue and sincerity.

“If even our body is governed by destiny, then how can a body of virtue and sincerity not evoke a response from heaven? As is said in the ‘Tai Jia Chapter’ in the *Book of History*: ‘One may run away from the retribution of heaven, but one can never escape the retribution for one’s misdeeds.’ It is said in the *Book of Songs*: ‘To permanently accord with

the mind of heaven and to seek our own great good fortune.”

The master then told me: “Mr. Kong had predicted that you would not receive an imperial appointment or have a son. These are the retributions of heaven, but even they can be changed. You only need to develop your virtue, diligently strive to practice goodness, and work to accumulate many hidden merits and virtues.

“These are your ways to re-create good fortune. How then is it possible that you will not get to enjoy it? *I Ching, the Book of Changes*, was written to help people accrue good fortune and to avoid adversity. If everything is destined with no room for change, how can we hope to do this?

“The first chapter of the *I Ching*

says, 'Families who often perform good deeds will have an excess of good fortune to pass on to the following generations.' Do you believe this?" I replied, "Yes." I gratefully accepted his advice and paid my respects to him by prostrating. Then I began to regret all my past wrongdoings, large and small, in front of the Buddha's image. I wrote down my wish to pass the imperial examinations and vowed to complete three thousand meritorious deeds to show my gratitude towards my ancestors, earth, and heaven.

Upon hearing my vow, Master Yun-gu showed me a merit-fault chart and taught me how to keep a daily record of all the good and bad deeds I had done. He warned me that bad deeds would neutralize the good ones. The master also taught me to recite the Zhuenti

Mantra. Only with a mind of purity and concentration could I attain what I sought.

Master Yungu explained that it had been said by specialists in drawing talismanic figures, “Those who are considered experts in the art of drawing charms but do not know the right way to do so will be laughed at by spirits.” The key to drawing charms is having no thoughts from beginning to end. Understanding this, begin the first stroke with a still mind after the primal darkness. In the process of drawing, one must let go of all wandering thoughts. Only in this way can a charm be effective.

“When one prays for and seeks for something or tries to change one’s fate, it is important that one does so without giving rise to a single thought. In this

way, one will easily receive a response. Mencius wrote, 'there is no difference between long life and short life.' At first glance, one would find it hard to understand how they can be the same; however, when there is no thought, there is no duality in short or long life.

“Upon careful analysis, there is also no duality between a good or a bad harvest. Understanding this, we will be content with our present situation, be it one of wealth or poverty. And with understanding that there is no duality between poverty and wealth, our minds will be content with our present status in society, be it high or low. Also, there is no duality between long and short lives. Understanding this, we will be content with our existing lifespan, be it long or short. The most important concern for human beings is that of life and death.

Thus, early death and longevity subsume all conditions, whether favorable or unfavorable, and whether of gain or loss.

“We have to wait until our cultivation reaches a certain level, then our destiny will change. This change depends on the accumulation of merits, on seeking a response from the heavens. When cultivating, we need to be aware of our faults and resolve to correct them as if we were curing a sickness. While waiting, let go of the thought of desiring something that we are not supposed to have and the thought of wishing for a reward. At this level it would be a state of reaching the ‘innate nature of no thought’ that is the actual learning and practice of wisdom.

“I know that you are still unable to accomplish the state of no thought, but

you can practice reciting the Zhuenti Mantra continuously without counting the number of recitations and without interruption. When you reach a higher level of constant mindfulness, you will be able to achieve the level of ‘to not recite when reciting and to recite when not reciting.’ When you no longer have wandering thoughts, the mantra will become effective.”

My name used to be Xuehai, which means “broad learning.” But after receiving these teachings from Master Yungu, I changed it to Liaofan, which means “transcending the ordinary.” It signified my understanding of the fact that we could re-create our destiny and that I did not wish to be like ordinary people who were controlled by destiny. From then on, I began to be very cautious in whatever I thought or did. Soon,

I felt quite different from before. In the past, I had been careless and without self-discipline. Now, I find myself being naturally watchful and conscientious.

I maintain this attitude even when alone, for I know that there are spirits and heavenly beings everywhere who can know my every thought and deed. I am cautious not to offend them with my thoughts. Even when I encounter people who dislike or slander me, I bear their insults with a patient and peaceful mind, and do not feel compelled to quarrel with them.

The year after I met Master Yungu, I took the preliminary imperial examination in which Mr. Kong had predicted that I would come in third place. Amazingly, I was first! Mr. Kong's predictions were beginning to lose their accuracy.

He had not predicted that I would pass the imperial examination at all, but that autumn, I did!

Although I had corrected many faults, I found that I could not wholeheartedly do the things I ought to. Even if I did do them, it was forced and unnatural. I reflected within and found that I still had many shortcomings, such as seeing an opportunity to practice kindness but not being eager enough to do it or having doubts when helping others.

Sometimes I forced myself to act kindly, but my speech was still uncontrolled and offensive. I found I could contain myself when sober, but after a few drinks, I would act without restraint. Although I often practiced kind deeds and accumulated merits, my faults and

offenses were so numerous that they seemed to outweigh the good that I did. A lot of my time was spent vainly and without value.

It took me more than ten years to complete the three thousand meritorious deeds I had vowed to do. I was unable to dedicate the merits from these three thousand good deeds at a temple until I returned to my hometown in the south, a few years later. At that time, I had the opportunity to ask two monks to dedicate them for me. Then, I made my second wish and that was for a son. I vowed to complete another three thousand good deeds. A few years later, your mother gave birth to you and named you Tianqi.

Every time I performed a good deed, I would record it in a book. Your mother,

who could not read or write, would use a goose feather dipped in ink. She made a red circle on the calendar for every good deed she did. Sometimes she gave food to the poor or bought living creatures in the marketplace and freed them in the wild. She recorded all of these with her circles on the calendar. At times, she could accumulate more than ten circles in one day!

Everyday we practiced like this and in four years, the three thousand deeds were completed. Again, I invited the same two masters to make the dedications, this time at our home. On the 13th day of the ninth month of that same year, I made my third wish and that was to pass the highest level of the imperial examination. I also vowed to complete ten thousand meritorious deeds. After three years, I attained my

wish and passed the examination. I was also made the mayor of Baodi county.

I prepared a small book to record my merits and faults, and called it the *Book of Cultivating the Mind*. Every morning, when I began work in the office, my servant would bring the book and have the guard place it on my desk. I would record my every deed—good or bad—no matter how small. At night, I set up an altar in the courtyard and put on my official uniform to emulate the way of Mr. Zhao, an officer in the Song dynasty. I burned incense and reported all my deeds to the heavens.

Once, your mother was concerned when she saw that I had not accumulated much merit. In the past, she was able to help me in our accumulation of good deeds and we were able to complete

the three thousand meritorious deeds. Now, I had made a vow to complete ten thousand more deeds but there were fewer opportunities to practice them at the government residence. She worried about how long it would be before my vow could be fulfilled.

That night, I dreamed of a heavenly being and told him of my difficulty in completing the ten thousand good deeds. The heavenly being reminded me that upon becoming mayor, I had reduced the taxes on the farmlands. That one good deed was worth ten thousand merits. My vow was already fulfilled! When I had become mayor, the farmers in Baodi county were highly taxed so I reduced the tax by nearly half. But, I felt bewildered and still had doubts. How could just one deed be worth ten thousand merits?

Coincidentally, the Zen Master Huanyu was traveling from Wutai Mountain and stopped in Baodi. I invited him to the government residence, told him of my dream, and asked whether it was believable. Master Huanyu said: "If one does a good deed with such a true and sincere heart without expectation of reward, then one deed can indeed be worth the merits of ten thousand. Besides, your act of reducing the taxes in this county benefits more than ten thousand people!" Upon hearing this, I immediately gave all my savings for him to take back to Wutai Mountain. I asked him to use the money for a food offering for ten thousand monks and to dedicate the merits for me.

Mr. Kong had predicted that I would die at the age of fifty-three. However, I survived that year without illness al-

though I did not ask the heavens for a longer life. Now I am sixty-nine. The *Book of History* explains: “Destiny exists but it is changeable. Destiny is not set, but is created and determined by ourselves.” All this is true. I came to understand that both good fortune and misfortune are the results of our own actions. These are truly the words of sages and virtuous people! If someone said that good fortune and adversity are determined by the heavens, I would consider that person ordinary.

Tianqi, my son, I wonder what your life will be like? We should always prepare for the worst. Therefore, even in times of prosperity, act as if you were not. When things are going your way, be mindful of adversity. When you have enough food and clothing, be mindful of poverty. When loved and respected by

all, remain apprehensive and conservative. When the family is greatly respected, carry yourself humbly. And when your learning is extensive and profound, always feel that the more you learn the less you know.

For the past, we can think of how to advocate the virtues of our ancestors. For the present, we can think of how to conceal the faults of our parents. For the country, we can think of how we can repay its kindness to us and for the family we can think of how to bring about its good fortune. For other people, think of how to help those in need around us, and for within ourselves think of how to prevent improper thoughts and actions from arising.

We need to find our faults daily and to correct them immediately. If we are

unable to detect our faults then we will think that everything we do is right. When we are unable to correct our faults, improvement will be impossible. There are many intelligent people in the world who cannot improve in either their cultivation of morality and virtues or in their work. Their failures in this life are owed to a single word: procrastination.

Tianqi, the teachings of Master Yungu are most worthy, profound, real, and proper. I hope that you will learn them well and practice them diligently. Use your time wisely and do not let it slip by in vain.

The Second Lesson: Ways to Reform

During the Spring-Autumn Period, China was divided into several small nations. Many prestigious advisers of these nations were able to accurately predict whether a person's future would be fortunate or unfortunate based on their observation of that person's speech and behavior. Many of these are recorded in *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

As a rule, there are signs that signal impending danger or the coming of good fortune. These signs rising from within are due to one's thoughts and feelings being revealed in his or her behavior. Usually a person is more fortunate when tending toward kindness but invites trouble when tending toward cruelty.

Ordinary people often do not know what is really happening. It is as if their vision were blurred. Since they cannot see the truth, they claim that good fortune and misfortune are unpredictable.

When we are sincere and honest, our hearts will accord with the will of heaven. By observing our goodness, others will be able to foresee the coming of good fortune; and by observing our immorality, they will foresee approaching misfortune. If we wish to gain good fortune and avoid misfortune, we first need to reform before we even talk about doing good deeds.

There are three ways to reform our faults.

First, we must be able to feel ashamed. Think of all of the ancient sages and virtuous people whose names

and teachings have lasted for hundreds of generations. They were people just like us, but why is my name worthless like a broken roof-tile?

We are clinging to worldly desires. Secretly, we do many improper things while thinking others will not know about them and then are shamelessly proud of ourselves! One day, we will be reborn as an animal without realizing it. There is nothing else in the world that calls for more shame and remorse than behavior such as this. Mencius once said: “Shame is the most important word in a person’s life.” Why? Because one who knows shame will put forth his or her best efforts into correcting faults and will eventually attain sagehood or become a virtuous person. One who does not know shame will be just like an animal: unrestrained and immoral. This

is the key to correcting our faults.

The second way to reform is to know fear. Celestial beings and earthly spirits hover over our heads in observation. There is no way for us to deceive them. Even when my wrongdoings are done in a concealed place, the beings and spirits of heaven and earth are present and see all my faults. If my bad deeds are serious, then all kinds of adversities will befall me. If my fault is minor, it will still reduce my current good fortune. How can I not feel fear?

Even when we are alone in our room, the beings and spirits watch us very carefully and record everything. Even if we try to conceal our improper acts with clever speech, the spirits and celestial beings can see into our hearts as clearly as seeing into our lungs or

liver. We are just trying to deceive ourselves and others. In actuality, others have seen through us, and we thus become worthless [in their eyes]. When we think about this, how can we not be afraid?

However, as long as we still have one breath left, we have the chance to regret even the worst deeds. There are cases in history where people who had committed numerous bad deeds but who later deeply regretted them during their dying moments were able to pass away peacefully.

If a person can have a determined and courageous kind thought at the most important moment, it can cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated offenses. This is like only needing one lamp to bring light into a valley that has

been dark for a thousand years. It does not matter how long one has been committing misdeeds. If one can reform, he or she is exceptional!

We live in a constantly changing and chaotic world. Our bodies, made of flesh and blood, are perishable. If our next breath does not come, then this body will no longer be a part of us. Then, even if we want to reform, it would be too late.

When we commit a wrongdoing, our retribution in this world is a bad reputation that will last for hundreds, even thousands of years. Even filial and loving descendants cannot restore our honor. Then, in a future life, we might end up in hell suffering immeasurable pain. When even the sages, virtuous people, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas cannot help

us escape from our bad consequences, how can we not be afraid?

The third way to reform is to have a determined, courageous heart. When we hesitate to reform our faults because we do not really want to change, we are content with what we can get away with. For a reform to take place, we must be resolute and resolve to change immediately. We should not hesitate or postpone until tomorrow or the day after.

A minor fault is like a thorn piercing our flesh and should be quickly removed. A big fault is like our finger being bitten by a poisonous snake. We must quickly cut off the finger to prevent the poison from spreading and killing us. If we consult the *I Ching* and receive the wind-thunder symbol, it means that our strong determination in reform-

ing assures us of success. If we can follow the three ways of shame, fear, and determination to reform, then we will surely be transformed. There is no need to worry. It will happen as assuredly as the spring sun will melt a layer of ice.

There are also three methods of practice to help us reform. The first is changing through behavior, the second is changing through reasoning, and the third is changing from the heart. Trying to force ourselves to suppress our faults is extremely difficult because we have not permanently uprooted our faults, merely temporarily curbed them. Therefore, changing through behavior cannot help us to permanently eliminate our faults.

Instead, we can try to reform by understanding why we should not do

something, for example, killing. To love all living things is a virtue of heaven. Understanding that all living beings love life and fear death, how can I be at peace with myself by taking another's life to nurture my own? At times, animals such as fish or crabs are cooked alive. Such pain and suffering reach down into their very bones. How can we be so cruel?

When we eat, we use many expensive and tasty things to nourish ourselves, enough to fill the whole dining table! But once the meal is done, even the best delicacies will become body waste and be excreted. The result of our killing accomplishes nothing. Consuming vegetarian foods can fill and nourish us just as well. Why let our stomachs become a graveyard and reduce our good fortune through killing?

Think of all the living beings with flesh and blood. Like us, they are self-aware. They and we are one entity. Although our cultivation of virtue has not yet reached the state that will enable these beings to respect us and feel safe around us, we can at least not harm them or make them hate us. If we think about it, we will naturally feel sorrow for these animals and thus be unable to swallow their flesh.

Another example of changing through reasoning is an easily angered person. He or she can stop and think that we all have our strengths and weaknesses. If I touch on someone's weakness, I should feel sad about their failing and forgive any shortcomings. If someone offends me for no reason at all, it is that person's problem and has nothing to do with me. There is no reason for

me to become angry.

I also think that no great person thinks that he or she is always right. Nor do intelligent people blame their faults on others. When things do not go the way we wish, it is because we have not cultivated our virtues and morals, and have not accumulated enough merits to move others!

We should always reflect upon ourselves first. In so doing, criticism can become a training ground to refine our character and to strengthen our abilities. We should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism and guidance. What is there to be angry and complain about? Likewise, in the face of slander, we should maintain the mind of stillness. Although the slanderous rumors and tale bearing spread like a huge fire,

like a torch, they will eventually burn themselves out.

If we become angry and try to defend ourselves when slandered, it would be like the spring silkworm spinning its own cocoon and suffocating itself. Becoming angry does not benefit us; it harms us. There are other faults and offenses we can change. If we understand the principle behind the need for reform, we will not repeat our mistakes.

What does “changing from the heart” mean? Although we have thousands of different faults, they all stem from the heart, from the mind. If my heart is still of thoughts, then actions will not arise and faults can be avoided. Practitioners do not have to try to eradicate faults such as the desire for fame, sex, profit, or anger, one by one. All we

need is a sincere heart to practice good deeds. As long as our hearts are virtuous and kind, then naturally our minds will not have any improper thoughts.

“Demons do not appear during the day.” This is the essence, the key to our change. Since all mistakes stem from the heart, we change from the heart. It is like getting rid of a poisonous tree. If we want to put an end to it, we uproot it altogether so it cannot grow again. Why exert ourselves to no avail by pulling out its leaves one by one and cutting it twig by twig?

The best way to reform our faults is through cultivating our hearts for purity will surface right away. If my heart is pure, I can recognize and stop an improper thought as soon as it arises. The immoral idea will disappear the moment

I am conscious of it.

If I am unable to succeed at reforming my faults through changing the heart, then I will try at the level of understanding, knowing the reasons why I need to make the change. If I cannot succeed with this, then I will try to reform by changing through behavior. The best way is to cultivate the heart and understand the reasons behind the need to change. It is foolish to confine ourselves to reforming through behavior. This is the inferior way. Instead we should be reforming from the heart, for this is the best way to change.

But even when we vow to change, assistance is needed to truly reform. We will need constant reminders from genuine friends who witness our actions in everyday life. As for our good

and bad thoughts, we can ask the beings and spirits of heaven and earth to be our witnesses. We also need to be diligent and to sincerely regret day and night. If we can honestly regret for one to two weeks, one to three months, then in this way, we are assured of attaining good results benefits.

What are the benefits of contrition? We may feel very much at ease and our hearts may feel light and generous. An unintelligent person may suddenly become wise. Another might maintain a clear and relaxed mind even in a disturbing and confusing environment. Our minds will be clearer and our compassion will increase enabling us to no longer feel anger upon seeing an enemy while we remain happy.

We may dream of spitting out black things, of having ancient sages or virtu-

ous people encourage and escort us, or we may dream of flying in space. We may dream of colorful pennants and ornately decorated canopies. Such phenomena are indications of a successful reform and a dissolving of past offenses. However, we must not consider seeing these phenomena as signs of perfection. Instead, we must resolve to further improve ourselves and work even harder to reform.

[An example is Qu Boyu.] At twenty, he was already mindful of his faults, had analyzed them, and tried to thoroughly correct them. At the age of twenty-one, he felt that he still had not completely corrected all of them. At twenty-two, he felt as if twenty-one was wasted, without any real improvement. Thus, year after year, he continued to correct his faults. When he reached fifty, Boyu still felt

that the past forty-nine years were filled with wrongdoings. This was how particular our ancestors were regarding the correction of faults!

We are all just ordinary people with mistakes as numerous as a porcupine's spines. Often when we look back, we do not even see our faults because we are careless and do not know how to reflect on our actions. It is as if a cataract is growing in our eye.

All these are symptoms of having accumulated too many offenses! Our hearts may feel confused and oppressed, lacking energy. We will become extremely forgetful and filled with worries even when nothing is happening, feel embarrassed and depressed upon meeting a virtuous person, or become displeased at hearing proper reasoning. When kind to

others, we will be met with hostility. We may have nightmares where everything is upside-down, and talk incoherently and behave abnormally. These are all signs of misfortune.

If we have any of these symptoms, we must immediately reinforce our willpower to correct all of our faults. It is necessary to start anew and not delay!

The Third Lesson: The Ways to Cultivate Goodness

We read in the *I Ching*: “Families who perform good deeds will accumulate prosperity that can outlast many generations.” An example is the Yan family. Before they married their daughter to the man who was to be Confucius’s father, they inquired about the family. After finding that they practiced goodness and accumulated virtues, the Yan family felt confident that they were marrying their daughter into a family that would prosper and have outstanding descendants.

In another example, Confucius had praised Shun for his filial piety by saying: “Due to his great filial piety and sincerity, Shun deeply moved even his

ancestors to accept his offering. His accumulation of merits and good fortune would last for many generations.” This principle is confirmed by many examples.

The following are some additional examples of how merits can be attained through performing good deeds. In Fujian province, a man named Yang Rong held a position in the imperial court as the emperor’s teacher. Yang Rong’s ancestors were boat people who made a living by helping people cross the river.

One year, a storm lasted so long that violent flooding swept away people, animals, houses, and belongings. The other boaters took advantage of the situation to collect the floating belongings. Only Yang Rong’s grandfather and great grandfather rescued the drowning

people and ignored the belongings. The boaters laughed and thought the two to be very foolish. Later, when Yang Rong's father was born, the Yang family gradually became wealthy.

One day a heavenly being who had manifested as a Taoist monk told the Yang family that due to their ancestors' accumulation of hidden merits, their descendants would enjoy wealth and prominence. He then suggested a special place where they could build the ancestral tomb. They followed his suggestion. Today it is called the White Hare Grave. Shortly after, Yang Rong was born. He passed the imperial examination when he was only twenty years old and later received the imperial appointment of master. The emperor even bestowed the same imperial honors on his grandfather and great grandfather. Today, his virtu-

ous and prosperous descendants are still prominent.

Yang Zicheng, from the county of Yin in Zhejiang province, is another example. He worked in the county courthouse and was kind, fair, and honest. Once, the county magistrate punished a criminal by beating him until he was bleeding profusely. Zicheng knelt and pleaded with him to stop. The infuriated magistrate retorted: "It's all right for you to plead, but how can I not be angry when he has broken the law!" Zicheng replied that when government leaders do not follow the proper path, ordinary people would lose their way. Realizing this, we should feel sorrow and not pleasure [at solving the case]. And we should certainly not become angry. A case like this called for more understanding. Moved by Zicheng's plea, the magistrate ceased

the beating.

Although Zicheng's family was poor, he refused all bribes. If the prisoners were short of food, he would take some from his own home to give it to them even if it meant going hungry himself. One day, it was time for several newly arrived prisoners to be fed. But Zicheng himself had little food. If he gave the prisoners what he had, his family would go hungry; if he kept the food for his family, the prisoners would have nothing to eat—an appalling dilemma. He felt that the prisoners needed the food more than his family did. He discussed it with his wife who asked where the prisoners were from. Zicheng told her that they were from Hangzhou.

Later, Zicheng had two sons. The elder son, Shouchen, and the younger

one, Shouzhi, both held important government positions. Zicheng's eldest grandson became vice minister of the Ministry of Justice and his second grandson was a highly placed member of the government staff in Sichuan province. They too were prominent. Today, their descendant Yang Chuting, also a government official, is known for his virtuous deeds.

Another account took place during the Zheng-Tong period, [the time of Emperor Yingzong]. In Fujian province, many intellectuals had joined a group of rebels. The emperor appointed Imperial Censor Zhang to stop them. He tricked the rebels and captured their leader.

Later, Imperial Censor Zhang dispatched General Xie to put an end to the remaining rebels in the eastern part

of the province. The general obtained a list of the insurgents and commanded that white flags be secretly given to everyone not on that list along with instructions to place the flags on their doors when the imperial army came to town. He ordered the soldiers not to harm the innocent and with this one thought of goodness, he saved tens of thousands of people from being killed. His son Xie Chian placed first in the imperial examinations and eventually became an advisor to the emperor. His grandson Xie Pi placed third in the imperial examinations.

Another example is the Lin family from Putian in Fujian province. Among their ancestors was a very generous elderly lady. Every day she made rice balls for the poor and gave away as many as they wanted. An immortal who manifest-

ed as a Taoist monk came daily for three years and always asked for six or seven. Her ceaseless generosity convinced him of her deep sincerity.

He told her: “I have eaten your rice balls for three years and have done nothing to show my gratitude. Perhaps I can do so now. On the land behind your house is a good place for your grave. If you are placed there when you die, the number of your descendants who will have imperial appointments will equal the number of seeds in a pound of sesame seeds.” Her son followed his recommendations.

The first generation after that, nine men passed the imperial examinations and it continued that way for generations. It was said in Fujian that the surname of Lin was always on the list of

those who had passed the imperial examination.

Another example is Mr. Feng, the father of the imperial historian, Feng Zhuoan. One winter many years ago, Mr. Feng was on his way to school when he saw someone lying in the snow. Finding that the man was barely breathing, he quickly took off his coat, wrapped it around the man, carried him back home, and revived him. That night, Zhuoan's father dreamt that a heavenly being told him: "Out of complete sincerity, you helped a dying man. This is a great virtue. I will have the famous General Han Qi of the Song dynasty to be reborn as your son." Later, Zhuoan was born and was named Qi.

Also, there was Mr. Ying, a minister who lived in Taizhou. When he was

young, he studied in remote mountain areas. At night, he often heard the sounds of ghosts and spirits but was never afraid of them. One night, he heard one ghost happily say to another: "There is a village woman whose husband left home a long time ago and has not returned. Her in-laws think that their son is dead and are forcing her to remarry. Tomorrow night, she is going to commit suicide and will replace me. Then I will be reborn!"

Upon hearing this, Mr. Ying immediately set out to sell some land that he owned. He received two hundred grams of silver for it. He then made up a letter from the daughter-in-law's husband, and sent it to her home along with the silver. The parents knew that the letter was not in the son's handwriting, but examined the silver and said, "This letter may be

false, but the silver is not. Perhaps our son is alive.” Consequently, the daughter-in-law was not forced to remarry. After a while the husband returned home and the couple resumed their lives together.

Mr. Ying next heard the ghost say, “Originally, I was supposed to leave here and be reborn, but Mr. Ying messed up my chance!”

The other ghost asked, “Why don’t you get even with him?”

The first ghost replied: “I can’t. The heavenly beings have recognized his goodness and he is going to receive a prominent position in the future. How can I hurt him?” Upon hearing this, Mr. Ying became even more diligent in practicing goodness and accumulating merits. Whenever there was a famine,

he gave grain from his storehouses to those who needed it. He always helped relatives in emergencies. When things did not go his way, he always reflected within himself rather than complain of others. Thus, he always quietly complied with conditions. Even today, his descendants are prominent.

Another person, Xu Fengzhu, lived in Jiangsu province. Whenever there was a famine, his wealthy father would be the first to waive the rent on the rice fields, hoping that other wealthy people would follow suit. He also donated grain from his storehouses to those who were hungry.

One night, he heard ghosts outside his home say, "A county scholar in the Xu family is going to pass the provincial imperial examination!" This went on for

several nights and indeed that year his son Fengzhu passed the examination. After that, Fengzhu's father became even more diligent in accumulating good deeds. He paid for the repair of roads and bridges, and provided food for monks as well as for the poor. He did all he could to help others. Sometime later, he heard the ghosts again. They said: "The provincial scholar from the Xu family is going to hold a high position in the government." Eventually, Fengzhu became the governor of Zhejiang province.

Another example is Tu Kangxi who lived in Jiaying, Zhejiang province. Mr. Tu worked in the courthouse and would spend nights in the prison cells, talking with the inmates. Instead of making a name for himself, he would write secret reports to the minister of justice, telling

him why certain prisoners were innocent. The Minister would then question the prisoner accordingly and clear the cases. Through Mr. Tu's efforts, more than ten innocent people were released and all of them were extremely grateful to the judge praising the minister of justice for his wise judgment.

Soon after, Mr. Tu made a report to the imperial judge saying: "If innocent people are imprisoned here, there must be many more throughout the country. I recommend that investigators be sent to check the prisons for innocent people every five years. The sentences can be canceled to prevent the innocent from remaining in prison." The minister, Mr. Tu's superior, took the report to the emperor, who agreed with Mr. Tu's suggestion. Mr. Tu was subsequently chosen as one of the special agents in charge of

reducing sentences for those who were found innocent.

One night, he dreamt that a heavenly being came to him and said: “Originally, you did not deserve a son in this life, but this act of reducing prison sentences for innocent people accords with the wishes of the heavens. You will be bestowed with three sons and they will all attain high positions.” His wife later gave birth to three sons who all became prominent.

Another example of attaining good results from practicing kindness is Bao Ping who lived in Jiaxing. Ping was the youngest of seven sons of the magistrate of Chizhou, Anhui province. He married into the Yuan family in Pinghu county, Zhejiang province, and was a good friend of my father. Bao Ping was

knowledgeable and talented, but always failed in the examinations. He spent his time studying Buddhism and Taoism.

Once, while traveling to Lake Mao, he came to a village and saw a temple in dire need of repair. The statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva was wet from the rain that leaked through the roof. Ping took out all his money and gave it to the abbot, so that he could restore the temple. The abbot replied: "It is a major project, I am afraid this is not enough."

Bao Ping then took out all his expensive clothes and handed them to the abbot. His servant tried to persuade him to keep his best outfit, but he refused, saying: "It does not matter to me. As long as the statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva remains undamaged, I do not care if I have to go without clothes."

The abbot, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed: "To give up money and clothing is not difficult, but your deep sincerity is truly rare." After the temple was repaired, Bao Ping asked his father to visit it and together they spent the night there. The temple's Dharma Protector, Qielan, came in his dream to thank him and said: "Since you have accumulated these merits and virtues, you will have many generations of descendants who will receive imperial appointments." His son and grandson both passed high examinations and were appointed as imperial officials.

Zhi Li from Jiashan county, in Zhejiang province is another example. His father used to be a clerk in the provincial courthouse. Once, when Zhi Li's father learned that an innocent man had been given the death penalty, he tried to save

the man's life. When the prisoner heard about this, he told his wife: "I am greatly indebted to this man who has spoken on my behalf, but I have no way to show my gratitude. Will you invite him to our house and offer yourself to him? Perhaps this will please him and increase my chances to live."

The wife cried as she listened to his request, but there was no other way to help. The next day when the clerk came to visit, she offered him wine and told him of her husband's wish. The clerk refused, but continued to do all he could for the man. When at last the prisoner was released, he and his wife went to the clerk's house to thank him. He said: "One with such virtue as yours is truly rare these days, how can I show my gratitude? Since you do not have a son, allow me to offer my daughter in mar-

riage to you. Please accept for this is the only way that I can repay you.”

The clerk accepted and soon afterwards, she bore him his son, Zhi Li. He passed the highest level of the imperial examinations when he was just twenty years old and later was appointed to an important government position. His son Gao, grandson Lu, and great grandson Dalun, all passed the examinations and received imperial appointments as well.

These ten examples all tell of the deeds cultivated by different people. Although their actions differed, their intent was the same—to perform goodness. If we carefully think about goodness, we will realize that there are many different types—real and false, honest and crooked, hidden and visible, apparent and actual, proper and improper, full

and half, big and small, and difficult and easy. These different types each have their own causes that need to be understood. If we try to practice good deeds but do not know how to distinguish between right and wrong, we may end up doing more harm than good and all of our efforts will have been in vain.

What are “real goodness” and “false goodness?” In the Yuan dynasty, a group of scholars went to visit Master Zhongfeng. One said: “We hear in Buddhism that the karmic reward for good and bad is ‘like a shadow, following the form wherever it goes.’ But why is it that although some people practice goodness, their families and descendants are not prosperous? On the other hand, while others behave immorally, their families and descendants do very well. What has happened to cause and effect? Are there

no standards in the Buddha's teachings?"

Master Zhongfeng replied: "Ordinary people are blinded by worldly viewpoints and not having cleansed their minds of impurities are unable to see clearly. Consequently, they look upon real goodness as wrongdoing and mistake wrongdoing as goodness. This is very common today. Moreover, these people do not blame themselves for failing to understand, and unfairly blame their misfortune on the heavens."

The scholars questioned how good and bad could be mistaken for each other. Master Zhongfeng asked each of them to express their thoughts on what was bad and good. One scholar said that to yell at and hit others was bad; to respect and treat others in a polite way

was good. The master replied, “Not necessarily.” Another scholar said that being greedy and taking another’s money was bad while being generous and behaving properly was good. Master Zhongfeng again replied, “Not necessarily.” The remaining scholars all expressed their views on what was bad and good, but Master Zhongfeng always concluded, “Not necessarily.”

Master Zhongfeng then said: “To do things for the benefit of others is good; to do things for self-benefit is bad. If what we do is for the sake of benefiting others, then it does not matter if we yell at or hit them; it is still good. But, if our intention is for self-benefit, then regardless of our appearance of respect and courtesy, it is bad.”

“Practicing goodness solely to ben-

efit others is considered public benefit and is real goodness. If we only think of ourselves while doing good acts, then that is considered private benefit and is false goodness. When goodness springs from the heart, it is real goodness. But, when we do something good just because others are doing so, it is false. When we do good without expecting anything in return, it is real goodness. But, when we practice good deeds for some purpose other than to benefit others, it is false. Those who wish to practice real goodness need to consider all these differences.”

What are “honest goodness” and “crooked goodness”? People today often look upon an extremely conservative and nice person as good and kind. However, the ancient sages and virtuous people have shown that they preferred those

who were aspiring and dignified. As for those who appear to be compliant and careful in their actions, everyone may like them, but sages often speak of them as “thieves of virtue.” From this, we can see that the viewpoint of ordinary people on good and bad differs greatly from that of sages and virtuous people.

Because of this, our judgment could be erroneous. Beings and spirits of heaven and earth all look upon good and bad from the same viewpoint as the sages and not that of ordinary people. Therefore, when we wish to accumulate merits, we must not give in to greed or be affected by the things around us. As soon as improper thoughts arise, we need to be aware of them and then purify them.

Honest goodness is to be respectful

and comes from the thought to sincerely help all others. Crooked goodness is to act without sincerity and arises from the thought to flatter others to obtain what we want. To love others is honest, and to hate others and be jealous is crooked. These all need to be very carefully differentiated.

What are “hidden goodness” and “visible goodness”? Goodness is hidden when no one knows about it and visible when our good acts are known by others. Those with hidden virtues will naturally be known by the heavens and be rewarded. Those who practice visible goodness will be known by people and enjoy fame. Fame itself is good fortune, but heaven and earth shun fame. Those who have great fame, but lack the virtue to support it will eventually encounter overwhelming adversities. Those who

have not done anything wrong but are falsely accused will have descendants who suddenly become prosperous and successful. From this, we can see how important it is to understand hidden and visible goodness.

What are “apparent goodness” and “actual goodness”? In the Spring-Autumn Period, the country of Lu made a law that rewarded those who paid the ransom to free their fellow citizens who were servant-slaves. At that time, Confucius had a rich student named Zigong who, although he paid the ransom to free people, did not accept the reward for doing so.

Upon hearing this, Confucius was very unhappy and scolded Zigong: “You acted wrongly. When sages and virtuous people do something, it is to improve

morality and teach people how to behave. We do not do something for self-benefit or reputation. In Lu, the poor outnumber the wealthy. Since you refused the reward, others will think that accepting reward money is being greedy and if this happens, no one will pay the ransom to free our people.”

Another student of Confucius, Zilu, once saw a man drowning in the river and rescued him. Later, the man thanked him by giving him a cow. When Confucius heard that Zilu had accepted the gift, he was happy and said: “In the future, people will be eager to help those who are drowning.”

In the eyes of ordinary people, Zigong’s refusal of the reward money was good, while Zilu’s acceptance of the cow was not. Who would have expected

Confucius to praise Zilu and scold Zigong! From this, we can see that those who practice good deeds must not only consider the current outcome but that of the future as well. Neither should we only consider our own gain and loss but think about the impact made on others.

What we do now may be good but in time may prove harmful. Thus, what seems like goodness may actually be bad. What appears to be bad may actually have positive long-term effects, turning out to have been good after all. Thus, what seems like a bad deed may actually be goodness. For example, apparent responsibility may be actual irresponsibility, apparent propriety may be actual impropriety, apparent trustworthiness may be actual untrustworthiness, and apparent kindness may be actual unkindness. We need to carefully differ-

entiate to make proper choices.

What are “proper goodness” and “improper goodness”? Lu Wenyi was a prime minister in the Ming dynasty. When he grew old, he retired to his hometown where he was well loved and highly respected. Once, a drunken villager went to his home and began to yell insults at him. Mr. Lu calmly told his servant, “This man is drunk, don’t argue with him.” With that, he closed the door and ignored the onslaught of insults.

A year later, the same man committed a grave crime and was sentenced to death. Hearing this, Mr. Lu remorsefully said: “If only I had taken him to the authorities for punishment that day, perhaps a little discipline could have prevented this. At the time, I was trying to be kind but I inadvertently encour-

aged his arrogance and cruelty. Now, he has been sentenced to death.” This is an example of having good intentions but doing something bad.

There is also an example of those who achieved goodness although they had acted from improper intentions. Once, after a devastating famine, people were reduced to stealing food in broad daylight. A wealthy family reported this to the authorities who did nothing. As the poor grew more daring, chaos was imminent. The family, taking the law into their own hands, caught and punished the thieves. In this way, peace was restored and the thefts were stopped. If this had not been done, chaos would have erupted.

We all know that goodness is proper and wrongdoing is improper. However,

there are cases where deeds done out of good intentions resulted in bad. This is called the “improper within the proper.” There are also deeds done out of improper intentions that resulted in good. This is called the “proper within the improper.” We can benefit from understanding this.

What are “half goodness” and “full goodness”? We read in the *I Ching*: “People who do not accumulate virtuous deeds will not achieve honor while people who do not accumulate bad deeds will not bring about self-destruction.” And from the *Book of History* we learn that “Zhou, who was the last emperor of the Shang dynasty, committed horrible crimes.” The dynasty ended with his death. It is like collecting objects in a container. With diligence, it will soon be full but if we slack off and stop collect-

ing, then it will be only half full. This is an example of full and half goodness.

Once a woman visited a Buddhist temple and wished to make a donation. Being extremely poor, she only had two cents but she unreservedly gave these to a monk. To her surprise, the abbot himself came to help her regret for past offenses and to dedicate her merits.

Later, she was chosen to enter the imperial palace, and obtained wealth and prestige. Clad in her riches, she returned to the temple to make a donation, this time bringing a small fortune. To her dismay, the abbot sent another monk to help dedicate her merits. She did not understand and questioned the abbot: “In the past, I only donated two cents, yet you personally helped me regret my past offenses. Today, I have

brought much money but you will not help me perform my merit dedication. Why?”

The abbot replied: “Although you gave only a little in the past, it came from a true and sincere heart. It was necessary for me to repay your sincerity by personally performing your dedications. Today, your donation is much greater, but the heart of giving is not as sincere. Therefore, it is enough that my student performs your dedications for you.” This is an example of how thousands of silver coins are only considered “half goodness” and two cents are “whole goodness.”

Another example is of Quan Zhongli, an immortal of the Han dynasty, who was teaching his student, Lu Dongbin, the art of transforming iron into gold.

They would use it to help the poor. Dongbin asked his teacher if the gold would ever change back to iron. Zhongli said, "After five hundred years, it will return to its original form." Dongbin replied, "Then I do not want to learn this art for it will harm those who possess the gold in five hundred years."

Zhongli said: "To become an immortal, one must complete three thousand virtuous deeds. What you have just said came from a truly kind heart. Your three thousand deeds are fulfilled." This account is another example of whole goodness and half goodness.

When we perform a good deed, it is best not to attach to what we have done. If we practice in this way, then all of our good deeds will reach fulfillment and success. But, if we always think of the

good that we have done as we look for a reward, then no matter how diligently we practice, even for an entire lifetime, the deeds will still be considered half goodness.

For example, when we donate money, we can practice pure donation. We do not linger on the thought of “I” who is giving, on the importance of the object that is given, or on the one who has received. We simply give out of true sincerity and respect. When we practice pure donation, one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune, and the merits from giving one cent can wipe away the transgressions of a thousand eons.

But, if we always think of the good that we have done and expect rewards for our actions, then even a donation of one million dollars would not bring us

the reward of a fully good fortune. This is another way of explaining whole goodness and half goodness.

What are “big goodness” and “small goodness”? Once, an important official, Wei Zhongda was led into the underworld for judgment. When the records that the judge had ordered to be brought out arrived, Zhongda was astounded at the courtyard filled with his bad records and the single scroll of his good deeds. The official then ordered them to be weighed. Surprisingly, the bad records, which had filled the courtyard, were lighter than the single scroll of good deeds that was as thin as a chopstick!

Zhongda asked the judge: “I am barely forty years old, how could I have committed so many offenses?”

The judge answered: “When you give

rise to a single thought that is improper, it is considered a bad offense there and then; it does not have to be carried out to be counted as a wrong.” Zhongda then asked the judge what was recorded on the single scroll.

The judge replied: “Once the emperor planned to build a great stone bridge. You opposed the project due to the hardships it would cause the tens of thousands of people needed for the work. This is a copy of your objection.”

Zhongda said: “I did make the proposal, but the emperor dismissed it and proceeded with the project. What I said had no effect on the matter. How can it bear so much weight against all my offenses?”

The judge replied: “Although the emperor rejected your suggestion, your

one thought of kindness for all those people was very great. If the emperor had accepted your idea, then the good performed would have been even greater.” Therefore, when one is determined to do good for the benefit of all people, a small deed can result in great merits. If one thinks only about benefiting oneself, then even if many deeds of kindness were performed, the merits would still be small.

What are “difficult goodness” and “easy goodness”? Scholars of the past said that one who wishes to conquer greed and desire should begin with what is most difficult to overcome. When Confucius talked about our cultivation of humanity, he also said to begin with what is most difficult to practice. For example, an elderly teacher, Mr. Shu of Jiangxi, gave two year’s salary to a

poor man who owed money to the government. If the man had been sent to prison, the family would have been torn apart.

Another example is Mr. Zhang from Handan. He gave what had taken him ten years to save to a poor man who owed money to the government. This saved him from going to jail and enabled him to remain with his wife. Such examples as Mr. Shu and Mr. Zhang are rare, for they gave what is most difficult to give. What others would not sacrifice, they did so willingly.

Another example is Mr. Jin from Jiangsu province who was old and without any sons. His neighbors offered him their young daughter in marriage so he might have descendants to continue his family. Mr. Jin refused the offer and

sent her home. This is another example of being able to overcome what is most difficult to conquer in oneself. The heavens showered down especially good fortune on these three men.

It is easier for those who have money and power to accumulate merits and virtues than for those who are poor. However, if one refuses to cultivate goodness when the opportunity presents itself, then it would truly be a shame. For those who are without wealth or status, doing good things for others is very difficult. However, if one can help others in the face of difficulties it will be even more valuable.

There are many ways to help others whenever the opportunity presents itself. These can be simplified into the following ten important categories.

1. To support the practice of kindness.
2. To revere love and respect.
3. To help others succeed in practicing goodness.
4. To persuade others to practice kindness.
5. To help those in desperate need.
6. To develop public projects for the greater benefit of people.
7. To practice merits by giving wealth.
8. To protect and maintain proper teachings.
9. To respect elders.
10. To love and cherish all living things.

What does “to support the practice of kindness” mean? Emperor Shun lived during the Yao Period. One day, before he became emperor, Shun was watching some fishermen on Lake Leize. He noticed that all the younger and stronger fishermen took the spots where the water was deep and the fish were abundant, while those who were older and weaker were left with the rapids and shallow water, where there were very few fish.

When Shun saw this, he sympathized with the older fishermen. He joined in the fishing and whenever he saw younger fishermen grab the good spots, he said nothing. But whenever some yielded to others, he praised them everywhere he went and emulated their humble and polite manner. He did this for one year until the fishermen got into

the habit of yielding the good spots to others.

A wise and capable man such as Shun could have easily influenced others with a few words. Why did he not simply say something instead of trying to change others by setting a good example? Shun's painstaking and good intentions were like the expert artisanship that results from long practice and hard work.

In today's era of low morality, social breakdown, and loss of proper thinking, it is extremely difficult to find a good standard of behavior. Therefore, when those around us have shortcomings, we do not use our strengths to point out their deficiencies. When others are unkind, we do not use our kindness to compare ourselves to them. When others are less capable, we do not purposely

surpass them. Even when we are intelligent and competent, these are to be kept hidden. Instead of boasting, we need to behave even more modestly. When someone makes a mistake, we tolerate and do not reveal it. This provides the opportunity to reform without the loss of self-respect.

When we allow others to keep their dignity, they will be even more careful of future actions. When we see strengths or small kindnesses in others, we can learn from them and praise them to others. In daily life, we can refrain from speaking and acting with selfish intentions, but instead, seek to benefit society. We can help set standards for others to follow. These are the qualities of a great person; someone who thinks of public welfare as more important than his or her own.

What does “to revere love and respect for others” mean? Sometimes it is hard to tell on appearance whether someone is an honorable person or a fraud, since frauds pretend to be honorable. The difference is as obvious as black and white. As Mencius said, the difference between honorable people and ordinary people lies in their intentions.

The heart of a genuinely honorable person is filled with loving-kindness and respect for others. There are thousands of different types of people in this world, some close to us while others are strangers. Some have prestige while others have none. Some are smart while others are not and some are virtuous while others are corrupt. Nevertheless, we are all humans and are thus, all one entity. We should neither hate nor disrespect any-

one.

When our hearts are filled with loving-kindness and respect for others, it is the same as if our hearts were filled with loving-kindness and respect for the sages and virtuous people. When we understand and agree with others, it is the same as if we understand and agree with the sages and virtuous people. Why? Because all the virtuous people and sages want people to obtain what they wish for. If we can have loving-kindness and respect for people, and help them to achieve in their endeavors, we are acting as a sage or a virtuous person.

What does “helping others to do good” mean? If we tossed aside a piece of raw jade, it would remain a worthless stone. But if we carved and polished it, it would be transformed into a valuable

object. So, when we see people whom we feel have the potential to practice goodness or to work towards a proper goal, we can guide, support, praise, and encourage them, thus helping them to succeed. If others wrongly accuse them, we can try to clear their name and share their burden of slander. Only when we have helped them back on their feet to become a functioning part of society, will we have fulfilled our responsibility in helping others to do good.

Most people dislike those who are different from them. There are always more bad people around than good people, so those who are good often have difficulty standing on their own.

Good people have abilities and virtues that enable them to become famous. They usually pay little attention

to their appearance. They can easily be wrongly accused, so striving to do good turns out to be a challenge. When this happens, it is entirely up to virtuous people and elders to protect and help those who are moral to stand on their own. They can do this by providing what the people need to practice goodness. The merits of the virtuous people and elders who do this will be great.

What does “persuading others to practice kindness” mean? As humans, we all want to be good and to have a conscience, but chasing after wealth and fame has kept us so busy that we have stopped listening to our conscience. This is the result of having to survive in a world filled with hardships. When a friend is about to ignore his or her conscience to do something unworthy, we can remind and warn this friend, hop-

ing to wake him or her from delusion. It is like waking up someone when they are having a nightmare. It is up to us to shake them into reality. When a person is undergoing a long spell of depression, we can pull this person out of it and help to clear his or her mind. We are most virtuous if we can treat our friends with such kindness.

A scholar named Hanyu once said: "By word of mouth, one can only persuade and influence others for a while. If one can persuade and influence others through written works, one's words can be passed on for hundreds of generations around the world." Depending on what is appropriate in the circumstances, we can use either speaking or writing.

To encourage virtue, we can per-

suade others through speech or writing. Compared with teaching others through behavior these are more direct and clear. Sometimes, we do not have time to teach others through behavior. Then verbal or written education will be more effective. However, if we can apply it like the right medicine for an illness, often it will prove to have wonderful effects. Therefore, we cannot give up. If we make the mistake of “losing a person” [it was proper for us to guide this person but we did not] or “wasting our words” [it was improper for us to persuade this person but we tried to] we need to think and find the wisdom not to repeat the mistake.

What does “helping those in desperate need” mean? People often suffer from serious difficulties. If we meet someone like this, then we immediately

help that person as if we were the one who was suffering. If a person has been wrongly accused or convicted, then we should plead on their behalf as well as help in any way we can. The scholar Mr. Cui once said: “It does not matter whether a favor is big or small. What is important is that it is done at a time when others need it most.” These are words of loving-kindness.

What does “developing public projects for the benefit of others” mean? Small construction projects are needed for villages, and big construction jobs are needed for cities. As long as they help people, they should be built. Public projects can be the construction of systems to irrigate farmlands, dams to prevent flooding, or bridges to facilitate travel. Also, we can give food or water to those who are hungry or thirsty.

Whenever we have the opportunity, we need to inspire others to do their share as well to help accomplish the project, either through the sharing of wealth or of labor. Do not be afraid of what others might say or become discouraged when the job becomes difficult. Do not allow the jealousy and hatred of others to weaken our resolve to do what is virtuous.

What does “accumulating merits and good fortune by giving wealth” mean? In Buddhism, giving is considered the foremost practice among all the methods. What is giving? Giving is letting go. A wise person who understands this principle would be willing to give away everything, even to the point of letting go of our attachments to the six sense organs within. Externally, we can also give away that which we see, hear, smell, taste,

touch, and think.

We can give away anything. When we find ourselves unable to do so, we can begin with the giving of wealth. Ordinary people regard their clothing and food as dearly as their lives; therefore, they consider wealth to be of the utmost importance. When we give spontaneously, we can cure stinginess while helping others in dire need. However, for many this is very difficult to do, especially at first. But, gradually the more we give the more natural it will become. This is the best way to cure selfishness and to eradicate attachments and stinginess.

What does “protecting proper teachings” mean? For millions of years, proper teachings have been a standard of truth and provided spiritual guidance for all living beings. Without proper teach-

ings, how can we participate in and support the nurturing of heaven and earth? Without proper teachings, how can we help people to succeed in their practice? How can beings in all the realms succeed in their endeavors without a standard to live by? How can we be free of the five desires, the six dusts, our delusions, our afflictions? Without proper teachings, how can we set a standard in the world and help people transcend samsara?

Whenever we see temples, memorials, or pictures of past virtuous people or sages, or Buddhist texts, we should be respectful. If they are in need of repair, we should repair them. We can propagate and pass on the proper teachings, and help others to learn their value. In this way, we can repay our gratitude to the Buddha. We should do our best and

encourage others to do so as well.

What does “respecting our elders” mean? It is to make an extra effort to be attentive to and respectful of parents, older siblings, leaders, superiors, elders, and those of great virtue and learning. When taking care of our parents at home, we are to do so gently with loving hearts and obliging demeanors. We should not raise our voice but maintain a peaceful bearing. As we cultivate these virtues, they will become a part of us and we will change into a gentle-hearted person. This is the way we can touch the hearts of heaven.

When working for our superiors or the government, we should follow the rules and not do as we please just because our superiors do not know what we are doing. Before we convict some-

one of a crime, regardless of whether the crime is serious or not, we should investigate carefully and be just. We should not abuse power or be cruel because our superiors do not know what we are doing. When with our supervisor, we should show him or her the same respect as if we were facing the heavens. [As the proverb says,] “This is the correct behavior handed down from our ancestors.” It has an important bearing on our hidden virtues. Look at all the families who practiced loyalty and filial piety. Their descendants prospered for a long time and had bright futures. We can follow their example and practice with caution.

What does “loving and cherishing all living things” mean? A compassionate heart makes a person. A person seeking the virtues of loving-kindness and

compassion cultivates his or her heart of compassion. A person who wants to accumulate merits also cultivates a compassionate heart.

It is stated in the Book of Rites: “In January, when most animals bear their young, females of the species are not to be used for sacrificial purposes.” Mencius once said: “An honorable person will not go near the kitchen.” This is to protect a compassionate heart. Our ancestors did not eat meat under four circumstances: if they heard the killing, saw the killing, had the animal killed, or raised the animal themselves. If we cannot stop eating meat immediately, we can begin by following these four guidelines. In this way, we are gradually increasing our compassion.

We should not only refrain from

killing any animals, but insects as well, for they are also living creatures. Man makes silk from the cocoons of silkworms that have to be boiled in water with the silkworms inside. When we cultivate the land for farming, how many insects have to be killed? We need to be aware of the cost in lives involved in our food and clothing. We kill to provide for ourselves so to waste food and clothing is as serious an offense as killing. How often have we unknowingly harmed or stepped on a living creature? We should do our best to prevent this from happening again.

An ancient great poet once wrote: “For love of the mice, we often leave them some rice and in pitying the moth, we will not light the lamp.” This is compassion. I cannot begin to talk of all the infinite types of goodness. If we can

expand the ten previous categories, we can make them into a multitude of good deeds and virtues.



The Fourth Lesson: Benefits of The Virtue of Humility

In the *I Ching*, the hexagram for humility stated: “The laws of heaven take from the arrogant and benefit the humble. The laws of earth bring flowing water from areas that are full to those that are lower as it passes by. And the laws of spirits bring harm to those who are arrogant and good fortune to those who are modest. Even the laws of people despise those who are arrogant and prefer those who are modest.”

In the *I Ching*, only the humility hexagram contains solely good outcomes. The *Book of History* also explains: “While arrogance invites disaster, humility gains benefit.” I often went

to take the examinations accompanied by others and every time I would meet scholars who were very poor. I realized that before they passed the examinations and became prosperous, their faces radiated such humility that I felt I could almost hold it in my hands.

Several years ago, ten of us from the village went to take the preliminary imperial examination. The youngest, Ding Jingyu was extremely humble. I told one of the applicants, Fei Jinpo, that Jingyu would undoubtedly pass the examination. Fei Jinpo asked how I could tell and I told him: "Only those who are humble receive good fortune. My friend, look at the ten of us. Is there anyone as honest, generous, and uncompetitive, as Jingyu? Do you see anyone who is as respectful, tolerant, careful, and humble as Jingyu? Do you see anyone like him,

who when insulted does not talk back or who when slandered does not argue? Any person who can achieve such humility will receive protection from the earth, heaven, and spirits. There is no reason he will not become prosperous.” Sure enough, when the test results came out, Ding Jingyu had passed.

One year in Beijing, I stayed with a childhood friend, Feng Kaizhi. Always humble, he had a kind and accommodating appearance. He was no longer the arrogant person I had known years ago. His friend, Li Jiyan, was very blunt and outspoken, and often scolded him for his mistakes, but Kaizhi just calmly accepted the accusations without talking back. I told Kaizhi: “Just as there are signs that tell of coming good fortune or misfortune, we can see that prosperity or adversity come to those who have

cultivated their causes. Heaven will help those whose hearts are humble. You, my friend, will doubtless pass the imperial examination this year!" Later, he did just that.

There was a young man from Shandong province named Zhao Yufeng who passed the preliminary level of the imperial examinations before he was even twenty. But, try as he might, he could not pass the succeeding examinations. When his father moved to Jiashan to accept another government post, Yufeng went with him and came to greatly admire a well-known scholar in the village named Qian Mingwu.

Yufeng brought his work to Mr. Qian who picked up his calligraphy brush and made many corrections to the essay. Not only was Yufeng not angry, he gratefully

accepted all of Mr. Qian's corrections and immediately made the recommended changes. The following year, Yufeng passed the imperial examination.

One year, I went to the capital to pay my respects to the emperor and met a scholar named Xia Jiansuo who had all the qualities of a great man without a trace of arrogance. I felt the intense aura of his virtue and humility. When I returned home, I told a friend: "When heaven wants a person to prosper, it first bestows him with wisdom that can make a pompous person honest and well disciplined. Jiansuo is gentle, kind, and good. Surely, heaven will now make him prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Jiansuo had passed the examination.

There was a scholar named Zhang

Weiyan from Jiangyin who was well educated, wrote good essays, and was well known among scholars. One year, while taking his examination in Nanjing, he stayed at a temple. When the test results were posted and he found that he had failed, he became furious and loudly accused the examiner of being blind to obvious talent.

A Taoist monk who saw this began to smile. Weiyan immediately redirected his anger towards the monk who said the essay must not be good. Weiyan got even angrier and demanded how he knew it was not good when he had not even read it! The Taoist replied that he had often heard that the primary element in writing good essays was a peaceful mind and a harmonious disposition. Weiyan's loud and angry accusations clearly showed that his mind and disposition were vio-

lent so how could he possibly write well? Weiyang accepted what the Taoist said and asked for his advice.

The Taoist said that whether or not one passes depends on destiny. If someone is not destined to pass, then no matter how good the paper is, he or she will fail. When the Taoist concluded that Weiyang needed to make some changes, Weiyang asked how he could change destiny.

The Taoist replied that although the power to form our destiny lies in the heavens, the right to change them lies within us. As long as we practice goodness and cultivate hidden virtues, we will receive what we seek.

Weiyang said that he was only a poor scholar and questioned his ability to practice goodness. The Taoist explained

that practicing goodness and accumulating hidden virtues depended on the heart. As long as one intended to practice goodness and accumulate virtues, the merits would be infinite! He used the example of the virtue of humility that cost nothing. Weiyan needed to look within instead of berating the examiner for being unfair.

Weiyan listened to the Taoist monk and from then on suppressed his arrogance. Every day, he tried harder to practice goodness and to accumulate more merits. One night, three years later, he dreamt that he had entered a very tall house and saw a book with many names as well as many blank lines. He asked the person next to him about it and was told that the names belonged to the applicants who had passed the examination that year.

When Weiyang asked about all the blank lines, he was told that the spirits of the underworld checked on the applicants every three years. Only the names of those who were faultless and practiced goodness remained in the book. The blank lines had contained the names of those destined to pass, but due to recent offenses, their names had been removed.

The person pointed to a blank line and said that for the past three years Weiyang had been very careful and so disciplined that he had not made any mistakes. Perhaps his name would fill the blank. He hoped that Weiyang would value this opportunity and continue his faultless behavior. That year, Weiyang passed the examination and placed one hundred and fifth.

We now know that spirits and heavenly beings are three feet above our heads. Obtaining good fortune and preventing misfortune is up to us. As long as we have good intentions, refrain from wrongdoings, do not offend the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, are tolerant and not arrogant, then the beings and spirits of heaven and earth will feel compassion for us. Only then will we have a foundation for future prosperity.

Those who are filled with conceit are not destined for greatness. Even if they do prosper, their good fortune will be short lived. Intelligent people would never be narrow-minded and refuse the good fortune they are entitled to. Those who are humble always increase their opportunities to learn and in this way, their good deeds are boundless! Those who wish to cultivate and improve their

virtues cannot do without the virtue of humility.

The ancients said: “Those who have their hearts set on success and fame will surely attain them just as those who have their hearts set on wealth and position will attain what they wish for.” A person who has great and far-reaching goals is like a tree with roots. They must be humble in every thought and try to relieve other’s burdens even if the occurrence is as insignificant as a speck of dust. If we can reach this level of humility, we will naturally touch the hearts of heaven and earth.

I am the creator of my own prosperity. Look at the applicants who sought fame and wealth. Initially, they were insincere and what they sought was a passing impulse. When they wanted

something, they sought it but when their interest waned, they stopped seeking it.

Mencius once said [to Emperor Xuan of Qi]: “If you can expand from the heart that seeks personal happiness, to sharing happiness with all your subjects and make them just as happy as you are, then surely the nation will prosper!” This is also true for me in seeking to pass the imperial examination. [I alone can seek and thus change my destiny.]

Glossary

affliction. Condition or cause of pain, distress, and suffering which disturbs the body and mind. They can be thoughts of gain or loss, of wanting to control others, of criticism or slander. They might be worries, doubts, regrets, etc.

Amitabha. The name of the Buddha of the Western Pure Land, primarily meaning Infinite Life and Infinite Light. To help all beings attain Buddhahood, Amitabha Buddha created the Western Pure Land, an ideal place of cultivation. Sakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha of our world, explained that people in our age would be immersed in afflictions and bad habits. Due to this, virtually the only hope that we have to transcend our sufferings is to properly practice the Pure Land method and thus be born into the Pure Land.

attachments. These are strong desires or cravings for family, friends, possessions, sensuous pleasures, erroneous views, life, the idea of the self as an individual, etc.

bodhisattva. One who has vowed to attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment for themselves as well as for all beings. While Buddhas symbolize our virtuous nature, Bodhisattvas and Arhats represent the virtue of practice, without which, the innate virtuous nature cannot be revealed.

Buddha. Buddha is a Sanskrit word, meaning “wisdom and enlightenment.” A Buddha is one who has reached supreme perfection both in self-realization and in helping others to attain realization. The innumerable Buddhas are not gods to be worshipped but compassionate and wise beings to be respected and emulated.

causality (also know as cause and effect).

Everything that happens to us is the result of what we have thought, said, or done. What we undergo in this lifetime are the consequences of what we had done in our previous lifetimes, while what we do now will determine what we undergo in our future lifetimes.

delusion. False beliefs and views, not understanding the true reality.

Dharma. 1) The teachings of the Buddha (generally capitalized in English); 2) things, events, phenomena, everything in the universe; and 3) duty, law, doctrine.

discriminatory thoughts. Discriminatory thoughts and attachments are the root cause of why we are still subject to reincarnation. Discriminatory thoughts occur when we see others and ourselves as two.

dust. All the pollutants that contaminate our true nature. They include form, sound, scent, taste, touch, and views.

filial piety. Filial piety has profound meanings in Buddhism. It means to take care of parents physically, mentally and to fulfill their wishes. To further extend and enhance our respect and care for our parents, we have compassion for all beings in this world.

four kinds of kindness. Triple jewels, parents, teachers, all sentient-beings.

good fortune. All the goodness in one's life. It may manifest as happiness, friends, family, health,

longevity, intelligence, prosperity, position, etc. Good fortune is the benefit of the human and heaven realms, and can be carried with us from one life to another but it cannot help us to transcend reincarnation.

merits and virtues. Merits are accumulated by selflessly doing good deeds without wandering and discriminatory thoughts, or attachments, and the correction of our erroneous thoughts and behavior. Virtues arise from deep concentration and wisdom.

phenomena. Things, events, happenings: everything in the entire universe. Noumenon is the principle or essence while phenomena is the event or form. Noumenon is perceived through intuition or thought while phenomena is perceived through the senses. Noumenon is the theory as opposed to the phenomena that is reality.

retribution. Karmic consequences from thoughts, words, or deeds.

sutra. Buddha's teachings.

wandering thoughts. Afflictions that cloud our true nature. To have no wandering thoughts means to

have only virtuous thoughts, not that our minds are empty of all thoughts. As ordinary beings, we use an illusory mind, the mind that arises and ceases, and that has wandering thoughts. Awakened beings use the true mind that constantly dwells on truth.

Dedication of Merit

May the merits and virtues
accrued from this work
adorn the Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four kinds of kindness above,
and relieve the sufferings of those
in the Three Paths below.

May all those who see or hear of this
bring forth the heart of
understanding and compassion
and live the teachings
for the rest of this life.
Then be born together
in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

