

## Foreword

Liaofan's Four Lessons is a very special book for at least two reasons:

1. It is short.
2. It can change your life.

Very few books survive the passage of time. Fortunately, this one has; 500 years, and still counting. But why is this book so popular even today? Let us look at the history.

Yuan Liaofan wrote this book for his son in the early 1600s. The book explains what he had learned during his lifetime. It was never meant to be circulated world-wide, but it was accidentally discovered and subsequently distributed amongst friends. Now the book has been translated into multiple languages and spans the globe. The wisdom it contains is as relevant today as it was then. Perhaps more so, with modern life obscuring, distorting and diminishing real life values.

The language in the book is simple, but the message is very important: you can define your own fate. Quite literally, this book can turn your life around if you adopt the necessary changes.

Liaofan had a chance encounter with a fortune-teller, who described in accurate detail his life until that day. The fortune teller proved his accuracy, and then dropped the bad news: Liao will die at the age of 53, without a son to continue the family lineage.

Liaofan decided there was no need to work hard. Why should he work hard to get promotions and wealth if he was going to start pushing up daisies at such an early age? What is the purpose of his life, apart from drinking and partying?

Liaofan then made some startling discoveries which changed his outlook on life, and subsequently changed his destiny. Liao discovered that ill-fortune is brought upon by the way you live your life, and destiny can be changed. Destiny is not carved in stone, permanent and unchanging.

Liaofan's Four Lessons is divided into 4 chapters.

Chapter 1: How to create your own destiny.

This chapter covers the fundamentals, and explains the significance of good deeds.

Chapter 2: How to change your life fortune.

To change your life fortune, you must first reform your faults. To reform, you must know shame and fear, but also be determined

and courageous. Your actions, reasonings and moral standards will collectively define your future.

Chapter 3: How to cultivate kindness.

Kindness is the expression of good deeds. In this chapter, the different types of goodness are discussed, and the merits of each explained.

Chapter 4: The value of humility.

An arrogant person will see no need to self-improve, but a humble person will continuously strive to be better.

By adopting lifestyle and attitude changes, Liaofan lived a happy and contented life. He wrote the book at the age of 69; 16 years after his destined expiry date.

If you read, understand, and follow the guidelines of this book, your life will become more rewarding and meaningful. Your journey to happiness and contentment begins on the next page.

*John White*

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## The First Lesson: Learning to Shape One's Destiny

My father passed away in my childhood and my mother advised me to study medicine instead of seeking an official rank. She said, “Being a doctor, you can not only support yourself but also help those in need. This was also your father's wish for you.”

One day at the Temple of the Compassionate Cloud, I met an elder with a long neat beard and a dignified appearance. He had such an ease of bearing that I saluted him respectfully.

This elder told me, “You are destined to become a government official. Next year, you will pass the preliminary official examination. Why aren't you studying for the exam?” I told him that my mother instructed me to study medicine, but, as I was curious about him, I requested his name and where he was from. He replied, “My family name is Kong and I'm from Yunnan. I received the true teachings from Mr. Shao Kangjie who mastered Huang Ji Shu and developed the principles of accurate predictions of the future. By my analysis and calculations, it's you to whom I should pass on the skills of making accurate predictions of the future.”

I invited Mr. Kong to my house and told my mother about what

he had said. While she cautioned, "Treat Mr. Kong well", to test the accuracy of his fortune-telling, my mother invited Mr. Kong to make a few more predictions about me. To our delight, every single prediction about me, no matter how small, turned out to be accurate. Accordingly, we were convinced of Mr. Kong's predictive powers and, consequently, I thought again about studying for an official rank. Subsequently, I consulted with my cousin, Sheng Cheng, about this, and he explained, "My good friend Mr. Yu Haigu is teaching at Sheng Youfu's. I'll recommend you to him. You can board at Sheng's, and it should be very convenient for you." Taking this advice and presenting myself to Yu Haigu, I revered him formally for accepting me as his student.

Again Mr. Kong made predictions for me, saying, "You'll be placed fourteenth in the preliminary examination, seventy-first in the regional one and ninth in the provincial one." The following year, each of these predictions came true.

Mr. Kong also made predictions for the rest of my life: at such-and-such a place in such-and-such a test in such-and-such a year I would become a linsheng at a certain time, I would be promoted to gongsheng and, lastly, I would be appointed governor of a county in Sichuan. Three-and-a-half years after that, I would then retire and return to my hometown. I would die between one and three a.m. on 14 August, 1603 at the age of 53. Unfortunately, I would not have any children. I carefully recorded everything

that he had predicted and kept them in mind.

Thenceforth, my places in whichever examinations I took turned out to be exactly as Mr. Kong had predicted - with one exception. According to the prediction, I would be promoted to gongsheng after I had received state benefits of 91 dans 1 and 5 dou of grain. However, I received only 70 dans of grain when I was recommended by Mr. Tu, the provincial director of education, to be gongsheng. Because of this inaccurate prediction, I began privately to doubt Mr. Kong's predictions.

Nevertheless, even this prediction turned out to be correct. While the recommendation was turned down by Mr. Yang, the deputy director, several years later when Mr. Yin Qiuming saw my past exam papers and exclaimed, "These five essays are as well-written as reports to the Emperor! How could we allow such a virtuous and knowledgeable talent to be wasted and not recognised?" Subsequently, Mr. Yin instructed the governor of the county to present a letter, formally recommending me to be a gongsheng, and the recommendation was approved. Accordingly, Mr. Kong was proven to be absolutely right in his prediction that I would receive 91 dans and 5 dous of grain before I was promoted to a gongsheng, a candidate eligible to study at the Imperial Academy.

After this, I was completely convinced that I could not escape my destiny and that what was preordained would come true in due

time. As a result, I began to treat everything with indifference, aspiring to nothing in the world since nothing I did or believed would make any difference to my destiny.

After being selected as a gongsheng, I attended the Imperial Academy in Yanjing (Beijing). During my year-long stay at the Academy, every day I just sat in the classroom quietly without a single thought I lost interest in books and stopped studying. The following year I returned to the Imperial Academy in Nanjing. Before settling down at the Academy, I paid a visit to Master Yungu, a venerable Zen master who resided on Mount Qixia. Together, we sat face to face in a meditation room for three days and nights without sleep.

On the morning on the fourth day, Master Yungu said to me, "The reason why ordinary people can't become sages is because their minds are entangled with wandering thoughts. During the three-day meditation, I didn't observe a single thought arising in you. Why is that?"

Respectfully I replied, "Mr. Kong predicted the entire outcome of my life. I've seen that my birth and death as well as the favourable and unfavourable situations in my life are all preordained and unchangeable. It's futile for me to have any thought or to try to act any differently from what was predicted for me."

The master laughed and replied, "I thought you were a hero. But, after all, you're an ordinary person."

Feeling quite confused by what Master Yungu had told me, I asked him to explain. He replied, "The mind of an ordinary person is forever occupied by wandering thoughts and therefore his life is confined to the destiny created within yin and yang. We cannot deny the existence of destiny, but only ordinary people are confined to their destinies. Nevertheless, destiny cannot confine those who have done extremely good deeds. This is because the merits accrued from their good acts are so great as to alter their original destinies for the better. The merits accrued can actually change their destinies from suffering to happiness, poverty to prosperity, and a short life to a long one. Similarly, destiny can't confine those who commit extremely evil deeds. When a person's evil deeds are great and powerful, the good fortune and prosperity predetermined in their original destinies will be altered. So the life of such a person will be transformed completely from good to bad. For the past twenty years, you've lived your life in accordance with Mr. Kong's predictions and haven't done anything to change them. Therefore, your life's direction has been contained by your foreordained destiny. In this case, aren't you just an ordinary person?"

Taken aback, I asked Master Yungu, "So we can change our destinies?"

He repeated, "We can shape our own destinies to better ones. This is the true teaching found in The Book of Songs and The Book of History. In classic Buddhist texts, it's written that can attain wealth and high social status, children and longevity of life if we want these things and we perform good deeds. Since deceptive speech is strictly forbidden in the Buddha's teachings, we can be assured that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not deceive us."

After listening to what Master Yungu said, I still could not fully understand. So asked him, further, "Mencius once said that we can obtain whatever we desire, because the seeking is within our control; for instance, we can cultivate virtue through our own efforts - but gaining official ranks, and wealth and high social status are out of our control. How can we expect to acquire these earthly things?"

The master replied, "Mencius was right, but you misunderstood him. Patriarch Huineng, the sixth patriarch of Zen, taught that "The fields of good fortune are within our own minds. If we seek from within, we will obtain all that we wish for." By seeking from within, we'll not only attain inner integrity and

virtue, but also external benefits, such as wealth, fame and high social status. Such double gains are due to the proper means of seeking. If we can't reflect upon ourselves and change from within but, rather, blindly seek fame, profit, fortune and longevity from without, what we obtain is only what's preordained but not necessarily what we have wished for. As a result, seeking from without will bring us no fame, wealth or high social status. What's worse, in so doing whatever virtue within us will be lost due to ignorance, greed and ruthlessness merely for the sake of the gain. In the end, isn't this a double loss? Therefore, it is futile blindly to seek those things."

Next, Master Yungu asked, "What are Mr. Kong's predictions for the rest of your life?" Sparing no detail, I told him everything Kong had foretold for me. Master Yungu then asked, "Do you think you deserve the award of an official rank or the bearing of a son?"

Reflecting on my past deeds and attitudes, I answered, "No. Those who deserve to attain official ranks have a good look on their face, but I don't have them. I haven't done good deeds and accumulated merits, yet these are the foundations of good fortune. I'm impatient, intolerant and unwilling to suffer tedious tasks. I'm also very arrogant and vain, and like flaunting my intelligence and talent. I behave as I please and speak without restraint. These are all signs of scant good fortune and virtue.

How could I possibly be qualified for an official rank?

An old saying goes, “Dirty land often bears much life while clear water can harbour no fish.” The first reason why I don't think I deserve a son is that I'm obsessed with bodily cleanliness as opposed to spiritual cleanness. The second reason is that harmony cultivates life, but I'm quick-tempered and have no inner harmony. Third, loving-kindness is the fundamental reason for fertility whereas cruelty is the root cause of sterility. I am selfishly concerned about my own reputation and rarely make sacrifices for the good of others. The fourth reason is that I talk too much, which wastes much energy. Fifth, I drink too much alcohol. And sixth, I often stay up all night and don't know how to preserve my energy. Apart from these faults, I have others, as well-too many to mention.”

Master Yungu replied, “So you're saying that there're many other things in life that you don't deserve to have, not just official ranks and children. You see, those who possess millions of dollars in this life must have cultivated good fortune worthy of that amount in the past. Those who have thousands of dollars must also have accumulated good fortune worthy of that sum. Those who died of starvation must have done things causing them to die in that manner. The consequences that we receive today are the fruit of our own deeds done in the past. Tian has done nothing more than let our destinies take

their own courses and guiding them along the way. The same can be said for having children. If a person has accumulated merits that last for a hundred generations, he will have a hundred generations of descendants to spend that amount of good fortune. A person who accumulates merits that last for ten generations will have ten generations of descendants to preserve that amount of good fortune. The same applies to those who have descendants of two or three generations. As for those who have no descendants, the merits that they have accumulated are extremely few.”

He continued, “Since you've now recognised what you've done wrong, you should do all you can to rectify the misdeeds that caused you not to have a child or attain an official rank. You must accumulate good deeds, be more accommodating to others, be in harmony with others and love all beings. Also, you should cherish your body and mind and not drink alcohol or stay up late. Live as if everything in the past dissolved away yesterday and a brand-new future begins today. If you can accomplish this, you'll be a person born anew, of virtue and sincerity.”

“If our physical bodies are governed by our destinies, our virtuous bodies will certainly receive a favourable response from Tian. It is said in the chapter, ‘Taijia’, in The Book of History, ‘We may run away from natural disasters, but we

can never escape retribution for our misdeeds.’ Another instruction is given in The Book of Songs: ‘ When we understand the way to change our destiny, we will be able to gain abundant good fortune.’ In this regard, our good or ill fortune entirely depends on us.”

“Mr. Kong had predicted that you won't have any chance of receiving an official rank or having a son. This is your destiny, but this can be changed, so long as you cultivate your innate virtue, industriously perform good deeds, and accumulate bidden merits. In this manner, good fortune is cultivated by yourself, and it will be impossible not to have good fortune.”

He continued, “In addition to other reasons, The Book of Changes (I Ching) was also written to help virtuous people accrue good fortune and avoid adversity. If everything were predestined with no room for change, how could we possibly tend toward auspiciousness and avoid misfortune? The first chapter of The Book of Changes declares, ‘By doing good deeds and accumulating merits, a family will enjoy good fortune for generations.’ Do you believe this?”

I did believe what the master said and I accepted his teaching. I then kowtowed in gratitude and paid my respects to him. Afterward, I repented all my past misdeeds, both severe and minor, in front of the image of the Buddha. I wrote down my

wish to pass official examinations and vowed to complete 3,000 good deeds to show my gratitude to the kindness and merits of Tian, Di and my ancestors.

To help me with my efforts, Master Yungu showed me a merit-fault table and taught me how to keep a daily record of all my good and bad deeds. The master told me that I must record every single deed in the table, good and bad, with good deeds in the merit column and the bad ones in the fault column. In addition, a number of good deeds recorded would be taken away by the bad deeds that I did on the same day according to the severity of the bad deeds. He also taught me how to recite the Cundi Mantra. Only with a pure and sincere mind could I attain what I sought.

Master Yungu explained to me, “Experts in drawing Taoist talismans have a saying, ‘Spirits mock those who don't know how to draw a talisman.’ The secret behind drawing a talisman is to have no single thought in mind while doing it, from the beginning to the end. One must not allow a single improper thought to arise, and even good thoughts must also be cleared away. This is because our minds are not pure when there is a single thought in them. And at the moment of having no single thought, a talisman expert draws a dot on a piece of paper, which is called ‘the dot of setting a foundation’. From the beginning to the end of drawing the



talisman, if the expert has no single thought, the talisman will be very effective. Similarly, when one prays or tries to change one's destiny, it's critical that this is done without a single thought in one's mind. In this way, we'll surely receive receive a favourable response from Tian.”

He continued, “In his principle of forming destiny, Mencius stated that ‘there is no difference between long life and short life’. Initially, this seems hard to understand. The explanation is as follows: when we have no single wandering thought, the state of our mind is like that of a foetus, that is, having no means to distinguish between a long life and a short life. However, an infant starts to acquire knowledge and that is when his sense of differentiation develops. Subsequently, the difference between a short life and a long one is formed in the mind. In this manner, one's destiny is shaped by oneself. Similarly, in one's mind there can be no true differentiation between rich and poor. In other words, we shouldn't be irresponsible and do whatever we please if we are rich. Similarly, we shouldn't give up on ourselves and perform bad deeds if we are poor. In either case, we should fulfil our duties in society properly and be virtuous in every way. If we can think, speak and act morally regardless of our living conditions, we can surely change a poor life into a prosperous one, and a prosperous life into one of long-lasting prosperity. This is why it's wise to see no difference between long life

and short life. Those of us who haven't yet gained success in life shouldn't fling caution to the winds and do whatever we please. At the same time, those of us who are already successful shouldn't use our wealth and power to bully others and commit all sorts of misdeeds. In either case, we should avoid bad deeds and perform good ones. In so doing, the unsuccessful will become successful and the successful will progress to the next level of spiritual development. Those of us who know that death is soon approaching shouldn't think, ‘I'm going to die soon anyway, so I might as well do whatever I want while I'm still alive’, for some of the things we do will cause severe consequences to ourselves as well as others. Instead, one should make more efforts to perform good deeds in the hope of gaining a longer life in the next lives and even in this life due to the merits gained from performing good deeds. Similarly, those of us who have a long life shouldn't think, ‘I've still got many years ahead of me, and I can do whatever I want.’ In fact, long life doesn't come easily, and one should make even more effort to do good deeds and accumulate merits so as to sustain one's longevity. Only when one understands this rationale behind longevity, can one change a short life into a long one. The most important matters in life are birth and death. So a short life is as important as a long one despite the difference in length. In this regard, all the wealth, success and favourable situations in life as well as poverty and other unfavourable setbacks are all encompassed

in a long or short life.”

Master Yungu then told me about Mencius's teachings on cultivating the self. He said, “Self-cultivation must be a daily or constant task, and one needs to be mindful of one's conduct every moment in order to avoid wrongdoing. Changing one's destiny comes from accumulating merits and subsequently gaining a positive response from Tian. In regards to the cultivation of the self, one should be aware of one's faults and misdeeds, uprooting them as if finding a permanent cure to a disease. To do this, patience and perseverance are required. With skilful self-cultivation, one's destiny will change for the better. During the process of self-cultivation, one should not allow the slightest wandering thought to arise. Once we reach this pure state of mind, we will have arrived at the ‘original state of no thought’. Developing this mental state is the true learning.”

Master Yungu again said, “I know that you can't reach the state of no thought at the moment, but you can recite the Cundi Mantra, which will help you focus your mind. When reciting, you don't need to count the number of repetitions. You just recite it continuously without pausing. Once familiar with this kind of recitation, your mouth will pronounce the mantra's words automatically. This is called ‘not reciting when reciting’. As you reach the next level of skill, your mind will unwittingly

recite it when you're not reciting. This state is called ‘reciting when not reciting’. When we reach this level, the self, the mantra and the recitation will become one, and no wandering thought will arise. Then, the mantra will be effective.”

The name I gave to myself was not always Liaofan. It used to be Xuehai, which means “the sea of learning.” After learning from Master Yungu, I changed my name to Liaofan, which means “being freed from the ordinary”. The name-change was appropriate because I had come to understand that my destiny is shaped by myself, and I no longer wanted to be an ordinary person whose views and understanding of the universe confine him to a seemingly unalterable destiny.

From this point on, I began to be very cautious in my thoughts, speech and actions. Soon, I felt quite different from before. In the past, I had been careless about what I did. I lacked self-discipline. But now, I find myself being respectful naturally, careful and reserved in my thoughts, speech and actions. I maintain this attitude even when I am alone, for fear of offending Tian, Di, spirits and celestial beings. When I come across people who dislike or slander me, I am able to accept them with patience and composure, and no longer feel compelled to argue with them.

A year after I met Master Yungu, I took the preliminary official

examination for which Mr. Kong predicted that I would come in the third place. Amazingly, I placed first. Moreover, Mr. Kong did not predict that I would pass the official examination at the provincial level and be made a juren, but that autumn, I passed it. Mr. Kong's predictions began to lose their accuracy.

Although I had corrected many faults, I still could not perform good deeds wholeheartedly. Even if I did do this, the effort was forced and unnatural. I reflected on myself and realised that I still had many shortcomings, including seeing an opportunity to do good deeds but not being eager enough to do them, or having doubts about whether it is right to help a person in need. Sometimes I forced myself to do good deeds, but my speech could still be inconsiderate and offensive. I could control myself when being sober but, after a few drinks, I might act without restraint. Although I often practised good deeds and accumulated merits, my faults were so numerous that they outweighed the merits. Thus a lot of my time was wasted. It took me more than ten years to complete the 3,000 good deeds that I had vowed to do when, at the age of 35, I first took the advice of Master Yungu.

At that time, I had not yet dedicated the merits of doing the 3,000 good deeds. Ten years later, at the age of 46, I returned from

Beijing to my hometown in the south. It was then that I managed to invite Masters Xingkong and Huikong to dedicate the merits for me. At that point, I made my second wish and this was to have a son. I also vowed to complete another 3,000 good deeds. In the following year, your mother and I had you and we named you Tianqi.

Every time I performed a good deed, I would record it in a booklet. Your mother could not write, so she dipped a quill in red ink and printed a red circle on the calendar for every good deed she did. Sometimes she gave food to the poor, or bought living creatures at the market and freed them in the wild. At times, she recorded more than ten circles in one day. Both she and I kept on like this every day and, four years later, in August, we completed the 3,000 good deeds. Again, I invited the same two masters to make the dedications, this time at our home. On 13 September that year, I made my third wish. It was to pass the highest level of official examination. This time, I vowed to complete 10,000 good deeds. After three years, I attained my wish and passed the examination. Subsequently, I was appointed as the mayor of Baodi, a county in Tianjin.

When in that office, I prepared another booklet with tables to record my merits and faults, and called it The Booklet of Cultivating the Mind, in the hope of helping me avoid selfish

and improper thoughts. Every morning, when I began work in my office, my family would hand the booklet to the guard and ask him to place it on my office desk. I would record every deed I did, good or bad, no matter how small. At night, I would emulate Zhao Yuedao, putting on my official uniform and placing an incense burner on a table in the middle of the courtyard. I then burned incense and reported all my deeds to Tian.

But your mother noticed that I had not done good deeds as frequently as before. So one day she said to me with a frown, "In the past, I could help you do good deeds and we were able to do good deeds and we were able to complete the 3,000 good deeds promised. Now, you vowed to complete 10,000 good deeds, but there are few good deeds you can do as a government official. When can we possibly complete the 10,000 good deeds?"

That night, I dreamed of a celestial being and told him about my difficulty in completing the 10,000 good deeds. So the celestial being said to me, "You reduced the tax on farming land. That one good deed was worth 10,000 good deeds." So my vow was fulfilled by doing just one good deed. Being the mayor of Baodi, I found that the farmers there were heavily taxed, so I reduced the tax by nearly half. Nevertheless, I was shocked by what the celestial being said to

me and I still had doubts. How did he know about the tax deduction? How could just one deed be worth 10,000 deeds?

Coincidentally, my friend, the Zen Master Huanyu, was traveling from Mount Wutai and stopped at Baodi. I invited him to my office, told him about my dream, and asked, "Should I believe what the celestial being told me?"

Master Huanyu said, "If we do a good deed with complete sincerity but without asking for anything in return, this one deed is worth the merits of doing 10,000 good deeds. What's more, your decision to reduce the farming land tax across the whole county benefited more than 10,000 people. Therefore, you've indeed gained plenty of merits." Upon hearing this, I was overwhelmed with gratitude and immediately donated to him all my salaries as the fund for a food offering for 10,000 monks, and invited him to dedicate the merits of the donation for me.

Mr. Kong had predicted that I would die at the age of 53. However, I survived that year with no illness even though I did not ask Tian for a longer life. I am now 69. The Book of History says, "It is hard to believe in the way of Tian, and our destinies are not fixed." It also says, "Destiny is not set, but can be shaped and determined by oneself." These words

are true, indeed. From these wise words, I realised one thing: those who hold the view that “good fortune and misfortune are determined by one's own thoughts, speech and actions” are definitely sages and heroes. Those who think that “good fortune and adversity are determined by Tian” are definitely ordinary people.

Tianqi, I do not know how your life will turn out. In any matter of destiny, you should always prepare for the worst. Even if your destiny is to be prosperous, you must behave as if you were not prosperous. Even if things are going your way, you must be mindful of adversity. Even if you have plenty of food and clothing, you must live as if you had no money and house. Even if people around you like and respect you, you must constantly be cautious with your thoughts, speech and actions. Even if your family enjoys a great reputation for generations and is respected by everyone, you must still be modest at all times. Even if you are very knowledgeable, you must carry yourself humbly.

When mindful of the past, we should extol and promote the virtue of our ancestors. When mindful of the present, we should remedy the faults of our parents. When mindful of the nation, we should think of repaying her kindness to us. When mindful of the family, we should think of bringing about harmony and good fortune. When mindful of others,

we should help those in need. When mindful of ourselves, we should be strictly self-disciplined and prevent any improper thought or incorrect opinions from arising in our minds.

We must be alert to our faults every day so as to correct them immediately. If we are unaware of our faults, we will think that everything we do is right. When we have no fault to correct daily, improvement will be impossible. There are many intelligent and talented people in the world, but they do not work hard to cultivate their virtue and careers. The failures in their lives are owed to a single failing: their unwillingness to get out of the old lockstep.

The teachings of Master Yungu are most exquisitely pure, profound, true and proper. I hope that you will learn them carefully and seriously and make every effort to put them into practice. Use your time wisely and do not let any moment in life slip by in vain.

## **The Second Lesson: Ways to Rectify Faults**

During the Spring and Autumn period, the high officials of every state in China were able to predict accurately whether a person was to experience good fortune or misfortune, based on their observations of that person's speech and behaviour. Many of these are recorded in The Spring and Autumn Annals and The Discourses of the States.

Usually, there are omens that signal impending danger or the coming of good fortune. These signs arise from our minds and are subsequently demonstrated in our behaviour. For instance, if a person is kind-hearted and considerate, his behaviour is steady. If a person is selfish and mean, his behaviour is frivolous. A very kind and considerate person often receives good fortune, but a very narrow-minded and selfish person invites misfortune. Ordinary people often lack the wisdom of making proper judgments, as if their vision is blurred. As they cannot see the truth, they claim that good fortune and misfortunes happen unpredictably.

When a person is completely sincere, his mind aligns with the wishes of Tian. Therefore, if we can interact with others and handle matters with complete sincerity, good fortune will consequently knock on the door. By observing good speech

and deeds, others will be able to foresee the coming of our good fortune. On the contrary, by observing our ill speech and deeds, they will foresee our approaching misfortune. So, to gain good fortune and avoid adversity, we can put the question of how to do good deeds aside for now; first of all, we must rectify our faults. In so doing, we will gradually move in the direction of good deeds.

To rectify our faults, we must first of all develop a sense of shame. Think of all the ancient sages and virtuous people who have been remembered through hundreds of generations as great role models and teachers. They were human beings just like me, but why was I as worthless as a piece of broken roof tile? It was because I overindulged myself in worldly pleasures. Over time, I was increasingly influenced by bad things and people around me and secretly acted improperly. What was worse, I thought no one knew what I did. I was even proud of this. I had not the slightest sense of shame and guilt. Day by day, I became more and more debased and was not much different from a non-human animal. But I was completely blind to my bad thoughts and actions. There is nothing else in the world that calls for more shame and remorse than these kinds of behaviour. Mencius said, 'The sense of shame is the most important thing in one's life. This is because a sense of shame enables the person to rectify faults and become virtuous; without it he

becomes unscrupulous and loses integrity. These words are the key to rectifying one's faults.

The second way to rectify faults is to develop a sense of awe. Celestial beings and spirits hover above us. Different from human beings, they can see everything clearly. Therefore, it is impossible to deceive them. Even if one does wrong unobserved by other human beings, these beings and spirits are present. They can see whatever we do, just like a mirror reflecting all our faults. If the faults are severe, all kinds of misfortunes happen. If the faults are minor, one's existing good fortune will be reduced. How thus is it not possible to feel fear about doing wrong even when no observers can see what one does?

Apart from that, even when alone in a room, celestial beings and spirits are watching us. Even if one carefully conceals his improper acts with clever speech, these beings can still see the wrongdoing as clearly as a surgeon observes a patient's lungs and liver. Ultimately, all a person's secret wrongdoing is revealed and he can no longer deceive himself otherwise. If others happen to see through one's artifice, the person becomes worthless. Therefore, again, how can we not have a sense of awe, and constantly be cautious of our actions and fearful of the consequences they might bring?

But there is more to all of what I have said just now. So long as we have one breath left, we still have a chance to repent our most severe mistakes and transgressions. In ancient times, there were people who had committed misdeeds all their lives, but they sincerely repented on their deathbeds. This one single good thought of sincere repentance enabled them to die in peace, which tells us one thing: if we can summon a determined and courageous good thought at a critical moment, that good thought will be strong enough to cleanse us of offences accumulated over hundreds of years. Just like an abyss that has been dark for 1,000 years, the light of a lamp immediately removes the darkness. Therefore, it does not matter how long one has been committing misdeeds, or if the offenses were newly made; the person is surpassingly good as long as he remedies them!

However, we live in an ever-changing world. Our bodies, being made of flesh and blood, are perishable. If our next breath does not come, this body will no longer be ours. At that moment, even if we want to rectify our faults, it will be too late. But we still have to bear the consequences of our faults. The faults that are known to others form our bad reputations. A person's reputation can last for very long, even thousands of years. Even if one's descendants are reverent and loving, they will not be able to restore one's own honor. Faults unknown to others cause an endless pain that one suffers in a self-afflicted

hell. Even if we meet sages, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, they will not be able to take us out of our suffering. So how can we not be fearful of not rectifying our faults?

The third way of rectifying faults is to be determined and courageous. The reason why we hesitate to correct our faults is that we do not strive for the best and subsequently fall behind and become debased. Therefore, to rectify our faults, we must be resolute and resolve to change immediately. We must not hesitate or postpone this. A minor fault is like a thorn in our flesh and must be removed right away; a major fault is like a finger bitten by a poisonous snake. To extend the analogy, to rid ourselves of the poison, without any hesitation we must instantly cut off the bitten finger. Otherwise, the poison will spread in the body and eventually kill us. As the Hexagram of Benefit says in The Book of Changes, wind and thunder are mutually beneficial to the growth of everything. The implication is that we will truly benefit from rectifying our faults and seeking to perform good deeds.

If with a sense of shame, a sense of awe, and determination and courage, we can rectify our faults, we will be able to reform ourselves in no time; just as a thin layer of ice in springtime is melted by the sun's rays, our faults will disappear if they are remedied in these three ways. However, we should know that there are, also, three general approaches to rectifying our

faults. The first is correcting through our actions, the second is correcting through our understanding, and the third is correcting in our minds. As these approaches are three different levels of practice, the results they bring differ greatly.

For example, let's say I killed an animal, but from that action onward I vow not to kill again. Or I was angry and swore at someone, but from that action onward I vow not to be angry again. The changes come about because these vows are made through our actions. If we are reluctant to refrain from bad thoughts and habits, the root cause of the problems remains. We might suppress the impulse for now, but eventually we will commit misdeeds again. Therefore, this approach cannot help us get rid of our faults permanently.

Those who are good at rectifying their faults should first try to understand the reason why they should not do something. For instance, if the fault is killing, the person should first of all understand that loving all beings is a virtue of celestial beings. Moreover, every living being cherishes its life and fears death. How could our minds be at peace if nourishing our bodies only comes with the sacrifice of other beings? What is crueller, some living beings do not die completely in the act of killing, such as fish, or crabs. These kinds of creatures suffer extremely when cooked at high temperatures. For the sake of nourishing our bodies and pleasing our palettes, we cook all kinds of



delicacies. At first glance, our repast seems to be wonderful. But as soon as the food is eaten, there is no wonder left but human waste. We should understand that vegetarian food can sufficiently nourish our bodies. So, why do we have to kill other beings and reduce our good fortune?

Moreover, all living beings have spiritual awareness and consciousness. Since they are spiritually aware and conscious, they are the same as we human beings. Although our cultivation of virtue may not yet have reached the state that will enable these beings to respect us and feel safe around us, we can at least not harm them or make them hate us. With these thoughts in mind, we will naturally feel sorrow in front of dishes made of living creatures, and we will be unable to eat their flesh.

When it comes to correcting a bad temper, we should follow the same approach. We should always bear in mind that everyone has his own strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, when realizing another person's weaknesses, we should understand how common weaknesses are, and we should forgive the person for his shortcomings. When someone offends us for no apparent reason, being offended is his problem and has nothing to do with us. So, there is no reason for us to get angry.

I will add, true heroes never think they are always in the right.

Similarly, those who cultivate their virtue with genuine seriousness, never blame their misdeeds on others or on Tian. The point is, when things do not go the way we wish, it is because we have either not cultivated our innate virtue properly nor accumulated enough merits to motivate others to help us. We should always reflect upon our own bad actions and thoughts instead of laying the blame on others somehow for what we do and think. In this way, criticism is a training ground for strengthening one's character and enhancing one's abilities. We should, with delighted gratitude, accept others' criticism as a kind of guidance. When we can hold the right attitude, what is there to be angry about?

Likewise, in the face of slander, we should remain calm. Even though the slander may be as ferocious as a big fire, the fire is like a torch that will burn out because there is no fuel. The slander will eventually burn itself out on its own. But if, when slandered, we get angry and only think to defend ourselves, it will be like silkworms in spring spinning their own cocoons. Anger brings us no benefit, only harm.

As for other faults and offences, we should learn to understand them by following the same guidelines. Once we understand the principle behind the need for correcting our faults, we will not commit the same faults again.

Lastly, what is meant by changing from our minds? Throughout our lives, we develop all kinds of faults, but the root cause of them all is to be found in our minds. If we have no bad thoughts, surely we will neither say, or do, bad things. Today, even scholars crave beautiful women, as well as fame and profit, and they get angry easily. There is no need to seek different approaches to rectifying those faults. We only need to be completely focused on good thoughts and deeds. Naturally, then, improper thoughts will have no chance to influence us. The process is like sunlight driving away demons and is the only way to rectify our faults. We must work to make ourselves as fully aware as possible that one's mistakes stem from the mind. Therefore, we must correct them mentally. The process is akin to getting rid of a poisonous tree. We must uproot the tree altogether in order to stop it growing again. Why exert ourselves to no avail by pulling out its leaves one by one or cutting it twig by twig?

In this regard, the best approach to rectifying faults is to cultivate the mind, which enables one to be free of the bad thoughts that result in misdeeds. If we are determined to cultivate our minds, we will immediately notice any bad thought as soon as it arises. If we notice it, we can stop it. Subsequently, the bad thought no longer exists to incite us to commit the misdeed. But if we find this best approach hard to practise, we must clearly understand the consequences of bad thoughts

and subsequently repress them. If we find the second best approach difficult to practise, we can make ourselves refrain from committing misdeeds. However, we must know one thing: it is most stupid if we confine ourselves only to changing through action, which is an inferior way to rectify faults.

But then, we need help along the way once we are determined to rectify our faults. We need true friends to remind and supervise us when we become unreasonable. At the same time, we also need responses from spirits and celestial beings as witnesses. Apart from these aids, we need to repent wholeheartedly for our misdeeds. If we keep working at it, we will definitely see results after only a few weeks or months, and along the way there will be auspicious signs. For example, we may feel cheerful or suddenly feel wise. We may remain calm and organised when there are many things to deal with. We may feel delighted when coming across someone whom we disliked or even hated before and now greet them respectfully. In dreams, we may spit out black stuff, or have ancient sages or virtuous people giving us guidance, or we may fly in the air, or have colourful flags and beautiful canopies above us that are found in Tian or in the lands of the Buddhas. All of these signs indicate that some of our transgressions have been eliminated. However, we must not show off and become arrogant because of these good signs. Instead, we must resolve to improve ourselves further by working

even harder to reform.

During the Spring and Autumn period in China, there was a high government official in the Wei state, called Qu Boyu. At the age of 20, he was already able to be mindful of his past faults. He examined his mistakes and tried hard to correct them. At the age of 21, he felt that he had not completely rectified all his past faults. At the age of 22, he looked back on the previous year and felt that he had been dreaming and the time was all wasted without much improvement. Year after year, he continued like this to rectify his faults. When he reached 50, Boyu still felt that the past 49 years were full of mistakes. This is how much importance our ancestors attached to rectifying their faults.

We were all born ordinary, and our faults and transgressions are as numerous as spines on a hedgehog. When looking back, we often cannot see our faults. This is because we are too careless to reflect on ourselves properly. It is also because we are too blind to see the faults that we make every day, like patients suffering from cataracts.

Nonetheless, when the severity of our faults and transgressions is about to reach a tipping point, there will be obvious omens. For example, we may often be in low spirits and very forgetful, or be worried when there is nothing to be worried about.

We may feel ashamed when coming across someone of noble character, or be displeased with others talking about appropriate things. We may receive an ungrateful or even hostile response when being kind to others. We may have nightmares when sleeping, talk incoherently and behave abnormally. All of these are ominous signs. If we have any of them, we must be fully alert and realise that our faults and transgressions are severe. We must then immediately lift our spirits and be determined to correct all our past faults, and start life anew. There must be no delay in doing this!

## **The Third Lesson: The Ways to Cultivate Goodness**

The Book of Changes states, "By performing good deeds and accumulating merits, a family will enjoy good fortune for generations." One example is the Yan family, the maternal side of Confucius's family. Before marrying his daughter to Confucius's father, Confucius's maternal grandfather enquired into Confucius's father's family, the Kong family. After finding out that the Kongs had been practising good deeds and accumulating merits for many generations, he predicted that they would have great descendants flourishing for generations. As he predicted, his daughter later gave birth to Confucius. Confucius highly praised Emperor Shun I and said, "With his complete family reverence and virtue, Emperor Shun is therefore remembered by the people and presented with offerings at his ancestral temple. The abundant merits and good fortune that he accumulated are therefore preserved by his descendants for generations."

In Jianning, Fujian there was a man named Yang Rong who held a post at the Imperial Court as the teacher of the crown prince. His ancestors made a living by helping people cross the river in a boat. One year, there was a big storm and the river was flooded. The floods were so severe that all the houses in the village were destroyed, and dead bodies and unattended

properties were washed down the river. Villagers with boats worked frantically to collect the properties for themselves. By contrast, Yang Rong's paternal grandfather and great-grandfather focused their efforts on rescuing drowning villagers and touched none of the unattended properties floating down the river. People in the village laughed at them and thought they were stupid. After Yang Rong's father was born, the Yang family gradually became affluent. One day, a deity in the disguise of a Taoist practitioner visited the Yangs and told Yang Rong's father, "Your grandfather saved many lives and accumulated many hidden merits. His descendants are bound to prosper and enjoy great reputation and high social status. There is an excellent burial place where you should bury your father upon his death." Yang Rong's father respectfully followed the advice and built the grave, which is the White Rabbit Grave that we know today. Later, Yang Rong was born and, at the age of 20, was made a jinshi. He was later appointed as the teacher of the crown prince, the Junior Preceptor, with an official rank of the Three Dukes. The emperor was very grateful for his work and awarded his great-grandfather, grandfather and father the same official rank as his. His descendants are also very prosperous and many of them are virtuous and highly capable even to this day.

Another example, from Ningbo, Zhejiang, is Yang Zicheng, who worked as a clerk to the local government. He was kind and

considerate in character, and impartial and responsible at work. One day, the Head of County, upright but stern, got angry with a prisoner and beat him harshly. The prisoner started to bleed, but the Head of County was too angry with his crime to stop beating him. At the sight of this, Zicheng knelt down and pleaded with the Head of County to forgive the prisoner. So the Head of County said, "He has broken the law and committed a severe crime. How can I not be angry with him?" Zicheng respectfully replied, "When those at the top are corrupted and deviate from the appropriate path, how could we expect the rest of the people to be law-abiding? Even if our judgement is fair and he is guilty and deserves a heavy penalty, we should take pity on him rather than indulge our feelings of retribution. So, how can we be angry?" Moved by Zicheng's reasoning, the Head of County cooled his anger and ceased beating the man.

Although Zicheng was very poor, he never took bribes. When prisoners were short of food, he would always try hard to bring them food from his own home or from other kind people, even if sometimes it meant going hungry himself. One day, several prisoners arrived who were very hungry, and Zicheng had only a little rice left at home. If he gave the prisoners what he had, his family would go hungry. If he kept the food for his family, the prisoners would have nothing to eat-an appalling dilemma. So he discussed the problem with his wife, and she asked, "Where did the prisoners come from?" Zicheng answered, "Hangzhou.

They've walked in shackles for several days, and look very weak. They must have been starving all this time." Hearing what Zicheng said, his wife used their stock of rice to make rice porridge and shared it with the prisoners. Later, the couple had two sons. The elder one was called Shouchen and the younger one Shouzhi. Both of them were appointed deputy ministers of Personnel. An elder grandson became a deputy minister of Justice and a younger one the surveillance commissioner of Sichuan. All were reputable government officials. Today, their descendants, Yang Chuting and Yang Dezheng also are government officials who are known for their virtuous deeds.

Another account took place during the Zhengtong era. Many scholars and villagers had joined a group of rebels in Fujian. The ringleader was Deng Maoqi. The emperor appointed a Censor-in-Chief, Zhang Kai, to put down the rebellion. Zhang tricked the rebels and captured their leader. Later, Zhang dispatched General Xie to deal with the remaining rebels in the eastern part of the province. Xie obtained a list of the insurgents and ordered white flags to be given secretly to everyone not on that list, along with instructions to place the flags on their doors when the imperial army came to the town. He ordered the soldiers not to harm the innocent and, with this one thought of goodness, he saved tens of thousands of people from being killed. Later, his son, Xie Qian, placed first in the official examination at the national level and, later, became a prime minister.

Much later, his grandson, Xie Pi, placed third in the national level examination.

Another example is the Lin family from Putian in Fujian. Amongst their ancestors there was a very generous elderly lady. Every day she made rice balls for the poor and gave away as many of these as were wanted. An immortal in the disguise of a Taoist monk came daily for three years and always asked for six or seven rice balls from her. The old lady always granted his request and was never displeased by the large number requested. The celestial being could see that the old lady was genuinely kind. So he told her, "I have eaten your rice balls for three years; to repay your kindness, there is a good burial place behind your house, and if you are buried there upon your death, the number of your descendants who become government officials will be as many as a litre of sesame seeds." When the old lady passed away, her son followed the Taoist monk's advice and buried her at the designated place. The first generation after that, nine family members passed official exams, and this career success continued for every succeeding generation. So it is said in Fujian that the surname of Lin always appears on the list of those who have passed official examinations.

Another example is Mr. Feng, the father of the imperial historian, Feng Zhuoan. One winter morning, on his way to school Mr. Feng saw someone lying half-dead in the snow. Finding that the

man was still breathing, Mr. Feng quickly took off his coat, wrapped it around the frozen man, carried him back home, and managed to revive him. That night, Zhuoan's father dreamt a celestial being telling him, "Out of complete sincerity, you helped a dying man. This is a great virtue. I will dispatch the famous general Han Qi of the Song dynasty to be reborn as your son." Later, Zhuoan was born and was given the name, Qi.

Also there was a minister, Mr. Ying, who lived in Taizhou, Zhejiang. He studied in a hut on a mountain when he was thirty. At night, he often heard spirits shouting and scaring people, but he was not afraid of them. One night, he heard a spirit talking to another, "There is a woman in the village whose husband went to visit a friend. A long time passed and the husband did not return. The woman's parents-in-law believe their son is dead, so they are trying to force her to remarry. But the woman wants to remain faithful to her husband and doesn't want to marry someone else. Tomorrow night, she is going to commit suicide. Hooray, I've finally found a replacement!"

On hearing this, Mr. Ying immediately went back home and, without informing anyone, sold his farming land for 200 grams of silver. He then forged a letter from the woman's husband and sent it to her parents-in-law along with the silver. The old couple read the letter and realised that it was not in their son's handwriting, so they thought it was a forged letter. But then they said,

"Well, the letter may be forged, but the silver is real. Our son must be all right, otherwise he wouldn't have sent the silver home." Consequently, they abandoned their efforts to force their daughter-in-law to remarry. Later, their son did return home and the young couple reunited as before and lived happily ever after.

Later, Mr. Ying heard the spirits talking again, one saying, 'I thought I found a replacement and could leave here for rebirth, but this annoying xiucai<sup>1</sup> completely messed up my chance!' The other spirit asked, 'Well, why don't you take revenge on him?' The first spirit replied, 'I can't. His goodness and hidden merits have been acknowledged by the king of Tian, and the king has dispatched him to be the minister of hidden merits. So how could I hurt him?' Hearing these words, Mr. Ying became even more industrious in performing good deeds and accumulating merits. Whenever there was a famine, he donated rice to save those in need. He always helped relatives in emergencies. When things did not go his way or when he came across someone unreasonable, he always reflected upon himself and calmly accepted the situation. As a result, for generations and even to today his descendants have been offered official ranks and posts in the government.

Another example is Xu Fengzhu, who was born to a very wealthy family in Changshu, Jiangsu. His family owned much farming land, which they rented out to local farmers. Whenever there was

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. At the same time, his father also would donate grain stored at home to the needy. One night, he heard spirits chanting outside his house, "It's true, it's true! The xiucai of the Xu family will pass the provincial exam!" This went on for several nights and, indeed, that year Fengzhu passed the exam. After that, Fengzhu's father became even more industrious in doing good deeds and accumulating merits. He often built bridges and roads, and offered meals to Buddhist monks. When people were short of rice or clothing, he would immediately help them. Basically, Fengzhu's father did all he could to do what was good for others. Sometime later, he heard the spirits chanting again, "It's true, it's true! The provincial scholar of the Xu family will rise to high office!" And this, also, came true. Fengzhu became the travelling inspector of two provinces, Zhejiang and Jiangsu.

Here is another example of what happens when one does good deeds. Mr. Tu Kangxi from Jiaying, Zhejiang worked as a low-ranking official at the Ministry of Justice in Beijing. He often had to stay in the local prison in order to interrogate prisoners about their cases. To his surprise, he determined that many prisoners were actually innocent, but he did not claim credit for discovering this. Instead, he reported it secretly to the Minister of Justice, informing him of the details of his interrogations.

During retrials in the autumn that year, the minister, himself interrogated each of the prisoners about their cases. All of the prisoners answered his questions respectfully and praised the minister's acuity. Subsequently, the minister released the innocent prisoners and those who, though innocent, could not bear the severe torture they had endured that had forced them to plead guilty of crimes they did not commit. As a result, people in Beijing praised the minister for his wise and fair judgements. Soon after, Mr. Tu presented another report to the minister and said, 'There are so many innocent prisoners identified in the city where His Majesty lives. In this vast country there must be many more innocent prisoners. Therefore, on top of annual retrials in autumn, the ministry should dispatch a penalty-mitigating official every five years to verify cases in every province. In regards to prisoners who are guilty, he should make sure that the penalty given is fair. As for the innocent, he should order a retrial and either mitigate their penalties or release them.' The minister therefore presented the report to the emperor on behalf of Mr. Tu. The emperor approved Mr. Tu's suggestion and dispatched penalty-mitigating officials to every province. Mr. Tu happened to be chosen one of them. One night, he dreamt that a celestial being came to inform him that, ' ... according to your preordained destiny, you are not supposed to have a son, but your suggestion to mitigate penalties is in line with the wishes of Tian. Therefore, the king of Tian is sending you three sons who will attain high office, wearing purple gowns and belts trimmed

with gold.' That very night, Mr. Tu's wife conceived and, later, gave birth to three sons, Yingxun, Yingkun and Yingjun. All of the sons became high government officials.

Another example of attaining good results from practicing kindness is that of Bao Ping who lived in Jiaxing. He named himself Xinzhi, which means 'to have faith'. His father used to be the Governor of Chizhou in Anhui, and he had seven sons. Bao Ping was the youngest. Later, Mr. Bao married into a Yuan family with no sons, so he lived with his wife and parents-in-law in Pinghu. My father and he were close friends. He was very knowledgeable and talented, but failed preliminary exams every year. So he paid more attention to studying Buddhism and Taoism.

One day, Mr. Ping went on an outing with a servant eastwards to Lake Mao, and came across a Buddhist temple in a village. The temple was in poor condition, with shabby rooms. The statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva stood unsheltered and was exposed to the rain. Seeing all this, Ping donated all his money, 500 grams of silver, to the abbot, and suggested the temple be renovated. The abbot replied, "Thank you for being so kind. But renovating the temple is a big project. This amount of silver is not enough for such a project." In response, Ping donated four long rolls of luxurious cloth made in Songjiang, as well as seven pieces of clothing, to the abbot. Among the clothes



were some new ones made of ramie. So the servant who had accompanied Mr. Ping tried to persuade him not to give them away. But Mr. Ping said, "So long as Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's statue is sheltered properly, it doesn't matter even if I have nothing to wear."

Having heard what Ping said, the abbot, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed, "It's not difficult to give up money and clothing, but your complete sincerity is truly rare." After the renovation was completed, Ping took his father to visit the temple and they stayed there overnight. On that very night, Ping dreamt that the Dharma Protector of the temple, Qielan, came to thank him, saying, "Thank you for your kindness. Your descendants will enjoy official ranks and government salaries for generations because of these merits you've accumulated." Later, both Ping's son, Bao Bian, and grandson, Bao Chengfang, passed the official exams at the national level and were appointed to high office.

Zhi Li from Jiasban, Zhejiang is another example. His father was a clerk to the local prison. A prisoner was sentenced to death due to a false charge made against him. After learning the truth, Li's father felt sympathetic towards him and decided to request a mitigation of the death sentence on his behalf. The prisoner was very grateful, and told his wife who visited him at the prison, "Mr. Zhi has promised to speak for me. I'm greatly

indebted to him. But I have nothing with which to repay his kindness. Would you invite him to our house tomorrow and offer yourself to him? Perhaps this will please him and increase my chances to live." After hearing what he said, his wife cried. She could think of no other way to help her husband but to follow his suggestion. On the following day, Li's father visited the couple's house in a rural village. The wife served him with rice wine and told him her husband's wish. But Li's father refused the offer and still did all he could to save the man. Later, the prisoner was released and the couple went to Li's father's house to thank him. The grateful man said to Li's father, "It's truly rare to come across such a virtuous person like you these days. I learned that you have no son. I have a daughter. Please allow me to offer her in marriage to you, as this is my only way of repaying you." Li's father was touched by the man's sincerity and accepted his gesture of gratitude. Later, the new wife, Li's mother, gave birth to Li. Li passed the highest level of the official exams at the age of 20, and he was later appointed to the Secretary of the Hanlin Academy. Li's son, Gao, grandson, Lu, and great-grandson, Dalun, all passed the official examinations and were also appointed to high office.

To be more precise, there are different kinds of good deeds: genuine or fake, honest or crooked, invisible or visible, right or wrong, proper or improper, half-full or full of merit, big or small, difficult or easy. All have reasons behind them, and we should

distinguish carefully among these. Many of us do good deeds without understanding the proper principles behind performing them and, what is worse, claim the merits, and boast about them, which changes a good deed to a bad deed. All our good efforts are in vain and we receive no benefit from them.

So what is a genuine good deed? What is a fake one? In the Yuan dynasty, several students went to visit the virtuous Zen Master Zhongfeng up on Mount Tianmu in Zhejiang. One of them asked, "Buddhist teachings tell us that the consequences of our good or bad thought and our speech and actions are like the shadow following a form. Good deeds must result in good fortune and bad deeds in misfortune. Now, some people I know do good deeds but their descendants are not prosperous, whereas others I know do bad deeds but their families are very successful. In that case, I dare say, the Buddha's teachings on the law of cause and effect are groundless."

Master Zhongfeng replied, "Ordinary people are blinded by worldly views. The dirt of their desires are not cleansed away and, hence, these emotions darken the wisdom that, otherwise, is innate and perfect. In this manner, it is very common to mistake good deeds for bad and bad deeds for good. Alas, we get it all wrong. What's worse, we don't think we're wrong, but instead blame the law of cause and effect for being unfair."

Hearing Master Zhongfeng's explanation, the students asked further, "But good is good and bad is bad, Why do you say we've got it all wrong?" The master was very wise, Instead of explaining the matter to them right away, he invited them to describe their own understanding of good and bad deeds. One of them said, "It's bad to hit or scold others. It's good to be polite and show respect to people." Master Zhongfeng replied, "Not necessarily right." So another said, "It's bad to be greedy for money and to take money from others. It's good to refrain from seeking money and not take bribes." The master said, "Aha, not necessarily right, either." The rest of the students shared many other good and bad deeds they had witnessed, but Master Zhongfeng replied, each time, "Not necessarily right." So the students invited the master to teach them. They asked, "What exactly is good and what exactly is bad?" Master Zhongfeng replied, "Well, it's a good deed if it benefits others. It's a bad deed if it benefits ourselves. If the things we do will benefit others, they are good even if we scold or hit them. If the things we do only benefit ourselves, they are bad even if we are polite and show respect to the person."

Therefore, when we do a good deed, it is good and genuine if our intention is to benefit others, and it is bad and fake if our intention is to benefit ourselves. Moreover, good deeds springing from our conscience are genuine, whereas good deeds done for the sake only of doing them are fake. In addition,doing

good deeds without expecting anything in return is genuine. But if they are done with a single selfish intention or an expectation of praise from others, they are fake. These differences should all be contemplated.

Then, what is a good deed that is honest or crooked? Today, those who are cautious but yielding are highly respected. However, in ancient times sages and virtuous people would rather admire those who were of high aspiration and unyielding to immoral social practices. It is because this kind of person is courageous, willing to take on responsibilities and serve the people wholeheartedly, that such a person will achieve something great. In regard to those who are cautious and nice, everyone in the village likes them. But they are yielding, not aspirational in character, unwilling to take on responsibilities and easily going with the flow. This is why sages consider these people to be thieves of virtue. In this regard, ordinary people's views on good and evil are opposite to the views held by the sages. Similarly, what ordinary people like or dislike is entirely different from what sages like or dislike.

Tian, Di, spirits and celestial beings protect and reward good and punish bad people. 1 Their views on good and evil, right and wrong are in line with those of sages and opposite to those of ordinary people.

Therefore, when doing good deeds and accumulating merits, we must not be deceived and affected by what we hear or see. We must quietly cleanse our minds and prevent any improper thought from contaminating our originally pure minds. Helping others wholeheartedly is honest, whereas having selfish intentions of pleasing others is crooked. Loving others wholeheartedly is honest, whereas having a single thought to blame or dislike others is crooked. Respecting others wholeheartedly is honest, whereas having a single thought to ridicule others is crooked. We should learn carefully to distinguish between all of these.

What is a good deed that is visible or invisible? When our good deeds are known to others, the merits that we accumulate are visible. When our good deeds are unknown to others, the merits that we accumulated are invisible or hidden. With hidden merits we are rewarded by Tian, whereas with visible merits we are rewarded with worldly fame. Fame is also good fortune. However, fame is something that Tian and Di dislike. Look at those world-renowned people who in fact have no merit to match their fame, they often experience unexpected misfortune. By contrast, there are people who have done nothing wrong but are falsely accused with no good reason. Their descendants often experience sudden prosperity and success. From this, we can see how important it is to know the minute differences between hidden and visible goodness. We cannot afford to mistake them.

What is a good deed that is right or wrong? In the Spring and Autumn period, a law in the Lu state, Confucius's birthplace, declared that anyone who was willing to pay ransom and bring back enslaved Lu citizens from other states would be rewarded with money from the government. Confucius had a rich student called Zigong. With the intention of helping Lu citizens, Zigong paid ransom and brought back several enslaved Lu citizens. However, he refused to accept any government reward. Knowing what Zigong had done, Confucius was very unhappy and he scolded Zigong, "You've done it wrong! Whatever sages and virtuous people do, their intention is to reform social practices, and educate and guide the people to perform good deeds. They would never do anything as they please. Currently, there are more poor people than rich ones in the Lu state. If receiving rewards from the government is now considered to be greedy, there will be no one willing to pay ransom and save our people in the future."

Another student of Confucius, Zilu, once saw a man drowning in the river and rescued him. Later, the man thanked Zilu and gave him a cow as a gesture of gratitude. After hearing what Zilu had done, Confucius was very happy and said, "From today onwards, more people in the Lu state will be eager to save those who are drowning."

In the eyes of ordinary people, Zigong's refusal of the money

reward was good, whereas Zilu's acceptance of the cow was bad. However, a sage like Confucius praised Zilu but scolded Zigong. From this account, we should learn that when performing a good deed, we must not merely look at its instant outcome, but should consider carefully its impact. We should not merely consider its short-term impact, but its long-term one, as well. We should not merely consider its impact on ourselves, but its impact on everyone in the world. If a good deed is good at the moment of being done but will have negative impacts on others, it may seem to be right but is actually wrong. By contrast, if a good deed seems to be bad at the moment but will have positive impacts on others, it may seem to be wrong but is actually right. This principle should also be applied to many other situations in life, e.g., appropriateness that is inappropriate, politeness that is impolite, trustworthiness that is untrustworthy and love that is false love. We need to differentiate carefully to make proper choices.

What is a good deed that is proper or improper? In the Ming dynasty there was a prime minister called Lil Wenyi. He returned to his hometown soon after he retired. As he was upright and impartial during his time in office, the people of the entire country looked up to him, like planets orbiting their star. However, a drunken man from a rural village showed up, swearing at him outside his house. Being very forgiving, Mr. Lil did not take offence and calmly said to his servant, 'This man is drw1k.

Don't argue with him.' Then, he closed his gate and ignored the man. One year later, this man committed a severe crime, and he was imprisoned and sentenced to death. Upon hearing the news, Mr. Lil deeply regretted what had happened and said, 'Had I taken him to the authorities for punishment that day, perhaps a little discipline would have prevented this. I only thought about being kind at the time and let him off. I never realised that my kindness would end up encouraging his boldness.' This case is an example where a well-intended good deed turns out to be improper.

There are also examples where deeds of improper intent result in good deeds. There was once a rich family running a rice business at the local market. One year, the area was stricken by famine and many poor villagers in broad daylight robbed rice from the market. The rich family reported the robbery to the local authorities who ignored the charge. As a result, poor villagers became bolder and bolder. Having no other way of redress, the rich family set up a court in private, without government permission. They sent out a few strong servants, seized those who robbed rice, took them back home for trial, and punished them accordingly. Consequently, the robbery was suppressed. Had it not been dealt with in this way, those who robbed rice would have become rebels and would have severely undermined social security. The lesson is that it is widely known that being good is proper and being bad is improper, but there are

cases where good intents end up with bad results. In this case, it is “the improper within the proper”. There are also cases where bad intents end up with good results. In this case, it is “the proper within the improper.” We must fully understand the distinctions.

What is a good deed that is half-full or full of merit? The Book of Changes states, “Without accumulating good deeds, a person will not be able to acquire a good reputation. Without accumulating bad deeds, they will not experience deadly misfortune.” The Book of History records, “The amount of evil that the late Shang dynasty accumulated was as much as the coins filling a money box. If we actively put coins into the box every day, the box will eventually be full. If we slack off and stop putting coins into the money box, the box will never be filled up.” Similarly, accumulating good and bad deeds is like storing items. This is one way of explaining the concept of being half-full or full of merit.

In the past a young woman visited a local Buddhist temple and wanted to donate some money. Unfortunately, she was very poor and only had two pennies with her. But with complete sincerity she donated both pennies. To her surprise, the abbot of the temple came out and personally helped her repent her past transgressions. On her behalf, he also solemnly dedicated her merits in front of the statue of the Buddha. Later, the young

woman was chosen to be the emperor's wife and enjoyed great wealth and social status. One day, she went back to the rural Buddhist temple with the intention of paying back the abbot's kindness, and donated several thousand silver taels. However, this time the abbot did not show up but asked one of his disciples to help dedicate her merits of donation. The woman could not understand the huge difference between the abbot's attitudes towards her. So she respectfully invited the abbot to come out and enquired, "Many years ago I only donated two pennies, but you helped me repent in person. Today, I donated several thousand silver taels, but you did not personally help me dedicate my merits. Why?"

The abbot replied, "Although the amount you donated was very small in the past, you did it with complete sincerity. Therefore, we could not have repaid your kindness if I had not helped you repent in person. Today, you did donate a large sum of money, but you are not as sincere in your motivations as before. Therefore, it is enough that my student performs your dedications for you."

You see, with complete sincerity a small amount of donation resulted in complete good fortune. But after becoming the emperor's wife, the woman developed an air of self-importance and arrogance. She was not as sincere as before when interacting with others and handling matters. As a result, she had become

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debased and the merits she received were only half as much. This story instructs us that a donation of a large sum may only be half-full of goodness whereas that of a small amount may be full of goodness.

We find another example in the Han dynasty. Zhongli Quan was one of the eight deities in Taoism. Before teaching his student, LU Dongbin, all he could do without any reservation, Zhongli Quan wanted to test the student. So he told Dongbin that a piece of metal would turn into gold when it was mixed with a particular substance, and that the gold could be used to save the poor in the world. Hearing that, Dongbin asked, "Will the gold turn back into metal again?" Zhongli Quan replied, "After 500 years, the gold will turn back into its original metal." Dongbin then said, "If that is the case, it will be detrimental to those who possess the gold in 500 years' time. I don't want to do things like this." Hearing the answer, Zhongli Quan knew that Dongbin's intention to learn was genuinely kind. So he said to his student, "To be qualified for being a deity, you need to accumulate merits of 3,000 good deeds. What you've said just now has helped you complete the 3,000 good deeds." This account is another example of half-full goodness and full goodness.

We need to bear in mind one more rule. To do good deeds, we should learn to let go of the deeds that we have done. Do not linger on calculations of how many we have done, or what we

have done them. If we can follow this rule, whatever good deed we do will be successful and result in full merits. However, if we keep thinking about the good deeds we have done, the merits of the deeds will be only half-full even if we perform good deeds industriously throughout our lives. For example, when we donate money to others, we should see no individual donating the money, no person to whom the money is donated and no money that is donated. In Buddhism this is called 'the emptiness of the three wheels or a pure mind. If we can follow this principle, even one decalitre of rice will result in endless good fortune, and even one penny will eliminate transgressions of a thousand aeons. But if we cannot let go of the good deeds we have done, the good fortune we receive will only be half-full even if we donate 10,000 taels of gold to help others. This is another way of explaining full goodness and half-full goodness.

What is big goodness and what is small goodness? There was a man called Wei Zhongda who was an official at the Hanlin Academy. One night, his soul was taken into the spirit world by an attendant spirit. The judge of the spirit world ordered his clerk to present him with two types of scrolls, one recording Zhongda's good deeds done in the human world and the other similarly recording his bad deeds. After all the booklets arrived, the judge found that the bad deed scrolls filled the whole courtyard, whereas the good deed scroll was as thin as a chopstick. The judge ordered the clerk to weigh the bad and good deed scrolls

on a scale. It turned out that the large number of bad deed scrolls weighed much less than the single thin scroll of good deeds. So Zhongda asked the judge "I'm barely 40, but how could I possibly have so many faults and transgressed in so many ways?" The judge replied, "So long as you have one single improper thought, you commit a transgression. You do not have to wait until you physically commit it." Therefore, Zhongda asked what was recorded in the scroll of good deeds. The judge answered, "The emperor once wanted to do a big project, building a stone bridge in the three mountain area in Fuzhou. But you wrote a proposal and advised the emperor not to do it in order to avoid further hardship on the people and also the wasting of government funds. This is the draft of your proposal." Zhongda said, "I did make the proposal, but the emperor dismissed it and proceeded with the project. What I did made no impact. So how could it be that the proposal is so powerful in terms of the merits it receives?" The judge replied, "It is true that the emperor did not listen to your suggestions. Nonetheless, your thought was to save tens of thousands of people from hard labour. Had the emperor listened to your suggestion, your proposal would have been even more powerful." This case tells us that a small good deed can result in huge merits if our intent in doing it is for the people and countries of the world. If it is only done for ourselves or our families, it will result in small merits no matter how many good deeds we perform.

What is a good deed that is difficult or easy? In the past wise scholars would say, "To refrain from selfish desires, we must start from what is most difficult for us to overcome." Confucius's student, Fan Chi, asked him, "What can I do that can be considered consummate?" Confucius replied, "You must start from what is most difficult for you to overcome." What Confucius meant was to ignore one's selfish desires. For example, there was an elderly teacher, Mr. Shu, in Jiangxi. He had been a private teacher of a family for two years, and then, using his entire two years' earnings he helped the couple pay off the debt they owed to the government. Had he not helped them pay the debt, the husband would have been imprisoned and the couple would have been separated. Another example is Mr. Zhang in Handan, Hebei. One day, Mr. Zhang came across a destitute man who had to mortgage his wife and children. The man had no money left to redeem his family. Mr. Zhang gave up ten years' savings to help the man redeem his family.

The good deeds that Mr. Shu and Mr. Zhang performed are examples of good deeds that are difficult to do. What others would not sacrifice, they did so willingly. Another example is Mr. Jin in Zhengjiang, Jiangsu. At an old age Mr. Jin still had no son. His neighbours were a poor couple and they offered him their young daughter in marriage in the hope that she could bear a son for him. But Mr. Jin could not bear the thought of ruining the young woman's future. He refused the offer and returned the



daughter to her parents. This is another example of overcoming what is difficult to conquer. Therefore, the good fortune the three elderly men later received was also abundant. It is much easier for those who are wealthy and powerful to accumulate merits than it is for ordinary people. However, they are sometimes still unwilling to cultivate goodness when the opportunity presents itself. What they do, in fact, is to give up on themselves. As for those who are poor and have no power, doing good deeds can be very difficult, so when they do good it is truly precious.

Whenever opportunities arise to help others, we should do our best to do so. There are many ways to help people. To boil it down, there are ten guidelines that we should follow. First, set a good role model for others to perform good deeds. Second, at all times harbour love and respect for others. Third, support others to realize good deeds. For example, a person has been thinking of doing a good deed but is hesitating. Family, friends or colleagues should persuade him to make all efforts to do the good deed. In another scenario, where a person is performing a good deed but is experiencing obstacles, we should do our best to guide, persuade and help him to realize the good deed. We must not become jealous of the person or try to undermine his efforts. Fourth, one should persuade others to perform good deeds. Fifth, help others in emergencies. Sixth, develop public projects for the betterment of society. Seventh, accumulate merits by giving wealth to others. Eighth, protect and support

correct teachings. Ninth, respect elders. Tenth, love and cherish all living beings - we should love, protect and take pity on all living beings.

What is meant by setting a good role model for others to perform good deeds? Before becoming emperor, Emperor Shun was a farmer. He noticed that many young and strong fishermen chose to catch fish in the deep end of Lake Leize. Consequently, old and weak fishermen were forced to catch fish in the shallow end of the lake, where the current was very strong and there were fewer fish. He took pity on the old fishermen and joined their efforts in order to help them. Whenever he saw those who argued or fought with others over catching fish, he remained silent and did not point out their faults. But when there were some younger fishermen who were considerate and gave precedence to the old and weak men, Shun praised them, telling everyone about their good deeds and urging they be seen as good role models. One year later, all the young and strong fishermen learned to relinquish the deep end of the lake for the sake of the old and weak fishermen. Surely, with his great wisdom and capability, Emperor Shun could certainly teach the people with words but he did not do so. Instead, he reached the people's understanding by practising the right things himself and subtly reforming social practices. What Shun did was to be guided truly by his painstakingly good intentions.

We live in an era of low moral standards, when improper social practices prevail. It is very difficult in these times to be a good person. Therefore, we must neither compare our strengths with others' weaknesses, nor argue with others about the bad deeds they have done, nor make things difficult for others when they are not as capable as we are. Even if one is capable and intelligent, the person must not flaunt his qualities. We should remain modest, as if we had no capability. Whenever we see a fault in others, we should tolerate it and not reveal it. In doing so, we give the person with the fault the opportunity to rectify the faults without losing self-respect. At the same time, we should help the person develop a sense of shame so he refrains from making the same error again. On the other hand, one may sometimes find strengths or kindness in others. In this case, we should praise and learn from these persons, at the same time making their strengths known to others. Whatever we say or do in daily life, there must not be a single selfish thought. Instead, we must think of the influence our speech and actions have on others, and set a good model to follow. The quality of a great person is that of one for whom the public welfare is more important than his own.

What is meant by harbouring love and respect for others at all times? We cannot distinguish an exemplary person from a petty person simply by observing their physical appearances, speech or actions. This is because a petty person can pretend to be an

exemplary person by doing something that seems to be kind or appropriate. But there is a single, vast difference between the two: their different intents. Their intents are as clearly opposite to each other as black and white. Therefore, Mencius said, 'What makes an exemplary person different from others is their intent'. The intents of an exemplary person are those of loving and respecting others. It is because they know one thing very well. Irrespective of their kinship to us, their social status, their intelligence or their moral standards, everyone in the world is my sibling, and they and I are one. Loving and respecting others is to love and respect sages and virtuous people. Being able to understand what others want is to understand what sages and virtuous people want. This is because sages and virtuous people hope everyone in the world can lead a perfect and happy life. Therefore, when we can love and respect everyone in the world and enable them to lead a peaceful and happy life, we are in effect following the teachings of the sages in the world.

What is meant by supporting others to perform good deeds? Take jade as an example. If we carelessly throw away a piece of raw jade, it will be just like any other worthless stone. But if we carve, polish and engrave it properly, it becomes a precious gem. Similarly, a person needs advice and guidance. Therefore, when we see a person doing a good deed or who is modest and aspired to act for a good cause, and has an aptitude for such aspiration and action, we should do what we can to help the

person. We should either give him proper guidance, provide him with a better platform for what he does, encourage and reward him, or give him other support whenever needed. If a person is falsely accused, we should either help the person clear the accusation, share his burden of the slander against him or even take his place in receiving the slander. This is what Chinese ancestors called 'sharing slanders'. We must do all we can to help the person gain a foothold in society. Only in so doing will we truly have done our best.

Most people dislike those who are different from them. For example, petty individuals dislike exemplary people and those who are not virtuous dislike those who are virtuous. In a village, or anywhere, there are more bad people than good ones. Therefore, a good person often is bullied and finds it hard to gain a foothold in society. Moreover, those who are heroic in character often care little about their appearance. But lacking wisdom, ordinary people see things from a worldly perspective and only judge people by their appearance. They like gossiping about and criticising others. As a result, good deeds often fail and good people are slandered. When this happens, it is up to other good people and respectable elders to correct and guide those who have improper thoughts and speech and act improperly. At the same time, they should also protect and help those who are virtuous. The greatest merits are those that expel the bad and promote the good.

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What is meant by persuading others to perform good deeds? All human beings have consciences. But most of us are busy chasing after fame and profit. Some of us go against our conscience and do whatever we can to obtain fame or profit. In such a way we can quickly become debased. So when with others, we should observe them carefully. As soon as we notice they are about to become debased, we should remind or warn them whenever and wherever in the hope of ridding them of their delusions. It is like waking up someone who is having a nightmare. It is also like getting them out of their trap of worries and calming them down. We can receive boundless merits by treating others with a sense of gratitude. With regard to the best way to influence others, Hanzhu, a thinker, philosopher and statesman of the Tang dynasty, said, "By word of mouth, the influence of one's advice can only last for a while. By leaving written works, the influence will last for generations."

Indeed, influencing others by spoken words is limited in time and space, and what is said can easily be forgotten. But writing advice down can influence generations of people in the whole world. This is why writing books that advise people to abandon evil deeds and perform good ones, instead results in great merits. Compared with setting a good role model for others to perform good deeds, this approach places more emphasis on form or appearance. However, influencing by written words is like providing the correct medicine for the specific symptoms

and will be particularly effective when someone is especially fond of those books and tracts. Therefore, we should not ignore this approach. On the other hand, there should be limits to giving advice. Some of us can be too stubborn to listen to others advice. In this case, giving them advice is worthless. If we insist, it is to "say things that we should not have said". But for a meek person, we should give him timely advice in a way that is most effective for him. If we do not do it, it is to "lose the right opportunity of helping a person". In either case, we are not wise enough to identify the situations. Therefore, we must reflect on our own faults and strive for betterment.

What is meant by helping others in emergencies? In life, most of us experience all sorts of problems, misfortunes and setbacks. If we come across someone who is in urgent need of help, we should help that person as if we are the one experiencing the suffering. We can either help the person clear away the false accusations and relieve the pressure on him, plead for his innocence, or help him in other ways. The scholar Cui Xian once said, "It does not matter whether a favour is big or small; what counts is that it's done at a time when others need it most." What words of loving kindness!

What is meant by developing public projects for the betterment of society? Whether they are small or big, in a village or in a city, projects that benefit the general public are most suitable. These

projects might be opening a waterway for irrigating farming lands, building embankments for preventing floods, building bridges for the convenience of transportation and travelling, or providing water and food for those who are hungry or thirsty. Whenever such opportunities present themselves, we should persuade others to work together and assist in money or efforts. Do not be afraid of what others might say, or become discouraged when the job becomes difficult. Do not allow the jealousy and hatred of others to weaken the resolve to do what is virtuous.

What is meant by accumulating merits by giving wealth to others? In Buddhism, there are numerous ways to perform good deeds, but the most important one is giving or letting go. Those who thoroughly understand the truth behind this are willing to give away anything they have. In Buddhism these people are Bodhisattvas who have obtained their spiritual bodies. They are willing to give their six sense-organs as well as six qualities produced by the objects and organs of sense. They are willing to let go of whatever they can see, hear, smell, taste, touch and feel. Of anything we possess, there is nothing we cannot let go. If we can let go of all of these, both our bodies and minds will be in a pure state with no worries, the same as those Bodhisattvas. If we cannot let go of them, we can start by giving away money. Ordinary people like us consider food and clothing to be as important as life, itself. Therefore, it is most important for us to

start by giving money. If we are able happily to give others money, we can cure stinginess while helping others in dire need. Nonetheless, it is not easy to understand thoroughly what money really is. So we may find it difficult to give money at the beginning. But once we get used to it, we will find mental peace and gradually there will be nothing we cannot give up or away. This is the easiest way to vanquish greed and selfishness. At the same time, not holding onto anything eliminates obsession over things and meanness to others.

What is meant by protecting and supporting correct teachings? Teachings have been the guidance of all sentient beings as well as the standard of truth. However, there are correct and incorrect teachings. Without correct teachings, how can we join in and support the interplay of Tian and Di in their efforts to create all lives in nature? How could we possibly educate all beings and enable them to succeed? How could we possibly escape all kinds of delusions and confinement by worthless goals? How could we possibly manage and deal with all sorts of things in this world and eventually escape from the Sea of Suffering caused by the Cycle of Birth and Death? Therefore, whenever we see sacred buildings in memory of sages and saints, their pictures or statues, their holy works and their teachings, we must show reverence. As for those that are damaged or incomplete, we should work immediately to repair them. In regard to the correct Buddhist teachings, we must

promote and advocate the parts that are particularly important for people today, and enable everyone to pay attention to them. Only in so doing can we enact the kindness of Buddhas. We should put all of these into practice with all our efforts.

What is meant by respecting elders? We must show particular respect to our parents and elder siblings, and our national leaders and other leaders at different levels of government administration. We must also respect anyone who is older than us, of great virtue, of high position and of great wisdom and knowledge, irrespective of their ethnicity, nationality and faith. At home, we must look after our parents with deep love, a gentle attitude, a kind expression and a caring voice. As we keep doing these things, we will naturally develop a good character. This is an essential way to bring harmony to Tian and Di. When away from home and serving leaders, we must abide by the laws. We must never think that leaders do not know what we do or that we can do whatever we want irrespective of the law. Before convicting a person of a crime, we must be impartial and investigate the case carefully, irrespective of the severity of the accusation. We must not use the opportunity to bully the person and make false charges against him, thinking that our leaders are not aware of what we do. When serving our leaders, we must be as respectful as we are to Tian. This is the correct teaching handed down by our ancestors. Cases like these have the greatest impact on our hidden merits. Look at those families that practise

faithfulness and family reverence. All their descendants enjoy long-lasting prosperity and success, and all of them have bright futures. Therefore, we must be particularly careful with these aspects of the gaining of merit.

What is meant by loving and cherishing all beings? Compassion makes a person become human. Mencius said, "One is not human if one is without compassion." To be consummate is to have compassion. To accumulate merits is to accumulate compassion. The Rites of the Zhou states, "Do not use female animals as sacrifices in the first month of a year on a lunar calendar." Mencius also said, "An exemplary person is unwilling to be near the kitchen." This practice is to protect a person's compassion. Therefore, our ancestors had four taboos in relation to consuming meat. First, they would not eat the meat of an animal if they had heard it being killed. Second, they would not eat the meat of an animal if they had seen it being killed. Third, they would not eat the meat of an animal if it was reared by them. Fourth, they would not eat the meat of an animal if it was especially killed for them. We should learn from our ancestors kindness. Even if we cannot become completely vegetarian, we should at least follow these good examples to abide by the taboos and reduce the amount of meat we consume.

Although we may not be able to stop eating meat right away, we should gradually reduce the amount we eat until we are free

from it completely. In so doing, over time we will increase our compassion. We should not only refrain from killing animals, but also from taking the lives of beings as small as insects, for they are also living beings. To make silk clothing, manufacturers need to take unbroken silk threads from the cocoons of silkworms in boiling water before the silkworms come out from the cocoons. How many silkworms have to be killed in that process? When we cultivate farming lands, how many insects have to be killed? We need to be fully aware of the cost in lives involved in our food and clothing. We kill other beings in order to nourish ourselves. Therefore, we must cherish the food and clothing that we have. The transgression of wasting them is as severe as killing. In addition, how often have we killed lives unwittingly by touching and stepping on living beings? We should do our best to avoid committing the same transgressions again in the future. Su Dongpo (1037-1101), a prominent poet of the Song dynasty wrote: "To take pity on mice, we should often leave them some rice. To take pity on moths, we should not light lamps." What a consummate and compassionate statement!

## **The Fourth Lesson: The Benefits of Being Humble**

In The Book of Changes the Hexagram of Humility states, "The laws of Tian take from the arrogant and give to the humble. The laws of Di pass flowing water from areas that are full to those that are lower and have less water. The laws of spirits bring harm to those who are arrogant, and good fortune to those who are modest. Even the laws of humans despise the arrogant and favour the modest." Therefore, of the 64 hexagrams described in The Book of Changes, only the Hexagram of Humility brings complete auspiciousness. The Book of History also explains, "Arrogance invites misfortunes whereas humility brings benefits." I had taken official examinations with many people several times in the past. Every time I came across candidates who were from a poor background but were surely about to pass the examinations, I noticed that their faces gave out a light of humility that I could almost hold in my hands.

Several years ago, ten of us from the village travelled to Beijing to take the national examination. Ding Jingyu, the youngest among us, was extremely humble. I said to Fei Jinpo, a fellow candidate, "Jingyu will undoubtedly pass the exam." Fei Jinpo asked, "How do you know?" I replied, "Only those who are humble receive good fortune. My friend, look at the ten of us.

Is there anyone as honest, generous, and uncompetitive, as Jingyu? Do you see anyone who is as respectful, tolerant, careful, and humble as Jingyu? Do you see anyone like him who, when insulted, does not talk back or who, when slandered, does not argue? Any person who can achieve such humility will receive protection from Tian and Di. There is no reason he will not become prosperous.”

Sure enough, when the test results came out, Ding Jingyu had passed.

One year, I went to take the national examination for the second time in Beijing and stayed in a hostel with my childhood friend, Feng Kaizhi. During our stay, I found that Kaizhi was always very humble and accommodating. He was no longer the arrogant lad I had known many years ago. He had a friend, called Li Jiyan, who was very honest but blunt and often scolded him for his mistakes. But Kaizhi calmly received the accusations without arguing back. So I told Kaizhi, 'There are always signs for good fortune and misfortunes. When a person is sincerely humble, he will surely receive help from Tian. My old friend, you will pass the examination this year for sure!' Later, he indeed passed it.

There was another young man, Zhao Yilfeng, from Guanxian, Shandong. He passed the official examination at the provincial

level and was made a juren before twenty. However, in several attempts, he did not pass the examinations at the national level. Later, his father was appointed as a section chief at the local government in Jiashan, Zhejiang and Yilfeng went with him. With great admiration, Yilfeng visited a well-known local scholar, Qian Mingwu, and presented his essay to the respectable elder. Mr. Qian picked up his writing brush and made many corrections to the essay. Not only was Yilfeng not angry, he gratefully accepted all of Mr. Qian's corrections and immediately made amendments accordingly. In the following year, Yilfeng passed the official examination at the national level.

One year, I went to Beijing for an audience with the emperor and met a scholar, Xia Jiansuo. He had all the qualities of a virtuous man without the slightest trace of arrogance. I felt the intense aura of his humility. After returning home, I told my friends, "Before helping a person to succeed and bringing him good fortune, Tian will always help him discover his wisdom. Once the wisdom is discovered, the person changes from being frivolous to sensible, and from rash to cautious. Jiansuo is so gentle and kind. Apparently, Tian has helped him discover his wisdom. It's a certainty that he'll soon receive good fortune." Indeed, when the exam results came out, Jiansuo did pass the examination.

In Jiangyin, Jiangsu there was a scholar called Zhang Weiyan.



He was highly-educated, excellent at writing essays and, hence, well-known amongst scholars. One year, he attended a provincial examination in Nanjing, staying at a Buddhist temple. When the exam results were posted, he found that he had failed. He became furious and loudly accused the examiner of being blind to obvious talent. At that moment, there was a Taoist monk nearby who was visiting the temple. Having heard what Weiyang said, he smiled. Weiyang immediately directed his anger towards the Taoist monk. So the Taoist said, "Your essay is certainly no good." Hearing the comment, Weiyang got even angrier and demanded, "How do you know it's no good? You haven't even read it!" The Taoist monk replied, "I've often heard that the vital element in writing good essays is a peaceful mind and a disposition at harmony with itself. Your loud and angry accusations clearly show that your mind and disposition are not in harmony. So how could you possibly write good essays?" Hearing these words, Weiyang yielded to the Taoist and asked him for further advice.

The Taoist replied, "Passing official examinations depends on one's destiny. If you're not destined to pass, you'll fail no matter how good your paper is. The only way of changing your destiny is to make changes to yourself." Weiyang asked, "Since it's my destiny, how can I change it?" The Taoist replied, "Although our destinies are preordained, we have the right to change them. So long as we practise good deeds and accumulate bidden merits,

we will reap what we sow." Weiyang said, "I'm only a poor scholar. What good deeds can I possibly do?" The Taoist explained, "Performing good deeds and accumulating hidden merits all originate from our minds. So long as we habitually think of doing good deeds and accumulating merits, the merits gained will be infinite! Take humility for example. It costs nothing to feel and show humility. Why can't you be humble and reflect on yourself instead of berating the examiner for being unfair?"

Weiyang accepted the advice of the Taoist monk and refrained from arrogance from that point on. He became very mindful of his speech and actions and tried hard to avoid making mistakes affecting his merits. Day after day, he tried ever harder to perform good deeds and accumulate merits. Three years passed. One night, he dreamed that he entered a very tall building and saw a register recording the names of those who will pass official exams; there were many blank lines in the register. So he asked the person next to him what the almost blank register meant, and was told, "The register records those who will pass the examination this year." Weiyang then asked, "Why are there so many blank lines?" The person replied, "The spirits in the underworld check on the candidates every three years. Only the names of those who commit no misdeeds and accumulate merits will remain in the book. The blank lines contained the names of those who were destined to pass. But due to their recent misdeeds, their names have been removed." The person pointed to a blank line and said

again, “For the past three years you've been very careful and self-disciplined, and committed no misdeeds. Perhaps your name will fill this blank. I hope that you cherish this opportunity and take care not to do any wrong.” That year, Weiyan indeed passed the examination and was placed one-hundred-and-fifth.

All the above examples warn us that there are celestial beings and spirits above us who are constantly watching us. Therefore, obtaining good fortune and preventing misfortunes is entirely up to us. We must harbour good intentions, refrain from misdeeds and avoid offending celestial beings and spirits. At the same time, we should be humble, accommodating with others, and not arrogant. In so doing, celestial beings and spirits will take pity on us. Only then will we have a foundation for future prosperity. Those who are filled with conceit are not destined for greatness. Even if they prosper, their good fortune will be short-lived. Intelligent people never narrow their minds and refuse the good fortune they are entitled to. Moreover, those who are humble always improve their opportunities to receive advice and guidance from others. If we are not humble, no one will be willing to teach us. In addition, those who are humble are willing to learn from others strengths and good deeds. As a result, they gain boundless merits and goodness. This is of particular importance to students, scholars and literati.

The ancients said, “Those who hope, with the effective motivations,

to gain government posts and serve the people will certainly achieve their aspirations. Those who aspire, with the effective motivations, to gain wealth and high social status will also attain what they wish for.” Those who have great and far reaching goals are like a tree with roots. They must be humble in their every thought and try to relieve others' burdens even if the burden seems as insignificant as a speck of dust. If we can reach this level of humility, we will naturally touch the hearts of Tian and Di. The point is, I am the creator of my own prosperity. Today, those who want to gain official ranks and government posts have no real aspiration. What they do is merely out of impulse. They stop aspiring for the better whenever their impulses disappear. Mencius once said to Xuan, the king of the Qi state, “If you can expand from the mind that seeks personal happiness, to sharing happiness with all your subjects and to making them as happy as you are, then surely the nation will prosper!” It is the same with any person's aspiration for official ranks and government posts. We must direct and extend our aspirations to performing good deeds and accumulating merits, and do all we can to reach our goals. Consequently, our destinies and good fortune will be within our control.