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## Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

### THE THIRD LESSON:

#### THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

A Family that Accumulates Kind Deeds is Sure to Have Abundant Prosperity

Ten True Accounts of Virtuous People

I Ching, the Book of Changes explains that, “Families who perform good deeds will accumulate prosperity which can outlast many generations”. Let me give an example. Once there was a family by the name of Yan. Before they agreed to give their daughter in marriage to the man who later became Confucius’ father, they looked into the past deeds of the family. After finding the family to be one that practiced kindness and accumulated virtues, the Yan family felt assured that their daughter would be marrying into a family that would be prosperous with outstanding descendants.

I Ching, the Book of Changes is used as the introduction for the principle in this lesson. A family that accumulates good deeds is bound to have prosperity to spare. Even if we could not enjoy all the good fortune during this lifetime, we would have enough left over for our descendants to enjoy for generations. There is profound meaning within this.

People in the past were very different from those of today. Since ancient times in China, the decision of the parents and the advice of the matchmakers have always determined a union of marriage. When we compare freedom of love in today’s society with the traditional ways, the latter has its advantages. Parents who were well-educated and high in moral standards undoubtedly chose the best and most promising spouse for their children. On the other hand, the disadvantage is that parents, who had no education and did not know better, often sold their daughter out for a good price. Therefore, children were unwillingly forced together as they followed their parents’ wishes and were unhappy for the rest of their lives. This is an obvious disadvantage but we should not let this overshadow the advantages.

Liang-Ge Shu was Confucius’ father. The maiden name of Confucius’ mother was Yan. The “Yan family” spoken of here is Confucius’ maternal grandfather who married his daughter to Confucius’ father, which proved that careful thinking went into this match. He knew that the family had accumulated virtues and practiced kind deeds for several generations. This proves that “by the decision of the parents and the advice of the matchmaker”, many happy families have been joined since ancient times.

In ancient times, all those who held power, whether it was an emperor who ruled an empire or a mayor who ruled a city or town were to faithfully follow three guidelines. They were to “act as leader, parent and teacher”. First, it was necessary to act as the leader of the governed area. To act as the parent meant to be the parent of the citizens in the area that he was responsible for. He was supposed to behave towards the people as if they were his relatives in terms of protecting them, caring for them, nurturing them. To act as the teacher meant that he should be a role model for them and teach them what they did not understand. Consequently, the responsibilities of acting as the leader, the parent and the teacher all fell upon the shoulders of the ruler. If he could fulfill these responsibilities, then he had performed infinite goodness. Unfortunately, these three guidelines do not exist in today’s democratic system.

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

Confucius highly praised Emperor Shun. In ancient Chinese history, Shun was the first person recorded in history for his greatness in filial piety. He saw only his own faults, not those of others. In Buddhism, he was a prime example of a practitioner. The Platform Sutra says that, “A true practitioner does not see the faults of others”. Shun accomplished just this. As history proved, the virtues he had accumulated guaranteed his descendants prosperity. As they continued his practice of honoring ancestors, these descendants continued to accumulate goodness and virtues. Even the ancestors of others benefited as Shun's practices were gradually adopted by innumerable generations of Chinese.

The examples of the people who had performed kind deeds are all supported by historical fact. All of the people and events, which Mr. Liao-Fan used as examples, were from his own time, the Ming Dynasty. All of the events that happened were only a few decades apart and were familiar to everyone of his time. He used these examples to encourage people to practice good deeds and accumulate goodness because these would result in good rewards.

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

When I was young, I lived in Jianou for six years and often went with schoolmates to play in what had formerly been Rong Yang's house. It was of an ancient style filled with many antiques. There were two stone lions on either side of the front door. Lanterns were also hung in front of the door, similar to those outside of a way place.

At the time of this account, when there was too much rain, the rivers would overflow and cause serious flooding, destroying houses and washing away belongings. Other boaters took advantage of the situation by collecting the victims' belongings in order to make a small fortune. Only Rong Yang's grandfather and great grandfather were the exceptions as they were concerned with rescuing those who were drowning and took no interest in any of the passing possessions. The other boaters all laughed and thought they were very foolish in passing up such a great opportunity to become rich and instead chose to save lives. It was only with the birth of Rong Yang's father that the family's living conditions improved.

Consider how much money they could have made rowing people across the river. Sometimes, the passengers did not have had money to pay the fare, but they would still have to be transported across the river. Therefore, the fee was given at will and depended on how much the passenger was able to pay. A small container was placed on one side of the boat and the passengers would put in whatever amount they wished. There was no set rate. This was the accepted practice in Fujian during that time. Students did not even need to pay. With good causes, there will be good rewards.

One day a heavenly person manifested as a Taoist monk came to the Yang family. He told them that their ancestors had accumulated much hidden merit. Consequently, their descendants would enjoy wealth and prominence. He said that there was a special place where they could build their ancestral tomb. So, they followed the Taoist's suggestion. Today it is called the White Hare Grave.

Feng-shui, which is an early science of placing buildings in a way that will take maximum advantage of the natural chi or energy of the landscape has its factual basis. However, we need to have the good fortune to receive good Feng-shui. Good or bad, it depends largely on our good fortune, virtues and conditions. It has a natural course. If a knowledgeable person shows us a good Feng-shui spot, this will only enable us to receive what we are supposed to have sooner rather than later. If we do not deserve good Feng-shui, then not only will we not benefit from it, it will actually bring us misfortune. This is because we do not have the good fortune to enjoy it. Therefore, do not be too happy seeing a good thing coming. Think first whether we will be able to bear it.

After reading Liao-Fan's Four Lessons, we will realize that everything that happens does so for a reason. Indeed, for an ordinary person "one sip, one bite all is predestined". If we do not acknowledge this fact and do not go about reforming our faults and practicing good deeds, then there will be no variable in our life; it will always remain a constant. Only when we truly understand the way to accumulate kindness and reform faults will we have changing factors and be able to truly change our lives and create our destiny. In our lifetime, we have seen many happenings that have been totally proven by Buddhist and Confucian principles.

Shortly after, Rong Yang was born. He passed the imperial examination when he was only twenty years old and later received the imperial appointment of Master. The Emperor even bestowed his grandfather and great grandfather with the same imperial honors. Today, his many virtuous and prosperous descendants are still very prominent.

In ancient China, males were initiated into adulthood at the age of twenty. We can see here how young Rong Yang was when he passed the highest imperial examination, the Jin-Shi level and attained the highest academic degree at that time. It is equivalent to earning a doctorate degree today. His appointment was extremely high, similar to today's National Affairs Advisor. In other words, he was an advisor to the Emperor, obviously a very prestigious position. Later, he received the rank of Imperial Teacher.

The Emperor also conferred the same honors on his grandfather and great grandfather. In ancient times, it was a great honor to the family's ancestors if an individual became an imperial official. Although Rong Yang's father, grandfather and great grandfather were only common citizens, due to Rong Yang's high position, the Emperor bestowed upon his ancestors the same honors although they had already passed away. This was the way to honor ancestors during ancient times in China.

Today, we encourage and reward good deeds. Governments praise and cite good people and their accomplishments. Frankly speaking, the methods used in citing good deeds were a lot more effective in ancient times and had a deeper educational meaning. Because the descendants of a particular family had contributed to the country, it could bestow honor on the individual as well as on his ancestors. Today, the praise or honor ends with the individual and does not extend to his ancestors; whereas, in ancient times, the Emperor could bestow the same honor on the three previous generations.

We may not see any reason in bestowing an honor upon a person who died so many years ago. What was the point? Actually, there is a very good one for there is a valuable lesson to be learned from this. It can help us to realize that our achievements are most likely based upon the good deeds and merits that were accumulated by our ancestors. We have been rewarded with the good fortunes that stemmed from them. Realizing this, why would there be any reason not to practice good deeds? If this situation arose when the ancestors were in the Six Realms then they could still obtain an honor that was bestowed by the Emperor, regardless of which realm they were in. If they were in the hungry ghost realm, then all the kings of ghosts would respect them. Being great virtuous persons, they would gain the respect of heavenly beings and spirits. This is why it is such a valuable lesson. It can provide a wonderful incentive, which can encourage people to practice acts of kindness. Therefore, the true merits and virtues from this lesson are inconceivable.

Mr. Liao-Fan wrote how Rong Yang's descendants were still very prominent in his time. This happened because so many generations had accumulated goodness, had built a solid foundation. They held official positions for generations thus these descendants also had virtue and remained very prestigious and prosperous.

Zi-Cheng Yang, from the county of Yin in Zhejiang province, is another example. Zi-Cheng worked as a member of the staff of the county courthouse. He was kind and humane, fair and law-abiding.

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

Mr. Zi-Cheng Yang had a job in the county courthouse, which is similar to today's section chief. It was not a very high-ranking position. He had a kind and generous heart and he was very honest, impartial and law-abiding. At the time of this incident, the county magistrate also handled judicial matters. The magistrate was also the judge. When the criminal refused to tell the truth and even talked back, the magistrate became angry. He beat the criminal severely until his blood fell on the ground. But even then, the magistrate remained infuriated. When Zi-Cheng saw this, he felt compassion for the prisoner, knelt and pleaded with the magistrate to stop. Because of the seriousness of the prisoner's offense, the magistrate was infuriated.

This took a great deal of courage because what he said was a direct accusation against the behavior of the government. If the superior officer had not agreed and blamed him for being so blunt, Zi-Cheng could have gotten himself into serious trouble. However, if the superior officer were virtuous, moral and wise, he would not become angry. He would have realized that his staff was only reminding him to be rational.

Zi-Cheng spoke of those in positions of leadership in the government. He was talking about the provincial and city magistrates. Zi-Cheng said these officials did not follow the "Proper Path", which means that the government did not do a good job in political education. What is the "Path"? It is the Three Guidelines for a ruler to follow, to act as "the leader, the parents and the teacher". When a district government official who presided over the local administrations did not fulfill the duties similar to those of a parent or a teacher, then he did not properly look after his people. When a citizen had committed an offense, it was because the ruler did not teach them well. This is why Zi-Cheng said that when those in a position of leadership in the government do not follow the proper path, fellow citizens would lose their way because they had no guidelines to follow and no one to turn to for advice. If the administration behaved properly, then the people would have set principles to comply with.

During the Han Dynasty (approximately twenty-one hundred years ago) the philosophies of hundreds of scholars were replaced by those of Confucius and Mencius. Confucianism was used as the basis for the educational system. Before this time, during the Spring Autumn period, there were so many philosophies and scholars that it was difficult for the people to know which one was appropriate. In the numerous volumes of books written by hundred of scholars, each one had its distinct point of view and its own theories. Upon a rough examination, each seemed to make sense; however, with so many selections, people were at a loss as to which one to choose. This was why it was imperative to choose one as the model. The teachings of whoever was chosen had to be widely accepted, even by those with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Once this model had been chosen, then the works of other scholars could be used as supplementary references. Thus this established the objectives of the national education.

In China, the main moral standards derived from the philosophies of Confucius and Mencius. This system was used from the Han Dynasty up to the time of the Qing Dynasty. It naturally became the basis of the teachings for the Chinese people. Confucius and Mencius taught us the Five Human Relationships and the Ten Moral Responsibilities. These are the fundamental principles for people to follow, they are the proper path.

The Five Human Relationships concentrate on relations among people. They start with the basic relations between a married couple within their own bedroom. The husband should fulfill the responsibilities pertaining to his role as a husband and the wife should do likewise. Those responsibilities are a form of obligation. Each person must fulfill his or her obligations. A harmonious couple is the basis of all prosperous families. Outside of the bedroom is the larger family. There are the parents over us, children under us and siblings around us. Each holds a different role with different responsibilities, which we need to fulfill. These duties are innate, not assigned by another. Nor are they ideas of a particular person. They are moral principles, the proper path.

Beyond the family are society and the country. At the top is the leader of the country. Below the leader are the government officials. On the same level with us are our friends. The Five human Relationships refer to husband and wife, parent and child, siblings, friends, and political leaders and the public. To expand into a broader view, everyone in this world is like a sibling to one another. Therefore, the five relationships among people are the unification of a country. In this way, the entire country is like a big family. This is the proper path.

In the minds of the ancient sages and virtuous people, government officials would be considered as great people and so they were addressed as such. They had the responsibility to educate their people, nurture and lead them in proper thoughts and behavior by establishing moral guidelines. As long as people followed these guidelines, there would be no wrongdoing. In addition to these guidelines, they were to teach their people proper moral principles (such as loyalty, filial piety, humanity, faith, honesty and peace).

The basic educational goal in Confucianism is to “sever material desires, obtain awakening, have a sincere mind and a virtuous heart, discipline ourselves, have a harmonious family, rule a country and foster world peace”. Today, schools do not teach these anymore. Emphasis is now placed on technology rather than humanity. Therefore, our thoughts, viewpoints and behavior have no guiding principles. The latter teach us that when we see the misdeeds of others, we would do well to take a hard look at ourselves and see if we have fulfilled our duties as a government official.

Once we know the motive behind a criminal offense, we should feel compassion for the offender rather than joy at having solved the case. Why should we not feel joy? Because we have yet to fulfil our own responsibilities. And if we should not feel joy, then we certainly should not become angry. Fortunately for Zi-Cheng, in ancient times, in order for a person to hold a government position such as that of a county magistrate, he would have to pass an imperial examination. In other words, he would be well-educated. Therefore, the magistrate immediately realized his error when Zi-Cheng reminded him of it.

It was extremely brave for Zi-Cheng to speak up on behalf of the prisoner. The magistrate immediately recognized this and ceased to be angry. From this example, we could see that Mr. Yang had considerable wisdom, virtue and insight. Thus, it was good for him to accumulate virtue and merits in the court because he could do many good deeds.

Although Zi-Cheng came from a very poor family, he never took any bribes. If the prisoners were short of food, he would always take food from his own home even if it meant going hungry himself. One day, several new prisoners needed feeding. Zi-Cheng’s home was short of food. If he gave them what he had then his family would go hungry. But, if he kept the food

for his family then the prisoners would go hungry. He felt that the prisoners needed the food more than his family did. A deplorable situation. He discussed it with his wife who asked where the prisoners came from. Zi-Cheng answered that they were from Hangzhou. They had to tolerate hunger along the way.

Zi-Cheng's family was very poor. At that time, government officials received only a small salary and a lot of them retired with hardly any savings. If an official retired with a lot of money, it was most likely that he had taken bribes or embezzled money during his office. Where else could the money come from? In ancient times, scholars did not learn how to run a business. If a scholar became a high-ranking official and contributed great services to the country, then he would in turn receive rewards in the form of farmlands and houses. So, it was possible to become wealthy in this way. However, if he held just an average position, then his salary would be quite meager. Zi-Cheng only held a very low rank in the county government.

Regardless of this, he refused any gifts that were offered to him. Sometimes relatives of the prisoners would offer him bribes in exchange for a lighter sentence or better care in the prison. It was inevitable that he would receive such offers. However, he never accepted any of them and always acted justly and fairly in all circumstances. It was difficult to be so honest in such a tempting environment. Also, at this time the amount of food provided for the prisoners was meager. Often when the prisoners were moved over a long distance, they went without food. Zi-Cheng always did his best to try to help them.

It is quite a distance from Hangzhou to Ningpo. The prisoners had to walk with shackles so the travelling time was considerably slower than usual. At the maximum, they could cover maybe fifty or sixty kilometers a day. This means that they would have to spend several days on the road. Zi-Cheng felt great compassion for these prisoners who went without food for all those days. If he gave his small amount of rice to the prisoners, his family would go hungry. If he gave the rice to his family, the prisoners would go hungry. So, after discussing the situation with his wife, they came to a solution. They would take what little rice they had, make a pot of rice porridge and share half of it with the prisoners.

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

The two sons received the good fortune, which was accumulated by their parents. The government office they worked in would be equivalent to today's Ministry of the Interior. There were only six ministries at that time. Today, there are over a dozen in Taiwan. Therefore, the positions held in ancient times would be higher and entailed greater responsibilities than a similar position today. Zi-Cheng's two sons were both in what was then called the Department of Civil Personnel. Their rank would be similar to a vice-minister. Usually, there was one minister and two Vice-Ministers. One handled administrative matters and the other took care of general matters.

The eldest grandson was a vice-minister in the Ministry of Justice. The second eldest grandson was on the administrative staff, which was one rank lower than the Governor. He supervised each county's magistrate and oversaw approximately eight to twelve counties. Both grandsons were well known for doing a good job. A current descendant, Mr. Chu-Ting Yang also held a government position and was known for his honesty and fairness. This proves that the goodness accumulated by this couple benefited the following generations.

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