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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE THIRD LESSON:

THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

There was another person, Feng-Zhu Xu, who lived in Jiangsu province. His father was very wealthy. Whenever there was a famine, his father would be the first to waive the rent on the rice fields, hoping that other wealthy people would follow suit. He also donated grain from his storehouses to the poor.

Feng-Zhu was his courtesy name; his formal name was Shih. At that time, wealthy people owned all of the land, which they rented to farmers. When there was a disaster or a bad harvest, Feng-Zhu's father would waive the rent to help the farmers hoping that other wealthy landowners would follow suit. Most of the farmers would be able to survive a bad year as long as they did not have to pay the rent. This was a great act of goodness. Not only did he waive the rent, but also he shared his stored grain with the poor.

One night, he heard ghosts outside his home, "No kidding! A county scholar in the Xu family is going to pass the provincial imperial examination!" This went on for several nights and indeed, that year, his son Feng-Zhu passed the examination. After that, Feng-Zhu's father became even more diligent in accumulating good deeds. He spent money to repair roads and bridges and provided food for monks as well as the poor. He would do anything he could to help others. Sometime later, he heard the ghosts again, "No kidding! The provincial scholar from the Xu family is going to hold a high position in the government." Eventually, Feng-Zhu became the governor for Zhejiang Province.

People who live in the countryside hear many ghost stories. Sometimes ghosts can be seen or heard clearly. Outside the house of the Xu family, they sang that a family member was going to pass the provincial imperial examination. Indeed, his son Feng-Zhu passed the examination. Good fortune is the reward for good deeds. Those who are aware of this will try even harder to accumulate goodness. The ghosts sang that Feng-Zhu would receive a high position in the government. He first became an imperial judge in the Supreme Court. Later, he became governor of Zhejiang Province. All of this resulted from his father sincerely helping the poor.

Another example is Kang-Xi Tu who lived in Jiaying, Zhejiang Province. Mr. Tu used to work in the courthouse and would spend nights in the prison cells, talking with the inmates. Instead of making a name for himself, he would write a secret report to the Minister of Justice, telling him why a prisoner was innocent. The Minister would then question the prisoner accordingly and clear the case. Through Mr. Tu's effort, more than ten innocent people were released and all of them were extremely grateful to the judge praising the Minister of Justice for his wise judgement.

Helping a prisoner who had been wrongly accused was most admirable. No matter how careful one might be when examining a case, there was always the possibility of a wrong judgement. Even when an error has not been made intentionally, it is still a misdeed. From this, we can see how difficult it is to be a good lawyer or judge.

What Mr. Tu did was very rare. He would spend nights with the prisoners so that he could learn everything about each case to clear up any wrong accusations. When the prisoners were being questioned in the courtroom, sometimes they would become extremely frightened and would not be able to retell the true account of the circumstances of the case. Trials usually began at the break of dawn so that the courtroom was still very dark. It was quite similar to being held for judgement in hell. The whole atmosphere was frightening. Therefore, it was like taking the prisoner to meet the king of the underworld, which is quite different from trials today.

Mr. Tu worked in the judiciary department, which is similar to today's Supreme Court. His position was similar to that of section chief. It was not a high rank. When he stayed with the inmates to find out the truth behind each case, he did not take the credit himself. Instead, he wrote out the details of the case and gave this to the Minister of Justice so that all the credit went to his superior officer. His superior was, of course, very pleased with this for when he tried the cases at dawn, he already knew the truth of what had happened. After detailed questioning, he acquitted over a dozen innocent men. This was talked about throughout the imperial city and everyone praised the minister for bringing true justice to the system.

Soon after, Mr. Tu also made a report to the Imperial Judge saying, "If even in the Imperial City so many innocent people are imprisoned, there must be many more throughout the country. I recommend that the Imperial government send investigators to check the prisons for innocent people every five years. The sentences can be reduced or canceled in order to prevent the innocent from remaining in prison." The minister, his superior, took his request to the Emperor, who agreed to Mr. Tu's suggestion. Mr. Tu was chosen as one of the special agents in charge of reducing sentences for those who were found innocent.

The imperial city, which was where the Emperor resided, was considered the best area. Circumstances there should have been a model for the country. Therefore, the capital city was called "capital master". Master means to be a model for all the other cities. Mr. Tu understood that if the capital city had unjustly sentenced prisoners, then there must be many more such cases outside the city. So, he suggested that there should be a thorough investigation at least once every five years. An investigator appointed by the Emperor would re-open all of the questionable cases and free any innocent prisoners. The Imperial Judge carried this recommendation to the Emperor who willingly agreed. The Imperial Judge was very fond of Mr. Tu and knew him to be an honest, just and humane individual. After this investigation system was established, a new position became open, Agent in Charge of Reducing Sentences. The Court appointed Mr. Tu as one of the agents who were assigned a number of districts to investigate.

One night, he dreamt that a heavenly being came to him and said, "You were not supposed to deserve a son in this life, but this act of reducing prison sentences for innocent people accords with the wishes of the heavens. You will be bestowed with three sons and they will all attain high positions." After that, his wife gave birth to three sons who all became prominent men in society.

Similar to Mr. Liao-Fan, Mr. Tu was not destined to have sons. Mr. Liao-Fan sought a son and received one. Mr. Yu received a son due to his accumulation of good deeds.

Another example of attaining good outcomes from practicing kindness is Ping Bao who lived in Jiaying. Ping was the youngest of the seven sons of the magistrate of Chizhou, Anhui Province. He married into the Yuan family in Pinghu County, Zhejiang Province, and was a good friend of my father. Ping Bao was very knowledgeable and talented, but he was never able to pass the examinations. He spent his time studying Buddhism and Taoism.

Once, while traveling to Lake Mao, he came to a village and saw a way place in desperate need of repairs. The statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva was wet from the rain that leaked through the roof. Ping took out all his money and gave it to the Abbot of the temple, asking him to please use it to restore the way place. The Abbot replied "It will be a very big project, I am afraid this amount is not enough to complete your wish." Ping Bao then took out all his luxurious belongings and handed them to the Abbot. His servant tried to persuade him to keep his best outfit, but he refused, saying, "It does not matter to me. As long as the statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva remains undamaged, I do not care if I have to go without clothes."

This was an act of sincerity, donating money to restore way places. Ping's father was the head of the local government. Ping had failed in several attempts to pass the imperial examinations. Therefore, he had given up the hope of a government career. The finances of his family were adequate, so he was able to spend his time studying Buddhism and Taoism. One time, he happened upon a Buddhist way place and saw that the statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva was wet from a leak in the roof. It was obvious that the way place was in desperate need of repair. When he saw this situation, his immediate thought was to help repair it. So he opened his purse and took out sixteen ounces of silver, all the money he had and gave it to the Abbot to repair the damage. Doing this was an act of pure sincerity.

This was quite a large amount of money at that time and yet the Abbot told him that it was not enough. When Ping heard this, he took out the four bolts of cloth that he was carrying with him along with some fine clothing from his luggage to donate to the Abbot so that he could trade them for silver. Some of the clothing was new, made out of very good material and very expensive. Ping's servant advised him to keep it for himself. Ping answered that if it would help to fix the way place and protect the statue of Great Compassion Bodhisattva he would donate all of his clothing.

The abbot, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed, "To give up money and clothing is not a difficult deed to accomplish, but your deep sincerity is truly rare and precious to encounter". After the way place was repaired, Ping Bao asked his father to visit the temple and together they spent the night there. That night the Dharma Protector of the way place, Qie-Lan, came in his dream to thank him and said, "Since you have accumulated these merits and virtues, your children and descendants will enjoy having imperial appointments for generations to come." Later, his son and grandson both passed high examinations and were appointed as imperial officials.

It was not hard for a wealthy individual to donate money in aid of others, but his sincerity in thinking only of the statue and not of himself was very rare. He was the sole benefactor in repairing the way place, so they issued an invitation for him to return and view the restoration. He took his father with him and that night, he dreamt of the Dharma protector Qie-Lan, who thanked and told him of his good fortune, which he deserved due to his kindness in repairing the way place. Like the other examples, the good fortune was also rewarded to his descendants. So good results come from good causes and bad results come from bad causes.

Li Zhi from Jiashan County, in Zhejiang Province is another example. His father used to be a clerk in the provincial courthouse. Once, Li's father learned of an innocent man who was given the death penalty and tried to save his life. When the prisoner heard about this, he told his wife, "I am so indebted to this man who has spoken on my behalf but I have no way of showing my gratitude. Will you invite him to our house and offer yourself to him? Perhaps this will please him and increase my chances to live."

Li Zhi's father, knowing of the prisoner's innocence, took pity on him and pleaded with his superior to spare the inmate's life. If he could save the prisoner, he would also save the entire family. The prisoner knew of the clerk's intent so when his wife came to visit him in prison, he told her to try to repay the favor by giving herself to the clerk. He felt that by so doing, he would have a greater chance for a reduction of his sentence.

The wife cried as she listened to his request. However, it was the only way she could help her husband at this critical time. Therefore, the next day when the clerk came to visit, she offered him wine and told him of her husband's wishes. The clerk refused, but continued to do all he could to clear the case. When at last the prisoner was released, he and his wife both went to the clerk's house to thank him. The man said, "One with such virtue as yours is truly rare these days, how can I show my gratitude? You do not have a son. Please allow me to offer my daughter in marriage to you, this is the only way I can repay you. Please accept."

Li Zhi's father refused the prisoner's offer of his wife because he did not wish any reward for his action. He had acted out of a sense of morality and justice, feeling that it was part of his job. Li Zhi's father was not wealthy. His only source of income came from the small salary paid by the government. He had been married for many years, but had no sons. So, the prisoner offered his daughter to be a second wife to the clerk hoping that she would be able to bear him a son and continue the family name. This was an accepted custom at that time.

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

Li Zhi's final appointment was similar to present day First Secretary in the Central Research Institute. It was a very prominent position. This was the reward for saving an innocent life. In this lesson, Mr. Liao-Fan told of ten examples. They illustrate how good fortune is the result of accumulating goodness. These numerous examples serve to prove that the good fortune that the families experienced was not mere coincidence. The dates of these events all happened quite close to Mr. Liao-Fan's time. Some of the cases were those that Mr. Liao-Fan knew of personally or which had been related to his family. All this shows that goodness will result in good fortune, while meanness will result in bad fortune.

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