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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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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE THIRD LESSON:

THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

What is "honest goodness and crooked goodness"? People nowadays often look upon an extremely conservative and nice person as good and kind.

“Honest” means being virtuous, dignified and just. “Crooked” means being corrupt and dishonest. When we see a “Yes Man” who is very respectful and subservient to others, we think he is a good person. Presently, many people prefer to employ this type of person. Why? Because he or she is compliant and willing to do whatever he or she is told to do. People think this type of person is good and they like to have them around. He is like a “servant/slave” obeying every command, attending to every need with a respectful demeanor.

However, the ancient sages and virtuous people have shown that they preferred those who were aspiring and dignified. As for those who appear to be compliant and careful in their everyday actions, they may be liked by all but, sages often speak of them as “thieves of virtue”. From this, we can see that the viewpoint of ordinary people on good and bad differs greatly from that of the sages and virtuous people.

The great sages and virtuous people do not favor those who appear to be compliant and careful although most people consider these individuals good. They prefer people who have ability although they are stubborn, arrogant and sometimes, even a little rude. Why? These individuals possess particular skills. They may not always agree with us, but are capable of high achievement. Those who are compliant, who are considered nice and kind, sometimes cannot accomplish given tasks because they act according to convention and lack initiative. This is why sages and virtuous people prefer those with courageous and aspiring characters who are not caught up in trivialities.

Although most people may like those who are compliant, sages often call them “thieves of virtue”. They are usually confused about the truth of a matter and cannot tell right from wrong. And this is why they are called “thieves of virtue”. Virtue refers to customs and morality. When people cannot differentiate between right and wrong, then they have broken the moral tradition, like thieves who have broken the law.

Because of this, it is possible that our judgement could be erroneous. Beings and spirits of Heaven and Earth all look upon good and bad from the same viewpoint as do the sages. They do not view things from the same perspective as ordinary people.

We cannot always differentiate between real goodness and false goodness. Why do spirits and gods of Heaven and earth hold the same standards as the sages and virtuous people? Because they all have the same viewpoints and intentions.

Therefore, when we wish to accumulate merits, we must not give way to greed or be affected by the sights and sounds of the world. We need to be aware of our deviated thoughts as soon as they arise and to purify them.

Honest goodness comes from the thought to sincerely help all others. Crooked goodness arises from the thought of flattering others to obtain what we want. Loving others is being honest. Hating others and being jealous is being crooked. Honest goodness is when we are respectful and crooked goodness is when we act without sincerity. These are all to be carefully differentiated.

We must aspire to eliminate all that is bad and practice all that is good. We start from the self. First, we cannot allow ourselves to be affected by worldly phenomena. In other words, we must not be attached to the Five Desires and the Six Sense Objects but be able to let go of them. As long as we cling to them, we will never be rid of our selfishness. The thought of benefiting ourselves is the root of all negative karma. Any good deeds, which are done out of bad intentions will become bad. This is why Master Jung-Feng did not agree with what the scholars categorized as good because good things done with selfish intent would be considered as impure and false. Therefore, we must become less attached to worldly desires. Slowly, one by one, try to eliminate each of them until we are totally unaffected by them. In this way, we will be able to detect the desire as soon as it arises in our mind and immediately act to curb it. Also, we would do well to eradicate the deviant and impure feelings from our hearts. The Infinite Life Sutra explains this as “cleansing our hearts and correcting our past erroneous ways” to attain a pure and bright mind, which is filled with wisdom.

Honest goodness comes from sincerely trying to help others. It takes only one sincere thought to benefit all beings. We help them to understand the true reality, to break through delusion and attain awakening. As soon as they do this, they will naturally learn how to eliminate the bad and practice the good. Therefore, the foremost merit in Buddhism is that it helps people to learn about the true reality of life and the universe. Once they have accomplished this, then they will be free to choose their existence within any one of the Ten Dharma Realms.

The Buddhas will not interfere with our choice nor will they try to change our minds. Buddhas do not teach that becoming a Buddha is the best goal for all beings. It is their hope that eventually we will become Buddhas, but they will not force us to do so. If we prefer to be reincarnated as human beings, then the Buddhas will teach us the principles in becoming good people. If we wish to be born into the Three Bad Realms, then we can just immerse ourselves in greed, anger and ignorance. Then we will smoothly sail into the Three Bad Realms. Buddhas will not try to stop us nor will they try to help us. They only teach people how to break through delusion and attain awakening. This is the supreme benefit. This is honest goodness.

Crooked goodness arises from thoughts of flattering others so that we can obtain what we want, for example, fame and wealth. But, this is not the proper way to achieve fame and fortune. Any good acts performed out of motives such as this would be “crooked”, not “honest”. We should be careful and respectful when interacting with beings, matters and objects. Acting without sincerity is a fault and we would do well to be able to recognize it.

What is "hidden goodness and visible goodness"? When we do something good and people know about it, it is visible goodness. When no one knows about it, it is hidden virtue.

It is very important to be able to understand hidden and visible goodness. Ancient sages and virtuous people all taught us to accumulate hidden virtues. What are hidden virtues? Any good acts or deeds that are known by others are considered “visible”. When others praise us for what we have done that praise is our good fortune. For example, if the government commends our deeds and rewards us with a certificate or a plaque honoring our actions, then that is our good fortune. In other words, we have used up all that good fortune in the form of praise from others.

This is why it is so important that we realize the best way to accumulate goodness is to let our good deeds remain “hidden” and unknown. There is no need to let others know about them, just keep on accumulating, while asking for no rewards. This is how to accumulate goodness. Once people know about our deeds, then the good fortune that comes with it will begin to diminish because people will start to reward us for our actions. If we receive immediate reward for every good deed we do, then there is no accumulation at all. In fact, we might start to accumulate faults without realizing it. The more faults we accumulate, the worse our outcome will be.

Those with hidden virtues will naturally be known by the heavens and will be rewarded. Those who practice visible goodness will be known by people and will enjoy fame. Fame itself is good fortune, but it is forbidden for heaven and earth do not favor fame. We can see that those who have great fame, but lack the virtue supporting it will eventually encounter some kind of overwhelming adversity. A person who truly has not done any wrong but continues to be falsely accused by others will have descendants who will suddenly become prosperous and successful. From this, we can see how important it is to understand the minute differences between hidden and visible goodness.

If we have greed for popularity and fame, they are considered one of the good fortunes. Then, our reward for our good deeds may be popularity and fame. But actually, they are not considered a good return because they can cause envy amongst people as well as amongst beings and spirits of heaven and earth. Even worse, if we falsely take credit for virtuous conduct we do not have, then adversity will surely follow.

On the other hand, if we do not have faults but were wronged or despised by others for bad deeds, which we did not commit, then we are actually accumulating goodness. The more unsatisfied people are, the more jealous they are and the more they slander us, the better it is for us. Why? Because this slander and these obstacles will reduce our negative karma. When we accumulate virtues, it is best to do it quietly with the least amount of people knowing about it. There is no need to seek praise and respect from others. When all of our negative karma has been eliminated, then our accumulation of goodness will become even stronger. Consequently, our good fortune will be greater. This will result in the sudden prosperity of our descendants. When we carefully observe those who attain sudden prominence, we can see that most of their ancestors possessed a great deal of hidden virtues. Once we understand this, we will truly know the value of hidden virtues.

What is apparent and actual goodness? In the Spring-Autumn Period, there was a country named Lu that made a law, which rewarded those who paid the ransom to free their fellow citizens who were servant-slaves. At that time, Confucius had a very rich student named Zi-Gong. Although Zi-Gong paid the ransom to free his people, he did not accept the reward for doing such a deed.

This example addresses the difficulty of differentiating between "apparent and actual goodness". The difficulty arises because ordinary people's standard for goodness is different from that of sages and virtuous people.

How would someone have become a servant-slave in the homes of the nobility? Because they had broken the law and been sent to the homes of various nobles to serve their sentences. However, the government passed a law, which stated that as long as someone was willing to pay their fine, they could be released and regain their freedom. This was a good deed and the government encouraged the wealthy to perform the good deed of paying the fine for the criminals. The intention was to provide the criminals with the opportunity to reform. Therefore, Zi-Gong paid the fines for a servant to be released from the house of a nobleperson, but did not accept the reward offered through the government.

When Confucius heard this, he was very unhappy and scolded him saying, "You acted wrongly in this matter. When sages and virtuous people undertake anything, they strive to improve morality, teaching people to be good and decent. We do not do something just for personal virtues or reputation. In the country of Lu, the poor outnumber the wealthy. By refusing the reward, you lead others to think that accepting the reward money is being greedy. If this happens, no one will pay the ransom to free our people again".

Confucius was displeased with Zi-Gong's action. Why? Because Zi-Gong did not see the situation as clearly as virtuous people did. A virtuous person's perception of right and wrong is sometimes different from that of average persons. His or her goal is to improve social behavior and moral standards. Their teachings are set up for all people, not for any particular individual. Zi-Gong's action, from an individual standpoint, was extraordinary and praiseworthy. However, he went against local customs and disrupted a set pattern. And that was where his fault lay.

At that time in Lu, the poor greatly outnumbered the rich. Therefore, the reward offered by the government was designed to help motivate the average citizens. Because Zi-Gong refused the reward, everyone praised him as a good man. Consequently, anyone who performed a similar good deed would not dare to accept the reward, for to do so could result in others thinking that the deed was done solely for the reward. If this were so, then no one would be willing to pay the money to free the servants anymore. This would ruin the system established by the government. If the purpose was to encourage everyone to perform good deeds, then Zi-Gong should have accepted the reward, not for the benefit of the individual, but for the benefit of the public. This exemplifies how the sages and virtuous people interpreted things differently from average people.

Another student of Confucius, Zi-Lu, once saw a man drowning in the river and rescued him. Later, the man thanked him by giving him a cow as a token of gratitude. Zi-Lu accepted his gift. Confucius was happy when he heard this and said, "In the future, people will be willing and eager to help those who are drowning in deep waters or lakes".

If we look from the eyes of ordinary people, Zi-Gong, who did not accept the reward money, was good. Zi-Lu, who accepted the cow, was not as good. Who would have known that Confucius would praise Zi-Lu and scold Zi-Gong? From this, we can see that those who practice good deeds must not only consider the current outcome but that of the future as well. We would also do well to not only consider our own gain and loss but look to see the impact made on the public.

Zi-Lu was traveling along the road when he saw a man drowning. He immediately jumped into the water to rescue the man. Out of gratitude, the man gave Zi-Lu a cow, which he accepted. Confucius praised Zi-Lu because when others realized that a reward might be given out of gratitude when a life is saved, then it would become a good incentive for people to be braver in helping others in need. These are some examples of Confucius' truthful and honorable teachings. We can learn much from them.

When Confucius praised Zi-Lu instead of Zi-Gong, his viewpoint was diametrically opposed to that of ordinary people. However, he had sound reasons for doing this. When we look at the sages and virtuous people, we will see that their vision is much farther than ours and that their viewpoints are much deeper than the apparent superficial meanings. Ordinary people have very limited vision. We only see the immediate results. We do not realize the long-term effects that our actions may cause. We need to consider matters from the aspect of benefiting society, the country or even the entire world. We should also consider how history will regard events.

When we realize the broad scope involved, our viewpoints will be very different than before and we will understand that Confucius' viewpoint was correct. Therefore, good and bad cannot always be determined by present actions. We need to see whether the long-term effects are positive or negative in order to make a wise judgement.

What we do right now may be good but with the passing years, it may bring harm to others. Therefore, what seems like goodness may actually be bad. What now appears to be bad may actually have positive long-term effects, turning out to have been goodness after all. So, what seems like a bad deed may actually be goodness. There are some examples of what appears to be good but actually is not. Apparent responsibility may be actual irresponsibility, apparent propriety may be actual impropriety, apparent trustworthiness may be actual untrustworthiness, apparent kindness may be actual unkindness. In these instances, we need to differentiate carefully and know how to behave properly.

What we see superficially may appear to be goodness, but actually, it is not. It may be good for a particular individual or it may be good at one particular time. However, it may not be good for society as a whole and it may not be good for future generations. This is why in Buddhism, the determination of good and bad is never based on "current action". What appears to be good throughout history is the real goodness for it is good for generations thereafter. What is good now but is not good for future generations or that which has destined us to be born into the Three Bad Realms or the hells is not true goodness.

Before the First World War, world leaders were discussing peace in an atmosphere of apparent trustworthiness. After the war began it became clear that some had acted with actual untrustworthiness. High technology has seen the development of weapons of mass destruction. The intent, to keep the peace was apparent responsibility. The terrifying reality that countless people now have the means to destroy our world and every living being on it makes it clear that such development may well prove to be the ultimate actual irresponsibility.

In the case of Zi-Lu, who accepted the cow as a reward, his actions may not have seemed to be good at that time; however, since the long-term effects were good, it was good. This is a good example of what is "apparent" and "actual" goodness. What are responsibility and propriety? What are trustworthiness and kindness? There is "apparent" and "actual" goodness in all of these. If we are unable to differentiate between them, then we may have often actually committed great offenses when we thought that we were doing good. If we wish to practice to accumulate good fortune, we must first possess wisdom. Without wisdom, no matter how hard we try, we will not be able to obtain good fortune.

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