



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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June 30, 2014

## Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

### THE THIRD LESSON:

#### THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

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What is "proper goodness and improper goodness"? In the Ming Dynasty, there once was a Prime Minister named Wen-Yi Lu. When he grew old, he retired to his hometown where he was widely loved and highly respected. Once, a drunken villager went to his home and proceeded to insult him. Mr. Lu was not angered by his words but instead, told his servant, "This man is drunk. Let's not argue with him". With this, he closed the door and ignored the onslaught of insults.

A year later, the same man committed a grave crime and was given the death sentence. Upon hearing this, Mr. Lu said with great remorse, "If only I had taken him to the authorities for punishment that day, perhaps a little discipline could have prevented this. At the time, I was only thinking of being kind and unknowingly encouraged an arrogant and malevolent personality. Now he has been given the death penalty". This is an example of doing something bad while having good intentions.

Although Mr. Lu had already retired from office, his virtuous conduct and great merit had earned him respect from virtually everyone. When a drunken dissatisfied man came to his home and verbally abused him, Mr. Lu, who was tolerant and patient told his servant not to argue but to just close the door. He did not take the incident to heart. Later, Mr. Lu heard that the drunkard had committed a serious crime and was sentenced to death. Mr. Lu then felt deep remorse and believed that he had mishandled the situation when the drunkard had insulted him. Had he pressed charges and sent him to jail at that time, then he might have learned to discipline himself a little more and avoided the deadly offense he had committed.

We see many examples of "doing something bad while having good intentions". This is especially true with today's young parents. They unwittingly spoil their children so that when they grow up, they do not respect their parents and may even commit various crimes. Then, too late, the parents realize the serious mistake they have made. Children must be properly taught when they are young. The personality of the child will become the character of the adult. If children are not disciplined when they are young, then it will be too late to do so when they have grown. They would undoubtedly rebel against their parents' every wish and be disgruntled at the slightest disagreement of opinions. When this happens, it is outrageous!

In ancient China, a criminal sentence could be issued under the heading of "Parental rights". This meant that if a parent went to the judge and complained that the child did not fulfil his or her filial duties and he wished the child to be sentenced to death, the judge would immediately do so without even holding a trial. "Parental rights" were given the highest consideration. This was why children were petrified of their parents because if the parents were to file a complaint and wished a particular sentence issued, there was no recourse. If the parent wished the child to go to jail for three years,

then that was exactly what the judge would sentence. Why? "By order of the parents" was indisputable. No trial was necessary because everyone took the side of the parents. After all, what parents did not love their children? If our parents did not love us, then we would not be able to survive in society, we would be discriminated against.

"Parental rights" existed through the 1940's but was abolished soon after. With this kind of a law, no children dared not to fulfill filial duties. They could not even ask for a lawyer because with "parental rights", no defense was allowed. This law helped people practice filial piety and is worthy of reflection.

There is also an example of those who achieved goodness although they had acted from improper intentions. Once, a famine devastated the land and people stole food from others in broad daylight. A rich family reported these losses to the authorities. However, the government, did nothing to stop the thieves. Eventually, the poor grew more daring and chaos was imminent. So, the rich family took the law into their own hands and proceeded to catch and punish those who had stole from them. In this way, peace was restored and people stopped their stealing. Otherwise, the turmoil would have gotten completely out of hand.

When a famine strikes, those who are poor may turn to robbery. In this account, when the wealthy complained of the robberies, the authorities ignored them for fear of starting a revolt. The thieves became more daring and the authorities had no way of controlling them. So the wealthy people formed a vigilante group, caught and punished the thieves. Peace was restored. If this had not occurred, then order would have been completely disrupted. The action was bad and was done with selfish intentions; however, the result benefited everyone.

We all know that goodness is proper and wrongdoing is improper. However, there are cases where deeds done out of good intentions resulted in bad. This is called the "improper within the proper". There are also deeds done out of improper intentions that resulted in good. This is called the "proper within the improper". We can all benefit from understanding this.

Good intentions are "proper" and bad deeds are "improper". In the previous example, Mr. Lu had committed a bad deed although his intention was good. This is the "improper within the proper". The standard for good and bad are determined by the effect an action has on morality and on society. For instance, becoming a vigilante and punishing someone on our own is obviously not considered good. But in this situation, the authorities had ignored the criminals and the riots were getting out of control. Thus, some action needed to be taken to protect their own lives and possessions. By taking the law into their own hands, the wealthy family restored order. They stopped the thieves from creating further chaos and disrupting a proper way of life. Thus, a good deed was done through selfish intentions. This is "proper within the improper".

What is "half goodness and full goodness"? I Ching, the Book of Changes said, "People who do not accumulate virtuous deeds will not achieve honor. On the other hand, people who do not accumulate bad deeds will not bring about self-destruction". The Book of History said, "The last emperor of the Shang Dynasty, Zhou, had committed the worst of crimes". The dynasty ended with his death.

This is a lesson taught by ancient sages and virtuous people. Such lessons were later called and respected as sutras for they teach the truth. They are a truth, which surpasses time and space. If we do not practice goodness, we will not attain integrity. On the other hand, if we do not commit wrongdoings, we will not suffer self-destruction. This is the absolute truth.

It is like collecting objects in a container. With diligence, it will soon be full. If we are lazy, then the container will be only half full. This is one example of full goodness and half goodness.

This analogy of a container is easy to understand. If we want to accumulate goodness, it will

eventually become filled if we persist in our efforts. But if we are not persistent, the container will not become filled. This shows the importance of accumulating goodness. And most importantly, we must not accumulate wrongdoings or we will destroy ourselves.

Once a poor woman went to visit a Buddhist way place and wished to make a donation. Being extremely poor, she only had two cents but she freely gave these to a monk. To her surprise, the abbot himself came to help her regret for past offenses and dedicate her merits. Later, she was chosen to enter the imperial palace and obtained wealth and prestige. Clad in her riches, she again went to the way place to make a donation, this time bringing thousands of silver pieces.

To her dismay, the abbot only sent his student, another monk to help her dedicate her merits. The lady did not understand and questioned the abbot, "In the past, I only donated two cents, yet you personally helped me express my regret for past offenses. Today, I come with great wealth to give and you will not help me perform my merit dedication. Why?" The abbot replied, "Although the amount of money you gave in the past was small, it came from a true and sincere heart. It was necessary for me to repay your sincerity by personally performing your dedications. Today, although your donation is much greater, the heart of giving is not quite as true and sincere as before. Therefore, it is fitting and sufficient that my student performs your dedications for you." This is an example of how thousands of silver pieces are only considered "half goodness" and two cents are "whole goodness".

This is a true account in Buddhist records. A laywoman wished to make an offering to a Buddhist way place but she was so poor, she only had two cents with her. Nonetheless, she donated them to the way place. Because her sincerity was true, the abbot personally helped her to dedicate the merits from this good deed. Later when she moved into the imperial palace and became wealthy, she returned to the way place and brought a thousand ounces of gold as an offering. To her surprise, the abbot did not greet her personally and only asked one of his students to dedicate the merits for her. Confused, she asked why. This abbot had very high moral standards. This is unlike what we all too often see today, where we witness many Buddhists exhibiting improper behavior.

In the past, those with high moral standards judged people by their sincerity regardless of the amount they donated. If people were truly sincere, then no matter how little they donated, the abbot would have personally performed the dedications. If not, then the abbot was not obligated to do so. With a heart of sincerity, the donors nurtured good fortune by making offerings to the Buddha. With the heart of sincerity, they had only to donate a little to gain infinite benefits in return.

However, in this example, the woman had become wealthy and prestigious and her sincerity had been covered by her new manner of living. Therefore, by sending his student to greet her, the old abbot was actually trying to awaken her from her deluded state. This is the greatest kindness and compassion. He was trying to show her where she had erred in the hopes that she would feel remorse, acknowledge her mistake and correct her behavior.

When the woman had donated two cents on her initial visit, her return of good fortune was full and complete. But on her second visit, her return of good fortune was only half-full and incomplete. When we are practicing to accumulate good fortune, it is important for us to realize that the determining factor is not the amount of money or the number of good deeds done but the heart of sincerity. As long as we do things with utmost sincerity and effort then we will accomplish full and complete goodness.

When we dedicate our merits, we do three things to show our heart of true sincerity. We think to ourselves, "Today, when I practice, I do the following. First, I dedicate my merits to returning to the state of reality. I wish to attain clarity of the true mind to uncover my original self-nature. Second, I dedicate my merits to awakening. I wish to awaken from my state of delusion and to understand the truth of the universe. Third, I dedicate my merits to all living beings. I wish that the Buddhas will help all to break through delusion and attain enlightenment, to leave suffering and gain happiness. I

dedicate my merits for all others, not for myself". If this is truly our intention, then with this thought, we will be able to achieve full merits and virtues. But, if there is the slightest thought for ourselves, for example, for fame or wealth, then we will not be able to gain anything in return, not even a "half" return. In fact, we will have probably achieved much negative karma instead. Therefore, never look at things superficially, but learn to look into the profound truth of reality.

Another example is of Li Zhong, an immortal of the Han Dynasty. He was teaching his student, Dong-Bin Lu, the art of transforming iron into gold. They would use this gold to help the poor. Dong-Bin asked his teacher, "Will the gold ever change back to iron?" Li Jung answered, "After five hundred years, it will return to its original form". Dong-Bin said, "In that case, I do not want to learn this art for it will harm those who possess the gold five hundred years from now."

These are two of the "Eight Immortals" who are highly respected by the Chinese. Li Zhong offered to teach Dong-Bin alchemy, the art of turning iron into gold. Then, Dong-Bin could help the poor. But Dong-Bin was very cautious. He wanted to know if the transmutation would be permanent. Li Zhong told him that it was not. Dong-Bin's immediate response was that he did not want to learn alchemy because although it could benefit people for a few centuries, it would hurt those who possessed the gold five hundred years later. This would have been a bad deed. When we look around today, most people are only concerned with what they can get now. They do not think about how it might affect others in the future. From this, we can sadly see how moral standards have decayed over the years.

Li Zhong said, "To become an immortal, one must complete three thousand virtuous deeds. What you have just said came from a truly kind heart. Your three thousand deeds are fulfilled". This is another example of whole goodness and half goodness.

In Taoism, it is said that in order to practice the art of immortality, we must complete three thousand virtuous deeds. These requirements are more lenient than those in Buddhism. In the latter, we must possess purity of mind before we can achieve the state of mind of Buddhism and become a Dharma repository. Taoists do not seek to attain purity of mind; they seek the compassionate heart. It is more difficult to cultivate purity of mind than the compassionate heart.

With this single good thought, Dong-Bin had instantly accomplished the three thousand virtuous deeds required to practice immortality. His concern about not harming any sentient beings had actually surpassed the three thousand kind deeds. Thus, one single thought was sufficient to fulfill the requirement. This is similar to what Mr. Liao-Fan did in the act of reducing the taxes on the farmers. That one kind thought alone fulfilled the vow of ten thousand kind deeds. This teaches us the benefits from practicing from our hearts.

When we perform a good deed, it is best for us to not attach to how much we have done. If we practice in this manner, then all our good deeds will reach fulfillment and success. If, instead, we always think of the deeds that we have performed, looking for a reward of some kind, then no matter how diligently we practice, even for an entire lifetime, the deeds will still be considered as half goodness. For example, when we donate money to the poor, we can practice what is called "pure donation". In this type of giving, we do not linger on the thought of "I" who is giving. We do not dwell on the importance of the object that is given. We do not think of the other who has received. We are simply giving out of true sincerity and respect. When we give with this "pure donation" then one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune and the merit from giving one cent can wipe away the transgressions of a thousand eons.

If we always keep in mind the good that we have done and expect rewards for our actions, then even a donation of two hundred thousand gold pieces would not bring us the reward of a fully good fortune. This is another way of explaining whole goodness and half goodness.

If we have tried our very best then we will achieve full goodness. If we still have any reservations and have not done all we can then we have achieved only half goodness. Therefore, the thing to remember when we are accumulating virtuous deeds is to do everything with complete sincerity. Many people in this world do not understand the true reality and consequently, they hold many doubts about Buddhism. This doubt is what we discussed earlier as one of the Five Poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt. They believe and act according to what we have told them. However, in the act of practicing good deeds and in donating, they still want to reserve something, to hold something back. They are still unable to let go of everything. They are afraid that if they give everything away, then they will have nothing left to live on. This is doubt. They do not have the understanding, the wisdom or the determination to practice full goodness. They can only achieve half goodness. This is why although many people are practicing good deeds, they do not obtain good fortune in return and why they do not see any immediate results. Do we want to understand where the problem lies?

If we truly want to practice for good fortune then we must fully understand and believe in Buddhism without the slightest doubt. (Sometimes, worldly people will say that we are foolish and superstitious and when we think about it, we may think this is reasonable." Consequently, we may refrain from thinking kind thoughts and doing good deeds. When this happens, our heart of kindness has already been affected by deviated viewpoints.) When we truly believe and act accordingly, then the results will become easily recognizable.

They will be so much more than what was described in Liao Fan's Four Lessons; they will be incredible! After reading this book, we must believe that we have the courage within us to undergo anything. As long as we act with sincerity, we will gain a return of a thousandfold for a fraction of our effort. This is a fact. However, if we act with the hope of gaining a lavish return for our efforts then we have not acted with the heart of sincerity. We could give everything that we have but we would only gain "half" of the good fortune, not the "whole". Also, by keeping the good acts in mind, we have been unable to eliminate all of our longings. This is another reason why we can only gain "half goodness".

When we are willing to let go of our wealth, we will gain wealth. When we give teachings we will gain wisdom. When we give fearlessness, we will gain health and long life. The Law of Cause and Effect is a fact. It is as natural as the laws of heaven and earth. If we perform good deeds without expectation of reward, without the wish for prestige, wealth, wisdom, health or long life, without the wish for anything, then we are bound to receive full and complete everything. Is this not being free and at great ease?

Of course, we will still gain something if we perform good deeds as we seek, but it will not be full and complete. Why? When we no longer have wants and desires our hearts will be pure and our behavior will be a reflection of our true nature. When our true nature and virtues are uncovered, what we will receive is incredible. And what is most wonderful is that we will be able to go to the Pure Land, the Hua Zang world. The pure land of each Buddhaland is manifested from the true nature. But, if we possess just one longing, then this is no longer a reflection of our true nature. And all the prestige, wealth, health and long life that we have gained through practicing good deeds will eventually be lost. What we will have gained is limited, for it is measurable and one day, it will be used up.

Only a virtuous nature is similar to our true nature. It neither arises nor ceases. This is what freedom is all about. Only someone with great merits and wisdom is willing to let go of all belongings. No ordinary person would be willing to do so. This is why we can only find Bodhisattvas and Buddhas practicing great merits because even Arhats cannot practice them. They do not wish to be bothered with problems. For example, if we want to help someone and they rejected, slandered or embarrassed us, we would become angry and abandon the attempt. This would be incomplete.

Bodhisattvas, however, are very different. Bodhisattvas are aware of the bad habits, problems and

rebellious ways of ordinary people. They would not mind these obstacles and would use their patience and compassion to help them. Therefore, the heart of a Bodhisattva is different from that of an Arhat or a Pratyekabuddha. The latter two still use a false heart, whereas, a Bodhisattva uses his true heart. We seek wealth and prestige not realizing that these do not have to be sought because they are already within our true nature. People who practice Buddhism are trying to uncover their true nature and the abilities that lie within it.

Therefore, one of our goals as Buddhists is to return to reality, to uncover our self-nature, our intrinsic nature. This self-nature possesses everything. There is no need to seek outside, only within. The self-nature has infinite wisdom and abilities that are inexhaustible. Everyone has this self-nature, we just do not yet realize it. Until we do, we can rely upon the Buddha to teach us how to develop it. This is why the benevolence shown to us by the Buddha is so magnificent! This is the true reality behind all the reasoning. We would do well to understand this. As long as we are sincere in our every good deed, then it is true that freely giving one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune because it fulfills the integrity of the self-nature. And the good fortune from freely offering one cent to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha can wipe away the transgressions of thousands of eons.

The Surangama Sutra tells us that, "During the Dharma Ending Age, the number of deviated teachers is as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges River". They may appear to be teaching Buddhism, but their actual deeds are those of demons. Since this is the case, where should we go when we want to plant the seeds of good fortune and to practice virtuous deeds? What if the way place we choose to visit is run by people with deviated viewpoints? Then, not only will we not plant the seeds for good fortune, but we might even unknowingly commit some bad deeds!

We all would do well to understand that Buddhism is a teaching of practicing within. If our true intention is to go to the way place and pay our respects to the Buddha, then the Buddha will become Buddha Amitabha or Buddha Shakyamuni, according to what our heart is giving rise to. If the heart were true and honest then even if we went to a way place run by bad spirits, the Buddha would be true. However, if the heart were improper to begin with then even if we were practicing at a proper way place, we would still be corresponding with deviated people.

This is not to say that there are no good places to practice Buddhism during the Dharma Ending Age. The real way place is within our heart. The Vimalakirti Sutra tells us that "A sincere heart is the way place, a pure heart is the way place and a compassionate heart is the way place". A way place is within our heart. When our mind is on the path to enlightenment then no matter where we are, there will always be a way place. As long as our hearts are proper, then no matter where we go, there will always be proper teachings. This is what we mean when we say "the environment changes according to our minds". It is the mind within that changes the surroundings around us. If we can understand this reasoning and be diligent in our practice, then society and countries would be enveloped in good fortune. If we do not rid ourselves of wandering thoughts and our attachments to our good deeds then even if we gave away tens of thousands of gold pieces, our merit would not be full.

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

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