



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

25-27 Winter Street, Brockton MA. 02302 歡迎流通, 功德無量

Tel & Fax: Brockton (508)580 – 4349 (508)646-8168

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April 30, 2014

## Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

### THE THIRD LESSON:

### THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

What Is Goodness?

To Recognize Goodness

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

Sincerity is the most important factor in practicing goodness. It is to do so without asking for anything in return. This is true goodness. However, good acts based on certain conditions would not be considered true goodness but as wrongdoing. For instance, some people, especially Buddhists, do not understand that Buddhism teaches us to break through and eliminate wandering thoughts and attachments. When they go to a way place to pay their respects to the Bodhisattvas, they do so to ask for something. If there is nothing that they want, they do not go. They burn incense in front of the Bodhisattvas and pray for assistance and guidance. If the Bodhisattvas would just grant what they want, then they vow that they will return the favor with special offerings. This is trying to strike up a bargain! Not only are they not sincere, but they view the Bodhisattvas as beings who are bribable. This is a serious offense!

Li Zhi's father was a virtuous man. The prisoner's offering of his wife as a reward inadvertently reduced him to being immoral. Li Zhi's father was not offended and continued to help the prisoner. This was an act of generosity. Therefore, it was only right that he received such good fortune. The previous ten accounts are examples of good actions. Now we will look at the concepts that they illustrate. We would do well not to be ignorant of principles and proper ways to accumulate goodness. First, we will talk about the difference between real goodness and false goodness.

What is "real goodness and false goodness"? In the Yuan Dynasty, a group of scholars went to visit Master Jung-Feng. One of them asked, "Buddhism often speaks of the karmic reward for good and bad, saying that 'It is like the shadow, following the form wherever it goes.' Then why is it, that there are people who practice good deeds, but their family and descendants are neither prosperous nor successful? On the other hand, there are

bad and wicked people who behave immorally, but their family and descendants do quite well. What has happened to the Law of Cause and Effect? Are there no standards in the Buddha's teachings?"

Master Jung-Feng lived during the Yuan Dynasty (approximately seven hundred years ago). His name should be quite familiar to many of us because he edited the Thrice Yearning Ceremony Book, which we use. This is one practice of the Pure Land method. At that time, some scholars went to visit the Master and asked him some questions. Buddhism and Taoism both teach that the Law of Cause and Effect is immutable, is permanent. But, they said that nowadays, good people did not have good descendants yet those of bad people prospered. So, the scholars posed the question to the Master saying that this contradicted what they saw.

Master Jung-Feng answered, "Ordinary people are blinded by worldly views, they have not cleansed their minds of impurities and cannot see with true perception. Therefore, they look upon true goodness as wrongdoing and mistake wrongdoing as goodness. This is very common nowadays."

Ordinary people only see ordinary things. When our minds are impure due to worldly emotions, we are still bothered by many wandering thoughts and attachments. We do not have the "eyes of wisdom" to discern the truth. This is why people often mistake good for bad and bad for good. This is delusion. Although many people were like this, the Master was very courteous in his speech and only said that these people do exist.

The Master continued, "Furthermore, these people do not blame themselves for failing to understand, but instead, blame their misfortune on the heavens. This is unfair!" The scholars questioned how good and bad could be mistaken for each other.

The Master explained that not only did these people not examine their actions to determine good from bad, but they blamed their misfortune on others, complaining that the heavens were not fair. But the scholars were still confused and asked the Master how people could mistake good for bad and bad for good.

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

Upon the Master's request, the scholars gave their opinions on what was bad and what was good. The Master said that their standards of good and bad were unreliable and did not agree with any of the examples provided by the scholars. With this, everybody asked the Master to explain his standards, since his differed from theirs.

## The Definition of Goodness

Master Jung-Feng said, "To do things with the intention of bringing benefit to others is good. To do things to benefit oneself is bad. If what we do is for the sake of benefiting another, then it does not matter if we yell at or hit

that person, it is still considered good. If our intention is for self-benefit, then regardless of our appearance of respect and courtesy, it is still considered bad.”

This talks of the standard for good and bad in Buddhism. Anything done with the intent to benefit others is considered good, even if a certain amount of corporal punishment is involved. On the other hand, anything done with the intent to benefit only the self is considered bad, no matter how courteous and polite we may be towards others. For example, we may ingratiate ourselves with or fawn on others.

Master Jung-Feng continued, “Therefore, when we practice good deeds with the sole intention of benefiting others, this is considered public benefit. If it is for the public, then it is real goodness. If we only think of ourselves while doing good acts, then that is considered private benefit and that is false goodness.”

This is the true standard for goodness: to benefit others, to provide goodness for every living being. If in the act of doing good, we are still concerned about our own welfare and reward, then the act is no longer sincere or pure. It has become tainted by traces of badness. In addition to "true goodness and false goodness" there is "full goodness and half goodness". To understand full and half goodness, we need to be able to differentiate between "full and pure goodness" as opposed to "half and mixed goodness".

All the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, sages and virtuous people think only of others and not of themselves. This is true and full goodness. We have seen a good example of this in Zhong-Yan Fan. His actions were those of true and perfect goodness and thus he was an excellent role model. He never had any concerns for himself or of his family, but only of the country and how to benefit society to create good fortune. When we read his biography, we can see that not only he himself, but also his descendents practiced and accumulated good deeds. Mr. Fan served as Prime Minister and two of his five sons became Prime Ministers as well. The Emperor appointed another son High Scholar.

When Mr. Fan died, he did not have enough money left for his children to purchase a coffin. Where had all the money gone? He had given it to help others. This was why Master Yin-Guang praised Mr. Fan as having virtuous conduct second only to Confucius. Until the early 1900s, his descendents remained prominent and prosperous for eight hundred years. It was the result of having accumulated an abundance of virtues and goodness.

Today, when we practice good deeds, we do so sparingly, exerting only one or two percent of our effort. And yet we consider ourselves good people. Not only that, we also expect numerous benefits in return for our little bit of goodness. Many people go to temples to burn incense and make offerings. Why? Because they believe this has the most profit in it. A dollar invested for millions in return. So they burn incense and worship the Buddha because they think that by doing so, they will gain good fortune in return. They think that maybe if they donate a dollar today, they will win ten thousand dollars in the lottery tomorrow. This kind of thinking degrades the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas into someone with no character at all.

Therefore, when we see that these apparently sincere people, their families and even descendants suffer from bad fortune, we will know the reason why. They do not intentionally view the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as bad, but inadvertently view them as beings who take bribes. Although it is not obvious, this attitude is still there. This is a major mistake! Sometimes when some people want something from a government official, they offer a bribe.

This is the same as offering money to the Buddha in hopes of receiving what we want. People who accept the bribe are not good people. Consequently, if a Buddha accepted the bribe, would that not make him a bad person as well? That would be a major offense!

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

The "root of the heart" is generated from true sincerity. It is true goodness. What is true goodness and false goodness? We must look into our hearts to see if we are really practicing goodness. When we simply follow others, we are not acting out of sincerity for this is "false goodness". When we wish for nothing in return, it is "true goodness". When we hope for a return, it becomes an act "with a purpose" and thus is false goodness. We would do well to consider this and examine the difference to see if we are doing things correctly. The scholars said greed and excess possessions were bad, but Master Jung-Feng said "Not necessarily". If money and possessions were used to do good deeds, to benefit the public, then this is also considered good, not bad.

Often, businesspeople who are Buddhists have come and told me that they felt they could not abide by one of the Five Fundamental Precepts, which is not to speak vainly or falsely. Consequently, they asked, "When in the course of doing business, our main objective is to convince others to entrust us with their money, how can we do so if we always speak truthfully?" My answer to them was "When you use the profits to solely benefit others, to practice the Bodhisattva Way then it is OK."

Nowadays, when we encourage people to practice good deeds, they may be unwilling to do so. However, if we set out to trick or to lie to them to get them to perform a good deed, they would be perfectly willing to do it. Where does the problem lie? It lies within us. Do we really have the same intentions as the Bodhisattvas? If we resort to using deception (of course, this would be under extreme circumstances) to trick them into handing over the money, but we in turn use it to do good deeds on their behalf, then we are practicing the Bodhisattva Way. But, if we cheat them out of their money with the intent of enjoying ourselves, then it would be a bad deed. Ordinary people do not know how to perform good deeds. They do not know how to practice goodness so we do it for them, we create good fortune on their behalf. This is a good thing. If we see things only from the surface, then sometimes it really is hard to differentiate between what is good and what is bad. It all depends on the heart. The accumulation of great goodness and merit all arise from the heart of sincerity. This is especially true for great Bodhisattvas. Appearing as ordinary people, they do not dwell on the fact that they are Bodhisattvas nor do they dwell on trivial matters, but purely on benefiting all beings. Therefore, their viewpoints are very different from those of ordinary people.

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