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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 "protecting the proper teachings"? For millions of years, proper teachings have been a standard of truth and provided spiritual guidance for all living beings. Without proper teachings, how can we participate in and support the nurturing of heaven and earth? Without proper teachings, how can we help people to attain achievement. How can beings in all the realms succeed in their endeavors without a standard to live by? How can we be free of the Five Desires, the Six Dusts, our delusions, our afflictions? Without proper teachings, how can we set a standard in the world and help people transcend the Six Realms.

Proper teachings are the personal achievement of wise sages, which have been proven by using the standards of truth and wisdom, such as those found in the great teachings of Confucius and Buddha Shakyamuni. This shows how important it is to protect the proper teachings.

In China, when we protect the proper teachings, we first safeguard those of Confucius, Mencius, Lao-Zi and Zhuang-Zi, for they provide the foundation for Buddhism. This was no problem during Mr. Liao-Fan's time because during the Ming Dynasty all scholars had studied the work of Confucius. By learning the Four Books, the Five Classics and the various schools of thought that were developed over the centuries, everyone had a good foundation in Confucianism. We need to understand this to see why Buddhism is currently undergoing difficulties and has declined. As it is the root, Confucianism taught us how to properly conduct ourselves. If we cannot even be a decent person, how can we possibly become a Bodhisattva, much less become a Buddha? Our learning and practice to become Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is built on the foundation of the humanities.

Although we may not completely read the Four Books, which are Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean, Analects and Mencius, we should at least have read the first three so that we will know how to conduct ourselves. This is the foundation of Buddhism, the basic of the basics. We can compile good excerpts from the commentaries from the past to present times and widely distribute them. In the past, the books we printed were the version of stone printed books of China, without any copyrights; they were the commentary of the Four Books written by Scholar Xi Zhu. It would be good for us to print, distribute and advocate it.

Therefore, Buddhists would do well to read the Four Books. Truthfully speaking, we can only give rise to the heart, which loves the country and its people, if we have completely read the Four Books and understand China's historical culture. Today's Chinese people have forgotten the country and its people due to the fault of poor planning in the educational system. Nowadays, education places great importance on technology, forgetting the importance of the humanities. No matter how advanced our technology, if we have not studied the humanities, then as the ancient people questioned, "What is the difference between humans and animals?" Humans are animals. If we do not know morality, benevolence and honor, then there will be little difference between humans and animals. Human beings are the cruelest of all the animals, the most ruthless. Therefore, in order to help all beings, human beings must be helped first. If we can turn back from all that is bad to do all that is good, then all beings will be fortunate and happy. Only then, can each sentient being achieve what they want. This is the goal of the sages and the virtuous people in educating and

reforming sentient beings.

"Proper teachings" includes both those of Confucius and the Buddha. They have been the standard of truth, which has provided guidance for thousands of years. Heaven and earth have the merits and virtues of giving rise to and nurturing infinite things. Heaven gives rise, earth nurtures. Heaven and earth have shown great kindness to all beings, animate and inanimate. Once we understand this principle, not only will we neither destroy nor harm the natural environment, we will do all we can to help the natural ecological balance to become perfect, to enable all beings to receive what they need. The merits of heaven and earth are vast and great! Those who genuinely have morality and knowledge can participate in and support the rise and nurturing of heaven and earth. The world's wise sages, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do just this. As Buddhism says, "If we can transform objects and beings, then we are just like a Buddha". To transform objects means to change our own views, our own thoughts, to let go of selfish desires and to participate in the light of the sky, earth, sun and moon. To let go of our selfishness is true cultivation. True cultivation whole-heartedly exerting ourselves to help all beings. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas propagate the teachings and help all beings, guiding them in letting go of delusion and attaining the truth. Like Heaven and earth to nurture all beings. The merit from this is immeasurable. To be able to "transcend delusion and be liberated from confinement" means to end all afflictions and worries, to uncover our wisdom and transform delusion into awakening.

We are to use the behavior and conduct of sages and virtuous people as our models. The teachings of the sages are the classics and sutras. Their thoughts, speech and conduct are correct and without error. They surpass the dimensions of time and space. This is called "the career of the sages and virtuous people for guiding the world". We know that Buddhist sutras surpass time and space, because three thousand years ago Buddha Shakyamuni instructed and helped the people at that time. Today, as we read the sutras, we still feel that every sentence spoken by the Buddha is logical and should be practiced accordingly. This is especially true for the Pure Land sutras, which teach how to transcend this world by attaining birth into the Pure Land in one lifetime. This is to transcend the world. Buddhism was initially taught in India and was then introduced into China. India and China are very different, yet what the Buddha taught was fitting for both countries. Now as it is being introduced into Europe and the Americas it is still appropriate. This is called the teachings of governing and transcending the world.

Similarly, the Four Books are comprised of the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius and are the essence of the Chinese culture. Confucius and Mencius lived twenty-five hundred years ago. Their guidance benefited individuals, families, society, the entire country. As the Four Books are introduced abroad, people in other countries nod their heads in agreement after learning what they teach. So the teachings are timeless and beyond the boundaries of space. This is why the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, Lao-Zi and Zhuang-Zi are said to surpass the dimensions of time and space, and are genuine sutras and teachings on how to properly manage the country. Of course, there have always been teachings on the proper running of countries, yet if we compare carefully, the best have been those of Confucius, Mencius, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Frankly, among all the Buddhist sutras, the Infinite Life Sutra is unsurpassed, for it attains the highest level. The essence of traditional Chinese culture is contained within the Four Books and thus Zhu-Zi's merit is inconceivable! The content of the Four Books is very similar to that of the Flower Adornment Sutra, which provides principles, methods and behavior for us to emulate. Of the Four Books, Doctrine of the Mean provides the principles, Great Learning provides the methods and Analects and Mencius tell us of the lives of Confucius and Mencius. In other words, they teach how to apply the principles and methods in our daily interaction with others, matters and objects. Thus, the Analects and Mencius are just like the fifty-three visits of Sudhana, for they provide us with examples to follow. The Four Books and the Flower Adornment Sutra even have the exact same structures.

To guide the world is to set a standard and to be a role model. Regarding transcending this world, actually there are no boundaries between this world and the one beyond. The differences between them lie in whether we are deluded or awakened. When awakened, we transcend this cycle. But, with one thought of delusion, we are again in this world. With another thought of awakening, we again transcend this cycle.

Therefore, whenever we see way places, memorials of past virtuous people or sages, pictures of sages, or

Buddhist texts, we should be respectful. If they are in need of repair, we should repair and put them back in order.

The teachings of the sages have a direct bearing on individuals' minds within a society, trends in cultural behavior, societal happiness and peace, and the overall well being of the group. Since ancient times, the wise and virtuous have been analogizing the teachings of the sages as the "the sight of heaven and human". How do we protect and uphold them? Way Places are institutions of Buddhist education. Schools are institutions of worldly education. Both need to be protected and sustained. Today's schools have abandoned the education of morality and ethics, which is why we have such sufferings and misery. If we do not awaken to this fact, our world will eventually be destroyed.

Ancient Chinese sages were knowledgeable about science and technologies and yet they chose not to continue development of this knowledge. Why? They foresaw that in the end technology would destroy our world. So, they chose instead to concentrate on the humanities, to help people develop wisdom, to understand and practice morality and ethics. To help people totally understand the relationship between humans, between humans and spirits and between humans and nature. To become a person who is fearless and indomitable. Only in this way, will individuals experience true happiness and well being and will countries and citizens be able have a real future. This is genuine education.

In the early 1900s, the Chinese government abolished Chinese classic education. At the time, many wise and virtuous people felt deep sadness over this decision. The bad seeds that were planted then are now bearing fruit. If even after we have tasted the bad fruits we are still not awakened, then we are lost. This way of thinking can destroy countries and races. The result of our abolishing Chinese classics education is the destruction of the proper teachings! And if Confucian and Taoist teachings cannot be safeguarded then Mahayana Buddhism cannot be established. Buddhism has flourished for two thousand years in China because it was based on the foundation of Confucian and Taoism. But today we are digging away the roots, destroying the foundation. If this continues, the teachings of the Buddhas will become mere empty words.

In the past, books were not privately owned so writing in them was not allowed. They were carefully passed down from generation to generation so others could read them. Those who wished an individual copy would hand copy one for their personal use. They were cherished, respected and protected. If any of these ancient texts were damaged, then individuals would mend, copy and distribute it, so it would not be lost. This was the greatest merit.

We can propagate and carry forward the proper teachings and help others to learn their value. In this way, we can repay our gratitude to the Buddha. We should especially do our best and encourage others to do so as well.

This teaches us that we need to help propagate the teachings of Confucius and the Buddha, to encourage others to do so as well and to help benefit others. In so doing, we will be truly repaying our gratitude to the Buddha. To be able to accomplish this, we need to do two things. First, we need to help train Dharma repositories who can properly propagate the teachings. Second, we need to establish way places where the teaching can be taught enabling these people to have a good educational environment for both learning and practicing. Today, few people are propagating the Dharma, so instead of relying on others, we need to rely on ourselves to do this.

We establish a way place in the hope of providing the opportunity for more people to encounter and learn Buddhism. Today, the best way to do this is TV (and the Internet) which can bring Buddhism into every family's home. We could invite benevolent teachers, to choose the sutras that would benefit society the most to take turns lecturing. Since Mahayana Buddhism is built on the foundation of Confucianism and Taoism, we could lecture first on the Four Books. Next, we could lecture on Mahayana Buddhism. In this way, people would be able to thoroughly absorb and digest the teachings, thus preventing them from becoming just empty words. So, if we truly wish to help Buddhism flourish, we need to begin with traditional Chinese culture and traditional education such as the teachings of Confucius. We should begin by nurturing Dharma repositories and establishing way places.

Establishing a way place does not mean spending a large amount of money on a building that will result in endless squabbles and conflicts once it is completed. When this happens, the effort and expenditure will

become meaningless. We need to understand that once we start learning and practicing Buddhism and attain wisdom, we will realize that wealth is like a puff of smoke, a fleeting cloud. No matter how much wealth we have, it is only something to see. Think about it, is the money we keep in our home really ours? If it were truly ours, then we would keep it instead of giving it to another. And yet, when we receive money, we pass it on to another. It was ours for a very short time. Thus, we should not place much importance on wealth.

A fellow Buddhist, who had immigrated abroad, told me that after he had made a million dollars in the stock market, he immediately lost it. I asked him why he had not listened to Liao Fan's Four Lessons. When we lose something it means that we were not supposed to have it, so there is no need to worry. We should neither be happy when we gain something nor unhappy when we lose it. To do so would be a sad waste of time. Those who understand and possess wisdom would instead use their precious time to chant the Buddhas' name. We need to understand the principles. If we are diligent in our practice and help to propagate the teachings to help others, we will gain infinite merit. Then, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will praise us.

What is meant by "respecting our elders"? It is making an extra effort in being attentive to and respecting parents, elder siblings, leaders, superiors or elders or those of high virtue, prestige and learning. When taking care of our parents at home, we are to do so with loving hearts and a gentle, accommodating appearance. We should not raise our voice but maintain a peaceful bearing. As we cultivate these virtues, they will become a part of us and we will change into a gentle-hearted person. This is the way we can touch the hearts of heaven.

In ancient China, those who taught young children placed great importance on basic education. They taught filial piety, respect and sincerity, which are the outlines of the teachings. Thus, the character nurtured in our childhood will become our nature when we are grown. This provides the foundation for the nurturing of sages and virtuous people which will provide for a moral society and a wisely managed country. Since ancient times, this has been the Chinese social tradition. The Chinese say that, "Education is most essential to establish a nation, train its leaders and govern its people". If the basic quality of education is not clearly recognized, incorrect viewpoints and thinking are enough to destroy the entire culture, country and even it's people! All the government officials in ancient China studied the works of wise sages and virtuous people. Even if some had selfish intentions, there were still some limits and rules they would only exceed so much. Doing so probably resulted in feelings of regret. Nowadays, sexual misconduct, criminal acts, wrongdoings are all viewed as matter of fact. We no longer have a "shameful heart", no longer feel remorse. We have lost our sense of morality and ethics. We have lost our conscience. And this is deeply troubling because all that separates us from other animals is our good heart.

Hopefully, fellow Buddhists will realize that sincerity and respect are the gateway to and the foundation for practicing Buddhism. "Sincerity and respect" are cultivated within our family. At home, we are filial to our parents and respectful of our elders and siblings. Accomplishing this will enable us to be in accordance with superiors, to be diligent and dependable in meeting our responsibilities as individuals, members of society and citizens of our country. As Mr. Liao-Fan said, "habits become one's nature". Once a good habit is formed, then "we will be gentle and this will touch the heart of heaven". When we are peaceful, kind and agreeable, we will be able to move the beings and spirits of heaven and earth.

Today, we have forgotten the ethical teachings of the human relationships. We are no longer moral. Instead, most people are mired in thoughts of greed, anger, ignorance and arrogance. Malevolent spirits, beings and demons have descended. Why? Our improper thinking has formed a connection with them. Naturally, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will not come. Humans were already committing wrongdoings, but now there are malevolent spirits and demons creating chaos as well! This is why our world will have disasters of increasing severity and frequency. When this happens, there may be many deaths. Only when we personally experience these grave occurrences, will we be awakened from delusion and improper viewpoints, regret our wrongdoings and turn back to the right path. It is truly regrettable that "small" disasters cannot bring this about. It will take a major disaster to awaken us. This is unavoidable.

We need to study Chinese history and view the chaos in the world from a historian's viewpoint to realize the source of good occurrences as well as of disasters. This will enable us to detect the Law of Cause and

Effect beforehand. What are people thinking today? What are they doing? Knowing this, we will know the future. The results that we are currently seeing come from causes created decades ago. The results of the causes that we are currently creating over and over will be seen in two to three decades. Previously, the seeds that were planted might have taken seven or eight decades to mature. But today, the increase of these bad causes is resulting in a shortening of the maturity period and in greater magnitude. This is horrifying! Good causes will always result in good effects and bad causes will always result in bad effects. The principle of cause and effects is correct, in unchangeable.

When carrying out deeds for our superiors or the government, we should follow the rules and not become unrestrained just because our superiors do not know what we are doing.

Before we convict someone of a crime, regardless of whether the crime is serious or not we should investigate carefully and handle the case justly. We should not abuse power and rights or be excessively harsh because our supervisor does not know what we are doing. When we face our supervisor, we should show him the same respect as if we were facing the heavens. (As the motto says), "This is the correct behavior handed down from our ancestors". It has a direct and important effect on our hidden virtues. Look at all the families who practiced loyalty and filial piety. Their descendants prospered for a long time and had bright futures. Therefore, we can follow their example and practice with caution.

If someone cultivates the virtues of loyalty and filial piety then they also will have descendents to last for a long time. But today, parents and children are more like friends and this is destroying the moral principles. Confucianism and Taoism teach us that moral principles and ethics are the nature of virtue. Closer examination of Buddhism shows that it is the revelation of the virtuous nature. Sages and virtuous people do not experience selfishness so they have revealed their virtuous nature. Confucianism is the revelation of our virtuous self-nature. When this self-nature is revealed, it will be the same as that of Confucius. It is the same as light. When his lights up, mine does as well. One light intermingling with another light to become one, is the revelation of the self-nature. This is the true greatness, is truly inconceivable, is the perfect and virtuous self-nature.

Filial piety and respect are for the tools we use to reveal, to uncover our virtuous self-nature. To become enlightened. In Buddhism, it is said that the most important requirement to uncovering our self-nature is to generate the Bodhi mind. The same is true for Confucianism, which also teaches us to practice the sincere and virtuous mind. We would do well to interact with others, matters and objects with filial piety, respect and sincerity. To do so without deceiving others or ourselves. To do things quietly by ourselves is the true way of doing good deeds and accumulating merits. It is said, "It has a direct and important effect on our hidden virtue". Cause and effect can be witnessed throughout history and up until today. It is the truth, not false. Therefore, when we give rise to a thought or perform a deed, do not think that no one will know. Other people may not know, but all the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will know. Mr. Liao Fan told us earlier, to reform and correct our faults, we need the shameful heart, the fearful heart and the courageous determined heart. To become a sage, a virtuous person, a Bodhisattva or a Buddha, we simply need to truly and to completely generate these three hearts to realize our goals in this lifetime.

What is meant by "loving and cherishing all living things"? A heart of compassion is what makes a person. A person in search of the virtues of mercy and kindness looks out for his or her heart of compassion. A person who wants to accumulate merits also cultivates a compassionate heart.

"A heart of compassion" is the heart that is kind and loving to all beings and matters. When we see animals suffering we naturally have sympathy for them. Do we all have this heart? Yes, everyone. If we shed tears while watching a sad movie, this is the heart of compassion. We possess the heart even when we know that the tragedies on TV and at the movies are not real. So it goes without saying that when we see real people or animals suffering, that we would try to help them.

Not only human beings possess the heart of compassion, animals also do. This is truly the virtuous nature, the original nature. The original nature of animals is no different from that of humans, but because they are even more deeply deluded than we are, they have become animals. All the beings in the Ten Dharma Realms share the same true nature. That is why the Buddha, in the Mahayana sutras, spoke of

"Unconditional great compassion and the kindness of realizing that we are one entity". The heart of compassion is the heart of great caring and loving-kindness. They both are revealed from our true nature. This is what "a person in search of the virtues of compassion and loving-kindness" is seeking. It is also what "A person wanting to accumulate virtues" is seeking. It is wanting to broaden the heart to love and care for others, to truly be able to love all beings and objects. We do our best to help them.

It is stated in the Book of Rites from the Zhou Dynasty, "In January, when most animals bear their young, females of the species are not to be used for sacrificial purposes".

In the past, three animals, cows, sheep and pigs were used in major sacrificial ceremonies. Most other ceremonies would use just pigs. They did not use females for offerings that were made in the spring, because if the female was pregnant, then they would have been killing two lives. This is compassion.

Mencius once said, "an honorable person will not go near the kitchen". This is to protect a compassionate heart.

The purpose of Mencius saying this is the same as that of the Buddha in teaching of the "three pure meats", (we only eat animals when) we did not see the actual killing, hear the killing or have the animal killed for ourselves. It was the custom in India to go from house to house accepting food offerings. So whatever was offered, was eaten. No discrimination, no attachments and no choices. That is true compassion, according with conditions and not seeking affinities. Simply accept and eat whatever people offer. This tradition is still carried on today where Theravada Buddhism is practiced, for example in Thailand and Ceylon. When Buddhism was transmitted into China, at the time it was considered the most advanced and civilized country in the world regarding manners. Now there are no more manners left. In etiquette, the Chinese cannot compete with other countries; it is truly a failure of education.

When the Dharma masters were invited to China, the Chinese looked down on begging, so it would have been inappropriate to tell them to go out and beg for food. So, they were instead offered food in the palaces. The practice of going out to ask for food never really took hold in China, however the "Three pure meats" rule was always observed when offering food to the Dharma masters.

Emperor Liang Wu initially advocated vegetarianism for Buddhists. Throughout the Buddhist world, only Chinese practitioners, whether monks, nuns or laypeople are vegetarians. When we have attended international conferences, we have not seen monks or nuns from other countries practicing vegetarianism. So people need to know that, the tradition of Buddhism is to practice the three pure meat rule, not vegetarianism. The Chinese initially advocated vegetarianism. It is sanitary, protects nature and protects the compassionate heart. It is the practices of loving-kindness for all beings and things. When we understand that it is also the best and healthiest food, we will see that it is worth out efforts to advocate its practice.

Mencius taught that it was good to not be near the kitchen so one would not see or hear the killing. Then the individual would have been more at ease when eating. But actually, the mind of compassion could still not be at rest. So, it is best to not eat the flesh of living beings, especially today when we so often hear of meat that contains toxins causing people to contract strange diseases. Where do these diseases come from? From the consumption of meat. Ancient people said, "Illness enter from the mouth". My late teacher, Mr. Bing-Nan Lee, often sighed as he said that modern people were taking poison at all three meals. How could we not get sick!

Therefore, our ancestors did not eat meat under four circumstances. First was if they heard the killing, second was if they saw the killing, third was if they raised the animal themselves and fourth was if they had the animal killed for their consumption. Even if we cannot stop eating meat immediately, we can still try to start by following these four guidelines. In this way, we are gradually increasing our compassion. We would not only refrain from killing any living creature, but insects as well, for they are also living creatures. Man makes silk from the cocoons of silkworms. The cocoons have to be boiled in water first, with the silkworms inside. When we cultivate the land for farming, how many insects have to be killed? We need to be aware of the cost in lives involved in our everyday food and clothing. We kill to provide for ourselves. Therefore, to waste food and clothing would create the same violation as killing.

This speaks of the three pure meats with an additional rule that monks and nuns may not raise animals.

Raising animals and then killing them to eat is truly unacceptable. Practitioners who are unable to become vegetarian can practice the "three pure meats", and the "four circumstantial meats" rules, to cultivate great compassionate hearts.

Our life span in this world is short, only a few decades long. Yet in order to nurture ourselves we kill others. We are steeped in debt to all beings, regardless of whether we have harmed them intentionally or unintentionally. Just imagine how much bad karma we ourselves have created! This is why the Buddha said, "If bad karma had shape and volume, then even the entire universe could not contain it". We have an inconceivable amount of karmic obstacles. Only when we realize this, will we become more alert and cautious. How can we be responsible for all living beings between heaven and earth? We obviously need to strictly abide by the rules of not killing. But also we need to be frugal in our daily living, drinking and eating and not waste anything.

Modern people advocate consumption by saying that if people did not spend money then the factories would be closed down and the economy would collapse. Do you believe that this is correct? If Master Jung-Feng heard this he would say, "not necessarily". Actually, this is very incorrect. Many countries promote consumption and thus waste, yet their economies are still declining.

Only by being thrifty will people, a country, become rich, prosperous and peaceful. If there are no habits of saving, how can the country become prosperous and strong? How can the citizens have stable lives? If we have no savings, when we are out of a job we will have to depend on the country for financial aid and thus increase the financial problems of the country. If however, we have the habit of saving, then even if we became unemployed or suffered adversity, we could still live and not depend on the country. We need to be aware of this and to value our resources and powers.

How often have we unknowingly harmed or stepped on a living creature? We should do our best to prevent this from happening again. An ancient great poet once wrote, "In love of the mice, we often leave them some rice. In pitying the moth, we will not light the lamp". What a kind and compassionate statement!

The above words are for our understanding for modern society would strongly disagree with them. How can we "love mice"? Mice are harmful to human beings. Consequently, mice are often exterminated. People do not understand about the Six Realms of Reincarnation. When we kill mice, they will seek revenge. This cycle of revenge will continue, growing worse each time. Does killing them really solve anything? Are there not any other solutions to the problem? There is no such thing as walking away "Scot free" after a murder. No such thing as not paying our debts. By really understanding the reality, that the Law of Cause and Effect connects our past, present and future lifetimes, we would not do anything bad. For if we do, it will come back to us! There is no such thing as a free lunch. Once, we understand this principle, then we would never again harm any living beings, never again make an enemy of them, never again owe debts to others. This is how our minds will be at peace in this life. Only true sincerity, purity and compassion in this world can solve the seemingly insurmountable problems of human beings. So, it is essential to read our primary sutra.

There are infinite types of goodness. I cannot mention them all. As long as we can expand on the ten previous categories, we can make them into a multitude of good deeds and virtues.

The first lesson, "Learning to Create Destiny" talks about the Law of Cause and Effect. The second lesson, "The Ways to Reform" is built on understanding the Law of Cause and Effect. This third lesson, "The Ways to Cultivate Goodness" is the primary lesson, that of cultivating and accumulating good deeds. It is built on the basis of feeling regret and reforming our faults. The fourth lesson, "The Benefits of the Virtue of Humility" is the conclusion for the book.

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

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