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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE THIRD LESSON:

THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

What is "big goodness and small goodness"? Once there was a high ranking official named Zhong-Da Wei, who was led into the underworld to be judged for his good and bad deeds. The judge ordered his records of good and bad to be brought out. When the records arrived, Zhong-Da was astounded at the courtyard filled with his bad records and at the single scroll, which contained his good deeds.

The official then ordered the two to be weighed. Surprisingly, the bad records, which had filled the courtyard, were lighter than the single scroll of good deeds, which was as thin as a chopstick. Zhong-Da asked the judge, "I am barely forty years old, how could I have committed so many wrongdoings?" The judge answered, "When you give rise to a single thought that is improper, it is considered a bad offense there and then, it does not have to be carried out through action to be counted as a wrong".

Good fortune and kindness come in both big and small sizes. The above account tells of a man named Zhong-Da Wei who was led before the king of the underworld for judgement. The king asked the judge to bring out his records.

Everyone has committed both good and bad acts during his or her lifetime. Consequently, there would be a record of both kinds of conduct. These records are kept with the king of the Underworld and the ruler of the spirit world. This is why Mr. Liao-Fan taught us to have respect and fear within our hearts. After the records of Zhong-Da had been brought out, he saw that he had a massive amount of records, which told of all his bad deeds. On the other hand, the records that recorded his good deeds were as thin as a chopstick. However, after these records were placed upon a scale to see which was heavier, it turned out that the thin scroll of good deeds out-weighed the volumes of bad deeds! This was probably because he did not commit any serious offenses but many minor faults. Therefore, one large kind deed would be able to offset numerous small faults. Upon seeing the result, the judge was quite pleased. Zhong-Da was a good person after all.

Therefore, when Zhong-Da questioned how he had been able to commit so many faults before he had even reached the age of forty, the judge explained to him that even if it were just an improper thought without any resultant action, it would still be recorded as a fault. Thus, even if we did not actually commit any major transgressions, we have had thoughts about them. Luckily, Zhong-Da had one great good deed, which outweighed all his minor faults.

Zhong-Da then asked him what was recorded in the single scroll of good deeds. The judge replied, "Once the Emperor planned to build a great stone bridge but you proposed against the project due to the hardship and toil it would cause the tens and thousands of people needed for the work. This is a copy of your proposal to the Emperor". Zhong-Da said, "I did make the proposal, but the Emperor dismissed it and proceeded with the project anyway. My proposal had no effect on the matter at all. How can it bear so much weight against my numerous offenses?"

The judge replied, "Although the Emperor did not accept your suggestion, that one thought of

kindness you bore for the tens and thousands of people was very great. If the Emperor had listened to you, then the good performed would have been even greater". Therefore, when one is determined to do good for the benefit of all people, a small deed can result in great merits. If one thinks only about benefiting oneself, then even if many deeds of kindness were performed, the merits would still be small.

The content of the scroll was a description of the major good deed, which Zhong-Da had performed. When the Emperor wanted to construct a bridge, Zhong-Da foresaw that it would waste money and cause hardships for the citizens, so he submitted a proposal asking the Emperor to reconsider the matter. However, the Emperor ignored his proposal and went ahead with the plan. From this, we can see that the most important factor is in our original intention.

Zhong-Da's concern was not for himself, but for the hundreds of thousands of citizens who would suffer from such a major construction project. Even if they did not have to contribute in labor, they would have to pay heavy taxes in order to offset the cost involved in building the bridge. If the Emperor could forego the idea and avoid any unnecessary expenditure, then all the citizens would benefit from it.

Therefore, we can see the magnitude of goodness behind this single thought. Although the Emperor did not listen to Zhong-Da's suggestion, this does not alter the fact that Zhong-Da was sincere in his proposal. This signifies that his heart was true and the deed was an example of full and complete goodness. Of course, had the Emperor accepted Zhong-Da's proposal, then the significance of the act would have been even greater. But still, the thought itself was to be commended.

Herein lies the difference between big and small goodness. It is determined by our intentions, by whether we are thinking of all the beings in the world or whether we are thinking of just ourselves and our families. We should understand this logic when we dedicate the merits after we recite sutras or a Buddha's name. Usually we would dedicate the merits to a particular person, wishing that the Buddha would help him or her in gaining various benefits. This is what is called a small goodness. The benefits gained would be small as well.

In fact, we are not even sure if the person being dedicated to would actually gain any benefit. Therefore, in cases like this, when one or more of our family members is in a crisis, we should recite sutras and a Buddha's name and then dedicate the merits to all beings throughout the universe. We should wish that all living beings would be void of illness and suffering and that they would all be happy and healthy. When we are sincere in this thought, our family members will gain as well. Why? Because our heart is truly broad! We can see an example of this in the Earth Treasure Sutra where the Brahman girl called "Bright Eyes" made a vow on behalf of her mother.

People often say, "I have dedicated all my merits to others and have gained nothing for myself. What is the use in practicing goodness?" This could only come from a narrow mind. If we prostrate in front of the Buddha but do not feel any response, it is because our hearts are selfish. We are totally self-seeking and do not know that we should magnify our merits so that they encompass the entire universe. When we dedicate the merits to all living things, it is like passing on a light. We use our own flame to light those of others, so that the whole world is alight with brightness. This results in great benefit with no loss to the self. This is why people who practice Buddhism need to dedicate the merits from practice to all living beings in the universe, to awakening, and to reality, in order to uncover the perfect complete Buddha nature.

The heart and roots of Chinese culture lie in two things, namely, "Ancestral Memorial Halls" and "the classical Chinese language". The reason China became a country with so much cultural history that extends back over thousands of years is because of the strong foundation of the normal human relationships in the Chinese ethical tradition. Classical Chinese must be preserved because if we

cease its use, then the Chinese people would suffer great adversities and the race could never be restored. Also, we must preserve "the Mahayana teachings". As long as we can preserve these three things, then not only will our country and culture have a bright future, but the world will also benefit.

What is "difficult goodness and easy goodness"? The knowledgeable scholars of the past used to say, "When one wishes to conquer one's greed and desires, one should start with what is most difficult to overcome". When Confucius talked about how to cultivate one's humanity, he also said to start with what is most difficult to practice.

This section cites the teachings of the ancient sages and virtuous people, which tell us that we possess innumerable afflicting habits and desires. Therefore, they taught us to start with whatever is the most serious one. If we can overcome our most serious faults, then we can overcome other matters, which would appear trivial in comparison. When we want to eliminate the bad and practice the good, we must know where to begin. This is also why when Confucius was teaching about the cultivation of humanity, he believed that we should start with what is most difficult to practice. The following are a few examples.

For example, the old teacher, Mr. Shu of Jiangxi, gave two years salary to a poor family who owed money to the government. Thus, he saved them from being torn apart if the husband was sent to prison.

This is a very good example. He did something, which was difficult to do and gave up something, which was difficult to give up. During ancient times in China, the students used to give their teacher a small gift during holidays. Originally, it was "strips of dried meat", which were tied into a bundle. Later, the strips of dried meat became acknowledged as a student's gift to the teacher, although they may not necessarily have been dried meat. Teachers would teach at a "private school" and the number of students varied. Twenty to thirty students would be considered a very good number. The smaller "schools" might have had only dozen or so students. Therefore, the gifts (or pay) the teacher would receive could be quite meager. For Mr. Shu to donate two years' salary to help the couple pay off their debt was a considerable undertaking and yet, this is exactly what he did.

Another example is Mr. Zhang from Handan. Mr. Zhang gave his ten years of savings to a poor man so he could repay a debt. This saved him from going to jail and enabled him to remain with his wife.

The first example was to give away two years of salary and this example was to give away ten years of savings. In both cases, they were given to pay back the money owed to the government. In most case, an offense such as not being able to pay back public funds would entail a jail sentence for the offender. By paying back the funds, the family would not have to be torn apart.

Such examples as Mr. Shu and Mr. Zhang are rare, for they gave what is most difficult to give. What others could not sacrifice, they did so willingly.

People depend on money and materials to survive. Therefore, to be able to give away money is extremely difficult to do. Especially when it is all the savings that we have. This is to "to conquer what is most difficult to conquer, to start with what is most difficult to practice". It is also a good practice for curbing our desires.

Another example is Mr. Jin from Jiangsu Province. As he was old and without any sons, his neighbor offered their young daughter in marriage to him to give him descendants to carry on his lineage. Mr. Jin refused the offer and sent her back home. This is another example of being able to overcome what is most difficult to conquer in oneself.

Mr. Jin had no sons. During ancient times, it was an acceptable custom for him to take a second wife

to bear him an heir to carry on the family name. To have an heir was very important. A neighbor wanted to give their very young daughter to Mr. Jin. However, he recognized the great age difference and although he really wanted a son, he felt that he could not ruin a young girl's future and happiness just to serve his own purpose. Thus, this is a good example of restraining one's desires even when it is most difficult to do so.

Therefore, the heavens showered down good fortune, which was especially good for these three men. It is easier for those who have money and power to accumulate merits and virtues than for those who are poor. However, if one refuses to cultivate kindness even when it is easy and one has the chance to do so, then it would truly be a shame. For those who are poor and without prestige, doing kind things for others is very difficult. However, if in this difficulty one can still manage to help others then it would be even more valuable.

These are the differences between "difficult goodness" and "easy goodness". Upon understanding this logic, we should learn to grasp the opportunities for us to practice good and accumulate merit. Once we lose an opportunity, we may not get another chance in the future when we really want to practice some good deeds. Wealth does not last forever. A person's luck will change every five years. During our lifetime, there will be the best five years and the worst five years. If the good years are during our old age then this will be true good fortune. On the other hand, if the worst five years occur during our old age, then the hardships will be even more difficult to endure because physically, we are already at a disadvantage.

Therefore, we should learn to practice goodness at an early age, to let everyone share in our good fortune because once we give it away, we will still gain whatever we are destined to have. We need to understand this. When we are young and strong, we would do well to not exhaust all of our good fortune. If we do not use it up, then it will be kept intact for us to enjoy later in life. Similarly, if we suffer hardships first, then there will be none left for us to endure when we reach our old age. This is why we must learn to practice to cultivate and accumulate good fortune for us to enjoy during our old age.

It is most important that as Buddhists, we know exactly why we are practicing. We do so to accumulate the ultimate good fortune for when we die. What is ultimate good fortune? That of no illness, of knowing that when our time is up, we can leave this world in a sitting or a standing position and that we know exactly where we will be going. This is the greatest good fortune. Most people have overlooked this most important matter. It is up to those who practice Buddhism to help others who are willing to learn, so that we can all share in the same good fortune.

It is easier to help others when we have prestige and status and therefore, it is easier for us to accumulate merits. Thus, when we have prestige and status, we must remember not to use it in a bad way against others. Instead, we should use it to our advantage to perform more good deeds and to help more people. If we have the means to do this but we choose not to, then we are missing a great opportunity. On the other hand, when we are poor and do not have the means but still choose to help others, then the difficulty of the task makes the act even more valuable.

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

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