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## Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

### THE SECOND LESSON:

#### WAYS TO REFORM

The Reason to Reform:

To Avoid Misfortune and Accumulate Good Fortune

A Sign for all Good Fortune and Misfortune

The first lesson speaks of the Law of Cause & Effect. It concentrates on creating the confidence to alter destiny and the ways in which to do so. The second and third lessons place emphasis on the methods, thus they are concerned mainly with the ways to refrain from wrongdoing, accumulate virtues and change destiny.

During the Spring-Autumn Period, China was divided into several small nations. Many prestigious advisors and counselors of these nations were able to accurately predict whether a person's future would be good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate based on their observation of that person's speech and behavior. Many of these are recorded in history books.

From here, we can see the reality in ancient philosophy. Spring-Autumn, one of the Five Classics is an historic account of the Lu Nation. (It is a period mentioned throughout Liao-Fan's Four Lessons and refers to a period in China's history over two thousand years ago when the country was undergoing great change and turmoil.) Throughout his lifetime, Confucius edited and compiled these records into a book, which has been passed down through the centuries to this day. This book has commentaries written by many people.

The most popular and widely studied one has been extensively footnoted by Qiu-Ming Zuo and is called the Spring-Autumn Annals,. Confucius was not the author, but collected and edited the abundant records of the Spring-Autumn Annals by Zuo. Two other editions are the Gong-Yang Commentary and the Gu-Liang Commentary. By far, the Zuo's Commentary is the most accurate, best written and footnoted. All three editions have been compiled in the Thirteen Ancient Chinese Scriptures.

Mr. Liao-Fan told his son that there were many advisors during this period who were able to accurately predict whether a person's future would be good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate based on their observations of that person's speech and behavior. These predictions were later proven correct. On an individual basis, they could tell a person's success or failure. On a much larger scale, they could predict a country's rise and decline. Many of these examples have been proven in the articles found in the Spring-Autumn Annals and the National Language. All these tell of ancient Chinese history.

These individuals during this period had this ability because they understood the Law of Cause and Effect. When our speech and actions are good, and we are dignified and considerate, then it is safe to say that we will possess good fortune and a promising future. On the other hand, if our speech is harsh and our actions frivolous, then our

future will be gloomy. Even if we seem to be doing well now, this period of success will be short-lived, like a flower that blooms only once in one hundred years. Since our speech and actions can predict destiny, we would do well to place extra caution on our thoughts and behavior.

Usually, there are signs that signal impending danger or the coming of good fortune. These signs are a reflection of one's heart and mind. Though it is the mind from which thoughts arise, one's appearance can fully portray a person's character.

This is not just a theory but a fact that applies to individuals as well as to countries. A sign always precedes the actual occurrence of any event. The sign originates from the initial intention and is seen in thoughts and behavior. This is why calm and logical people are able to observe and predict future changes. He can see a nation's rise and fall through its people's desires and actions. It is said, "A country is based on its people". Just by observing the hearts and minds of people of all levels of society, what they are thinking and doing, we can often foresee a country's future, whether it is going to prosper or decline. The same applies to families. The manner in which the household members think and behave will greatly affect its success or failure. And this is true for individuals as well. There is a sign for everything and it is usually obvious to someone who has sufficient understanding and training to see it.

Usually a person is more fortunate when tending toward kindness but invites trouble when tending toward meanness. Ordinary people often do not know what is actually going on. It is as if their vision was blurred. Since they cannot see the true reality, they claim that good fortune and misfortune are unpredictable.

"Kindness" refers to our heart and behavior. Truly kind people will help others even if it means bringing harm to themselves. They will be strict with themselves but forgiving and lenient towards others. These people are bound to have an abundance of good fortune later in their lives. On the other hand, a person invites trouble when tending toward meanness. Such a person who treats others with disdain and concentrates only on self-indulgence can look forward to severe misfortune but they cannot see these signs. It is as if their vision is blurred, their eyes have been blindfolded. It would seem that there is no way to foretell destiny when actually, all the signs are right before their eyes. What types of people seek advice from fortunetellers? It is these ordinary people. What Mr. Liao-Fan told his son next is very important, we need to pay particularly close attention to and learn from it.

When we are absolutely honest and truthful, our hearts will be in agreement with the will of heaven.

This is the main principle. We must be sincere in all our actions towards others. We do not cheat others and we do not fool ourselves. The "Will of heaven" is what Buddhism calls the true nature. It is the state of having no wandering thoughts and constantly maintaining only those thoughts that are virtuous. When we are absolutely honest and truthful, our hearts will be in agreement with the will of heaven. In other words, even if we are presently suffering from hardships, they will soon be over and an abundance of good fortune will soon be ours. Therefore, whether in this world or beyond we need to begin from the foundation of sincerity.

Confucianism speaks of learning and cultivation. Within the Eight Guidelines, "the sincere and virtuous heart" is the essence. We accomplish this by "severing our desires and uncovering our self-nature". If we do not do this, we will be unable to accomplish ultimate sincerity. When severing desires, what are we cutting off? The Six Dusts or polluting factors of (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought) and the Five Desires for wealth, lust,

fame, food/drink and sleep. If these desires cannot be diminished, our hearts will be constantly affected by the external environment. How can such a heart hope to remain sincere?

Even if we cannot completely discard these desires, we can work to gradually curtail them. Most of us are immersed in our wandering thoughts, which are actually to no avail. The best thing for us to do is to abandon these thoughts and some of the enjoyments that we experience through our six senses and to be more considerate towards others. If we welcome others to share in our good fortune, then it will become even greater good fortune. Once we understand the logic in this, we need to act upon it.

When I started studying and practicing Buddhism, Liao-Fan's Four Lessons was my most significant introduction. A dedicated Buddhist, Mr. Jing-Zhou Zhu gave me this book as a gift. After reading it, I looked back on my life and realized that I had the same faults and destiny as Mr. Liao-Fan for I was also supposed to have a very short life. All the fortunetellers had told me that I was to die young, even Living Buddha Gan Zhu also said this. I believed them and was convinced that I was not going to live past age forty-five. Therefore, when I became a monk, I based my study on my presumed death at forty-five because that was all the time I had. I did not ask for a longer life. As expected, at forty-five I became seriously ill.

At that time, Master Ling-Yuan from Keelung's Da-Jue Temple was holding a summer retreat and asked me to lecture on the Surangama Sutra. I had only reached the third scroll when I became ill. I did not go to see a doctor or take any medication because I realized that my time was up. I simply stayed home every day, recited "Amitufo" and quietly waiting for my death and subsequent birth into the Pure Land. However, after a month, not only did I not die but also I regained my health! In all these years, as I have practiced according to this method and began to see the results I have felt increasingly confident. Now, I have let go of everything and I feel even more liberated.

Therefore, in order to receive, we must first let go. If we are reluctant to let go, then we will not be able to receive. The Chinese say "to give is to gain". This phrase comes from Buddhist sutras. We first give up something in order to receive something in return. If we do not give up then we will receive nothing. So, this lesson on reforming our destiny is all about letting go. What if we seek something? To seek also helps us to receive. But how do we do this? Just let go and we will receive everything we are seeking. First, we must let go of all our desires and wandering thoughts. Mr. Liao-Fan said, "When we are absolutely honest and truthful, our hearts will be in agreement with the will of heaven". This advises us to discard from the root, to discard our selfishness, to completely extinguish any thoughts of benefiting the self. Instead, all our considerations should be of how to benefit society, humanity and all living beings. Once this is achieved, we will gain infinite good fortune.

By observing our goodness, others will be able to foresee the coming of good fortune. On the other hand, by observing our lack of goodness, others can also foresee upcoming adversities.

Thus, all happiness and adversities have signs. Others know that good fortune is about to come to us when they see kindness in our hearts and behavior, for we let other people share in our good fortune. On the other hand, if we are unkind and selfish, robbing others of their benefits but never relinquishing any of our own, then our benefits and good fortune will eventually be used up and disappear. Once these have run out, there will be none left, then misfortune and calamities will befall us. So, as long as we continue to have reckless behavior, others will know that adversity will shortly occur. This principle of observation is applicable to an individual, a family, a society, a nation, even to the world. As long as we remain calm, composed and careful, we will be able to see

everything clearly. Therefore, it is possible to predict all good and bad fortune, happiness and suffering, a stable or turbulent world and even the rise and fall of a country.

The Basis of Reform:

A Perfect Awakening of Three Hearts

A Shameful Heart:

From Shame Comes Great Courage

If we wish to obtain good fortune and avoid misfortune, we must start first with reform before we even contemplate kind behavior.

We have seen how signs are only seen by those who have very pure minds and who can practice deep meditation. We do not have to practice Buddhism. We can be a Taoist, a Confucian, a scholar or simply someone who has attained purity of mind. The deeper the concentration, the farther we are able to see. This is why Buddhist sutras often tell us that an Arhat can see five hundred past lifetimes and five hundred future lifetimes. Actually, all living beings possess this ability for it is innate. This is the way it should be. However, this ability has now been lost because our minds have been distracted. Various wandering thoughts, discriminatory thoughts, attachments and afflictions have confused the mind sufficiently to lose its natural ability. Buddhism teaches us how to eliminate these pollutants and obstructions and to uncover our original self-nature.

Once we understand the principles, we then decide where to begin the process of reform. We have several effective methods. Each of us would like to attain good fortune, happiness and wisdom while avoiding adversity. Good fortune is the effect, which comes from good behavior, the cause. But if we do not first eliminate our karmic obstacles, good fortune will be difficult to obtain. Therefore, our primary objective is to rid ourselves of this negative karma. Some people believe in seeking outside of themselves not from within. Most people seek for what they wish, within the constant. This will not work. For, although we now place great hope in the knowledge that there is a variable in the course of things, that variable has yet to materialize. So how can we reach our final goal? We must first practice to purify our minds. What is goodness? When our minds are serene and pure, this is foremost goodness. When our mind is impure, then all the good deeds practiced will be tainted. Consequently, the amount of good fortune that we can receive would be limited. In other words, we have not yet thoroughly eliminated our karmic obstacles.

We can therefore conclude that preserving the mind of virtue and purity is of utmost importance. How do we return our mind to its natural state of purity? Just as Mr. Liao-Fan said, we must start with reform first before we even think about behaving kindly. The word “must” is a crucial requirement. So how do we reform our wrongdoings? The following are a few important guidelines.

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

**English website on how to practice Pure Land Buddhism:** <http://www.amitabuddha.co.cc>

**Boston Amita Buddhism Society new website:** <http://www.amtb-ma.org/>

## **Boston Amita Buddhism Society Activities**

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