



美國波士頓行願淨宗學會 - 行願蓮海月刊 Amita Buddhism Society - Boston, USA

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November 28, 2014

Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE FOURTH LESSON:

THE BENEFITS OF THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

Arrogance Invites Adversity while Humility Gains Benefits

Five True Accounts of Virtuous People

Humility enables us to preserve our good rewards. Without it, we will lose what we are trying to accumulate and all of our efforts will have been in vain. We need to rely on humility for it enables us to preserve our goodness. Therefore, the Diamond Sutra explains that we should use endurance to preserve what we have accumulated from our practice of giving which is accomplishing good deeds. If we were unable to endure, then no matter how much we cultivated and accumulated, all would be lost. According to the Confucian teachings, the way to retain what we have cultivated is to practice the virtue of humility.

In I Ching, the Book of Changes, the combination for Humility stated that, "The law of heaven takes from the arrogant and benefits the humble. The law of earth will bring flowing water from areas that are full to those that are lower as it passes by. The law of spirits brings harm to those who are arrogant and good fortune to those who are modest. Even the laws of people despise the arrogant and like the modest."

A good example to help us understand the "Law of Heaven" is the waxing and waning of the moon. After the moon is full, it begins to wane. Before the moon becomes full again, it gets brighter and brighter each day. This gradual increase is the virtue of humility. From this, we can understand natural law and the will of heaven.

The "law of earth" is a natural law. Water will move from areas that are filled to lower areas. When some spirits see that we have become successful, they become jealous and try to cause problems for us. When we are destitute, they feel sorry for us and try to help. People are the same way. The "laws of people" prefer those who are modest to those who are arrogant.

During the Qing Dynasty, Guo-Fan Zeng held the highest post as governor-general of four provinces in China. He was almost like a small emperor. Being highly educated, he knew that he had already advanced very high and that this was not good. So, he named his study "Room seeking Imperfection", to make known his aspiration. Most people seek perfection, but Mr. Zeng sought moderation. He sought to lack a little, to not have too much. He believed that as one's position was elevated, one should be more modest. Thus, he was able to maintain what he accumulated. Even to the present time, his descendents are quite prosperous. Due to his accumulated merits, virtuous conduct and the following of his teaching by his descendents, the prosperity of the family was prolonged.

In I Ching, the Book of Changes, only the Humility combination contains all good and no bad outcomes.

In I Ching, the Book of Changes there are sixty-four combinations. Every one of the explanations or predictions has the possibility of good fortune and misfortune, invariably mixed. Only the Humility combination, also called "high mountain under the ground", representing humility, has no possibility for misfortune. Thus, the higher we are, the more modest we need to be.

The Book of History explains that, "Arrogance invites disaster and humility gains benefit".

Those who are the most modest receive the most benefits and advantages.

I often went to take the examinations accompanied by others and every time I would meet scholars who were very poor. I noticed that before they succeeded in passing the examinations and became prosperous,

their faces radiated such humility that I felt I could almost hold it in my hands.

Based on the observation of his own life, Mr. Liao-Fan found what was written in I Ching and the Book of History to be logical and applicable to our daily lives. At every imperial examination that he had attended with companions, the students who passed were the most modest. From this, he could accurately predict who would pass the current examination.

Several years ago, ten of us from the village went to take the preliminary imperial examination. Jing-Yu Ding was the youngest and extremely humble. I told one of the applicants, Jin-Po Fei, that this young man would definitely pass the examination this year. Jin-Po Fei asked how I could tell. I told him that, "Only those who are humble receive good fortune. My friend, look at the ten of us. Is there anyone as honest, generous and never tries to come in first, as Jing-Yu? Do you see anyone who is as respectful, tolerant, careful and humble like Jing-Yu? Do you see anyone like Jing-Yu, who when insulted does not talk back or who when slandered does not argue? Any person who can achieve such a level of humility will receive protection from the earth, spirits and heavens. There is no reason he will not become prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Jing-Yu Ding passed.

One year Mr. Liao-Fan went with several other people to take the examination. Based on his observations of everyone, he commented to one of his companions that Jing-Yu Ding, who was the most modest, would pass despite his young age. His companion Jin-Po Fei asked how he could tell. Mr. Liao-Fan said that, "only those who are modest receive good fortune". He asked Mr. Fei to consider the ten travelling companions. Was anyone else as loyal, honest, kind, sincere and agreeable as Jing-Yu? He explained that Jing was respectful and modest, a rare person who would remain undisturbed and be tolerant when others humiliated or offended him. Those with great tolerance possess tremendous good fortune. As predicted, Mr. Ding passed the examination.

One year in Beijing, I was staying with my childhood friend, Kai-Zhi Feng. I noticed that he always carried himself in a humble way with a kind and accommodating appearance. He was not a bit arrogant, which was an immense change from his childhood ways. Kai-Zhi had a friend named Ji-Yan Li who was straightforward and honest. Ji-Yan often scolded him for his mistakes, but Kai-Zhi always accepted the accusations calmly without talking back.

This refers to the year when Mr. Liao-Fan was in the capital city with a friend named Kai-Zhi Feng. Mr. Liao-Fan had noticed that Mr. Feng had changed greatly since his younger years. After only a few years, he had become a completely different person. Mr. Li was a good friend of Mr. Feng. When he saw any faults in Mr. Feng, he would immediately criticize him right there and then. It did not matter to Mr. Feng whether or not Mr. Li was right in correcting him. He would accept all criticism from others. There is a saying "If we were at fault we need to correct it. If we were not, we need to correct mistakes if we have made any and guard against them if we have not". We do not resent others, if they wronged us for a non-existent fault. It is always good to be admonished. Actually, only those who reproach us genuinely care and look after us. We would reproach our children if they made mistakes. Why would we not admonish those of neighbors? Therefore, although it may be an unjust accusation, still it rose out of a heart of loving-kindness. Thus, we need to accept criticism willingly, to be grateful for the teaching.

I told him, "Just as there are signs that warn of coming good fortune or misfortune, we can see that prosperity or disaster comes to those who have cultivated the cause for it. Heaven will help those whose hearts are humble. You, my friend, will definitely pass the imperial examination this year!" Later, he indeed passed the examination.

Mr. Liao-Fan told him that good fortune and misfortune can be predicted. Mr. Liao-Fan had learned well. He had mastered the art of prediction from Mr. Kong. But knowing how to predict a person's fortune or misfortune is still secondary. When we end our erroneous ways and accumulate merits and virtues, we rewrite our own destiny. Thus, Mr. Feng passed the examination that year as Mr. Liao-Fan had predicted.

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

Ming-Wu Qian.

Yu-Feng brought his essays to this man. (He had no idea that) Mr. Qian would pick up his calligraphy brush and blot out his entire essay. Not only was Yu-Feng not angry, he sincerely accepted all of Mr. Qian's corrections and immediately made the recommended changes. The following year, Yu-Feng passed the imperial examination.

When Zhou's father was working as an official in Jiashan County, he greatly admired a scholar named Ming-Wu Qian. After Yu-Feng took his own work to Mr. Qian to ask for advice, Mr. Qian would make substantial changes to his essays. Usually, when this happens to us, we feel terrible or become offended. Even if our work was not that good, we would still feel that it did not deserve so many corrections. Surprisingly, not only was Yu-Feng not angry but he was extremely grateful and modest for he sincerely wanted to learn from Mr. Qian. Because of his sincerity, humility, respect and diligence, he made significant improvement and passed the examination the following year.

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

It was in that year, when he went to have an audience with the emperor that Mr. Liao-Fan met Mr. Jian-Suo Xia. He was stunned by how humble and respectful Mr. Xia was towards others. The important message in this account is that before heaven gives us good fortune, it first gives us wisdom. If we do not have wisdom, then regardless of our cultivation, we will be unable to accumulate good fortune. There are real and false good fortunes as well as half and full, that we do not know about. If we do not understand this, we will commit serious offenses, all the while believing that our efforts are commendable and meritorious. The most important point is to learn and understand what the field of merit is so that we will know how to properly accumulate good fortune. Once we uncover our wisdom, we will naturally restrain ourselves, as we become calm and dignified, kind and modest, respectful and gentle. By possessing these characteristics, Mr. Xia passed the examination.

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

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

The Taoist explained that he had heard that good writing only comes from a peaceful and harmonious mind. With Wei-Yan's bad temper and arrogance, how could he possibly write a good essay? Fortunately, as a scholar, Wei-Yan recognized the logic in this and realized that the Taoist was right. Thus, he had no choice but to concede. After realizing his faults, he asked the old Taoist for advice. From this, we can see that Wei-Yan was able to change once he realized that he was at fault. This is a true learning, true practice.

The Taoist said that whether or not one passes depends on destiny. If someone is not destined to pass, then no matter how good the paper is, he or she will still fail.

This is truly understanding that destiny, that the Law of Cause and Effect is perfectly accurate. Passing or not passing the examination had little to do with the quality of the paper but with destiny. It is the same with fame and prestige. Whether we become wealthy or not has nothing at all to do with how we plan and manage our lives. The question is whether our destiny holds fame and prestige. When someone is destined

to be wealthy, it does not matter whether or not they are knowledgeable. They do not have to know how to obtain wealth. They just receive the amount of money they were supposed to. If we are not destined to become wealthy, then regardless of how much we plot and scheme, we will fail.

Today, people do not know or believe in destiny. They think that they can commit all kinds of offenses and still obtain good results, good fortune. Where is the logic in that! Why is it that in ancient times, most people would see the results from their offenses quickly, while today, we do not seem to suffer from them. Because too many people are committing too many offenses. There are too many for people to receive their retribution one by one. The debts will be collected at one time. Our education, abilities, good fortune, long lives, a peaceful death, everything depends on destiny. Creating destiny is the most intelligent and wisest thing we can do. Otherwise, if we fail to achieve this and seek what we were not meant to have, then all our time and efforts will have been wasted. This would truly be truly sad!

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

If he wanted to change his destiny, he had to do just as Master Yun-Gu had taught him. Mr. Liao-Fan knew that he alone could change his destiny. It is a constant that can be completely extrapolated from mathematical calculations. If we break the habit of committing offenses to cultivate good deeds, to accumulate merits, then we create the variables to rewrite our destinies. But, if we do not correct our erroneous ways, then we will remain bound by our destiny throughout our lives.

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

Wei-Yan said that he was a poor man. What could he do to accumulate merits? The Taoist replied that money was not necessary. More often than not, those who are poor are able to accumulate great merits while the wealthy may not necessarily do so. The Taoist then used Wei-Yan's behavior as an example, saying that his behavior just then had been very arrogant. If he could only be a bit more modest then he would be virtuous and good. To do so does not cost anything. When he did not pass an examination, he should reflect and reform within. How could he blame the examination official? It is obvious that good or bad, fortune or misfortune, all lies in an instant of thought.

Wei-Yan listened to the Taoist monk and from then on suppressed his arrogant ways. Everyday, he put forth additional effort to do more good deeds and accumulate more merits.

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

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

Dear fellow readers, if you believe in these matters, you are fortunate. The spirits of heaven and earth are closely linked with our world in our every gesture, word and smile. This is the truth and not superstition. When Mr. Jing-Zhou Zhu was still alive and I was a Buddhist novice, he told me many stories that he had experienced first hand. No one dies by accident, not even in a war. Life or death is destined. How we will die

is recorded in the underworld. No one dies unjustly. Although we live in a high-tech environment and know much of science, we cannot escape the control of the king of the underworld when that is our destiny. This is the truth. It is time for us to be awakened. We would do well to believe what the sages have taught us.

Humility and Modesty are the Foundation for

Good Fortune

From the previous examples, we know that spirits and gods are three feet above our heads. To be able to obtain good fortune and to prevent misfortune depends on ourselves. As long as we have good intentions, refrain from wrongdoings, do not offend the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, are tolerant and not arrogant, then the beings and spirits of heaven and earth will constantly have compassion for us. Only then will we have a foundation for future prosperity.

There are beings and spirits of heaven and earth who are watching us at all times. We alone are responsible for every good or bad deed we perform, for every good or bad result that happens to us. Thus, we need to be awakened in every thought. Buddha Shakyamuni taught us to be awakened instead of deluded, proper instead of deviated, pure instead of polluted. He also taught us to sever all attachments and to practice giving. We need to be extremely careful in our every thought, word and deed and to accord with the teachings and codes of behavior. Practicing Buddhism is to set a good example for all sentient beings. To perfectly have a kind heart, to do kind deeds, say kind words and be a decent person is to be a Buddha, a Bodhisattva.

Since we choose to practice the Pure Land method, we need to incorporate the teachings from the Infinite Life Sutra into our thinking, viewpoints and behavior. Then, there truly will be no difference between Buddha Amitabha and us. This is practicing the true teaching of the Buddhas. We mold ourselves by upholding within, according with the mind, vow, understanding and conduct of Buddha Amitabha. Liao-Fan's Four Lessons can be used as an invaluable aid in our learning. The Infinite Life Sutra is our main course of study. When we are abiding by the precepts and practicing Buddha Name Chanting, we are practicing both the primary and supporting learnings. This will assure us of being born into the Pure Land, to never again regress until we become Buddhas. It is to wholeheartedly be a Buddha, not to settle for being a Sound-hearer.

In the past, Zen practitioners used the expression "go drink tea". Today, I teach "go become a Buddha". We really can become one. This is the truth. True believers will be guarded and protected.

Those who are filled with conceit are doubtless not destined to be great. Even if they do prosper, they will not be able to enjoy their good fortune for long.

Look around and see all the wealthy people who live in the east and in the west. Many of them are not genuinely happy. They really do not know how to use their wealth. I have heard of some wealthy people who live in hiding so that they will feel safer. There is no joy in possessing such wealth, there is only suffering. A human being should live a truly happy life. That is true prosperity and happiness.

Intelligent people would definitely not make themselves small and narrow-minded and refuse the good fortune they are entitled to. Besides, those who are humble always increase their opportunities to learn. In this way, the kind deeds that humble people can accomplish are boundless! For those who wish to cultivate and improve upon their virtues, they especially cannot do without the virtue of humility.

It is essential for us to learn modesty for it is the key to cultivating and improving our virtue. We need to sincerely learn that others are better than we, that they excel in what they do. Even if others cannot see how we really are, if we are only pretending and are conceited, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the beings and spirits of heaven and earth already see us with extreme clarity. Thus, modesty must come from deep within us. It must be without the slightest pretension. We are no better than other people. If others accumulate merits and I do not, then they are above me. Others who commit offenses, when I do not dare to are also above me. Only by doing so are we completely modest. This is putting into practice the teaching of humility in the fifty-three visits of Sudhana in the Flower Adornment Sutra. I am the only student. All others are my benevolent teachers whom I can learn from. Sudhana learned about humility from the fifty-three visits and in the end, he perfectly attained Buddhahood.

The ancients said that, "Those who have their hearts set on attaining success and fame, will surely attain success and fame. Those who have their hearts set on attaining wealth and position, will surely attain wealth and position." A person who has great and far-reaching goals is like a tree with roots. A person who has set down great and far reaching goals must be humble in every thought and try to relieve other's burdens even if the occurrence is as insignificant as a speck of dust.

If we can reach this level of humility, we will naturally touch the hearts of heaven and earth. Furthermore, I am the creator of my own prosperity. Look at the applicants who sought fame and wealth. In the beginning, they were not sincere, it was only a passing notion. When they wanted something, they sought it. When their interest waned, they stopped seeking it. Mencius once said (to Emperor Xuan of Qi), "If you can expand from the heart, which seeks personal happiness, to that of sharing happiness with all your subjects and make them just as happy as you are, then surely the nation is bound to prosper!" This is also true for myself in seeking to pass the imperial examination. (I and I alone can seek and thus change my destiny.)

It is said that once we set our goals, we must work towards accomplishing them. If we do so, then naturally, our humility will touch the heart of heaven and earth and we will attain what we seek. Mr. Liao-Fan used a quote from Mencius for his conclusion. When we are enjoying our happiness, why not share it with others? Enjoying happiness with others is genuine and authentic happiness. Good fortune is to extend our happiness to the lives of others. For example, many people today are caught up in the drive to obtain wealth. The governments of the world would do well to realize this and join with people to create wealth, prosperity and happiness so that all can enjoy it together. "To like what people like, to dislike what people dislike". In so doing, we will be conforming to the heart all others. We should use wisdom to accumulate merits to create wealth to help those who have none. If we only accumulate wealth for ourselves to enjoy then trouble lies ahead. This is a momentous and worthwhile endeavor and is worthy of our sincerest efforts.

Web link to the article: <http://www.amtb.cn/e-bud/chinese/chinese.htm>

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