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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE THIRD LESSON:

THE WAYS TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

Practicing the Ten Good Deeds
When the Condition Arises

What is meant by "persuading others to practice kindness"? Since we are all humans, we all have a conscience, but chasing after wealth and fame has kept us constantly busy and we have forgotten our conscience. Although we want to do good, the necessity of surviving in a world filled with hardships can result in our forgetting to do good. When a friend is about to ignore his or her conscience to do something unworthy, we can remind and warn this friend, hoping to wake him or her from delusion. It is like waking up someone when they are having a nightmare. It is up to us to shake them into reality. When a person is undergoing a long spell of depression, we can pull this person out of it and help to clear his or her mind. We are most virtuous if we can treat our friends with such kindness.

Virtually all people would prefer to be good. Even the worst person will say that he or she would like to practice goodness. From this, we can conclude that a good heart and good conduct is the true nature of humankind. Buddhism teaches us that this is a virtue of our true nature. So, if this is the case, why do people resort to bad conduct? Two reasons. First, people commit bad deeds because of their afflictions and bad habits. Second, because of bad conditions. But, despite the fact that some people commit bad deeds, there are very few who are not bothered by their conscience. Unfortunately, they do not have any good friends to remind and help them to reform. Consequently, they become more and more deluded, more and more confused. We see many cases where this has happened.

Mr. Liao Fan expressed it very well in the above example, "Although we want to do good, the necessity of surviving in the world filled with hardships can result in our forgetting to do so". While trying to make a living, we do many things to maintain a certain standard of living for our families and to further our careers. Due to this, the environment in which we live has a strong influence on our behavior. This could become unfortunate in our immoral society. For instance, today, many people like to gamble. This is obviously not a good sign. Many young people become obsessed with it, which has proven very harmful to themselves, their families and society. This is very dangerous. However, this is the present trend and it seems to be slowly affecting the entire world.

With the aid of the media, negative effects become magnified and can reach into the farthest corners of the world thus causing even more damage. Therefore, when we see our friends and relatives, we should do our best to try to help them see reason and lead them away from bad influences. We can encourage them to start by reading Liao Fan's Four Lessons because everything in this book is true.

Sometimes, it is quite easy to become wealthy through the stock market. But, the wealth we gained from trading stocks was still destined to be ours. If our destiny does not include wealth, then the money will soon be gone. If we carry the cash with us, we are afraid of being robbed. If we deposit it in the bank, all we can do is look at it. What is the difference? When we think about it, we will realize that wealth only increases our greed, anger and arrogance. It has absolutely no redeeming factors whatsoever.

There is an old saying, which sums it up well. As long as we are in this world, all that we need are “three meals a day and a six-foot bed at night”. Therefore, would it not be better if we were to use our good fortune a little at a time rather than exhaust them all at once? Thus, we should help family members and friends to realize, through logic and reason, that they are on the wrong path and that they should not gamble with their life. This is the proper path, one that can last for a long time.

Buddhism is both flexible and inventive. We must assist those who wish to learn by helping them to feel happy. Then they will be more accepting of what we say. In this way, we will be able to help others understand how they would do well to change. We can then lead them away from confusion, away from a seemingly endless bad dream. When they suddenly wake up, it will be similar to awakening in Buddhism. Once they awaken, all they need to do is practice. This is like getting rid of the roots of all afflictions. All that remains is a sense of serenity and freedom. This is wisdom. We must help others with what is most beneficial to them.

A scholar named Yu Han once said, “By word of mouth, one can only persuade and influence others for a while. If one can persuade and influence others through written works, one's words can be passed on for hundreds of generations around the world.” We can use either speaking or writing, whichever is appropriate for the circumstances.

This is showing the flexible and expedient method of teaching. When we are analyzing matters trying to help others to awaken, we are doing it “by word of mouth”, which only benefits others in the current lifetime. If we are trying to guide many others as well as future generations, then the best tool to use would be “written words”. By recording our kind words and deeds, we can pass these down for future generations to use. This will ensure that these good words will be preserved.

An example of this is Liao-Fan's Four Lessons. Mr. Liao-Fan's objective in writing the book was to alert his son of the dangers in committing bad deeds. He did not intend for these four lessons to be so widely read for so many generations. So, he has unintentionally performed a great deed of goodness. Many people have followed his teachings and have succeeded in changing their destinies from those of suffering to happiness. They all have benefited from Mr. Liao-Fan's written words. This thin volume, is a prime example of teaching people to be good. He used his own experiences as an example for his descendants, hoping that they would understand and learn to practice all that is good. This is the most effective, outstanding, profound and all-encompassing goodness.

Actually, writing is something each of us is capable of doing. We may think that we lack a literary background and are thus incapable of writing. But this is not so. If we can just record one or two occurrences that we hear or see each day, the outcome would be quite similar to the lessons in this

book. From this, we can conclude that “persuading people by speech and persuading generations by written works” is not difficult, as long as we have the heart of sincerity and the persistence to pursue this act of benevolence.

We can persuade others by word of mouth as well as by writing books to promote virtue. Compared with teaching others through behavior this is much more direct and obvious. Sometime, we do not have time to teach others through behavior. Then verbal or written education will be more effective. However, if we can apply it like the right medicine for an illness, often it will prove to have wonderful effects. Therefore, we cannot give up.

The previous category is referred to as "Associate Embracing" in Buddhism. This means that we should interact with those whom we are trying to help and use our own actions as examples to influence others, similar to what Emperor Shun did with the fishermen.

In Buddhism, four guidelines are used to guide and influence all sentient beings. This is called "Fourfold Embracing Methods". The first method is “giving”, which is a way to establish a good affinity and amicability with others. Once we have earned the confidence of others, then whatever we say or do will create a positive effect on them and they will be willing to follow our suggestions. The second method is "kind words". This does not mean we use glib talk or honeyed words to sway others. Kind words means to act with flexibility with others and help them to be comfortable. As explained by Master Jung-Feng earlier in this lesson, when our motivation comes from loving-kindness for others, then even if we scold or hit them for their own good, it would be an act of kindness. But when we are scolding, we should take into consideration their ability to withstand and accept the reproach. If they reject it when it is overdone then our words will have a negative effect. Therefore, when we intend to speak to others of their faults, we should make sure that no one else is present so that they will not feel embarrassed or antagonized. This is an example of being flexible and making the person feel comfortable. The third method is "beneficial and advantageous conduct". This means that our words and actions must be truly beneficial to others. The fourth and last method is "cooperating with and adapting oneself to others". This is to participate in the same activities as others and to be a good example to guide them.

When the Buddhas guide all sentient beings, they do not exceed these four methods. When we are encouraging others to be good, we are using “verbal education”. When we are joining others to teach them kindness, we are using “behavioral education”. Herein lies the difference.

If we make the mistake of "losing a person" (it was proper for us to guide this person but we did not) or "wasting our words" (it was improper for us to persuade this person and we tried to) we would do well to reflect and generate the wisdom not to make the same mistake again.

When we are able to advise someone but we do not then we have lost an opportunity to teach. If a person has potential to do good but we do not lead him or her to the right path, then we have “lost a person”. On the other hand, if someone is set in his or her ways and will not listen to us but we persist in trying to change him or her to no avail, then we have “wasted our words”. When interacting with others, we should learn to use our common sense to observe how they are reacting. This will prevent

us from “losing a person” or “wasting our words”. Master Hui-Neng explained it very well in the Platform Sutra. When others are willing to listen and accept, we teach them but when they are not, we simply put our palms together and wish them happiness.

What is meant by "helping those in desperate need"? During one's lifetime, people will often suffer from serious difficulties. If we meet someone like this, we can help that person as if we were the one who was suffering. We immediately come to this person's aid. If a person has been wrongly accused or convicted, we should plead on their behalf as well as provide aid in any way we can. Scholar Cui Zi once said, "It does not matter whether a favor is big or small. What is important is that it is done at a time when others need it most". These are words of loving-kindness.

Everyone is bound to encounter some misfortune during their lifetime. This is especially true during a war when we are forced to suffer overwhelming losses such as that of our home. In such situations, as we drift from one place to another we will have no idea what is going to happen next. Therefore, since the age of ten, all the children in my family were taught how to be independent, how to manage on our own if and when we were separated from our family. Also, we were taught how to survive alone in the woods.

Presently, we are living in a relatively peaceful world in which parents have many opportunities to spoil their children. However, will our world always be this peaceful? If we look honestly at the way we are currently headed, the future looks bleak. It would be most unfortunate if the aforementioned hardships and sufferings were to occur during our mid-life or old age. Therefore, when we meet others who are suffering, we should treat them as if we were suffering the same hardships and quickly do everything we can to help. This is the giving of fearlessness.

When others are oppressed or wronged, we must help them by pleading on their behalf and do whatever we can to prove their innocence. When they suffer from continuous hardships and we are unable to help them by ourselves, then we must alert others and encourage them to join in the effort. Scholar Cui Zi said that whether we are able to help a great deal or just a little, what is important is that we help when others need our help the most. However, while we are able to provide assistance in an emergency, poverty is a different issue. The best way to assist those who are in poverty is to help them learn ways to earn a living, to learn how to support themselves and to become independent. This is the greatest act of kindness.

What is meant by "developing public projects for the benefit of others"? Small construction works are needed for villages and big construction jobs are needed for cities. As long as it is beneficial to the people, it should be built.

On a small scale, we can benefit a village. On a larger scale, we can benefit a city or a county. Today, this is known as "social welfare". Every citizen, every governing body would do well to consider it their responsibility to do good deeds for the benefit of all.

We should do anything that benefits an area. Only when everyone has good fortune, do we have it as well. Everyone would do well to have this perception. But, if we alone enjoy good fortune while others

are suffering, then adversity is not far behind. A Chinese proverb says, "One family's wealth can cause resentment from thousands of families". If we share our good fortune with others, this will help to create a stable society and a peaceful world. This will then become true good fortune. When we share our good fortune with others, this is a sign of exhibiting great wisdom, great good fortune and virtue. Today, when we speak of "developing public projects for the benefit of others", we can do so by advocating and encouraging others to practice the teachings in Liao Fan's Four Lessons and of Mahayana Buddhism.

Public projects can be the construction of systems to irrigate farmlands, dams to prevent flooding or bridges to facilitate travel. Also, we can give food or water to those who are hungry or thirsty. Whenever we have the opportunity, we need to encourage others to do their share as well to help accomplish the project, either through the sharing of wealth or of labor. Do not be afraid of what others might say and do not become frightened when the job becomes difficult. Do not allow the jealousy and hatred of others to weaken our resolve to do good deeds.

In China, agriculture was the foundation of the country. Thus, the construction of irrigation systems was of paramount importance. Dams were also necessary in order to prevent flooding. These construction projects were not built to benefit oneself, but for the benefit of everyone. Therefore, even when obstacles occurred during the course of construction, they were not allowed to deter the completion of a good deed. A good deed completed despite obstacles is considered full and complete. There may be opposition at the beginning of a project but once it is finished and everyone has benefited from it, they will know its value and appreciate our efforts. Therefore, our vision must be all-encompassing and far-reaching. We need to possess wisdom, loving-kindness and perseverance in order to accomplish good, the standard for which is to benefit all sentient beings. To be selfish, to benefit only ourselves is not goodness. It was this standard that Master Jung-Feng spoke of.

What is meant by "accumulating merits and good fortune by giving wealth"? In Buddhism, giving is considered the foremost practice among all the methods.

This is the way to practice for good fortune. In Buddhism, there are infinite ways of practice. For the sake of simplicity, Buddhism has organized these infinite methods into six major categories, the Six Paramitas. Mahayana Buddhism often teaches the "Six Paramitas of infinite practices". If we were to summarize the categories, then all six become one, become "giving". There are three major categories of giving; that of wealth, teaching and fearlessness. Actually, all of the Six Paramitas are giving. For instance, the Paramitas of abiding by the precepts or self-discipline and patience can both be considered the giving of fearlessness. The Paramitas of diligence, deep concentration and wisdom can be considered the giving of teaching. Thus, these three types of giving have encompassed all the methods of practice in Buddhism. No matter how many other ways there are, they would all be within the method of giving. In the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha taught us not to be attached in the practice of giving. This is the ultimate perfect guideline for all the ways of practice.

Therefore, to give is to practice good fortune. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas. Since the Six Paramitas are the ways to practice good fortune, wisdom is a part of good fortune. When we practice the giving of teaching, we will gain intelligence and wisdom, which is considered good fortune. When

we practice the giving of fearlessness, we will gain health and longevity. When we practice the giving of wealth, we will gain wealth. The Chinese speak of these as the five good fortunes of wealth and prestige, longevity, merits and virtues, happiness and no adversities, and a good death. The last is a good death because it can in turn lead to a good birth. And the best death is to die while chanting a Buddha's name to be born into the Pure Land. During my lifetime, I have seen many instances where this has happened.

If we wish to attain perfect happiness in this world, we will not go wrong if we practice according to the teachings in this book. If we wish to attain perfect happiness beyond this world, then it would be enough to practice according to the Infinite Life Sutra. If we just lead our lives according to the guidelines of the Infinite Life Sutra and Liao-Fan's Four Lessons, we will attain the great liberation in both this world and beyond. Thus, here we are encouraged to practice good fortune through giving.

What is giving? Giving is to let go. A wise person who understands this principle would be willing to give away everything, even to the point of letting go of our attachments to the six sense organs within. Externally, one can also give away that which we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think.

To give is to let go, to give away. The more we give, the freer we will become. "A wise person who understands this principle" is someone who has true wisdom, is like a Bodhisattva. When we speak of letting go of the six sense organs and the six dusts, we are not talking about letting go in the physical aspect. Think about it, how could we really detach ourselves from our physical body? Even if we were able to discard our body, it still would not solve our problems. Therefore, when we speak of letting go of the six sense organs, we mean to detach ourselves from the aspect of our mind. This means we do not have any attachments or discriminations within and are not tempted by external phenomena. The Diamond Sutra tells us, "Do not attach to form. Remain unmoved within". Do not attach means to let go of the six senses. Once we have severed our attachments within and on the outside, we will no longer be deluded but will have uncovered our self-nature and become Buddhas.

In our innumerable past lifetimes, we have been deluded and thus remained mired in the cycle of birth and death. However, from now on, we will not create any more life and death karma. Therefore, those who are wise would want to transcend our Saha world, to be mindful of Buddha Amitabha and to be born into the Pure Land. We will maintain clarity of mind and await Buddha Amitabha to escort us to the Pure Land while we are alive, not dead. If we can go to the Pure Land after we die, then it means that the transcendence ceremony really works. Actually, transcending the spirit from suffering only has a limited effect. We cannot transcend a spirit into the Pure Land, just reduce the suffering.

For instance, the Venerable Master Bao Zhi was the manifestation of Great Compassion Bodhisattva. He transcended the spirit of Emperor Liang-Wu's favorite wife. But, he could only transcend her spirit to the second level of the Desire Heaven. He could not help her to advance any further. He could not help her to be born into the Pure Land. Although we wish that we could transcend others to Pure Land, it cannot be done. It is only our wish. Being born into the Pure Land depends on our own belief, vow and practice. So, we must do our best to learn the ways of practice while we are still healthy and strong; we must chant "Amitufo" and vow to be born into the Pure Land.

To let go is to do so from the mind. It is to detach ourselves from the Five Desires and the Six Dusts of the mind. We should learn neither to be attached to our bodies nor to our minds. As ordinary people, we are filled with discriminatory thoughts and attachments and find it extremely difficult to detach ourselves from them. We always have wandering thoughts. The Pure Land way of practice is to change our thinking, so that we are mindful only of Buddha Amitabha. Once we change our thinking to only those thoughts of Buddha Amitabha, we will finally be free. Truly cultivating the Bodhisattva way is concentrating only on Buddha Amitabha and chanting only "Amitufo".

There is nothing we cannot give away. When we find ourselves unable to do so, we can start with the giving of wealth. Ordinary people regard their clothing and food as dearly as their lives. Therefore, they consider wealth to be of the utmost importance. When we practice giving without hesitation, we can cure stinginess and at the same time, help others in dire need. However, for many this is very difficult to do, especially at first. But, gradually it will become more natural the more we give. This is the best way to cure selfishness and to rid ourselves of attachments and stinginess.

The Diamond Sutra tells us that "Everything with form is illusion, is false". This teaches us to give, to let go and be free of worries and attachments. If we find it difficult to do this, then we need to start by giving away our wealth so that we are not tempted or affected by it.

This is also the method that the Buddha taught us to escape the cycle of birth and death, to transcend the Six Realms and to transform ourselves from ordinary people to sages. It is always a little difficult when we first learn to give, so we often do so grudgingly. We may feel upset and perhaps even regret what we have done. This is when we need to use our wisdom and be determined to gradually make giving a habit. Then, it will become quite natural. Everyone will experience such a stage in their learning and cultivation. Eventually, as we give, we will experience a lessening in worries and stinginess. When we no longer attach to wealth, to our enjoyments, our body, heart and mind will feel great ease and liberation. This is when our self-nature will start to be uncovered and we will gain complete contentment and freedom. The Law of Cause and Effect never changes, either in this world or beyond. Therefore, the more wealth we give, the more wealth we will gain. We do not even know where this wealth will come from. The more teaching we give the more wisdom we will gain. So, we do not want to withhold any of our wealth or knowledge. Poverty is the result of not giving wealth. Ignorance is the result of not giving teaching. Illness and short lives are the result of not giving fearlessness.

The five good fortunes are all gained through giving. Giving is the cause; therefore, if we wish to have the good result, then we must practice the good cause. It is a wandering thought to think that we can gain the result without first planting the cause. This is impossible.

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

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