

Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE FIRST LESSON: LEARNING TO CREATE 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 such a look of a sage that 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 his name and where he was from. He replied, "My last name is Kong. I came from Yunnan Province. I have inherited a most sacred text on astrology by Shao-Zi. It is called The Imperial Standard of Governing the World. Shao-Zi developed the art of prediction very well. By 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 asked my mother about him. My mother asked me to treat him very well. We then tested Mr. Kong's ability at prediction. He was always correct whether it was for big events or for small everyday matters. Therefore, I became convinced of what he had said about my destiny and again began to think of studying for the examinations. I consulted with my cousin Chen Shen. He recommended a teacher Mr. Hai-Gu Yu, who was teaching at the home of a friend, Mr. You-Fu Shen. I thus became his student.

Mr. Kong then did some more calculations for me. He told me that as a scholar, I would place fourteenth in the county examination, seventy-first in the regional examination and ninth in the provincial examination. The following year, at the three examination places I placed exactly as Mr. Kong had predicted. 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 (equivalent to a high school student), and the year that I would receive a promotion to become an imperial scholar (equivalent to a university student). And lastly, I would be appointed as magistrate in Sichuan Province. After holding that position for three and a half years, I would retire and return home. I would die at the age of fifty-three, on August 14th around the hours of one to three am. Unfortunately, I would not have a son. I recorded everything that he said and carefully set it aside.

After that, 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 of rice when the Commissioner of Education, Mr. Tu, recommended me for a promotion. I secretly began to doubt Mr. Kong's predictions. Nevertheless, the prediction turned out to be correct after all, because Mr. Tu's replacement turned down the 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 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 prearranged. 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 silently, without giving rise to a single thought. I lost interest in books and did not study at all.

The following year I went to Nanjing. Before I was to enter the National University at Nanjing, I paid a visit to Master Yun-Gu, a venerable Zen Master at Qixia Mountain. We sat in meditation face to face in the Zen hall for three days and three nights without sleep. Master Yun-Gu said, "The reason why ordinary people cannot become sages is because they have too many wandering thoughts running through their minds. 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 all predestined. There was no use or need for me to think about it or to desire anything. The master smiled and replied, "I thought you were someone of remarkable capabilities! Now I realize you are just an average, ordinary person!"

Feeling confused by what Master Yun-Gu 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 their life is bound by chi, the energy of yin and yang as well as destiny. We cannot deny the fact that it exists, but only ordinary people are bound by it. Destiny cannot bind those who cultivate great kindness. Nor can destiny bind those who have committed flagrant bad deeds. He told me that for the past twenty years, I had lived my life just as Mr. Kong had predicted and had done nothing to change it. Instead, I became bound by destiny. If I was not considered an ordinary person, who was. Taken aback, I asked Master Yun-Gu if it was true that we can change our destiny. The Master answered, "We create our own destiny. We seek our own good fortune. It is the true teaching and says so 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, position, a son, a daughter, long life, we can attain them. Since lying is one of the greatest offenses in the Buddha's teachings, we can be assured that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have no reason to deceive us. I then said I had heard that Mencius once said, "Whatever is sought can be attained. The seeking is in ourselves". This refers to inner qualities such as virtue, responsibility and kindness. These are all qualities 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 correct, but that I had misinterpreted his meaning.

Master Yun-Gu said that Master Hui-Neng, 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 one wishes for". By seeking inside ourselves, we will not only attain the inner qualities of virtue, responsibility and kindness, but we can also attain wealth, fame and prestige. To be able to attain both on the inside and on the outside is beneficial to our reward.

Master Yun-Gu then told me that if one cannot reflect inside one's own heart but instead blindly seeks fame, fortune and long life from outside sources, although one may pursue them by using intelligence, one can only attain at most what destiny had entitled one to. To do otherwise, one might lose both inner purity and what one was predestined to have. Then this seeking will have been in vain.

Master Yun-Gu then asked what were Mr. Kong's predictions regarding my entire life. I honestly told him the whole story. He then asked if I felt that I deserved imperial appointments or a son. I reflected upon my previous deeds and attitudes in the past for a long time. Then I answered him that no, I did not feel that I deserved an imperial appointment or a son. Those who received imperial appointments all had the appearance of good fortune and I did not. I did not work towards accumulating virtues to build up my good fortune, either. I was very impatient and narrow-minded. Sometimes, I would show off my intelligence and talent in putting down others. I also behaved arbitrarily and spoke without any sense of restraint. These were all signs of scant good fortune and virtue. How could I possibly receive an imperial appointment?

There is an old saying, "Life springs from the dirt of the earth. Clear water often harbors no fish". The first reason why I felt that I did not deserve a son was that I was overly attached to cleanliness.

The second reason was that harmony is the cultivator of all life. But I was quick tempered and easily became angry. The third reason was based on the principle that loving-kindness is the root of reproduction and harshness is the root of sterility. I overly guarded my own reputation and could not sacrifice anything for the sake of others. The fourth reason was that I talked too much, which wasted a lot of chi or energy. The fifth reason was that I indulged in drinking. The sixth reason that I did not have a son was my habit of staying up nights, not knowing how to conserve my energy. Aside from these, I had many other faults that were too numerous to mention.

Master Yun-Gu then said, "According to you then, there are many things in life you do not deserve, not only fame and a son! Those who have millions of dollars in this life must have cultivated the good fortune worthy of that amount in the past. Those who have thousands of dollars must also have good fortune, which is worthy of generating that sum. Those, who die of starvation were in fact were meant to die in that manner. The karmic result today is simply the fruit of their deeds. Heavenly beings do not have any intentions for us".

For example, if a person has accumulated enough merits and virtues for a hundred generations, then he or she will have descendants to last a hundred generations. One who accumulates enough merits and virtues to last ten generations will then have ten generations of descendants to live out that good fortune. The same goes for three generations or two generations. For those who have no descendants at all, it is because they have not accumulated enough good merits and virtues.

"Now that you recognize your own shortcomings, you need to put forth your utmost efforts into working to change and reforming your misdeeds, which cause you not to have a child or become an imperial official. You need to cultivate virtue and tolerance and to treat others with compassion and harmony. Also, to care for your health and conserve your energy and spirit. Live as though everything of the past dissolved yesterday and all of the 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 own wrong deeds.' "It is also said in the Book of Songs, 'To remind us to permanently accord with the mind of heaven and to seek the great good fortune by our own'".

The Master 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 still be changed. You only need to develop your virtue, diligently try to practice kind deeds and work to accumulate many hidden merits and virtues. These are your own transactions to create good fortune. How is it then possible that you will not get to enjoy them?"

"I Ching, The Book of Changes, was written to help people bring about good fortune and to avoid adversity. If everything is predestined with no room for change, then how can we improve upon our good fortune and avoid adversity? The very first chapter of I Ching, The Book of Changes also said, 'Families who often perform kind deeds will have an excess of good fortune to pass on to the next generations.' Do you believe this"? I replied "Yes".

I gratefully accepted his advice paid my respects to him by prostrating. Then I began to regret all my past wrongdoings, whether large or 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 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 kind and unkind acts I did. He told me that bad deeds would neutralize the good ones. The Master also taught me to recite the Zhun Ti Mantra. Only with a pure and concentrated mind could what I seek for come true. Master Yun-Gu explained that it had been said by specialists in drawing talismanic figures, "Those who are considered experts in the art of drawing charms but who 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 start to finish. With this understanding, start with the first stroke, which is called a good beginning. In the process of drawing, one must let go of all wandering thoughts. Do not even give rise to a single thought of goodness. Only under these circumstances can a charm be effective.

Master Yun-Gu continued, "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 discussed in 'Learning to Create Destiny' that, 'There is no difference between a long life and a short life.' At first glance, one would find this hard to understand. How can long life and short life be the same? In fact, when we do not give rise to thought there is no duality in short or long life".

"Separately analyze re-creating destiny. When there is no duality between wealth and poverty we will be able to create and form our own destiny. When there is no duality between failure and success, then we can control the fate of prestige and lack of position. When there is no duality between short life and long life, then we can control the destiny of life and death. The most important concern for human beings is that of life and death. So talking about early death and longevity encompass all conditions, whether favorable or unfavorable, whether 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, one needs to be aware of one's own faults and resolve to correct them just as in curing a sickness. While waiting we should let go of the thought of desiring something that we are not supposed to have and the thought of wishing to receive a reward". It would be quite an accomplishment in achieving these teachings to be able to reach the innate 'State of No Thought'. It is the actual learning and practice of wisdom."

Master Yun-Gu told me "I know that you are still unable to accomplish the 'State of No Thought', but you can practice reciting the Zhun Ti 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 give rise to wandering thoughts, the mantra will become effective and successful."

My name used to be Xue-Hai, which means "broad learning", but after receiving these teachings from Master Yun-Gu, I changed it to Liao-Fan, which means, "transcending the ordinary". It signified my understanding of the fact that we could create our destiny and that I did not wish to be like ordinary people, who were controlled by their destiny. From then on, I began to be very cautious and careful in whatever I thought or did. Soon I felt quite different from before. In the past, I was careless and had no self-discipline at all. Now, I found myself being naturally cautious and conscientious. I maintained this attitude even when alone, for I know that there are spirits and heavenly beings everywhere who can know my every action and thought. I am cautious to not offend them with my thoughts. Even when I encounter people, who dislike or slander me, I could take their insults with a patient and peaceful mind and do not feel compelled to quarrel with them.

The year after I met Master Yun-Gu, I took the preliminary imperial examination in which Mr. Kong had predicted that I would come in third place. Amazingly, I came in 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 of my 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 and not being eager enough to do it or having doubts when helping others in need. Sometimes I forced myself to act kindly, but my speech was still untamed and offensive. I found I could contain myself when sober, but after a few drinks, I would lose self-discipline and act without restraint. Although I often practiced kind deeds

and accumulated merits, my faults and offenses were so numerous, they seemed to outnumber my good deeds. 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 Tian-Qi. 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 and make a red circle on the calendar for every good deed she did. Sometimes she gave food to the poor or bought living creatures from 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 red 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 in our home. On September thirteenth 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.

Then I prepared a small book to record my merits and faults and called it the Book of Cultivating the Mind. Every morning, when I started to 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 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 three thousand meritorious deeds. Now, I had made a vow to complete ten thousand good deeds and 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, after your mother spoke these words, I dreamed of a heavenly being and told him of my difficulty in completing the ten thousand good deeds. The heavenly being told me that when I became mayor, I had reduced the taxes on the farmlands. That was a great good deed and that deed itself was worth ten thousand merits. My vow was already fulfilled! As it turned out, the farmers in Baodi County had to pay a very high tax and when I came to office, I reduced the taxes on the farmlands by nearly half. But still, I felt strange and bewildered. I still had doubts and wondered how a single deed could be worth ten thousand merits.

Coincidentally, the Zen Master Huan-Yu 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 Huan-Yu 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 from ten thousand good deeds. Besides, your act of reducing the taxes in this county benefits more than ten thousand people." Upon hearing his words, I immediately gave all my savings for him to take back to the Wutai Mountain. I asked the Master 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 illnesses although I did not ask the heavens for a longer life. Now I am sixty-nine. The Book of History explains that, "Destiny exists but is difficult to be believed by most people because it is very changeable". "Destiny is not set, but is only created and determined by ourselves". These are all true. I came to understand that both good fortune and misfortune are incurred by our own actions. These are truly the words of sages and virtuous people! If one were to say that good fortune and adversity

are all determined by the heavens, then I would consider that person to be ordinary.

Tian-Qi, my son, I wonder how your life will be? In any case of destiny 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. And when you have enough food and clothing, be mindful of poverty. And when loved and respected by all, remain careful, apprehensive and conservative. When the family is greatly respected and revered, carry yourself humbly. When your learning is extensive and profound, always think that the more that you learn the less you feel that you know. When thinking of the past, we can advocate the virtues of our ancestors. When thinking of the present, we can conceal the faults of our own parents. When thinking of the country, we can think of how we can repay its kindness to us and when thinking of the family we can think of how to bring about our families' good fortune. When thinking of the outside, think of how to help those in need around us and when thinking of within think of how to prevent improper thoughts and actions from arising.

We need to be able to find one's faults everyday and to correct them everyday. If we are unable to detect any faults in ourselves then we will think that everything we do is all right. Then, we will be unable to correct our faults and improvement will be out of the question. There are many intelligent people in the world who cannot make improvements in cultivating morality and virtue. Nor can they make improvements in their work. Their failures in this life are owed to a single word. Laziness.

Tian-Qi, the teachings of Master Yun-Gu are truly the most worthy, profound, real and proper teachings, and I hope that you will be well-versed in them and practice them diligently. You must use your time wisely and 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 advisors and counselors of these nations were able to accurately predict whether a person's future would be good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate based on their observation of that person's speech and behavior. Many of these are recorded in history books.

Usually, there are signs that signal impending danger or the coming of good fortune. These signs are a reflection of one's heart and mind. Though it is the mind from which thoughts arise, one's appearance can fully portray a person's character. Usually a person is more fortunate when tending toward kindness but invites trouble when tending toward meanness. Ordinary people often do not know what is actually going on. It is as if their vision was blurred. Since they cannot see the true reality, they claim that good fortune and misfortune are unpredictable.

When we are absolutely honest and truthful, our hearts will be in agreement with the will of heaven. By observing our goodness, others will be able to foresee the coming of good fortune. On the other hand, by observing our lack of goodness, others can also foresee upcoming adversities. If we wish to obtain good fortune and avoid misfortune, we must start first with reform before we even contemplate kind behavior.

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 tarnished and my reputation ruined like a cracked tile? We are unwilling to part with worldly desires.

I secretly do many improper things and think others will not know about them. I am shamelessly proud of myself. One day I will sink to the level of an animal without even realizing it. There is nothing else in the world, which calls for more shame and remorse than behavior such as this. Mencius once said, "Shame is the greatest and most important word in a person's lifetime." 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 cannot comprehend the word shame will be unrestrained and immoral and will be just like an animal. These are really key words to correcting our faults.

The second way to reform is to know fear. The celestial beings and earthly spirits all hover over our heads in observation. It is impossible for us to deceive them. Even when my wrongdoings are done in a concealed place, the beings and spirits of heaven and earth are just like a mirror, clearly reflecting all my faults. If my offense is serious, then all kinds of adversities will befall me. If my fault is minor, it will still deduct from my current good fortune. How can I not feel fear?

And there is more. Even when we are alone in our room, the beings and spirits watch over us very carefully and record everything. Even if we try to conceal or cover up our improper acts with clever speech, the spirits and celestial beings can see through to our hearts as clearly as seeing into our lungs or liver. Ultimately, we cannot deceive ourselves. If others were to see our behavior, we would find ourselves discredited. Therefore, how can we not be constantly cautious of our every action and be fearful of the consequences they might evoke? But there is more to it! As long as a person still has one breath left, then he or she has the chance to regret even the most serious wrongdoings and offenses.

Once, a person who behaved badly during his entire lifetime felt remorse just when he was about to die. He realized his past mistakes and regretted all the bad things that he had done. His mind came to a very kind thought and immediately afterwards, he peacefully passed away. This is to say that if a person can have an overwhelming and courageous kind thought at the most important moment, then it can cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated misdeeds. This is just 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 or if the offenses were newly made. He or she is an exceptional person as long as they are able to reform!

Besides, we are living in a tumultuous and constantly changing world. Our body, made of flesh and blood, is extremely perishable. If our next breath does not come, then this body will no longer be part of us. Then, even if we did want to reform, it would be too late to do so. Therefore, when we commit a wrongdoing, our retribution in the physical world is a bad reputation, which will last for hundreds, even thousands of years. Even filial children and loving grandchildren cannot restore our honor. Then in our afterlife, we might end up in hell suffering immeasurable pain. Even the sages, virtuous people, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot help us escape from the bad consequences. So how can we not be afraid?

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

A minor fault is like a thorn piercing our flesh. It should be quickly removed. A big fault is like a finger bitten by a poisonous snake. We must cut off that finger without hesitation to prevent the poison from spreading and taking our life. In I Ching, the Book of Changes, when we get the symbol of wind and thunder, it tells us that we have strong determination in reforming and are certain to succeed in doing so. If we can follow the three ways of shame, fear and determination to reform, then our personality will surely be transformed. Just as the sun's rays shine on a thin layer of ice in the springtime, there is no need to worry about its melting.

There are also three methods of practice to help us reform. First is changing through behavior, second is changing through reasoning and third is changing from the heart. Since the degree of achievement varies, so do the results. For example, if I killed living beings in the past, I now vow not to kill again starting today. If I was angry and yelled at others in the past, I vow not to get angry starting today. This is how a person changes through behavior and refrains from repeating a wrongdoing by vowing not to do it again. However, it is a hundred times harder if we force ourselves not to do something

than if we just stopped doing it naturally. If we do not uproot our faults, but merely suppress them, the faults will eventually resurface even if we have temporarily stopped committing them. Therefore, the method of changing through behavior cannot help us to permanently rid ourselves of our faults.

We can try to reform by refraining from wrongdoings by understanding the reason and principle behind why we should not do something. In the instance of killing, we can reform through contemplating that loving all living things is a virtue of heaven. All living beings love life and are afraid to die. How can I be at peace with myself by taking another's life to nurture my own? At times, animals were even cooked alive, such as fish or crabs. They may not have been completely slaughtered before going into the cooking pot. Such pain and suffering reach down into the very bones, how can we be so cruel to them?

When we eat, we use all kinds of expensive and tasty things to nourish our bodies, enough to fill the whole dinner 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 stomach become a graveyard and reduce our good fortune through the violation of killing?

Think again of all the living beings with flesh and blood. Like us, they have a conscience since they possess self-awareness. They and we are one entity. We can cultivate virtue and allow these living beings to respect us and feel safe around us. How can we continue to harm them and make them hate us? If we think about it, we will naturally feel sorrow for these animals and be unable to swallow their flesh.

Another example of changing through reasoning is the person who often gets angry. They need to stop and think that everyone has his or her individual strengths and weaknesses. According to my reasoning, if I touched on someone else's weakness, I should feel sorry for that weakness and forgive any shortcomings. If someone offends me for no reason at all, then it is that person's problem and has nothing to do with me. There is no reason for me to get angry.

I also think that there is not a great person who thinks that he or she is always right. There is not a truly learned person who blames their faults on others. Therefore, 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 actually become a training ground to refine our character and to strengthen our abilities. Therefore, we should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism and teachings. What is there to be angry and complain about?

Additionally, we should maintain the mind of stillness when we are slandered. Although the slanderous rumors and tale bearing spreads like a huge fire burning to the sky, eventually, like a torch it will burn itself out in space. If we hear others slandering us, get angry and try to defend ourselves, it would be like the spring silkworm spinning its own cocoon tying itself in suffocation. Therefore, no benefit but rather harm is derived from getting angry. There are other faults and offenses we can change. If we can understand the reasoning behind the need for reform, we will not repeat our mistakes.

What is meant by "changing from the heart"? Although we have thousands of different types of 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. If our heart is rooted in faults such as desire, fame, profit or anger, we do not have to find ways to get rid of each fault.

Demons do not appear in bright daylight. This is the essence, the key for us to turn over a new leaf. All mistakes stem from the heart; therefore, 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. If we are willing to cultivate our hearts, then it is possible to purify our faults 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 a fault 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 action and force the thought to dissipate. The best way is by cultivating the heart and understanding the reasons behind the need to change. The alternative way is forcing ourselves not to commit the wrongdoing again. Sometimes all three methods have to be used to succeed at reforming a fault. It is foolish to dismiss the best way, which is to reform from the heart and to be attached to the inferior way of reforming through action.

But even when we vow to change, assistance is needed to truly reform. We will need constant reminders from genuine friends who are witnesses to 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 regret sincerely and wholeheartedly from morning to night. If we can honestly regret from one to two weeks, one to three months, then continuing in this way, we are assured of attaining results and benefits.

What are the benefits of contrition? We may feel very much at ease and our hearts may feel light and generous. A person of low intelligence may suddenly become wise. Another might maintain a clear and relaxed mind even in a disturbing and confusing environment. We would also feel an extensive understanding of everything. Or we would be able to drive out all hatred upon seeing an enemy and maintain a happy attitude. We may dream of spitting out black things. We may also dream of ancient sages or virtuous people who have come to encourage and escort us or we may dream of flying in space without a care in the world. We may also dream of all kinds of colorful pennants and ornately decorated canopies. These distinctive phenomena are all indications of a successful reform and a dissolving of past offenses. However, we must not consider seeing these phenomena as a sign of perfection. Instead, we must resolve to further improve ourselves and work even harder to reform.

When Bo-Yu Qu was twenty, he was already mindful of his faults. He analyzed his mistakes and tried to correct them thoroughly. At the age of twenty-one, he felt he still had not completely corrected all his faults. When he was twenty-two, he felt as if twenty-one was spent dreamily, without practical improvement. Thus, year after year, he continued to correct his faults. When he reached fifty, Bo-Yu 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 and our mistakes are as numerous as the spines on a porcupine. Oftentimes when we look back, we do not even see our own faults. This is because we are careless and do not know how to reflect on our own actions. It is as if a cataract is growing in our eye. All these are the symptoms of having accumulated too many offenses and transgressions! Our hearts may feel confused and oppressed, lacking energy and spirit. We will become extremely forgetful, filled with worries even when nothing is happening.

We may feel embarrassed and depressed upon meeting a virtuous person. We will become displeased at hearing proper reasoning and when showing kindness to others, we are in turn treated with hostility. We will constantly have nightmares where everything is upside-down and will talk incoherently and behave abnormally. All of these are signs of misfortune. If we have any of the above symptoms, we must gather our willpower and reform all faults. It is necessary to form a new life and not delay!

THE THIRD LESSON: WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

I Ching, the Book of Changes explains that, "Families who perform good deeds will accumulate prosperity which can outlast many generations". Let me give an example. Once there was a family by the name of Yan. Before they agreed to give their daughter in marriage to the man who later became Con-

fucius' father, they looked into the past deeds of the family. After finding the family to be one that practiced kindness and accumulated virtues, the Yan family felt assured that their daughter would be marrying into a family that would be prosperous with outstanding descendants.

Confucius had once praised Shun on his filial piety, saying, "Due to his great filial piety and sincerity, Shun could deeply move even his ancestors to accept his offering. His accumulation of merits and good fortune would last for many, many generations." These sayings were later proven true by history. Now I will show in some true accounts that merits can be attained through performing good deeds.

In Fujian province, there was a prominent man named Rong Yang who held a position in the imperial court as the Emperor's teacher. His ancestors were boat people who made a living by helping people cross the river. Once, there was a storm, which lasted so long that fierce flooding washed away all the houses. People, animals and belongings were carried downriver by the current. Other boaters took advantage of the situation and strove to collect the floating belongings. Only Rong Yang's grandfather and great grandfather took interest in rescuing the drowning people. They did not take any of the goods that floated by. The other boaters all laughed and thought them to be very foolish. Later, when Rong Yang's father was born, the Yang family gradually became wealthy.

One day a heavenly person manifested as a Taoist monk came to the Yang family. He told them that their ancestors had accumulated much hidden merit. Consequently, their descendants would enjoy wealth and prominence. He said that there was a special place where they could build their ancestral tomb. So, they followed the Taoist's suggestion. Today it is called the White Hare Grave. Shortly after, Rong Yang 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 his grandfather and great grandfather with the same imperial honors. Today, his many virtuous and prosperous descendants are still very prominent.

Zi-Cheng Yang, from the county of Yin in Zhejiang province, is another example. Zi-Cheng worked as a member of the staff of the county courthouse. He was kind and humane, fair and law-abiding. Once, the county magistrate punished a criminal by beating him until his blood spilled out onto the ground. The magistrate's anger did not subside and as he was about to continue, Zi-Cheng knelt and pleaded with him to stop beating the prisoner. The magistrate said, "It is all right for you to plead, but how can I not be angry when this person has broken the law!" Zi-Cheng replied that when those in a position of leadership in the government do not follow the proper path, ordinary people would lose their way. Once we realize this, we should feel sorrow rather than joy. And if we should not feel joy, then how could we feel anger? Thus, a case like this called for more understanding. The magistrate was touched by Zi-Cheng's speech and ceased the beating.

Although Zi-Cheng came from a very poor family, he never took any bribes. If the prisoners were short of food, he would always take food from his own home even if it meant going hungry himself. One day, several new prisoners needed feeding. Zi-Cheng's home was short of food. If he gave them what he had then his family would go hungry. But, if he kept the food for his family then the prisoners would go hungry. He felt that the prisoners needed the food more than his family did. A deplorable situation. He discussed it with his wife who asked where the prisoners came from. Zi-Cheng answered that they were from Hangzhou. They had to tolerate hunger along the way. So Zi-Cheng and his wife cooked their rice and shared it with the prisoners.

Later, Zi-Cheng had two sons. The elder's name was Shou-Chen and the younger was named Shou-Zhi. Both sons became very prominent and held important government positions. His eldest grandson became Vice Minister of the Ministry of Justice. His second grandson was a member of the government staff in Sichuan Province. They were both prominent. Today, the government official, Chu-Ting Yang, who is known for his virtuous deeds, is also their descendent.

Here is another true example that happened during the Zheng-Tong period during the time of Emperor Ying-Zong. Once, a group of rebels appeared in Fujian Province. Many intellectuals joined them.

The Emperor appointed Imperial Censor General Zhang to go south and subdue them. The general tricked the rebels and captured their chief. Later, official Zhang dispatched General Xie to subdue the remaining rebels, in eastern Fujian Province. General Xie managed to attain a list of those who belonged to the organization and commanded that a white flag be secretly given to those who did not belong with the rebels. They were told to place the flag on their door when the imperial army came to town and the soldiers were ordered not to harm the innocent. With this one thought of goodness, General Xie saved tens of thousands of people from being killed. Later, his son Chian Xie achieved first place in the imperial examinations and later became an advisor to the Emperor. His grandson Pi Xie, also placed third in the imperial examinations.

Another example is the Lin family from Putian, in Fujian Province. Among their ancestors was an elderly lady who was very generous. Everyday she made rice balls to give to the poor and always gave as many as they asked for. There was an Immortal who manifested as a Taoist monk and came everyday for three years and each day, would ask for six or seven rice balls. She always granted his request. The Taoist monk then realized her deep sincerity.

He said to her, "I have eaten your rice balls for three years with nothing to show my gratitude in return. Perhaps I can help you in this way. On the land behind your house, there is a good place for you to place your grave. If you are placed there in the future, the number of your descendants who will have imperial appointments will be equivalent to the number of seeds in a pound of sesame seeds". Her son followed his recommendations and buried her there. The first generation after that, nine men passed the imperial examinations and it continued that way for every succeeding generation. There was a saying in Fujian that the results of the imperial examination always had the surname Lin on it.

Another example comes from the father of an imperial historian whose name was Zhuo-An Feng. One winter many years ago, Zhuo-An Feng's father was on his way to school when he encountered a person lying frozen in the snow. Finding the man still breathing, he quickly took off his coat to wrap around the frozen man. He carried him back home and revived him. That night, Zhuo-An's father dreamt of a heavenly being telling him "You helped a dying man out of utter sincerity, this is a great virtue. I will bring the famous General Qi Han of the Song Dynasty to be reborn as your son". Later, Zhuo-An was born and was named Qi.

Another example is Mr. Ying, the Minister who lived in Taizhou. When he was young, he used to study 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 say happily 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 here and will replace me. Then I can be reborn!"

Mr. Ying heard this and immediately set out to sell a parcel of land that he owned. He received two hundred grams of silver for it, made up a letter from the daughter-in-law's husband and sent it to her home along with the silver. The in-laws 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 truly alive and well." Consequently, the daughter-in-law did not need to remarry and her husband returned home after a while. The couple got back together and were like before.

Mr. Ying heard the first ghost say, "Originally, I was supposed to be able to leave this place to be reborn, but Mr. Ying messed up my chance!" The second ghost asked, "Why don't you get even with him?" The first ghost replied, "I cannot. The heavenly beings have recognized his goodness and virtue and he is going to receive a prominent position in the future. How can I harm him?" Mr. Ying heard this and became even more diligent in practicing kindness and accumulating merits. Whenever there was a famine, he would give grain from his storehouses to the poor and needy and was always eager to do whatever he could to help relatives in emergencies. When things did not go his way, he always reflected within himself rather than complain of external conditions. Thus, he always quietly complied

with conditions. Even today, his descendants are still very prominent.

There was another person, Feng-Zhu Xu, who lived in Jiangsu province. His father was very wealthy. Whenever there was a famine, his 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 the poor. One night, he heard ghosts outside his home, "No kidding! 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 Feng-Zhu passed the examination. After that, Feng-Zhu's father became even more diligent in accumulating good deeds. He spent money to repair roads and bridges and provided food for monks as well as the poor. He would do anything he could to help others. Sometime later, he heard the ghosts again, "No kidding! The provincial scholar from the Xu family is going to hold a high position in the government." Eventually, Feng-Zhu became the governor for Zhejiang Province.

Another example is Kang-Xi Tu who lived in Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province. Mr. Tu used to work 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 a secret report to the Minister of Justice, telling him why a prisoner was innocent. The Minister would then question the prisoner accordingly and clear the case. Through Mr. Tu's effort, 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 judgement.

Soon after, Mr. Tu also made a report to the Imperial Judge saying, "If even in the Imperial City so many innocent people are imprisoned, there must be many more throughout the country. I recommend that the Imperial government send investigators to check the prisons for innocent people every five years. The sentences can be reduced or canceled in order to prevent the innocent from remaining in prison." The minister, his superior, took his request to the Emperor, who agreed to Mr. Tu's suggestion. Mr. Tu was 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, "You were not supposed to 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." After that, his wife gave birth to three sons who all became prominent men in society.

Another example of attaining good outcomes from practicing kindness is Ping Bao who lived in Jiaxing. Ping was the youngest of the 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. Ping Bao was very knowledgeable and talented, but he was never able to pass the examinations. He spent his time studying Buddhism and Taoism.

Once, while traveling to Lake Mao, he came to a village and saw a way place in desperate need of repairs. The statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva was wet from the rain that leaked through the roof. Ping took out all his money and gave it to the Abbot of the temple, asking him to please use it to restore the way place. The Abbot replied "It will be a very big project, I am afraid this amount is not enough to complete your wish." Ping Bao then took out all his luxurious belongings 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 Great Compassion 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 a difficult deed to accomplish, but your deep sincerity is truly rare and precious to encounter". After the way place was repaired, Ping Bao asked his father to visit the temple and together they spent the night there. That night the Dharma Protector of the way place, Qie-Lan, came in his dream to thank him and said, "Since you have accumulated these merits and virtues, your children and descendants will enjoy having imperial appointments for generations to come." Later, his son and grandson both passed high examinations and were appointed as imperial officials.

Li Zhi from Jiashan County, in Zhejiang Province is another example. His father used to be a clerk in the provincial courthouse. Once, Li's father learned of an innocent man who was given the death penalty and tried to save his life. When the prisoner heard about this, he told his wife, "I am so indebted to this man who has spoken on my behalf but I have no way of showing 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. However, it was the only way she could help her husband at this critical time. Therefore, the next day when the clerk came to visit, she offered him wine and told him of her husband's wishes. The clerk refused, but continued to do all he could to clear the case. When at last the prisoner was released, he and his wife both went to the clerk's house to thank him. The man said, "One with such virtue as yours is truly rare these days, how can I show my gratitude? You do not have a son. Please allow me to offer my daughter in marriage to you, this is the only way I can repay you. Please accept."

So the clerk accepted and soon afterwards, she bore him his son, Li Zhi. Li passed the higher level imperial examination when he was just twenty years old. Later, he was appointed to a high government position. Li's son Gao, grandson Lu and great grandson Da-Lun all passed the examinations and received imperial appointments. These ten examples all tell of the different deeds cultivated by different people. Although their actions differed, their intent was the same: doing good deeds.

If we were to examine goodness closely, we would find that there are many different kinds. There is real goodness and false goodness, honest goodness and crooked goodness, hidden and visible, apparent and actual, proper and improper, full and half, big and small, and finally, difficult and easy. These different types of goodness each have their own reasons, which are to be carefully learned and understood. If we try to practice good deeds but do not learn how to differentiate between right and wrong, we may end up doing more harm than good. Then, all of our efforts would have been in vain.

What is "real goodness and false goodness"? In the Yuan Dynasty, a group of scholars went to visit Master Jung-Feng. One of them asked, "Buddhism often speaks of the karmic reward for good and bad, saying that 'It is like the shadow, following the form wherever it goes.' Then why is it, that there are people who practice good deeds, but their family and descendants are neither prosperous nor successful? On the other hand, there are bad and wicked people who behave immorally, but their family and descendants do quite well. What has happened to the Law of Cause and Effect? Are there no standards in the Buddha's teachings?"

Master Jung-Feng answered, "Ordinary people are blinded by worldly views, they have not cleansed their minds of impurities and cannot see with true perception. Therefore, they look upon true goodness as wrongdoing and mistake wrongdoing as goodness. This is very common nowadays. Furthermore, these people do not blame themselves for failing to understand, but instead, blame their misfortune on the heavens. This is unfair!" The scholars questioned how good and bad could be mistaken for each other.

Master Jung-Feng asked each of them to express their thoughts on what was good and what was bad. One scholar said that to yell at and hit others was bad, to respect and treat others in a mannerly way was good. The Master replied, "Not necessarily". Another scholar then said that being greedy and taking another's money was bad, not being greedy and behaving properly was good. Master Jung-Feng again replied, "Not necessarily". The remaining scholars all expressed their views on what was good and what was bad, but Master Jung-Feng always concluded, "Not necessarily".

Master Jung-Feng said, "To do things with the intention of bringing benefit to others is good. To do things to benefit ourselves is bad. If what we do is for the sake of benefiting another, then it does not matter if we yell at or hit that person, it is still considered good. If our intention is for self-benefit, then regardless of our appearance of respect and courtesy, it is still considered bad. Therefore, when we practice good deeds with the sole intention of benefiting others, this is considered public benefit. If it is for the public, then it is real goodness. If we only think of ourselves while doing good acts, then that is

considered private benefit and that is false goodness.”

“When goodness springs from within the root of the heart, it is real goodness. When we do good just because others are doing so, it is false. In addition, when we do good without expecting anything in return, it is considered real goodness. When we practice good deeds for some purpose other than to benefit others, it is false. Those who wish to practice true goodness need to contemplate all these differences.”

What is "honest goodness and crooked goodness"? People nowadays 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 everyday actions, they may be liked by all 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 the sages and virtuous people. Because of this, it is possible that our judgement could be erroneous.

Beings and spirits of Heaven and Earth all look upon good and bad from the same viewpoint as do the sages. They do not view things from the same perspective as ordinary people. Therefore, when we wish to accumulate merits, we must not give way to greed or be affected by the sights and sounds of the world. We need to be aware of our deviated thoughts as soon as they arise and to purify them.

Honest goodness comes from the thought to sincerely help all others. Crooked goodness arises from the thought of flattering others to obtain what we want. Loving others is being honest. Hating others and being jealous is being crooked. Honest goodness is when we are respectful and crooked goodness is when we act without sincerity. These are all to be carefully differentiated.

What is "hidden goodness and visible goodness"? When we do something good and people know about it, it is visible goodness. When no one knows about it, it is hidden virtue. Those with hidden virtues will naturally be known by the heavens and will be rewarded. Those who practice visible goodness will be known by people and will enjoy fame. Fame itself is good fortune, but it is forbidden for heaven and earth do not favor fame. We can see that those who have great fame, but lack the virtue supporting it will eventually encounter some kind of overwhelming adversity. A person who truly has not done any wrong but continues to be falsely accused by others will have descendants who will suddenly become prosperous and successful. From this, we can see how important it is to understand the minute differences between hidden and visible goodness.

What is apparent and actual goodness? In the Spring-Autumn Period, there was a country named Lu that made a law, which rewarded those who paid the ransom to regain the freedom of their fellow citizens who were servant-slaves. At that time, Confucius had a very rich student named Zi-Gong. Although Zi-Gong paid the ransom to free his people, he did not accept the reward for doing such a deed. When Confucius heard this, he was very unhappy and scolded him saying, "You acted wrongly in this matter. When sages and virtuous people undertake anything, they strive to improve morality, teaching people to be good and decent. We do not do something just for personal virtues or reputation. In the country of Lu, the poor outnumber the wealthy. By refusing the reward, you lead others to think that accepting the reward money is being greedy. If this happens, no one will pay the ransom to free our people again".

Another student of Confucius, Zi-Lu, once saw a man drowning in the river and rescued him. Later, the man thanked him by giving him a cow as a token of gratitude. Zi-Lu accepted his gift. Confucius was happy when he heard this and said, "In the future, people will be willing and eager to help those who are drowning in deep waters or lakes".

If we look from the eyes of ordinary people, Zi-Gong, who did not accept the reward money, was good. Zi-Lu, who accepted the cow, was not as good. Who would have known that Confucius would praise Zi-Lu and scold Zi-Gong? 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. We would also do well to not only

consider our own gain and loss but look to see the impact made on the public.

What we do right now may be good but with the passing years, it may bring harm to others. Therefore, what seems like goodness may actually be bad. What now appears to be bad may actually have positive long-term effects, turning out to have been goodness after all. So, what seems like a bad deed may actually be goodness. There are some examples of what appears to be good but actually is not. Apparent responsibility may be actual irresponsibility, apparent propriety may be actual impropriety, apparent trustworthiness may be actual untrustworthiness, apparent kindness may be actual unkindness. In these instances, we need to differentiate carefully and know how to behave properly.

What is "proper goodness and improper goodness"? In the Ming Dynasty, there once was a Prime Minister named Wen-Yi Lu. When he grew old, he retired to his hometown where he was widely loved and highly respected. Once, a drunken villager went to his home and proceeded to insult him. Mr. Lu was not angered by his words but instead, told his servant, "This man is drunk. Let's not argue with him". With this, he closed the door and ignored the onslaught of insults. A year later, the same man committed a grave crime and was given the death sentence. Upon hearing this, Mr. Lu said with great remorse, "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 only thinking of being kind and unknowingly encouraged an arrogant and malevolent personality. Now he has been given the death penalty". This is an example of doing something bad while having good intentions.

There is also an example of those who achieved goodness although they had acted from improper intentions. Once, a famine devastated the land and people stole food from others in broad daylight. A rich family reported these losses to the authorities. However, the government, did nothing to stop the thieves. Eventually, the poor grew more daring and chaos was imminent. So, the rich family took the law into their own hands and proceeded to catch and punish those who had stole from them. In this way, peace was restored and people stopped their stealing. Otherwise, the turmoil would have gotten completely out of hand.

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 all benefit from understanding this.

What is "half goodness and full goodness"? I Ching, the Book of Changes said, "People who do not accumulate virtuous deeds will not achieve honor. On the other hand, people who do not accumulate bad deeds will not bring about self-destruction". The Book of History said, "The last emperor of the Shang Dynasty, Zhou, had committed the worst of crimes". The dynasty ended with his death. It is like collecting objects in a container. With diligence, it will soon be full. If we are lazy, then the container will be only half full. This is one example of full goodness and half goodness.

Once a poor woman went to visit a Buddhist way place and wished to make a donation. Being extremely poor, she only had two cents but she freely gave these to a monk. To her surprise, the abbot himself came to help her regret for past offenses and dedicate her merits. Later, she was chosen to enter the imperial palace and obtained wealth and prestige. Clad in her riches, she again went to the way place to make a donation, this time bringing thousands of silver pieces.

To her dismay, the abbot only sent his student, another monk to help her dedicate her merits. The lady did not understand and questioned the abbot, "In the past, I only donated two cents, yet you personally helped me express my regret for past offenses. Today, I come with great wealth to give and you will not help me perform my merit dedication. Why?" The abbot replied, "Although the amount of money you gave in the past was small, it came from a true and sincere heart. It was necessary for me to repay your sincerity by personally performing your dedications. Today, although your donation is much greater, the heart of giving is not quite as true and sincere as before. Therefore, it is fitting and sufficient that my student performs your dedications for you." This is an example of how thousands of

silver pieces are only considered "half goodness" and two cents are "whole goodness".

Another example is of Li Zhong, an immortal of the Han Dynasty. He was teaching his student, Dong-Bin Lu, the art of transforming iron into gold. They would use this gold to help the poor. Dong-Bin asked his teacher, "Will the gold ever change back to iron?" Li Jung answered, "After five hundred years, it will return to its original form". Dong-Bin said, "In that case, I do not want to learn this art for it will harm those who possess the gold five hundred years from now." Li Zhong 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 is another example of whole goodness and half goodness.

When we perform a good deed, it is best for us to not attach to how much we have done. If we practice in this manner, then all our good deeds will reach fulfillment and success. If, instead, we always think of the deeds that we have performed, looking for a reward of some kind, then no matter how diligently we practice, even for an entire lifetime, the deeds will still be considered as half goodness. For example, when we donate money to the poor, we can practice what is called "pure donation". In this type of giving, we do not linger on the thought of "I" who is giving. We do not dwell on the importance of the object that is given. We do not think of the other who has received. We are simply giving out of true sincerity and respect. When we give with this "pure donation" then one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune and the merit from giving one cent can wipe away the transgressions of a thousand eons.

If we always keep in mind the good that we have done and expect rewards for our actions, then even a donation of two hundred thousand gold pieces would not bring us the reward of a fully good fortune. This is another way of explaining whole goodness and half goodness.

What is "big goodness and small goodness"? Once there was a high ranking official named Zhong-Da Wei, who was led into the underworld to be judged for his good and bad deeds. The judge ordered his records of good and bad to be brought out. When the records arrived, Zhong-Da was astounded at the courtyard filled with his bad records and at the single scroll, which contained his good deeds. The official then ordered the two to be weighed. Surprisingly, the bad records, which had filled the courtyard, were lighter than the single scroll of good deeds, which was as thin as a chopstick. Zhong-Da asked the judge, "I am barely forty years old, how could I have committed so many wrongdoings?" 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 through action to be counted as a wrong".

Zhong-Da then asked him what was recorded in the single scroll of good deeds. The judge replied, "Once the Emperor planned to build a great stone bridge but you proposed against the project due to the hardship and toil it would cause the tens and thousands of people needed for the work. This is a copy of your proposal to the Emperor". Zhong-Da said, "I did make the proposal, but the Emperor dismissed it and proceeded with the project anyway. My proposal had no effect on the matter at all. How can it bear so much weight against my numerous offenses?"

The judge replied, "Although the Emperor did not accept your suggestion, that one thought of kindness you bore for the tens and thousands of people was very great. If the Emperor had listened to you, 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 is "difficult goodness and easy goodness"? The knowledgeable scholars of the past used to say, "When one wishes to conquer one's greed and desires, one should start with what is most difficult to overcome". When Confucius talked about how to cultivate one's humanity, he also said to start with what is most difficult to practice.

For example, the old teacher, Mr. Shu of Jiangxi, gave two years salary to a poor family who owed money to the government. Thus, he saved them from being torn apart if the husband was sent to

prison. Another example is Mr. Zhang from Handan. Mr. Zhang gave his ten years of savings to a poor man so he could repay a debt. 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 could not sacrifice, they did so willingly.

Another example is Mr. Jin from Jiangsu Province. As he was old and without any sons, his neighbor offered their young daughter in marriage to him to give him descendants to carry on his lineage. Mr. Jin refused the offer and sent her back home. This is another example of being able to overcome what is most difficult to conquer in oneself.

Therefore, the heavens showered down good fortune, which was especially good for 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 kindness even when it is easy and one has the chance to do so, then it would truly be a shame. For those who are poor and without prestige, doing kind things for others is very difficult. However, if in this difficulty one can still manage to help others then it would be even more valuable.

There are many ways to help others whenever the opportunity presents itself. In short, the ways of helping others can be simplified into ten important categories. The first is "supporting the practice of kindness". The second is "revering love and respect". Third is "helping others to succeed in doing good". Fourth is "persuading others to practice kindness". Fifth is "helping those in desperate need". Sixth is "developing public projects for the greater benefit of people". Seventh is "practicing merits by giving wealth". Eighth is "protecting and maintaining the proper teachings". Ninth is "respecting elders". Tenth is "loving and cherishing all living things".

What does "supporting the practice of kindness" mean? In the Yu Dynasty, there once was an emperor by the name of Shun. 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 the older and weaker fishermen were left with the rapids and shallow water, where there were very few fish. When Shun saw this situation, he felt sympathy for the older fishermen. He decided to join in the fishing. Whenever he saw fishermen grab the good fishing spots, he would not speak of their faults. When he saw those who were humble and yielding, he praised them everywhere he went and even followed their humble and polite ways. Shun stayed and fished like this for a whole year until the other fishermen got into the habit of yielding good fishing spots to others.

A wise and intelligent man such as Shun could have easily influenced others with a few words of advice. Why did he not just say something instead of changing others by setting a good example? Shun's painstaking and good intentions were like the expert craftsmanship that comes only as the result of long practice and hard work.

In today's era of low morality, social breakdown and loss of proper thinking, it is most difficult to find a good standard of behavior. Therefore, when those around us have shortcomings, we do not use our good points to highlight their deficiencies. When others are unkind, we do not use our kindness and compare ourselves to them. When others are not as capable as we are, we do not purposely surpass them with our abilities. Even when we are intelligent and competent, these skills are to be kept hidden and not boasted of. Instead, we need to behave even more modestly than ever. When someone makes mistakes, we tolerate and conceal them, providing 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 set standards for others to follow. These are the qualities of a great person, who thinks of the public welfare as more important than his or her own.

What is meant by "revering love and respect for others"? Sometimes it is hard to tell from appearance whether one is an honorable person or a fraud, since frauds can pretend to be honorable. The difference lies in their intentions. The difference between them is like black and white. So, Mencius said that the difference between genuinely 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 are close to us while others are strangers, some are in high positions while others are in low, some are smart while others are not and some are virtuous while others are corrupt. Nevertheless, they are humans like us and are thus, all one entity. I should neither hate nor disrespect anyone. 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 the people on this earth to obtain what they wish for. Therefore, if we can have loving-kindness and respect for people and help them to achieve in their endeavors, we are doing the job of a sage or a virtuous person.

What does "helping others to do good" mean? If we threw away raw jade, it would be like any other worthless stone. But if we carve and polish it, it will be transformed into a valuable object. So, when we see people whom we feel have good potential for doing a good deed or working towards a proper goal, we can guide, support, praise and encourage them, helping them to succeed in their endeavors. If others wrongly accuse them, we can try to clear their name and share their burden of slander. Only when we have helped them stand on their feet and become a part of society will we have fulfilled our responsibility in helping others to do good.

There are always more bad people around than good people. Therefore, those who are good often have difficulty standing on their own. Good people have good abilities and virtues, which allow them to achieve fame. They usually do not care much for 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 good and need to stand on their own. They can provide what the good people need to practice goodness. The merits of these virtuous people and elders who do this will be great.

What is meant by "persuading others to practice kindness"? Since we are all humans, we all have a conscience, but chasing after wealth and fame has kept us constantly busy and we have forgotten our conscience. Although we want to do good, the necessity of surviving in a world filled with hardships can result in our forgetting to do good. When a friend is about to ignore his or her conscience to do something unworthy, we can remind and warn this friend, hoping 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 Yu Han 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." We can use either speaking or writing, whichever is appropriate for the circumstances. We can persuade others by word of mouth as well as by writing books to promote virtue. Compared with teaching others through behavior this is much more direct and obvious. Sometime, 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 and we tried to) we would do well to reflect and generate the wisdom not to make the same mistake again.

What is meant by "helping those in desperate need"? During one's lifetime, people will often suffer from serious difficulties. If we meet someone like this, we can help that person as if we were the one who was suffering. We immediately come to this person's aid. If a person has been wrongly accused or convicted, we should plead on their behalf as well as provide aid in any way we can. Scholar Cui Zi 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 is meant by "developing public projects for the benefit of others"? Small construction works are needed for villages and big construction jobs are needed for cities. As long as it is beneficial to the people, it 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 encourage 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 and do not become frightened when the job becomes difficult. Do not allow the jealousy and hatred of others to weaken our resolve to do good deeds.

What is meant by "accumulating merits and good fortune by giving wealth"? In Buddhism, giving is considered the foremost practice among all the methods. What is giving? Giving is to let 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, one can also give away that which we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. There is nothing we cannot give away. When we find ourselves unable to do so, we can start 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 practice giving without hesitation, we can cure stinginess and at the same time, help others in dire need. However, for many this is very difficult to do, especially at first. But, gradually it will become more natural the more we give. This is the best way to cure selfishness and to rid ourselves of attachments and stinginess.

What is meant by "protecting the proper teachings"? For millions of years, proper teachings have been a standard of truth and provided spiritual guidance for all living beings. Without proper teachings, how can we participate in and support the nurturing of heaven and earth? Without proper teachings, how can we help people to attain achievement. 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 the Six Realms. Therefore, whenever we see way places, memorials of past virtuous people or sages, pictures of sages, or Buddhist texts, we should be respectful. If they are in need of repair, we should repair and put them back in order. We can propagate and carry forward the proper teachings and help others to learn their value. In this way, we can repay our gratitude to the Buddha. We should especially do our best and encourage others to do so as well.

What is meant by "respecting our elders"? It is making an extra effort in being attentive to and respecting parents, elder siblings, leaders, superiors or elders or those of high virtue, prestige and learning. When taking care of our parents at home, we are to do so with loving hearts and a gentle, accommodating appearance. 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 carrying out deeds for our superiors or the government, we should follow the rules and not become unrestrained just because our superiors do not know what we are doing.

Before we convict someone of a crime, regardless of whether the crime is serious or not we should investigate carefully and handle the case justly. We should not abuse power and rights or be excessively harsh because our supervisor does not know what we are doing. When we face our supervisor, we should show him the same respect as if we were facing the heavens. (As the motto says), "This is

the correct behavior handed down from our ancestors". It has a direct and important effect 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. Therefore, we can follow their example and practice with caution.

What is meant by, "loving and cherishing all living things"? A heart of compassion is what makes a person. A person in search of the virtues of mercy and kindness looks out for 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 from the Zhou Dynasty, "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.

Therefore, our ancestors did not eat meat under four circumstances. First was if they heard the killing, second was if they saw the killing, third was if they raised the animal themselves and fourth was if they had the animal killed for their consumption. Even if we cannot stop eating meat immediately, we can still try to start by following these four guidelines. In this way, we are gradually increasing our compassion. We would not only refrain from killing any living creature, but insects as well, for they are also living creatures. Man makes silk from the cocoons of silkworms. The cocoons have to be boiled in water first, 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 everyday food and clothing. We kill to provide for ourselves. Therefore, to waste food and clothing would create the same violation 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, "In love of the mice, we often leave them some rice. In pitying the moth, we will not light the lamp". What a kind and compassionate statement! There are infinite types of goodness. I cannot mention them all. As long as we can expand on 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 I Ching, the Book of Changes, the combination for Humility stated that "The law of heaven takes from the arrogant and benefits the humble. The law of earth will bring flowing water from areas that are full to those that are lower as it passes by. The law of spirits brings harm to those who are arrogant and good fortune to those who are modest. Even the laws of people despise the arrogant and like the modest." In I Ching, the Book of Changes, only the Humility combination contains all good and no bad outcomes. The Book of History explains that "Arrogance invites disaster and 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 noticed that before they succeeded in passing 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. Jing-Yu Ding was the youngest and extremely humble. I told one of the applicants, Jin-Po Fei, that this young man would definitely pass the examination this year. Jin-Po Fei asked how I could tell. I told him that "Only those who are humble receive good fortune. My friend, look at the ten of us; is there anyone as honest, generous and never tries to come in first, as Jing-Yu? Do you see anyone who is as respectful, tolerant, careful and humble like Jing-Yu? Do you see anyone like Jing-Yu, who when insulted does not talk back or who when slandered does not argue? Any person who can achieve such a level of humility will receive protection from the earth, spirits and heavens. There is no reason he will not become prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Jing-Yu Ding passed.

One year in Beijing, I was staying with my childhood friend, Kai-Zhi Feng. I noticed that he always

carried himself in a humble way with a kind and accommodating appearance. He was not a bit arrogant, which was an immense change from his childhood ways. Kai-Zhi had a friend named Ji-Yan Li who was straightforward and honest. Ji-Yen often scolded him for his mistakes, but Kai-Zhi always accepted the accusations calmly without talking back. I told him, "Just as there are signs that warn of coming good fortune or misfortune, we can see that prosperity or disaster comes to those who have cultivated the cause for it. Heaven will help those whose hearts are humble. You, my friend, will definitely pass the imperial examination this year!" Later, he indeed passed the examination.

There was a young man from Shandong Province named Yu-Feng Zhao who passed the preliminary level of the imperial examinations before he was even twenty. Unfortunately, try as he might, he could not pass the succeeding examinations. When his father was moved to Jiashan to accept another post in the government, Yu-Feng went with him and came to greatly admire a well-known scholar in that village named Ming-Wu Qian. Yu-Feng brought his essays to this man. (He had no idea that) Mr. Qian would pick up his calligraphy brush and blot out his entire essay. Not only was Yu-Feng not angry, he sincerely accepted all of Mr. Qian's corrections and immediately made the recommended changes. The following year, Yu-Fong passed the imperial examination.

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

There was a scholar named Wei-Yan Zhang from Jiangyin who was very learned and wrote good essays. He was also very well known among scholars. One year while taking his examination in Nanjing, he stayed at a temple. When the test results were posted, he found that he had not passed. He became furious and loudly accused the examiner of being blind for not recognizing his obvious talents.

At that time, a Taoist monk stood by smiling and Wei-Yan immediately directed his anger towards him. The monk said the essay must not be good. Wei-Yan got even angrier and demanded how he knew it was not good when he had not even read it. The Taoist replied that he often heard people say that the most important element in writing good essays was a peaceful heart and harmonious disposition. Wei-Yan's loud and angry accusations clearly showed that his mind was not at peace and his disposition was violent. How could he possibly write good essays? Wei-Yan acceded to the Taoist's words and in turn asked him 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 still fail.

The Taoist concluded that Wei-Yan would have to make a few changes in himself. Wei-Yan asked how he could change destiny. The Taoist further explained that although the power to form our destiny lies in the heavens, the right to change it lies within us. As long as we are willing to do good deeds and to extensively cultivate hidden virtues, we will receive what we seek.

Wei-Yan said that he was only a poor scholar and questioned his ability to do good deeds. The Taoist explained that practicing good deeds and accumulating hidden virtues all stem from the heart. As long as we constantly have the intent to practice goodness and accumulate virtues, our merits will be infinite and boundless! He used the example of the virtue of humility. It does not cost anything. Wei-Yan should reflect within himself instead of berating the examiner for being unfair. Wei-Yan listened to the Taoist monk and from then on suppressed his arrogant ways. Everyday, he put forth additional effort to do more good deeds and accumulate more merits.

Three years later, one night as he slept, he dreamt that he had entered a very tall house and saw a book that contained many names/names of the applicants who had passed the examination that year. He saw many blank lines. He asked the person next to him what it was. The person replied that the book contained all the names of the applicants who passed the examination that year.

When Wei-Yan asked why there were so many blank lines, he answered that the spirits of the underworld check on the applicants every three years. Only the names of those who practice good deeds and are without faults are listed. The blank lines used to bear the names of those who were supposed to pass the examination, but due to their recent offenses, their names had been removed. Then, the person pointed to a line and said that for the past three years Wei-Yan had been very careful and had exerted such self-control that he had not made any mistakes. Perhaps his name would fill the blank. The person hoped that he would cherish his opportunity and take care not to make any mistakes. Indeed, Wei-Yan passed the examination that year and placed one hundred and fifth.

Those who are filled with conceit are doubtless not destined to be great. Even if they do prosper, they will not be able to enjoy their good fortune for long. Intelligent people would definitely not make themselves small and narrow-minded and refuse the good fortune they are entitled to. Besides, those who are humble always increase their opportunities to learn. In this way, the kind deeds that humble people can accomplish are boundless! For those who wish to cultivate and improve upon their virtues, they especially cannot do without the virtue of humility.

The ancients said that, "Those who have their hearts set on attaining success and fame, will surely attain success and fame. Those who have their hearts set on attaining wealth and position, will surely attain wealth and position." A person who has great and far-reaching goals is like a tree with roots. A person who has set down great and far reaching goals 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. Furthermore, I am the creator of my own prosperity. Look at the applicants who sought fame and wealth. In the beginning, they were not sincere, it was only a passing notion. When they wanted something, they sought it. When their interest waned, they stopped seeking it. Mencius once said (to Emperor Xuan of Qi), "If you can expand from the heart, which seeks personal happiness, to that of sharing happiness with all your subjects and make them just as happy as you are, then surely the nation is bound to prosper!" This is also true for myself in seeking to pass the imperial examination. (I and I alone can seek and thus change my destiny.)