Changing Destiny

A Commentary on Liaofan's Four Lessons

Venerable Master
Chin Kung

Revised Third Edition
2018

Translated by
Silent Voices

Published 2000.

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Translated by Silent Voices

Revised Third Edition
2018

Printed in Taiwan
by He Yu Publishing House

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Translator's Notes

In *Changing Destiny*, Venerable Master Chin Kung speaks of reciting Mr. Xia Lianju's compilation of the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Master Chin Kung has said that reciting the *Amitabha Sutra*, of which several translations are available on the Internet, is an excellent alternative.

We use the Chinese convention of placing the family name first, to be followed by the given name, courtesy name, or sobriquet.

We apologize for any errors and would be most appreciative if you would bring them to our attention. Please email us at purelandpress@gmail.com.

Respectfully,
Silent Voices
November 2017

Introduction

The book *Liaofan's Four Lessons* was written in the sixteenth century in China by Yuan Liaofan with the hope that it would teach his son, Yuan Tianqi, about destiny, how to differentiate good from bad, how to correct his faults, and how to practice good deeds to cultivate both virtue and humility. As an embodiment of his teachings, Liaofan was living proof of their benefits, for he had changed his destiny.

Learning to re-create destiny has long been of interest to those who believe that wealth or poverty, long life or short life—everything is destined. People who accomplished good deeds in their past lives will naturally enjoy wealthy and long lives now, while those who committed bad deeds in their past lives will undergo deprivations and short lives. However, there are exceptions.

Destiny can be changed.

If we were originally supposed to enjoy wealth and longevity in this lifetime, but have committed excessive bad deeds, then without waiting until the next life, we will become poor and have shortened lives. If we were originally supposed to undergo poverty and have short lives, but have accomplished exemplary deeds, we will become wealthy and have long lives. History provides many examples of this.

Although everything that we have to go through in this life is the result of our thoughts and behavior in our past lives and has been predetermined, it is not rigid. We can still modify it with our current thoughts and behavior.

As Buddhists, we are taught to refrain from evil, to do

good, and to purify our minds. This is the Dharma seal, our criteria to determine the genuineness of Buddhist teachings or truths. Buddhist sutras address principles and logic, and are spoken by five types of people. They are 1) Buddhas, in our case Sakyamuni Buddha, 2) his students, 3) heavenly beings, 4) immortals, and 5) manifested beings.

As long as what has been said conforms to the Buddha's teachings and does not contradict them, the Buddhas with their great broad-mindedness will recognize them as sutras. Thus, we should regard and respect as a sutra, any work that conforms to Buddhist principles.

This applies to *Liaofan's Four Lessons* for although it is not a Buddhist sutra, we need to respect and praise it as one. This is especially so for this book for it was certified and advocated by Great Master Yinguang, the thirteenth Patriarch of the Pure Land school. In the early part of the twentieth century, he dedicated his life to its propagation and was responsible for printing millions of copies as well as studying, practicing, and lecturing on it. Not only can it help to serve as a foundation in our learning, but more importantly, it can also serve as a foundation for non-Buddhists in helping them learn how to change their destinies.

There is much to learn, including principles and methods, all of which are covered in this book. Although it is relatively short, its impact can be significant. Therefore, if we wish to change our destiny or to truly achieve attainment through the practice of Buddhism, we would do well to accord with its guidance.

There are four chapters or lessons in this book. The first lesson of "Learning to Change Destiny" is about the law of cause and effect. The second lesson of "Ways to Reform" is developed from understanding causality. The third lesson of "Ways to Cultivate Goodness" is the primary lesson, that of cultivating and accumulating goodness. It is based on feeling regret and reforming our faults. And the fourth lesson of "Benefits of the Virtue of Humility" is the conclusion for the book.

The First Lesson:
Learning to Change Destiny

In this lesson, Liaofan told his son, Tianqi, about his personal experiences and those of others. Wanting Tianqi to do his best in practicing goodness and ending his incorrect behavior, to re-create and control his destiny and no longer be bound by it, Liaofan taught him the principles of why things happen and how to change them. For example, as Pure Land practitioners, if we are able to follow this method, we are assured of attaining happy, fulfilling lives and of being born into the Western Pure Land.

Mr. Kong's Accurate Predictions

> My father passed away when I was young. My mother persuaded me to learn medicine instead of studying and passing the imperial examinations because it would be a good way to support myself while helping others. Perhaps, I could even become famous through my medical skills; thus fulfilling my father's aspiration for me.

In ancient China, the purpose of studying and passing the imperial examinations was to become a government official. Thus, to stop studying for the examinations was to give up any chance to work in the government. A career in medicine would enable one to have a skill that would provide a good living in addition to helping others.

At that time, teachers did not charge a fee but accepted

whatever was offered. Wealthy families gave more; poor families gave less. As long as the student was sincere in honoring the teacher and respecting the teachings, the amount given was unimportant. The same applied to physicians. Their goal was to save lives, to do their very best to make others well. The payment for the services rendered was at the discretion of the patient. Both teachers and physicians were dedicated to helping others and were highly respected.

> One day, I met an elderly but distinguished looking gentleman at the Compassionate Cloud Temple. He had a long beard and the look of a sage. I immediately paid my respects to him. He told me: "You are destined to be a government official. Next year, you will attain the rank of Learned First Level Scholar. Why are you not studying for the examination?" I told him the reason.

This segment is about a turning point: Liaofan's opportunity to learn how to change his destiny. It described his meeting an elderly gentleman who had a handsome countenance, was tall with an elegant celestial air, and who did not look like an average person. Liaofan naturally paid his respects to him.

Because the elderly gentleman could foretell the future, he knew that Liaofan should have been studying and needed to do so as soon as possible.[1]

> I asked the elderly gentleman for his name and where he was from. He replied: "My family name is Kong and I am from Yunnan province. I have inherited a very sacred and accurate text on astrology and prediction. The text, written by Shaozi, is called the *Imperial Standard of Governing the World*. By my calculations, I am supposed to pass it on to you and teach you how to use it."

Shaozi was a scholar from the Song dynasty.[2] He was a well-known and highly-respected intellectual of his time. The sacred text on astrology is an in-depth book that has been compiled with others into the *Complete Works of the Four Treasuries*.[3]

The content of Shaozi's book is completely in accordance with the principles in *I Ching, the Book of Changes*[4] and predicts the future through mathematical calculations. The predictions in the book cover numerous subjects, including changes in countries and the world. The prosperity or decline of a dynasty, the good fortune or misfortune of an individual could all be completely extrapolated from mathematical calculations. This book of profound knowledge is based on a precise science and is both logical and credible.

Everybody and everything has a set destiny. Sakyamuni Buddha taught us that this is due to the law of causality. As long as we give rise to a cause, be it a thought, word, or act, a result that is a set destiny will follow. Only when the mind is

devoid of thought can we transcend the predetermination of the mathematics. Why are practitioners with high levels of achievement often able to transcend? Having attained the level of one mind undisturbed, their minds do not give rise to any thoughts. As long as we have thoughts, our fates will remain bound by the mathematics. A highly skilled person is able to accurately predict our futures through calculations.

Our lives are destined. Arhats or other sages with a higher level of spiritual enlightenment, who have already transcended samsara, the six paths of existence, are able to transcend their destiny.

Are the heavenly beings in the Form Realm and Formless Realm able to transcend their fate? Yes, for in their state of deep concentration, the mathematics cannot affect them. But this transcendence is only temporary. Once they lose their state of deep concentration and give rise to thoughts, they are again bound by mathematics. This is why they have never been able to transcend samsara.

If the strength of their concentration enabled them to transcend samsara and advance to the ninth concentration level to become non-regressive arhats, then they would no longer be bound by the mathematics. Once we understand these principles and know that everything is destined, we will look at this world with a non-discriminatory mind. We will not feel happy in favorable circumstances or unhappy in unfavorable circumstances.

> I invited Mr. Kong to my home and told my mother about him. She said to treat him well. As

> we tested Mr. Kong's ability at prediction, we found that he was always correct whether it was for big events or for minor everyday matters. I became convinced of what he had said and again began to think of studying for the examinations. I consulted my cousin who recommended Mr. Yu Haigu, who was teaching at the home of a friend,[5] and became Mr. Yu's student.

Liaofan invited Mr. Kong to his house and being a filial son, told his mother about him. She said to take good care of Mr. Kong and recommended that they test him. When someone tells us something, we would usually want to check its validity before believing it. When Liaofan did so and found Mr. Kong's predictions to be accurate, he became naturally convinced and heeded his advice.

> Mr. Kong then did some more calculations for me. He told me that as a scholar, I would be placed fourteenth in the county examination, seventy-first in the regional examination, and ninth in the provincial examination. The following year, I placed exactly where Mr. Kong had said for all three examinations.

Mr. Kong told Liaofan that he would rise through several stages of examinations to become a scholar. In the second year, the results of the examinations were exactly as expected.

From Mr. Kong's predictions for Mr. Liaofan, we can see

that everything is destined. Every day, every month, when and how we will live, when and how we will die. Regardless of how we try to plan, or even scheme, ordinary people cannot escape from this reality.

> I then asked him to make predictions for the rest of my life. Mr. Kong's calculations showed that I would pass such and such a test in such and such a year, the year that I would become a civil scholar, and the year that I would receive a promotion to become an Imperial Scholar.[6] And lastly, I would be appointed as a magistrate in Sichuan province.
>
> After holding that position for three and a half years, I would then retire and return home. I would die at the age of fifty-three, on the 14th day of the eighth month between one to three o'clock in the morning. Unfortunately, I would not have a son. I carefully recorded and remembered everything that he said.
>
> The outcome of every examination turned out exactly as predicted. Mr. Kong had also predicted that I would only be promoted after receiving a ration of ninety-one *dan* and five *dou* of rice.[7] However, I had received only seventy dan when the Commissioner of Education, Mr. Tu, recommended me for a promotion. I secretly began to doubt the prediction. Nevertheless, it turned out to be correct after all, because Mr. Tu's replacement reversed the approval for my

promotion.

> It was not until some years later that a new Education Commissioner, Mr. Yin, reviewed my old examination papers and exclaimed, "These five essays are as well written as reports to the emperor. How can we bury the talents of such a great scholar?"

When Liaofan's salary reached almost seventy dan of rice, Mr. Tu approved his promotion. Liaofan began to doubt the predictions. However, either due to a promotion or a transfer, Mr. Tu was replaced by another person who disagreed with Liaofan's promotion and overruled it.

It was a few years later that another official, Mr. Yin, went through the papers of those who had failed the examination. These papers were kept and re-read occasionally with the hope of finding talented individuals who had been overlooked. He read Liaofan's papers and was very impressed with them, saying they were as well written as official recommendations from government officials to the emperor. Obviously, Liaofan was very knowledgeable and his papers were extremely well written.

> The new commissioner wanted the magistrate to issue an order for me to become a candidate for Imperial Scholar [8] under his authority. After undergoing this eventful promotion, my calculations showed that I had received exactly ninety-one dan and five dou of rice. From then

> on, I deeply believed that promotion or demotion, wealth or poverty all came about in due time and that even the length of one's life is pre-arranged. I began to view everything in a detached manner and ceased to seek gain or profit.

We can see that Mr. Tu was an exceptional person for he had wanted to promote Liaofan as soon as he read the examination papers. However, his replacement overruled the promotion. It was because these two people had different opinions.

Liaofan was obviously very talented. From this we learn that even a talented person is still bound by destiny. Whether destiny, time, or cause and condition, everything is predetermined. Liaofan had to wait until another government official read his papers for the proper conditions to mature in order to receive his promotion.

From then on, Liaofan was awakened and he truly understood. All of our encounters in life, whether good fortune or bad fortune, good luck or bad luck, wealth or poverty—all are destined. Ordinary people cannot change this. If we are not supposed to have something, no amount of trying to hold on to it will succeed for long. Conversely, we will naturally receive what we are supposed to. It is not worth the effort to do what is wrong and to risk all in the hope of attaining self-satisfaction.

Understanding this, Liaofan no longer had any thoughts of demand or of gain and loss. He was truly at peace. We can say that at this point, he was a "perfect" ordinary person.

Today, people cannot even meet this standard for ordinary person. Why? Our minds are impure and filled with wandering thoughts. Liaofan did not have wishful, wandering thoughts since he already knew everything that was going to happen in his life. Ancient sages said that a wise and virtuous person knows that everything including "one sip and one bite" is destined. However, foolish people relentlessly pursue things that are already destined to be theirs.

Ordinary people are bound by their destiny. At this time, Liaofan only knew that life was destined. He did not yet know that there was a variable and that by practicing in accordance with true principles and methods he could change his destiny. In this way, he could attain whatever he wished for, as he became the master of his future.

For example, if we wish to attain wealth, we practice the giving of wealth. To attain intelligence and wisdom, we practice the giving of teaching. To attain health and longevity, we practice the giving of fearlessness. This is the correct way to change our destiny. By following the right principles and methods, we can even attain supreme enlightenment much less worldly enjoyment and happiness.

> After being selected as an Imperial Scholar, I was to attend the University at Beijing. During my yearlong stay in the capital, my interest in meditation grew and I often sat in silence, without giving rise to a single thought. I lost interest in books and stopped studying.

Liaofan was now meditating daily. From this, we can see

how peaceful and quiet his mind had become. When the mind is tranquil, wisdom will naturally arise. The wisdom of most people is non-functional because their minds are not pure. Liaofan was able to remain calm because he knew his entire future. He knew that it was useless even to think about it. Without wishful thoughts, his mind naturally became settled.

Master Yungu's Advice on Changing Destiny

The Principle of Changing Destiny

> The following year I went to Nanjing. Before I was to enter the National University there, I paid a visit to Master Yungu, a venerable Zen master at Qixia Mountain. We sat in meditation, face to face in the Zen hall for three days and nights without sleep.
>
> Master Yungu said: "The reason why ordinary people cannot become sages is because of wandering thoughts. In our three-day meditation, I have not observed a single thought arise in you. Why?"
>
> I replied that Mr. Kong had clearly predicted the entire outcome of my life. I had seen that the time of life, death, promotion, and failure are destined. There was no need for me to think of anything.

> The master smiled and replied: "I thought you were someone of remarkable capabilities! Now I realize you are an ordinary person!"

Liaofan and Master Yungu sat face to face in the meditation hall for three days without fatigue or sleep. How? Because they did not have any wandering thoughts, they were able to conserve all of their energy. Master Yungu thought Liaofan to be extremely young to have achieved this difficult and rare level of cultivation.

Ordinary people are unable to become arhats or attain higher levels of achievement because they have so many wandering thoughts. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* tells us: "All sentient beings have the same wisdom and virtuous abilities as the Buddha; but, because of wandering thoughts and attachments, sentient beings are unable to uncover their abilities." So, the cause of not being able to become a sage is our wandering thoughts.

> Feeling confused by what Master Yungu had said, I asked him to explain. He told me that an ordinary person's mind is forever occupied by wandering and imaginary thoughts, so naturally his or her life is bound by the mathematics of destiny. We cannot deny the fact that destiny exists, but only ordinary people are bound by it.
>
> Destiny cannot bind those who cultivate great kindness or those who have committed flagrant wrongdoings. Since I had lived my life just as Mr.

> Kong had predicted and done nothing to change it, I had been bound by destiny. Thus, I was a typical ordinary person.
>
> Taken aback, I asked Master Yungu if we could change our destiny. He answered: "We can re-create our own destiny and seek good fortune. It is the true teaching and is found in the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of History*."[9]

Master Yungu explained that if one has not yet attained the state without wandering thoughts, then one is still at the mercy of destiny. Why? If a person had reached the state of no wandering thoughts, he or she would have transcended the control of destiny. Did Liaofan reach this state of no wandering thoughts? No. He simply did not wish to think about anything because he realized the futility of doing so! But he still had wandering thoughts. He still thought: "I do not need to think about anything. My destiny has been foretold; thus, I clearly know my whole life." Having yet to reach the state of no wandering thoughts, we are still bound by our destiny.

Profoundly deep concentration is not achievable by ordinary people in our world. When the Zen Patriarch Master Huang Bi was in this state of deep concentration, he was able to break through the dimensions of time and space. At this point, the past, present, and future all become one; thus, everything is perfectly visible. Using mathematics to deduce the future is achievable by ordinary people in this world. However, they are unable to actually see the past,

present, and future. It requires deep concentration to reach the state of being able to see the future. This is only achievable by those with deep concentration beyond the third stage of sagehood in Theravada Buddhism.

Master Yungu told Liaofan that although ordinary people are bound by destiny, it cannot control those who have accomplished numerous exemplary deeds. Neither can it control those who have committed many flagrant offenses. Liaofan had been bound by Mr. Kong's predictions for twenty years. He had done nothing to change them and so he was indeed an ordinary person. A person of great virtue also had a set destiny but he or she has changed it. The same applies to those who have committed excessive offenses, for they too have changed their destinies. We can see that Liaofan did not cultivate either extremely good or bad deeds since his life accorded so completely with what had been predicted.

Can destiny be changed? Can we escape it? Yes. To escape is to transcend. Although there are variables in the set numbers, Mr. Kong, either not knowing about the variables or not knowing how to calculate them, had predicted just the set numbers. Since the variables are within our control, we can re-create our own destiny. We can seek our good fortune.

Before meeting with the master, Liaofan did not know about these variables. Did the master believe that the set numbers existed, that the future could be calculated? Yes. "Before a person achieves the state of no wandering thoughts, he or she is bound by destiny." Master Yungu

completely acknowledged the reality of predestination. However, Buddhism is not about predestination; it is about re-creating destiny. We can only depend on ourselves to do this, to become awakened; no one else can do this for us.

"We re-create our own destinies and seek our good fortune." Since Liaofan was a scholar, he knew the teachings of Confucius and so the master cited principles from the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of History* to awaken him. Master Yungu understood these teachings, and confirmed that they were important and true.

> In the Buddhist teachings, it is written that if we wish for and seek wealth, a high position, a son, a daughter, or long life, we can attain it. Since the Buddha told us that lying is one of the greatest transgressions, we can be assured that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas would not deceive us.

As Buddhists, we learn that in seeking wealth, one will attain wealth and in seeking children, one will attain children. Even if we were not meant to have children in this life, upon practicing goodness we can have a child. We learned from the text that Liaofan was not meant to have a long life; he was supposed to die at fifty-three [but he lived until the age of seventy-four]. By cultivating according to the teachings, we will attain whatever we seek. Buddhism encourages us to re-create our destiny rather than be constrained by them.

Zhangjia Living Buddha[10] said, "In Buddhism, all of our sincere pleas will be answered." He explained that most people are unable to attain what they want because they do

not accord with the teachings. If we understand the principles and methods, and have sought something in accordance with them, then we are assured of receiving a response to our sincere requests. If we do not receive the desired response after having accorded with the teachings, it is due to our karmic obstacles. Once we have successfully eradicated these obstacles, we will gain the desired results. As Zhangjia Living Buddha said, with proper seeking, we can receive everything.

Once we understand the fundamental principles, we will understand that everything in this world and beyond arises from the mind and changes according to our perceptions. If we seek to become Buddhas, we will become Buddhas. If we seek to become heavenly beings, we will become heavenly beings. Everything accords with the mind. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* tells us: "We should observe the nature of the Dharma Realm as everything is created by the mind." Therefore, the way of seeking is to accord with the principle that everything arises from the mind and is changed by our perceptions.

The teachings of the Buddha are appropriate and perfect. Then if we seek youth, health, eternal life in accordance with these teachings, can we attain them? Certainly! In this case, Master Yungu only taught Liaofan some of the related principles and methods because Liaofan was not very ambitious and only sought fame, wealth, and prestige.

Master Yungu told him that lying is one of the worst transgressions in Buddhism. There are four fundamental precepts: no killing, no stealing, no lying, and no sexual misconduct. Since, no lying is one of these precepts, how could the Buddha ever deceive us? Thus, the master spoke

the truth when he said that whether a person sought children, wealth, or long life, all could be obtained. We will see that as Liaofan had strictly practiced according to the master's guidance, he obtained what he sought.

> I told Master Yungu that I had heard that Mencius once said: "Whatever is sought can be attained. The seeking is within ourselves." This refers to inner qualities such as virtue, integrity, and kindness. These are all values we can work toward. However, when it comes to outside factors such as wealth, fame, and prestige, how can we seek to attain them? The master replied that Mencius was right, but that I had misunderstood his meaning.

Enhancing our intrinsic qualities to become sages and virtuous people is within our control. But how do we seek fame, wealth, and prestige? Although these are external benefits, they are also attainable through seeking. It would seem that they were destined because if we are not supposed to have something, how could we seek it? This is the general understanding of destiny, a constant in predestination. The constant is the cause that we have created in our past lives and the result that we should receive in this life. Most people do not know that there are variables within the constants and that the results will change with the addition of variables. Fame, wealth, and prestige are indeed attainable.

> Master Yungu said that Master Huineng,[11] the

> sixth Patriarch of the Zen school, taught: "All the fields of merit are within one's own heart. If one seeks from the true mind within, one can be in touch with all that one wishes for." By seeking within ourselves, we will not only attain the inner qualities of virtue, integrity, and kindness; we will also attain [external benefits such as] wealth, fame, and prestige. To be able to attain both inner qualities and external benefits is invaluable.

Whether attaining something outside of ourselves such as material objects or inside ourselves such as virtues, we still need to seek from within, from the mind. Seeking from the outside would be futile. Why? The outside factor is a constant; it cannot change. The mind is a variable; it changes. For twenty years, when compared to ordinary people, Liaofan's mind was pure. Not knowing of the variables, his mind accorded completely with the constants and his life had unfolded exactly as predicted, without the slightest deviation.

Master Yungu explained that the seeking is in ourself. Virtue, morality, kindness, and integrity are on the inside and are the cultivation of virtuous conduct. Fame, wealth, and prestige are on the outside and are the enjoyments in life. To be able to receive both kinds of benefits is of great value. As is said in the *Avatamsaka Sutra:* "not to be hindered in the matter of phenomena or principles" is the ultimate and perfect enjoyment. This is the great perfection of everything going as we wish, when we are satisfied with everything. This is to be liberated; it is to do all that is benevolent and noble

as we wish. If we cannot attain such wonderful results, there would be no point in our practicing.

Buddhism is neither negative nor passive; it is eminently realistic and practical. Today, many people talk about practicality. Well, there is nothing more so than Buddhism for it addresses reality, something truly attainable. It is crucial that we understand its importance so as to derive its benefits. The truth is that people have misunderstood Buddhism, and thus have missed its benefits. If we are able to personally experience the benefits, we will know that of all teachings, Buddhism is an unsurpassed, profound, and complete education. It is definitely not outdated. It is as appropriate now as it was three thousand years ago and it is fitting for all people whether in the east or in the west.

> Master Yungu then told me that if one does not reflect inside one's own heart; but, instead blindly seeks fame, fortune, and long life from outside sources, no matter how one schemes to pursue them, one can only attain, at most, what had been destined. Seeking from the outside, one might lose both inner purity and what one was destined to have; thus, the seeking would have been in vain.

As ordinary people, can we attain everything we want? No. When we obtain something, it is because we were destined to have it. Only when we receive what we are not destined to have, can it be said that we have gained what we sought. It does not count when we receive what we are supposed to have for we would have gained it regardless.

We have all heard of those who made millions of dollars in the stock market. But these people simply received what they were supposed to have. Others who are not destined to make money will eventually lose it in the stock market. Not everyone profits from it. Likewise, money won from gambling is something the gambler was meant to have. Even the thief was meant to have what was stolen. If he was not supposed to have it, he would have failed in his attempt to steal it. [If he did not steal, the items would have come from another source.]

The ancients said that a person of noble character and integrity is happy to be such, but it is not worth the effort for a fool to be so. Why? Because each will not be able to escape their own destiny, the constant. If we could just understand the principles, we would all be content with what we have. In this way, we would enjoy fulfilling lives, society would be stable, the world would be peaceful, and there would be no more conflicts or wars.

Buddhism teaches us to seek something not destined in our lives, not within the constant. What we attain from seeking comes from the variable. How do we seek? From within! We have not been able to seek awakening and to develop great virtue from within because we do not yet understand the principle. We have been seeking from without: working and even scheming every day. But in seeking, we need to follow the right path, for even if we have the method, the plan, and the means, we will merely attain what we are destined to. If we are not supposed to have it, we will not get it.

All that we attained was destined, our constants. Liaofan understood that there were constants; so, he did not worry or seek in an improper way. He knew his destiny. He knew that to give rise to wandering thoughts or to use whatever means possible was doomed to failure if it was not supposed to be. Seeking from without, we will be totally at a loss because our minds will be impure and we will only obtain what is destined. How could we not give rise to afflictions when such seeking is frustrated? For twenty years, Liaofan conformed to Mr. Kong's predictions. He maintained a state of contentment and a mind of purity. He had no wish to seek anything for he felt that everything was destined.

Ordinary people who do everything possible in seeking things from without will find that their knowledge and experiences are incomparable to those of Liaofan because he had achieved peace of mind. Ordinary people will end up living with afflictions and unsettled minds. Whatever they attain is something they are supposed to have; thus, they sadly lose from both within and without.

The Ways of Changing Destiny

To Acknowledge our Faults

> Master Yungu next asked about Mr. Kong's predictions for the rest of my life. I honestly told him everything. He asked if I felt that I deserved imperial appointments or a son. Reflecting on my past deeds and attitudes, I answered no I did not.

> Those who received imperial appointments all had the appearance of good fortune but I did not.
>
> I also did not work towards accumulating virtues to build up my good fortune. I was very impatient and narrow-minded, and would show off my intelligence and abilities by putting others down. I behaved as I pleased and spoke without restraint. These were all signs of scant good fortune and virtue. How could I possibly receive an imperial appointment?

Master Yungu did not directly answer the question. Rather, he asked Liaofan a question to teach him to reflect and to find the cause of his faults and sufferings; to determine whether he deserved an imperial appointment or not, and whether he deserved to have a son. Of course, the discussion between Master Yungu and Liaofan did not only include these two questions, but to Liaofan these two were the most important. There was no need to mention the rest. Liaofan thought for a long time about what the master had asked. He then honestly answered that no, he deserved neither an imperial appointment nor a son.

On his honesty, Mr. You Xiyin in his commentary on *Liaofan's Four Lessons* stated: "Honesty is the foundation in developing virtue. If a person hides or glosses over his or her faults, or covers up mistakes, how can his or her future be promising?" When we are honest and encounter benevolent teachers, they will take care in guiding us. If we are dishonest and arrogant, they will smile but will not seriously teach us.

Liaofan deeply regretted his faults and this became the key to changing his destiny. He told Master Yungu that he did not deserve an imperial appointment because he did not have the appearance of good fortune that was very important for government officials. Citizens will suffer under the rein of an official that lacks good fortune, but benefit when the official has it.

Upon examination of ancient social systems, we see that educated and logical people did not quarrel. We can also see that some emperors were very wise. For example, Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty[12] was extremely learned, broad-minded, and admired by the people. He asked: "What is so good about being an emperor? To be one is a grave responsibility. If you wish, you can take my place." As the emperor, he did not enjoy or use his position to intimidate others, but served the people and enabled them to enjoy happiness. Also, to better serve the people, he found capable scholars to work on behalf of the empire.

All caring government officials have the appearance, or signs, of good fortune. Liaofan at this time in his life had very little good fortune and was unable or unwilling to cultivate any. Thus, he did not even have the appearance of a government official and, consequently, was inadequate to serve or to lead.

Next, Liaofan explained that he was very impatient, intolerant, and undisciplined—three serious faults. Being impatient and bad-tempered gives us the appearance of little good fortune. Being narrow-minded renders us unable to tolerate others. These bad qualities would cause a person to

improperly supervise, lead, or justly serve others.

Also, he frankly admitted that he was self-indulgent and liked to show off his intelligence. He did whatever he wished. This is also something not readily endured by others. He was indiscreet and irresponsible in his speech, and lacked consideration for others. All these faults bring misfortune rather than good fortune.

People who truly have good fortune are kindhearted, honest, and tolerant. Their speech and manner are calm and dignified. Confucius said: "Without dignity, one is unable to inspire others." Only with dignity and the ability to inspire respect are we able to effectively interact with others. Liaofan admitted that when he was young, he simply was not calm or dignified and cited this as one of the reasons that he lacked good fortune and was thus, undeserving of an imperial appointment.

> There is an old saying that "Life springs from the dirt of the earth while clear water often harbors no fish." The first reason why I felt that I did not deserve a son was that I was obsessive about cleanliness. The second reason was that while harmony is the cultivator of life, I was quick-tempered. Third, although loving-kindness is the cause of fertility and harshness the cause of sterility, I was selfishly concerned about my reputation and would not sacrifice anything for others.

The fourth reason was that I talked too much and

> this wasted a lot of energy. Fifth, I drank too much. And sixth, I did not have a son because I often stayed up all night and wasted my energy. Aside from these, I had many other faults that were too numerous to mention.

Fish are generally not found in clear water. Why? They know that when they are seen they are easier to catch. The saying also pointed out that nothing would grow without dirt. Liaofan had an exaggerated fear of things not being clean. Being clean and neat is a good quality; however, to be overly so can become an obsession. It is not good when one cannot tolerate even the slightest bit of dirt. This was one reason why he did not deserve a son.

Harmony can help a family to prosper, and friendliness is conducive to wealth. Liaofan's bad temper was one of the reasons he was not wealthy and this placed his family in a precarious financial situation. Also, he was easily angered by the least provocation and could not tolerate anything displeasing. To behave in this manner resulted in a lack of good fortune and this was another reason he did not deserve a son.

Loving-kindness is caring for others. Liaofan understood the principles, but was unable to act on them. Why? He was a very unkind person! He overvalued his own reputation and was unwilling to help others. This was another reason why he did not deserve a son. Also, he talked too much, which wasted a lot of energy. Liaofan came up with six main reasons why he did not have children. The first three were

being obsessive over cleanliness, being quick-tempered, and lacking loving-kindness. These were from the aspect of intention, or the mind.

The next three were talking too much, drinking, and staying up all night. They were from the aspect of behavior, or the body. He liked to talk and criticize others. He indulged in gossiping about other's faults and was argumentative. These harm the body and exhaust one's energy. He also liked to drink excessively and this harms the mind and tires the spirit. Finally, he said he did not deserve a son because he spent his nights talking with friends, drinking, having a good time, and not bothering to look after his health.

By realizing that he had so many bad habits and faults, Liaofan honestly admitted and regretted all his flawed behavior. To acknowledge all of one's offenses without hiding anything is to regret and eradicate one's karmic obstacles. This must be done sincerely to be effective. Awakening is achieved when we are able to identify our faults. Cultivation is accomplished when we have recognized these faults and corrected them. Since most people are unaware of their mistakes, they are not truly cultivating. Therefore, the first step is to recognize our bad habits. Liaofan was so unusual because once Master Yungu questioned him, he was able to carefully reflect and to discover all his faults. This is how he was able to change his future from then on.

How was he able to do this? And why are we unable to? Completely unaware of our bad habits, we are of course

unable to correct them. Liaofan was able to reflect, uncover, and change all of his improper behavior. In this way, he attained what he sought. On the inside, he attained virtuous and caring conduct, and on the outside wealth and children. He did not seek from without. We did not see him bowing and burning incense in front of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva seeking children, fame, and wealth. But today, people seek what they want by merely going through the formalities of blindly worshiping. They do not understand the principles. They seek what they desire, but just going through the formalities is the wrong way to do so and will lead to failure.

Day and night, we see countless people going to temples, burning candles and incense while asking for wealth and children, basically to attain what their destiny had already ensured them of receiving. In their ignorance, they would think what they received was granted by the grace of heaven. Practitioners need to understand the reality and to seek in accordance with the teachings. As Master Yungu said, it is to gain from both within and without. In this way, we can attain whatever we seek.

> Master Yungu said: "According to you then, there are many other things in life you do not deserve, not only fame and a son! Those who have millions of dollars in this life cultivated the good fortune worthy of that amount in the past. Those who have thousands of dollars must also have the good fortune worthy of that sum. Those, who die of starvation, were in fact meant to die in that

> manner. The karmic result today is simply the fruit of their own deeds and has nothing to do with external powers.

This advice from the master is most important and must not be regarded as mere superstition. If we do so, it is due to our delusion and inability to believe what the sages have told us. Master Yungu taught Liaofan to honestly reflect within and doing this enabled him to recognize his many faults. The greatest virtuous deed is that we recognize and change our mistaken behavior.

Making offerings to infinite sages is also a great virtuous deed. But we learn from the *Infinite Life Sutra* that it is even better to turn back from delusion and to conscientiously cultivate. Cultivation is to change ourself. The ancient sages regarded it as the great virtue of regretting and reforming.

Master Yungu told Liaofan that apparently he felt there were many things in life that he did not deserve, not only a son or an imperial appointment. Attaining a high grade in the examinations and the resultant imperial appointment both relied on the cultivation and accumulation of merit from one's past lives. We need the right conditions to have millions of dollars or social position. These are not randomly attained.

In Buddhism, it is said that for us to possess wealth in this life, we needed to have extensively practiced the giving of wealth in our past lives. Can we force nature to give us wealth? Impossible! To try to do so will bring disaster and misfortune. "Neither misfortune nor good fortune come

without reasons and conditions; we incur them."[13]

The ancients who created Chinese characters had great wisdom. The two characters for good fortune, 福, and misfortune, 禍, differ only by a little. This illustrates that a small discrepancy leads to a serious error. All this helps us to understand cause and effect. When we seek fame, wealth, and prestige in accordance with the teachings, we will find that everything is attainable.

"Millions of dollars" represents wealth of the upper class. "Thousands of dollars" represents wealth of the middle class. Because of the good causes planted in past lives, some people will possess great or moderate wealth. Those who starve to death committed numerous offenses in their past lives. Being miserly, they did not practice giving. Today unfortunately, many such people are unwilling to do the slightest of good deeds or to give even a little. While encouraging others to give, they do not follow their own advice. They will undergo poverty in future lifetimes.

We reap what we sow.

Our lives are not controlled by external powers. The master said that the heavens do nothing more than punish those who are bad with the suffering they deserve and reward those who are kind with the good fortune they have earned. Some people assume that everything is arranged by the will of heaven; but this is not so. The true cause of everything that happens to us is our thoughts and behavior. Heaven does not have any plans for us. With true wisdom, we will clearly see the truth. To be wealthy with a good social position or to be poor with none all lies within us.

> "For example, if a person has accumulated enough merits and virtues to last a hundred generations, then he or she will have a hundred generations of descendants. One who accumulates enough merits and virtues to last ten generations will have ten generations of descendants to live out that good fortune. The same applies to three or two generations. Those who have no descendants had too little merits and virtues.

This talks about the destiny of having or not having children. If we have accumulated enough merits and virtues for a hundred generations, then we will have a hundred generations of descendants. Great Master Yinguang often praised Confucius, who cultivated the "virtue of a hundred generations." Confucius constantly thought of benefiting the country and its people, without the slightest thought of himself. He dedicated his life to education and passed on his ideals and hopes to his students. He was the greatest educator in Chinese history.

There have now been over seventy generations of Confucius' descendants and his current descendant, Mr. Kong Decheng, is still respected by people all around the world. Not only the Chinese, but others are also courteous and respectful, warmly welcoming him upon hearing that he is the descendant of Confucius. From this, it becomes evident that by planting good seeds or causes, we reap good harvests or results.

In *Liaofan's Four Lessons*, we read that when we

accumulate enough merits and virtues for ten generations, we will have ten generations of descendants to enjoy that good fortune. Throughout Chinese history, emperors tried to establish dynasties that were able to reign for many generations, such as the Qing dynasty that lasted for ten generations. But, if their ancestors had not accumulated enough merits and virtues then it would have been impossible.

Today, people do not know or believe this. They think all they need is ability, good political tactics, and knowledge. But they are wrong. Virtues accumulated by our ancestors plus our virtuous conduct from our past lives will result in having additional virtuous people being reborn into our families, assuring its continuation.

Similarly, how many generations will a family business last? In Taiwan, there is a chain of medical stores called Universal Compassion Hall that originated in Beijing. By the accumulation of virtues and merits, it has been in business for over a hundred years and has been passed down through succeeding generations. Compassionate ancestors, whose driving ambition was to save lives, founded it. Unconcerned about profits, they only wanted to make enough to live very simply. Their goal was not to enjoy a comfortable life, but to benefit society and to help those who were suffering.

With this objective, they were able to found a business that has lasted over a hundred years. If the descendants do not deviate from their ancestor's objectives, this chain will continue forever. They will not be like those who lack merits and virtues, and find their businesses going bankrupt after

only a few years.

Some people may only have enough merits and virtues to last for two or three generations of descendants. The Chinese say that of the three serious offenses of being unfilial, having no descendants is the most critical.[14] This lack of merits and virtues results in not having any descendants.

In the past, people were extremely concerned about this, but today things are very different. Many couples do not even want to have children, thinking they will be too much trouble. Also, we now have social welfare. Who takes care of the elderly? Countries do! With no need to rely on their children to provide for them when they become older, many couples have decided that they need not have children. They can retire in their sixties and collect social security every month from the government.

This is possible because today's social welfare system is much better than what transpired in the past, when the elderly had to depend on their children for support. Now, more governments are helping to care for the elderly. This system is more filial than many children are! However, [children need to remember that] the law of causality remains unchanged.

"Just as one stores up grain against lean years, one raises children against old age" has been a commonly held idea. In his commentary, Mr. You said: "Sages transcending this world consider the cultivation of ending desires and attachments, eradicating delusion to attain wisdom, and transcending the ordinary to reach sagehood to be the utmost virtue and merit. Unfortunately, this level of attainment is not

understood by ordinary people."

This idea of raising children against old age still exists today. Usually when young people give rise to the compassionate heart to become monks or nuns, their family and friends try their best to stop them. Not understanding, they think that their biggest concern is not having descendants. Buddhism looks into the past, present, and future, and understands the truth of life and the universe. Ordinary people see only a tiny portion of the universe. Of this portion, they have only witnessed the human realm. Of this realm, they only see the present. They do not see the past or the future; therefore, they are unable to perceive as clearly as Buddhas and bodhisattvas do.

When someone in a family becomes a monk or nun, it is truly the most joyous occasion for this is an outstanding pursuit. However, monks and nuns must sincerely practice in renouncing worldly life for if we do not achieve, we will fall into the three bad paths. In Buddhism, it is often said that an offering of one grain of rice is as great as Mt. Sumeru and not transcending the cycle of birth and death in this lifetime consigns monastics to repay the debt as an animal [in the next or following lives].

As Pure Land practitioners, we have to achieve a certain level of attainment and to transcend samsara to be born into the Western Pure Land. Theravada practitioners need to reach, at the least, the level of stream-enterer, which is achieved by severing various wrong views. It is the lowest of the four stages of sagehood in Theravada Buddhism. At this point of attainment, practitioners will continue to be reborn

into the heaven and human realms for seven more times. In this way, they are assured of attaining the state of arhat although it may take them a long time to do so. But by not falling into the three bad paths, they are considered to have achieved attainment.

According to this criterion, the minimum standard to achieve attainment in Mahayana Buddhism is to rid ourself of a portion of our attachments, to sever the eighty-eight kinds of deviated thoughts and views. If we cannot sever these, we have not yet achieved attainment. Mahayana practitioners, who successfully sever them, reach the initial belief stage. Theravada practitioners who sever various wrong views reach the stage of stream-enterer.

Without these accomplishments, we will still be reborn within samsara, still repaying our debts. For monastics, this means we will have to repay every single offering from throughout the universe that was enjoyed during the time we were monastics. These offerings given by practitioners to monastics were given in expectation of rewards.

If Theravada practitioners are able to achieve the level of stream-enterer or if Mahayana practitioners are able to sever the eighty-eight kinds of improper thoughts and views, those who have made the offerings will receive good fortune. Then, there is no need for us to repay them because they have harvested from the fields of merit. Using these requirements as the standard, such attainment is not attainable by monks and nuns of this generation.

However, there is still another way: to seek birth in the Western Pure Land. Otherwise, attainment is not possible. If

we cannot go to the Pure Land, we will have achieved nothing. Seeking birth in the Pure Land is actually much simpler than severing the eighty-eight kinds of improper thoughts and views because we do not need to sever them all, but can carry our residual karma with us. As long as we have faith, vows, and practice [moral living and constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha], [15] we will achieve attainment. The Buddha explained this to us in the *Infinite Life Sutra* and the *Amitabha Sutra*. Therefore, when we renounce worldly life to become monks or nuns, we must achieve attainment.

To Reform Faults Thoroughly

> "Now that you recognize your shortcomings, you need to do all that you can to change and correct your misdeeds that caused you not to have a child or not to become an imperial official.

Master Yungu taught Liaofan how to correct his bad habits and shortcomings. Since he knew what these were, the master told him to do everything he could to improve. Mr. You said in his commentary, "Each of us has our faults and weaknesses, but if we are able to calmly think and find every one of them, we will know where to begin."

Changing our conduct and improving ourself is true cultivation. It is by no means just a formality of reciting sutras, prostrating before the Buddha, or chanting mantras. To have cultivated an entire lifetime and still be mired in

samsara is to have simply gone through the formalities. For others, formalities exemplify the teachings so that they might see them and begin to awaken. For us, they serve as reminders of the teachings.

For self-cultivation however, importance is not placed on the formalities but rather on discovering our faults. This is awakening. To correct our faults is to improve in our cultivation. Therefore, the most important point is for us to be calm, introspective, and be watchful of our conduct as we look for our bad habits and faults. When we know these, we will know where to begin, what to correct, and how to proceed. We can then concentrate and use all of our energy to reform.

In his commentary, Mr. You has provided us with some examples. "We can change from a miserly and greedy person to become one who is generous to those in need" was one of them. When we are miserly, we are unwilling to give to others. When greedy, we are always trying to gain what we do not have. If we find that we are habitually doing this, we can become generous through the practice of giving. What I have and others do not, I can unreservedly give to them upon request. Or better yet, when I see others who have an urgent need, I can take the initiative and simply provide them with what they need. This is the cultivation of good fortune through the first of three kinds of giving, that of giving wealth.

This second kind of giving is teaching and is practiced when we help others by sharing our skills or wisdom. If we are good at what others are not, we can enthusiastically teach

them so they will have the skill or uncover their wisdom. The third kind of giving, the giving of fearlessness, is helping others to be calm and secure in both body and mind. It is to help relieve their uneasiness and their fears. For example, if someone is afraid to walk home alone at night, we can accompany him or her so he or she will no longer be apprehensive.

Today, many young people serve in the armed forces to protect their countries from invasion. This is another form of the giving of fearlessness because soldiers protect a country and its people, and maintain the peace by not allowing harm from foreign forces to befall its people. We can see that the scope of these three kinds of giving is extensive. With the giving of wealth, we gain wealth. With the giving of teaching, we gain intelligence and wisdom. With the giving of fearlessness, we gain health and longevity.

In many countries, freeing captured animals is another form of the giving of fearlessness. However, many improper practices have arisen because of this. Since many people wish to free captured animals, others have gone into the business of capturing them. Freeing animals in this way is not the giving of fearlessness but subjects them to harm. If we did not have the intention of freeing animals, others would not capture them. We would do well to thoroughly understand the situation so that in our attempts to be kind, we do not inadvertently cause harm instead.

In some countries, we can properly practice this giving by freeing animals that we find when shopping in the food market. We do so in the knowledge that they will be able to

survive once they are freed. This is genuine compassion and kindness for it is saving those in suffering. However, we need to be aware that many pet shops sell animals that are domestically raised and therefore would be unable to survive on their own. If they were freed, they would die and our good intentions would become transgressions.

Therefore, we need to consider the consequences to everything that we do. When we do occasionally find animals in a food market and buy them to set free, the proper way to do so is to chant the Three Refuges of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and then chant a Buddha's name. In this way, we are saving their lives.[16]

The commentary next talks about changing from an angry and agitated person to one who is calm. Easily giving in to anger or becoming irritated is a major fault and was one that Liaofan had. The master encouraged him to remain calm instead. When we are able to accomplish this, we will naturally be gentle. Both Sakyamuni Buddha and Confucius stressed this important quality of our virtues. The students of Confucius praised his five virtues of gentility, kindness, respectfulness, thriftiness, and humility that he exhibited towards everyone and everything. Confucius did not live an extravagant life but one of simplicity. Being courteous and humble, he never argued, always accorded with others, and was a model of moral excellence.

The commentary continues with, "To change from a person who exaggerates and is boastful to one who is modest." When people exaggerate, we automatically doubt whatever they say. As a result, it is difficult for them to win

our confidence because basically, they are dishonest. Therefore, we need to be modest and honest in all that we say and do.

"To change from a person who is flighty and impatient to one who is settled." If we can remain calm, we will attain purity of mind. "To change from a person who is arrogant and insolent to one who is courteous." There really is nothing to be arrogant about. If we accomplished something successfully, it was our responsibility to do so. If we did not, we should be corrected and told how to improve. Buddhas and bodhisattvas, who are enlightened beings, respect everyone and everything, as did Confucius and Mencius. Given that we are far behind them in attainment or understanding, we need to regard others with respect and courtesy for these are natural virtues.

"To change from a person who slacks off and is lazy to one who is diligent." Being lazy is a serious affliction for the person will not succeed in anything. Instead, we would do well to be purposeful and energetic. One of Sakyamuni Buddha's students, Aniruddha was known for his laziness. After being reproached by the Buddha, he resolved to go without rest for seven days and nights. Due to his enthusiasm, he damaged his vision. The Buddha compassionately taught him the Illuminating the Diamond of Delightful Observation Samadhi, a form of deep concentration that enabled him to see far better than before. Consequently, he was able to see one Buddha-land, an area that is comprised of one billion galaxies.

We also need to be inspired with enthusiasm and

determination. Nothing is accomplished through laziness. Not only are we unable to succeed in our practice and learning of Buddhism, but we will also fail to accomplish anything in our daily lives. In ancient times or today, in the east or in the west no one has become successful through laziness. Diligence is the good cause for Mahayana practitioners and bodhisattvas.

"To change from a person who is cruel to one who is compassionate. To change from a person who is cowardly to one who is courageous." As being overly fearful is another serious fault, we can instead endeavor to be conscientious and resolute. Liaofan admitted to having all of these faults. We would do well to be more like him and do everything we can to improve ourselves.

Next, the master taught Liaofan several essential points for his cultivation.

> "You need to cultivate virtue and tolerance, and to regard others with good will and compassion. You also need to care for your health and conserve your energy and spirit.

First, Master Yungu encouraged Liaofan to accumulate merits by avoiding all that was bad and embracing all that was good. This is our foundation for improvement in Buddhism and in worldly teachings. If we do not earnestly accumulate merits and virtues by avoiding evil and practicing goodness, how can we hope to be "those who have thousands of dollars" or "those who have accumulated enough merits and virtues for a hundred generations?" An entire country

respected Confucius. The entire world respected Sakyamuni Buddha. The former accumulated great merits of the world. The latter accumulated great merits of the universe.

Second, we can strive to be tolerant of others as we broaden our minds and hearts. If we do not, we will encounter more afflictions and this will present further obstacles to our cultivation. We cultivate awakening, proper thoughts, and pure minds. If we cannot attain purity of mind, then we will not be awakened. This will result in deviated thoughts. Proper and great-enlightened thoughts rely on the foundation of purity of mind. We accomplish this through tolerance.

There is no need to be overly serious or to criticize everything. As we learn in the *Diamond Sutra*: "All phenomena are illusory, like dreams, mirages, bubbles, shadows." Nothing is real. As the ancients said, all phenomena are as fleeting as clouds. There is nothing worthy of anger or dispute. There is no point in dwelling on things, for this will hinder our cultivation of purity of mind.

There is every point in being gentle, loving, and peaceful. Failing to be so was Liaofan's biggest problem. We can strive to practice loving-kindness and compassion for everyone and everything. The Buddha taught that these are non-discriminatory and are to be held equally for all. Confucius also taught of loving-kindness, explaining, "The benevolent person has no enemies." If we cannot accept anything that is contrary to what we think, then we are neither kind nor compassionate. Conflict simply does not exist within the heart of loving-kindness. This is also what is meant in

Buddhism as great compassion and is what we need to learn and practice to truly benefit ourself.

In the Pure Land sutras, we read about one mind undisturbed. This state is unattainable if anything exists in opposition. To have opposition is to have a mind of differentiation. Master Huineng said, "Originally, our true mind contained nothing." If the mind still clings to even one wandering thought, then it is not the true but an illusory mind. The pure and uncontaminated mind will not have opposing thoughts. When there are no more opposing thoughts, the true mind can be uncovered, purity of mind can arise, and we will attain one mind undisturbed.

The states of one mind undisturbed and constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha begin from here. In constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha, initially the mind remembers the Buddha and does not forget. After prolonged cultivation, we ceaselessly contemplate the Buddha. If we have been chanting "Amituofo" for many years and have not yet reached the state of constant mindfulness, we need to determine where the problem lies and correct it.

When we have eliminated our obstacles, we will be able to achieve this state and be assured of birth in the Pure Land. Regardless of our state of cultivation, we will know when we have achieved it. There is no need to ask others.

When we are born in the Pure Land through the state of constant mindfulness, we will be born in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together. With the state of one mind undisturbed in mindfulness, we will be born in the Land of Expedient Liberation. With the state of one

mind undisturbed in enlightenment, we will be born in the Land of Real Reward. The level of attainment we achieve determines which land we will be born in.

There are also different levels in the state of constant mindfulness; thus, there are nine levels of birth. People who are born in the higher three levels of birth are able to pass away whenever they wish. At that time, they can go without any illness and may be standing or seated. If they do not feel like leaving this world yet, they can stay longer. Everything can be achieved at will. People who are born in the middle three levels of birth are able to know a few months in advance when they are going to pass away. Again, they may leave this world standing or seated. In the lower level, people will know several days in advance of their death, but they may become ill before their time of death.

People reaching the state of one mind undisturbed have even higher abilities. There are two levels of one mind undisturbed: mindfulness and enlightenment. These levels are not achievable by ordinary people like us in one lifetime, whereas constant mindfulness is. Therefore, in this lifetime we can attain the state of constant mindfulness in which we will have the ability to pass away at ease, to leave whenever we wish. This is to be born in the higher three levels of birth, in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, and to carry our residual karma along with us.

The master told Liaofan that he should care for his health and conserve his energy and spirit. Because Liaofan liked to sit up all night and did not know how to take care of himself, he needed to pay special attention to caring for his health

and energy.

> "Live as if everything in the past dissolved yesterday and a brand-new future begins today. If you can accomplish this, then you are a person born anew, a person of virtue and sincerity.

Everything that happened yesterday is in the past. Do not dwell on it. If we do, it is as if we have committed or undergone them again. To do so will leave additional impressions in the alaya consciousness. Therefore, let bygones be bygones and forget them. The important thing is to correct what is in the present and what will be in the future. Doubts and regrets are afflictions that are conditions or causes of grief and distress that disturb the body and mind.

The Buddha taught us not to dwell on the past. We read in Mr. You's commentary, that this is the key to changing destiny for the perfect people. Perfect people are those with higher levels of wisdom and who are awakened. There are six steps to accomplish this, beginning from the need to cultivate and accumulate merits and virtues, and culminating in becoming "a person born anew, a person of virtue and sincerity." These are the keys to changing destiny.

Mr. You said in his commentary, "The first step in changing destiny is to correct our faults. To brush away all the accumulated bad habits one by one and to pull out the roots of our problems one by one. At all times and in all places, to be constantly vigilant of our every thought, word, and act. We restrain and discipline ourselves. We protect the

innocent and the virtuous as we would a newborn baby." The full responsibility for changing destiny is in our hands, not in the hands of heavenly or enlightened beings.

People of utmost virtue are no longer bound by destiny.

We need to be strict with ourselves. If we constantly forgive ourselves, we will limit our futures. However, while we are exacting and stern with ourselves, we ought to be generous and lenient with others. We need to protect those who are pure, virtuous, and innocent. What is innocence? It is to not have any selfish thoughts. If we constantly have wandering thoughts, then we lose our innocent, true, and pure mind.

The responsibility for changing what is predetermined is entirely up to us. Once we understand the truth about re-creating our futures, we will no longer need to ask fortunetellers what the future holds. We can carefully reflect to know what it is supposed to be and how to change it. Knowing this, others would no longer be able to deceive us.

Previously Master Yungu told Liaofan about people who were of the utmost virtue. In the Pure Land sutras, we learn that they live in the Pure Land. People of utmost virtue are able to feel regret and reform. In the Western Pure Land, they do so daily, until there is nothing left that requires correction. Then they become Buddhas.

Even the highest-level bodhisattvas still have faults. What kind? They still have one degree of ignorance yet to be broken through. If equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas still need to regret and reform, we can imagine how much we need to do! From now on, we need to have the

compassionate heart to feel remorse and change for the better. Even upon reaching the level of equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas, we will still need to do this. Only when there is nothing left to correct will we become Buddhas. We cannot attain supreme enlightenment if we still have one remaining fault.

Enlightenment is to know and correct our faults. Bodhisattvas are enlightened sentient beings. We are also sentient beings, but are unenlightened since we do not know our faults and thus do not know to correct them. We believe that we are already correct. We question, "Do I have any faults?" and think for a long time without finding any. Thus, it is said that ordinary people do not have faults while bodhisattvas have many. They constantly watch over their every thought, word, and deed, knowing that they have many shortcomings, continuously correcting them and doing so for three great eons. When we think about how many faults there can be, how can we possibly think that as ordinary people we do not have any!

What is the difference between "enlightened" and "unenlightened"? One who knows that they have many faults is an enlightened being—a bodhisattva. One who does not know they possess numerous faults is unenlightened—an ordinary person. Bodhisattvas are not deities, but are beings who know their faults and constantly strive to correct them. If we were to improve, not only would we correct our faults, but we would also give rise to the vows of Amitabha Buddha and this would be the most remarkable way of changing our destiny.

We recite the *Infinite Life Sutra* daily to be very familiar with it, but this is only the initial step. The second step is to use the sutra as a mirror, reflecting once with each recitation to make a comparison and to find our faults. By looking at reflections in a mirror, we can see what parts are soiled and immediately clean them. To clean is to correct. We recite the sutra to find the pollution in our mind that we are not yet aware of. The sutra is like a mirror that sees and reflects what parts of our minds have faults so that we may immediately correct them. Therefore, we initially become familiar with the sutra and then we accord with its teachings.

In cultivation, first we give rise to vows. We need to think carefully if we have given rise to the forty-eight vows of Amitabha Buddha, to adopt these vows as our own, and to be of one heart and vow with him. Then, we will be the same as him and become his manifestation. He is our role model to help us to mold and transform ourselves to be the same as him. This is to be of one mind, one heart, and one vow. How could we not be reborn into the Pure Land when our hearts and vows are the same as his? When this happens, we will think, speak, and act the same as Amitabha Buddha as we relate to other people and circumstances, become constantly mindful of Amitabha Buddha, and always remember to encourage others to chant Amituofo.

When our three karmas of body, speech, and mind are the same as Amitabha Buddha, we become his manifestation. We return to this world to fulfill his original vows. This is even more remarkable than being a person of virtue and sincerity. Originally, we were reborn in this world

to repay our karmic debts, but now each of us is Amitabha Buddha coming to this world through the strength of our vows! This is the most remarkable and unsurpassable method in changing our destiny.

> "If even our body is governed by destiny, then how can a body of virtue and sincerity not evoke a response from heaven?

Here Master Yungu was talking of wandering thoughts and attachments. Our bodies really have nothing to do with destiny. What matters is the mind, for it influences the body. To be honest, the minds of most people are selfish and thus, they are governed by destiny. We also fall under the control of destiny when we use the conscious mind or our eight consciousnesses.

Enlightened beings are able to transcend because they have turned their eight consciousnesses into the four wisdoms. Not using the eight consciousnesses, enlightened beings are not controlled by destiny. After we have reached a certain level of enlightenment, we too will use our enlightened mind. Currently, we are using deluded feelings. If we used our enlightened wisdom, how could we not "evoke a response from heaven"?

In the commentary, we learn: "Utmost sincerity can split a stone of diamond, can evoke a response from heaven, and can change destiny." Consider the well-known account of what happened to the famous General Li Guang who lived during the Han dynasty.[17] One time he and his soldiers were on a march. On one side of the road, the grass was very long.

There was a large stone partially hidden in the grass and he mistakenly thought it was a tiger. He immediately shot an arrow and it went deep into its target.

After getting off his horse and going to survey his marksmanship, he was amazed to see that it was a stone! He thought, "I must be very strong to have shot an arrow so deep into a stone!" He tried again and again, but failed to repeat his accomplishment. From this, we can see that the first shot resulted from the utmost sincerity of having no wandering thoughts.

Similarly, when great Master Kumarajiva was about seven years old, he lifted up a great iron bowl without so much as a thought. But then he thought, "I am so small. How could I have lifted it?" He tried to do so again, but failed. General Li Guang had mistaken the stone for a tiger and was able to shoot an arrow into it. Master Kumarajiva thought nothing of the weight of a great iron bowl and was able to lift it.

Once General Li Guang realized that the tiger was actually a stone and Master Kumarajiva realized that the iron bowl was extraordinarily heavy, they were unable to repeat their previous accomplishments. Both initially acted from the mind of sincerity that had no wandering thoughts. Thus, the stone was split open and the iron bowl was lifted up.

From these two examples, we can confirm what is said in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: "There are no obstacles among phenomena or principles." This is achieved when the mind attains a certain degree of purity as we sever our wandering discriminatory thoughts and attachments. If the mind is not pure, then all phenomena present obstacles. But, when the

mind is pure, there are no obstacles.

"Utmost sincerity thus evokes a response from heaven." Confucianism speaks of wrestling with materialistic desires, teaching us to let go of and no longer be influenced by desire. Utmost sincerity can change destiny. It is the true mind as explained in the *Visualization Sutra*. It is the bodhi mind:[18] the mind of utmost sincerity, profundity, merit dedication, and vow generation.

> "As is said in the 'Tai Jia Chapter' in the *Book of History*,[19] 'One may run away from the retribution of heaven, but one can never escape the retribution for one's misdeeds.'

To say that we may run from the retribution of heaven means that although we had committed offenses in former lifetimes, the retribution for them is changeable by our current cultivation, and the accumulation of merits and virtues in this lifetime. The retributions of heaven are destined and changeable.

"But one can never escape the retribution for one's misdeeds" is about the offenses of this lifetime. The retributions of heaven are meted out for offenses of past lives but they are changeable, as are our destiny. However, nothing can be done regarding the retribution for the misdeeds that we commit in our present lifetimes. And if we continue to commit these, then we will be unable to regret and reform, unable to change our destiny.

When bad causes created in the past, encounter present adverse conditions, the retributions for these wrongdoings

mature. However, if we refrain from committing further misdeeds, we can suppress the adverse conditions. The bad causes still exist but without the right conditions, they will not mature. The principle in changing destiny is based on this conditional aspect of the law of causality. Cause is what was created in the past and is unchangeable; but condition is changeable and controllable.

We reap what we sow. We can plant melon and bean seeds that are causes. When we do so, we will grow the melons and beans that are fruits. However, we cannot grow beans from melon seeds or melons from bean seeds. Cause is a constant here. What we will harvest depends on the conditions. If we would like to harvest beans, we plant the seeds for them and put away the melon seeds. For a cause to come into effect, appropriate conditions are required.

For example, seeds need the right conditions, which are good soil, fertilizer, sun, and water to grow well. Even after the seeds are planted and the cause is created, we can prevent them from maturing. We simply withhold the water and sunlight. The seeds will not grow. They will not mature into fruits because they do not have the right conditions.

Therefore, although we have created bad causes in our past lives, if we refrain from wrongdoings in this life, end our erroneous behavior, and cultivate kind deeds, we will not provide the bad conditions for these causes to mature. Surely, we also created some good causes in our past lives. How could a person have only committed bad deeds or only performed good deeds? Such a person simply does not exist. Therefore, life after life all of our deeds have been a mixture

of good and bad. Sometimes more good; sometimes more bad.

We do not need to be afraid that we have committed transgressions as long as we refrain from committing any more. If we can block the bad conditions, although we may only have a small amount of good deeds, these will blossom and mature.

> "It is said in the *Book of Songs*: 'To permanently accord with the mind of heaven and to seek our own great good fortune.'

This reveals the real purpose of our morning and evening classes. The morning class serves to remind us of Amitabha Buddha's vows. The purpose of the evening class is to look back on the day to see if we had followed the sutra's guidance and whether we had been watchful over our thoughts, words, and deeds. Thus, it is meaningful to participate in both. In Sakyamuni Buddha's time, the content for both morning and evening classes was the Three Refuges from the "Chapter of Purification of Conduct" in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: "To the Buddha I return and rely, vowing that all living beings will profoundly understand the great Way and bring forth the heart of great understanding."

Ancient virtuous people compiled our current recitation handbooks and the content was suitable for the people practicing together at that time. But is this recitation suitable for our current practice? If not, the handbooks need to be modified so that they will allow us to continue to benefit from them by correcting our faults. The same applies to

repentance ceremonies. If we participate in these and do the many prostrations with an impure mind, not only will we not eradicate our karmic obstacles, we will increase them.

This is similar to taking medicine when we become ill. If the medication proves ineffective, we have to change prescriptions. The purpose of sutra recitation and repentance prostrations is to treat the illness in our minds to cure our afflictions. If they are ineffective, we need to find a better prescription. This is why the *Jewel King Samadhi Repentance Ceremony* compiled by Mr. Xia Lianju is more suitable than other similar books in treating our current problems. Upon careful reading, we will understand that many of its phrases are appropriate today. Hence, we need to choose the morning and evening recitations based on our illnesses and problems.

For the morning and evening classes, many Pure Land practitioners now recite the *Infinite Life Sutra* to cultivate concentration. If we do not have enough time to recite the entire sutra, then we can recite chapter six that comprises the forty-eight vows for the morning, and chapters thirty-two to thirty-seven for the evening [thirty-one to forty in some translations, the section in which Amitabha Buddha is talking to Maitreya Bodhisattva]. These six chapters talk of causality and of learning how to change ourself. Doing this, we will permanently accord with the minds of heaven and seek our own great good fortune.

"The minds of heaven" means the original true nature; it does not literally mean heaven, earth, and celestial beings. If we can accord with this nature, we will achieve the basic

virtue and return to it.

> The master then told me: "Mr. Kong had predicted that you would not receive an imperial appointment or have a son. These are the retributions of heaven, but even they can be changed. You only need to develop your virtue, diligently strive to practice goodness, and work to accumulate many hidden merits and virtues.

Master Yungu told Liaofan that not receiving an imperial appointment or not having a son were the consequences of his accumulated negative karma from previous lifetimes. However, these were changeable for while destiny exists, it is not fixed. What is from the past is a constant: what is done in the present is a variable.

Master Yungu explained that to change what is supposed to happen we begin from our hearts and develop our virtues. From this, we can see that if we are to seek and change only from without, we will be "at a loss, within and without." We have seen people who try to improve their environment by changing the placement of doors, windows, and so on, all to be at a loss, within and without. On appearance, they seemed to gain, but actually what they gained was what they were destined to have. It was still within their destiny—a constant, not a variable.

We need to change from our minds and hearts, to refrain from wrongdoings and to cultivate goodness. The master also said "work to accumulate many hidden merits and virtues." These are good deeds that others do not know about. If we

did something that was good and then made it widely known, so that others praised us, we would lose our merits and virtues as these have now turned into praise. To do what is good but to cancel its benefits at the same time will prevent us from accumulating merits and virtues.

It is much better to practice goodness without letting anybody know and even better if some people reproached us, for this will help to reduce our negative karma. It would be best if our negative karma and retributions were reduced and even eradicated, while our merits and virtues remained hidden.

Today, when we do good and are criticized or even slandered, we feel it is undeserved. Why do we have bad consequences when we do good? Actually, these are good consequences. If we are immediately complimented upon doing good deeds, we will lose our merits and virtues. Therefore, we can strive to accumulate merits and virtues while hiding them from others, for only then is this truly a good deed.

> "These are your ways to re-create good fortune. How then is it possible that you will not get to enjoy it?

We will be able to enjoy all the good fortune that we have created in this life. The sutras tell us: "Cause and effect are linked through the past, present and future." What we undergo in this lifetime are the consequences of what we had done in our previous lifetimes, while what we do now will determine what we undergo in our future lifetimes. If we

cultivate very diligently, we need not wait until future lifetimes to reap our rewards; instead, we may see our deeds bear fruit in this lifetime! Due to this principle, Liaofan completely changed his destiny. He had accumulated so many good deeds that he did not have to wait until his next life to enjoy the results.

> "*I Ching, the Book of Changes*, was written to help people accrue good fortune and to avoid adversity. If everything is destined with no room for change, how can we hope to do this?

The *I Ching* is considered by many to be the earliest philosophy book in ancient China and teaches people to become sages and virtuous people. It accomplishes this through mathematics and the use of sixty-four hexagrams of whole and broken lines representing all possible combinations of the lines. There are three hundred and eighty-four possible predictions. Changes as small as those that affect individuals to those that affect countries and even the world can be deduced from these figures. The book uses mathematics to determine the natural course of cause and effect.

What Master Yungu said regarding the surpassing of mathematics is where the techniques of the *I Ching* fail. The *I Ching* works well with constants, but although it understands that there are variables, it fails to work with them. This teaches us to accumulate merits and to avoid bad deeds. One virtuous thought is a plus and one negative thought is a minus. So, every day is simply a matter of

addition and subtraction, multiplication and division. If the margin of change is not too much, others can foretell our destiny with a reasonable degree of accuracy. This is how Mr. Kong foretold Liaofan's destiny.

For twenty years, Liaofan neither increased nor decreased his bad or good thoughts and deeds, but completely accorded with his destiny. For most people there are usually some variances—one virtuous thought, one unkind deed. Liaofan, who had no interest in doing either good deeds or bad deeds, maintained constancy for twenty years; thus, his destiny was remarkably accurate. If the variance is large, we will surpass the constant to "accrue good fortune and avoid adversity."

We read in the commentary: "Because all thoughts and behavior are changeable, so all the consequences of gain and loss, joy and pain seem flexible and changeable. These consequences can be added, subtracted, multiplied and divided: gained and lost in accordance with the behavior of the individual."

A constant is the cause. A variable is the condition. The key to changing destiny is determined by the condition and this is what Buddhism stresses. "All the infinite creations in heaven and on earth arise from conditions." All existing things arise from the condition, which is a variable. By controlling this variable, we can change destiny. Then, we can pursue our wishes and goals to gain remarkable, perfect results. The Buddha also told us in the sutra: "Impermanence, no ego, Nirvana." Understanding this principle, we can become virtuous people and sages, arhats,

bodhisattvas, and Buddhas.

> "The first chapter of the *I Ching* says, 'Families who often perform good deeds will have an excess of good fortune to pass on to the following generations.' Do you believe this?" I replied, "Yes."

From this, we know that those who wrote the *I Ching* understood the constant that is the cause in this world and throughout the universe. They also knew that there is a variable that is the condition. By controlling this variable on a small scale, we can change our own destiny and on a larger scale, we can pursue lasting stability and peace for our world.

The *I Ching* is truly extraordinary; however, it is a pity that now it has virtually become a fortune-telling book. As Mr. Mei Guangxi said in the preface of the *Infinite Life Sutra*, "Originally, the *Amitabha Sutra* was a teaching that helped us to transcend the cycle of birth and death to become a Buddha. But now it has become something for people to recite at memorial services to send off the deceased!" That the *Amitabha Sutra* has been reduced to this sad state is just like the *I Ching* being reduced to a book for telling fortunes! It is a sad reflection of our times.

The *I Ching* was intended to teach us how to obtain happiness, world peace, and stability; to change our destiny by accumulating merit and virtue. To do this, we first need to regret and reform. The master asked Liaofan if he believed that a family, which practiced good deeds, could have so much good fortune that it would be passed on to the

following generations. Liaofan replied that he did.

The reason why Liaofan was able to change his destiny was due to his good roots and good fortune, thus enabling him to believe in good advice. His meeting with Master Yungu was the ripening of the appropriate conditions. As the Buddha told us: "When our good roots, good fortunes and right conditions mature, how can we not change our destiny?

Mr. You told us in his commentary: "One who hears good advice from sages and slanders them has committed a bad deed; doubt is one of the fundamental afflictions." Good advice is the teachings of the sages of this world and beyond. Later generations called these teachings sutras. The sutras speak of truths that do not change with time. The truth that surpasses time is the same now, as it was thousands of years ago; it never changes whether in the east or in the west.

The writings and teachings of sages did not come from their personal experiences and opinions, for if they did they would be biased or inappropriate. History is not made up of opinions but of accumulated experiences whereas sutras contain the truth that arises from the original true nature. Thus, the teachings in the sutras are the absolute truth that surpasses time and space.

We will benefit and improve if we believe in the teachings, but if we do not, then we will miss these remarkable benefits. This is why we say that doubt is one of the six fundamental afflictions of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, and deviated views.

The commentary also stated: "One who hears kind words of advice and gives rise to belief will nurture the appearance

of good fortune and merit. This belief is the mother of good fortune." "Mother" means to give rise, to grow. All good fortune and merit arise from belief in the teachings of the sages. If we are able to believe in the words and teachings of the sages, we will find that infinite good fortune and merit are generated from this. Liaofan was indeed a rare person: to deeply believe upon hearing the master's advice.

To Surpass Destiny by Cultivating Good Fortune and Accumulating Virtues

> I gratefully accepted his advice and paid my respects to him by prostrating. Then I began to regret all my past wrongdoings, large and small, in front of the Buddha's image. I wrote down my wish to pass the imperial examinations and vowed to complete three thousand meritorious deeds to show my gratitude towards my ancestors, earth, and heaven.

Here we see Liaofan's sincerity in honoring the teacher and revering his or her teachings. He did not casually say, "I believe and will follow your instructions" and then forget all about it after a while. He earnestly complied with them after he had unreservedly regretted each of his wrongdoings in front of the Buddha. He expressed his sincere repentance and asked the enlightened beings to be his witnesses.

We next read in the commentary: "It is a serious mistake to fear that others will know our misdeeds." If we conceal our faults, they will increase at an alarming rate. If we are

smart, we will let them be known. Then, when we are criticized and corrected, our karmic obstacles will be gradually eradicated. If others speak out about our mistakes, be grateful even if we have not done what they said we did, for to be wrongly accused by others will also eradicate our karmic obstacles. There is no need to refute or defend ourself in the face of undeserved accusations. When we are defensive, others will not want to help us correct our faults. Then the offense will become even more serious.

Taizong, a great emperor who lived over a thousand years ago during the Tang dynasty is remembered for being wise and accomplished. Why? Since he did not cover up his shortcomings, anyone could talk to him about them. Even as emperor, he did nothing to retaliate knowing that he still had faults to correct. [Also, if he retaliated, no one would dare to advise him again.]

Liaofan sought to pass the imperial examinations although Mr. Kong had not destined this for him. He vowed to complete three thousand meritorious deeds to show his gratitude. To gain what we wish for when it has not been destined is truly to have sought and gained.

> Upon hearing my vow, Master Yungu showed me a merit-fault chart and taught me how to keep a daily record of all the good and bad deeds I had done. He warned me that bad deeds would neutralize the good ones.

The merit-fault chart provided for the entry of both merits and faults and was very popular during the latter years of the

Ming dynasty.[20] Scholars as well as Buddhists used the chart in their cultivation of morality. Master Lianchi[21] drew up a merit-fault chart called the Self-reflection Record that totally derived its standards for good and bad behavior from Buddhism. It was thus especially helpful for Buddhists to use for ending faulty behavior and cultivating kindness. There are several versions of merit-fault charts that have been passed down over the years that can be used for our reference.

Liaofan lived five hundred years ago. His background and manner of living were very different from ours. However, we can still abide by the principles, using our wisdom to determine how we can adapt the charts for modern usage. Although no one has come up with a more current chart, its principles remain valid.

> The master also taught me to recite the Zhuenti Mantra. Only with a mind of purity and concentration could I attain what I sought.

In Esoteric Buddhism, Zhuenti Bodhisattva is a manifestation of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Why did the master teach Liaofan to chant a mantra instead of reciting a sutra? The purpose of the chanting is to uncover our pure mind to eradicate wandering thoughts. Since mantras are transliterated from Sanskrit, we only repeat their sounds, not analyze them. As we continue to chant over a long time, our minds will become pure, or at least our wandering thoughts will be suppressed.

The goal remains the same whether we are reciting sutras,

chanting mantras, or chanting a Buddha's name. It is important that we teach others the method that is most suitable for them. For example, if the master had taught Liaofan to recite sutras, he would have been tempted to analyze their meaning [and thinking while chanting obstructs our cultivation of purity of mind]. Thus, he was taught the mantra. There is a Buddhist saying: "Reciting a sutra is not as good as chanting a mantra and chanting a mantra is not as good as chanting a Buddha's name." All these emphasize actual cultivation.

Today, we lack the fundamental education that our ancestors received, so it will be helpful for us to follow this advice of ancient people: "It is not too late to mend the fold even after the sheep are lost." To make up for our lost fundamental education, for the first few years of our practice, we can concentrate on memorizing the *Infinite Life Sutra*. This is especially practical for young people as the best time to learn is before the age of twenty. If we are able to memorize the sutra and recite it by heart, we will benefit from it for the rest of our lives.[22]

Buddhism is the ultimate perfect wisdom; thus, reciting sutras by heart is a very important foundation. If we are able to end our erroneous ways, practice goodness, and cultivate purity of mind, then in due time whatever we seek will be attained.

> Master Yungu explained that it had been said by specialists in drawing talismanic figures: "Those who are considered experts in the art of drawing

> charms but do not know the right way to do so will be laughed at by spirits." The key to drawing charms is having no thoughts from beginning to end. Understanding this, begin the first stroke with a still mind after the primal darkness. In the process of drawing, one must let go of all wandering thoughts. Only in this way can a charm be effective.

Drawing talismanic figures is a form of ancient skill in Taoism similar to chanting mantras in Buddhism. The secret to drawing talismanic figures is to have a mind that is devoid of thoughts. We can use the Great Compassion Mantra to illustrate this. The Great Compassion water, which is consecrated by chanting the mantra, can be very effective for some, but not at all effective for others. Why? In chanting the mantra, the former did not have a single wandering thought from start to finish. If during the chanting a wandering thought arises, then the mantra will be ineffective. Therefore, the longer the mantra, the more difficult it is to successfully chant it.

The Surangama Mantra can be very effective, however, few people today are able to benefit from it. Why? The vast majority of people have many wandering thoughts while chanting, and it only takes one such thought to render their efforts ineffective.

The same applies to sutra recitation. If as Pure Land practitioners, we recite one round of the *Infinite Life Sutra* without having any wandering thoughts, it would be

wonderful! Our minds would be in accordance with the mind of the Buddhas throughout the universe in the past, present, and future. Therefore, we need to recite the sutra with a mind of purity, equality, sincerity, and respect. But, if we recite the sutra while having wandering thoughts, our minds will not be the mind of a Buddha.

From this, we can see that the shorter the mantra the easier it will be for us to recite and to concentrate on. And chanting "Namo Amituofo"[23] is even shorter. If we think that this is too long, Master Lianchi taught us to chant just "Amituofo." If we chant this without one single thought, it will be effective. It would be just like sending a message to Amitabha Buddha and having him receive it. But, if we add one wandering thought, then the message will not go through.

> When one prays for and seeks for something or tries to change one's fate, it is important that one does so without giving rise to a single thought. In this way, one will easily receive a response.

When we seek something from the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, or the beings of heaven or earth, we need to do so without having any thoughts for our seeking to be effective. To achieve this, our minds need to be truly pure, without any wandering thoughts. This is to have the mind of sincerity, purity, and respect. Only when we appeal to the enlightened ones using the mind of utmost sincerity will we attain what we wish for.

The same principle applies when some people make

offerings to their ancestors as they appeal in front of the ancestral plaque. It would be useless to do so with an impure mind. Therefore, in the past, making offerings to ancestors was a very special occasion. For example, those who officiated at the ceremony fasted and bathed for three days before. They cultivated purity of mind by shutting themselves in a small room to try to let go of attachments. They conducted the ceremony as if the spirits of their ancestors were present. Buddhists would call this "Visualization." By sincerely honoring them at the time of the ceremony, the spirits will appear.

When we pay respect to the enlightened beings at cultivation centers, are they present? Not necessarily. The presence of their images does not mean they themselves are there. If the practitioners, whether monastics or laypeople, are sincere and pure in mind then enlightened beings will be present. Otherwise, more often than not there will be some demons impersonating enlightened beings. This is explained in the *Surangama Sutra*.

> "Mencius wrote: 'There is no difference between long life and short life.' At first glance, one would find it hard to understand how they can be the same; however, when there is no thought, there is no duality in short or long life.

Short life and long life are completely different, why regard them as the same? Duality only exists when there are wandering discriminatory thoughts and attachments. Only when the mind is pure do we see non-duality.

Short life and long life are the same because everything in the universe is one. In Buddhism, this is called "entering the state of non-duality." The state of non-duality is mentioned in the *Speech of Vaisali Sutra*. In Pure Land school, this is known as one mind undisturbed. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, this is known as the One True Dharma Realm, the state where all Buddhas dwell. This is the state of mind of Bodhisattvas above the level of ground states.

> "Upon careful analysis, there is also no duality between a good or a bad harvest. Understanding this, we will be content with our present situation, be it one of wealth or poverty."

If we are content with things as they are, we can settle down and get on with our work. It is said: "If the rich were content to be rich and the poor were content to be poor," then society would be stable, the world would be peaceful, and everyone would be happy. What is being happy? Not having any wandering thoughts, worries, or afflictions. If a person in poverty was able to understand that his or her current condition was a matter of destiny, then he or she would also be contented.

A good example of this occurred in the early part of the twentieth century. A man in a village in Jiangsu province begged for food during the day and slept in old deserted temples at night. In this way, he was contented.

His son, after experiencing business success, became rich and influential but then found himself being admonished: "How can you be such an unfilial son? You have such great

wealth but you let your father continue to beg for his food?" The son felt ashamed after hearing this and sent people to search everywhere for his father and brought him home to care for him. But, after a month of living in his son's home, the father slipped out to resume his life as a beggar.

People asked the father: "Wouldn't it be better for you to enjoy good fortune at your son's home?" He replied: "I was very uncomfortable there! Now, in the daytime I can travel anywhere I want and enjoy visiting beautiful scenery. At night, I can make any place my home. There is nothing more joyful than to live as freely as this. To have to remain at home is suffering for me!"

He was contented with his condition so he could let go and attain true liberation. He was not at all affected by the five desires of wealth, lust, fame, food, and sleep. Rather, he was happy and had purity of mind. He preferred to be on the sidelines, regarding this world as a play, while everybody else was busy pursuing prestige and wealth.

This was no ordinary person, but a model of wisdom and contentment. Most people pursue a happy and fulfilling life, not realizing that these are not necessarily synonymous with wealth or social position. Therefore, we need to understand destiny, need to be able to adjust to accord with the wishes of sentient beings and be joyful over other's meritorious deeds. Only in this way will our lives be happy and fulfilling.

> "And with understanding that there is no duality between poverty and wealth, our minds will be content with our present status in society, be it

> high or low. Also, there is no duality between long and short lives. Understanding this, we will be content with our existing lifespan, be it long or short. The most important concern for humans is that of life and death. Thus, early death and longevity subsume all conditions, whether they are favorable or unfavorable, and whether of gain or loss.

This speaks of according with conditions. Regardless of favorable or unfavorable conditions, we will be completely at ease as everything becomes clear and logical. We can have good fortune and attain the great liberation. This is true living. True happiness is not achievable without great knowledge and effort in practice. We can now clearly see that only awakened people can settle their minds and re-create their destinies. It is pointless to behave immorally and to become increasingly deluded. Thus, the Buddha often referred to those who were deluded as "pitiable beings."

> "We have to wait until our cultivation reaches a certain level, then our destiny will change. This change depends on the accumulation of merits, on seeking a response from the heavens. When cultivating, we need to be aware of our faults and resolve to correct them as if we were curing a sickness."

We cultivate while waiting for destiny to be re-created; however, this is not accomplished overnight. It takes a long

time. We need to cease our laziness, and confidently and diligently strive to improve. We need to be awakened and not deluded, to do what is proper and not deviated. In time, we will attain the desired result. Cultivation is correcting our faults in the three karmas of improper thoughts, words, and deeds, and adopting whatever ways are necessary to remedy these faults.

> "While waiting, let go of the thought of desiring something that we are not supposed to have and the thought of wishing for a reward.

It is a wandering thought to hope for an early harvest of rewards for our goodness, for such thinking can create obstacles. We are only to ask about the cultivation, not the harvest. As long as we diligently cultivate, the harvest will naturally follow, why bother to constantly seek it? This is the true way of cultivation: to not seek anything. Just concentrate on ending improper behavior and cultivating goodness; eventually, we will obtain whatever we desire.

When we seek, our gains are limited, for most likely we will only receive what we request because our cultivation of virtues is not in accordance with our virtuous natures. Without seeking, everything is a manifestation of and in accordance with our virtuous natures.

Actually, what Liaofan achieved was cultivated virtues. It was not yet virtuous nature, because he still sought. Initially, he sought scholarly honor and official rank, then, he sought children. Whatever he sought was accomplished. If he had not had one thought of a request, if he had solely cultivated

and accumulated virtues, everything would have turned out perfectly. He did not seek longevity and yet he lived longer than destined. He was supposed to die at the age of fifty-three, but lived to seventy-four!

We will benefit if we cease our requests and affinity seeking, and only have sensible wishes like those in which we ask that our lives be smooth, that we have enough to eat, a safe place to live, and adequate clothing. It is enough to live simply and comfortably with minimal expenses in a small house. But most people want to possess luxuries and to impress others, not knowing the price they have to pay for these extravagances. They lose more than they gain. If instead, we share our good fortune with others then our good fortune is the accumulation of merits.

If we cultivate and accumulate enough virtue to last for a hundred generations, then our descendants would have good fortune. If we are truly intelligent and wise, we will surely want to share our good fortune with others. Therefore, be patient. Why seek for the early arrival of good fortune when it will come in good time?

> "At this level it would be a state of reaching the 'innate nature of no thought' that is the actual learning and practice of wisdom." Master Yungu told me: "I know that you are still unable to accomplish the state of no thought, but you can practice reciting the Zhuenti Mantra continuously without counting the number of recitations and without interruption.

> When you reach a higher level of constant mindfulness, you will be able to achieve the level of 'To not recite when reciting and to recite when not reciting.' When you no longer have wandering thoughts, the mantra will become effective."

Learning and practice of wisdom are true knowledge. Innate nature is "returning to the original state." This revelation of our original true nature is not the state of an ordinary being. The original state is true happiness for it is to be filled with the Dharma bliss and to truly abandon suffering for happiness. This is what awakened people seek.

This method called perfect practice with perfect attainment was taught by Master Yungu, and it enables us to practice concurrently the three learnings of abiding by the precepts, deep concentration, and wisdom. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, it is explained as: "One is all, all is one. To cultivate one method is to cultivate all methods." The essence of the practice is to do so without interruption, and without intermingling with other thoughts or other methods.

Do we need to count the recitations? Master Yungu did not tell Liaofan to do so, but rather to recite continuously. Many ancient sages required practitioners to begin their chanting practice by counting the number of recitations. Why? Because like us, they would become lazy and slack off. So, it was helpful for them to have a daily goal, such as chanting a Buddha's name ten thousand times a day. Meeting this goal helped to counteract the bad habit of laziness and being remiss, for if they did not count they might

have forgotten to practice.

However, for someone as honest and earnest as Liaofan, there was no need to keep track of the recitations. For him, that would have been intermingling of thoughts. His cultivation was truly learned and diligent; thus, he practiced without interruption, and without intermingling with other thoughts and methods.

All methods are equal: no one is different from the others. Attainment lies in delving deeply into only one method for a prolonged time. In the past, people generally practiced sutra recitation. But whether reciting sutras or chanting mantras or a Buddha's name, we do so with the mind of purity, equality, and respect. When we practice continuously, we will truly benefit from it.

The state of no thought is essential. It is to not have any wandering thoughts, discriminatory thoughts, or attachments. Although Liaofan had not given rise to any wandering thoughts for three days while he was meditating with Master Yungu, he had not yet reached the state of no thought. He had used belief, not concentration, to suppress his afflictions. He believed in causality and that all was destined.

Therefore, the master taught him a way to move on to the next level, to cultivate concentration. To recite the Zhuenti Mantra is to continuously cultivate concentration. By ridding ourselves of wandering thoughts and attachments, our true nature will be uncovered.

The Buddha often spoke of "the original nature as it is." Pure Land practitioners call this the true and perfect achievement of one mind undisturbed. It is the goal of our

practice. It is to reach the attainment of "to not recite when reciting and to recite when not reciting." This is often explained as "To not be attached to the act of chanting; thus, to not chant when chanting and to chant when not chanting."

We do so whether we are chanting the Buddha's name or reciting the sutra. When we recite the *Infinite Life Sutra* without attachment, we will first achieve constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha, then one mind undisturbed. Although the methods may differ, the principles and the goal are the same. When we reach the state of no thought and the reciting becomes second nature, it will naturally become effective.

There are three levels of achievement. The upper level is one mind undisturbed in enlightenment, the middle level is one mind undisturbed in mindfulness, and the lowest and initial level is constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. We cannot be proud when our attainment reaches a certain level for doing so will prohibit us from further advancement.

Reaching the upper level in constant mindfulness, we may have the ability to transcend this world at will, to leave anytime we wish. Whenever we want to go, Amitabha Buddha will come to escort us to the Western Pure Land. Although we have reached this level of attainment and are able to pass away with ease, it is best to stay longer in this world. Why? We read in the *Infinite Life Sutra* that to practice in our world of suffering for one day is the same as practicing in the Pure Land for one hundred years. We stay here to train our endurance.

Even more importantly, we stay to encourage more

people to go to the Pure Land. It is remarkable that we ourselves are able to go, but it will be even better if we can help others to be born there as well! Thus, we can concentrate on helping, educating, and encouraging others. When we ourselves cultivate and inspire others to do likewise, our merits are perfect. In so doing, we are able to pay back the great kindness that enlightened beings have shown us.

> My name used to be Xuehai, which means "broad learning." But after receiving these teachings from Master Yungu, I changed it to Liaofan, which means "transcending the ordinary."

In the past, Chinese people might have three sets of names [in addition to their surname]: a given name, courtesy name, and sobriquet. Their given name that was given to them by their parents expressed the parent's aspirations for their children. Changing this name was tantamount to ignoring this aspiration, truly an unfilial act.

Upon reaching adulthood, age twenty for males and sixteen for females, people were no longer addressed by the given name for to do so was disrespectful. At this time, they underwent a ceremony to be initiated into adulthood. During this ceremony, people of the same generation or older like siblings, schoolmates, and friends, would provide the courtesy name that would be used for the rest of their lives.

If in the future a person became a government official, even the emperor, people addressed him by his courtesy name. If an adult was addressed by his given name, then

most likely he had committed a crime, and was to be sentenced and punished.

To be even more respectful, people would address an individual by his or her sobriquet or birthplace. This indicated that he was a highly respected important person from a particular place.[24]

Liaofan and Xuehai were Liaofan's sobriquets. Only one's parents and teacher would use a person's given name after they reached adulthood; even grandparents, uncles, and emperors used the courtesy name. Thus, society accorded the same gratitude and respect to teachers as it did to parents.

> It signified my understanding of the fact that we could re-create our destiny and that I did not wish to be like ordinary people who were controlled by destiny. From then on, I began to be very cautious in whatever I thought or did. Soon, I felt quite different from before. In the past, I had been careless and without self-discipline. Now, I find myself being naturally watchful and conscientious.

This segment talks of Liaofan's determination and cultivation in correcting his errors and making a fresh start. First, he changed his sobriquet from Xuehai to Liaofan. *Liao* means "understanding and awakening." *Fan* means "to be an ordinary person." Liaofan means to understand worldly phenomena and that we can re-create our own destiny.

At that point, he understood everything in regards to worldly matters and was awakened. He truly knew that only

the individual could change and re-create his or her own destiny. He understood the principles and methods, and knew that from then on he did not have to passively accept his destiny because it was not fixed.

After his resolution to reform, his feeling towards everything changed. From that point on until the end of his life, he was constantly aware of his thoughts and behavior, always alert, and no longer deluded.

In the past, he had been unrestrained, doing things as he pleased, drifting aimlessly through each day. How did he live his life? He had no idea for he had no direction or goal. To live this way is to be bound by fate, unable to re-create a bright future.

After reforming, he found himself being naturally cautious and careful in thought, speech, and behavior. In other words, after turning over a new leaf, his beliefs and views regarding life and the universe changed dramatically. Previously, he had thought that everything was bound by destiny. But, now he knew that he could re-create destiny and thus, he became determined and optimistic.

> I maintain this attitude even when alone, for I know that there are spirits and heavenly beings everywhere who can know my every thought and deed. I am cautious not to offend them with my thoughts. Even when I encounter people who dislike or slander me, I bear their insults with a patient and peaceful mind, and do not feel compelled to quarrel with them.[25]

The reason why ordinary people cannot reform is that they do not understand this. Those who are more familiar with the *Infinite Life Sutra* are able to understand and be even more careful with their thoughts, speech, and behavior than Liaofan.

The population of the Pure Land is beyond calculation. Even if we used every computer in the world, we could not calculate the number of beings there. Each of them possesses the same abilities as Amitabha Buddha. Each has heavenly eyes to see all, heavenly ears to hear all, and the ability to know every thought of every being throughout the universe in the past, present, and future. So, Amitabha Buddha, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva, and all the beings in the Pure Land know our every thought and wrongdoing.

Even when we are alone, where no one else can see us, we still need to restrain ourselves and not give rise to a single improper thought. In so doing, we will truly achieve self-discipline and control. As Pure Land practitioners, we seek birth in the Pure Land and to achieve in our virtuous conduct. But, if we continue to deceive ourselves, we will not achieve anything. As Confucius said, a decent person is cautious even when alone. Living by ourselves, we can still be disciplined and not self-indulgent. In this way, we will truly be cultivating. Ordinary people constantly indulge themselves without any real restraint. When in public, they may appear careful and self-restrained, but when alone they again do as they please.

This is one of the reasons why monasteries of the past

had many practitioners sharing one room. If only one person was in a room, he or she would be unable to achieve in cultivation. With more than ten people in a room, everyone will behave well at all times. The purpose of this was to ensure that people disciplined themselves.

Today, very few people are willing to restrain themselves. Rather, they are intent on enjoying comfort. Fine! We can enjoy ourselves in this life and then we can also leisurely enjoy ourselves in the three bad paths in the upcoming life, having not succeeded on the path to enlightenment!

When living within a large group, everyone needs to work together. There are some single rooms at monasteries, but they are for cultivators of advanced years and those who hold high positions and have many responsibilities. For example, the abbot or leading monk or nun need to have a room of their own to allow them to conveniently oversee matters at all hours without disturbing others. Therefore, true cultivators practice "living together harmoniously," one of the six harmonies.

It is inappropriate for an individual to have a single room. If a person thinks it is uncomfortable to have two or three people living together in a room, it then becomes easy for them to think, "I do not want to live with that person." Then he or she will be unable to achieve the state of constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. Why? They have discriminatory and impure minds; the mind that still has dislikes and evades unpleasantness. How can that person achieve anything? Where then and how do we cultivate? We cultivate purity and the non-discriminatory mind in the place

we dislike the most.

It is wrong for us to be unwilling to live with or get along with someone. Liaofan had discovered his own faults and sincerely corrected them. But, in dealing with our own faults, we continuously excuse ourselves instead of correcting them. When we do this, how can we hope to succeed in our cultivation?

Within a Sangha, a starting point for our cultivation is the six harmonies, which are the basic guidelines to follow when living together in a group. All the individuals can abide by the five precepts and ten virtuous karmas. In the past, temples used the novice precepts and Guidelines for Dignified Behavior as the standard. This included the ten precepts and twenty-four kinds of dignified manners. Today, we do not need to be that strict. It is enough for us to use the five precepts and the ten virtuous karmas as the standards for both laypeople as well as for monastics. However, the standards cannot be lower than these.

To live harmoniously in a group, it is necessary to abide by the six harmonies to correct our faults and bad habits, and to learn to get along with others. Liaofan found that he no longer minded when he encountered those who disliked or even slandered him. He could patiently bear their insults with a peaceful mind and no longer felt compelled to quarrel with them. His mind had become calm, unlike before, when he was flighty and impatient, unable to endure the slightest inconvenience or wrong.

Here we can see his improvement from cultivation. Therefore, a true Buddhist practitioner needs to learn how

to get along with everybody regardless of whether they are enlightened beings or demons and ghosts. We need to find our inner peace and to hold on to it, regardless of the environment or circumstances.

After the sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Huineng, became enlightened, circumstances found him acting as an attendant to a group of hunters. Daily, he witnessed their hunting and killing. He served meat and cared for them. The hunters were his masters; he was their servant. He did this for not just a short time, but for fifteen years.

Could we have endured this? He not only endured but was contented and did not have any wandering discriminatory thoughts and attachments. These were fifteen years of true cultivation. He reached enlightenment when he was in Huangmei, in the southern part of China. Whether under favorable or adverse circumstances, he cultivated his mind of purity, equality, great compassion, and loving-kindness. There is nothing more important to our cultivation than these four virtues, and these were what he practiced.

Today, when we interact with others and with circumstances, are we cultivating purity of mind under favorable or adverse conditions? If we are not cultivating purity of mind, then we are not properly practicing Buddhism and will not benefit, for it has become merely an academic pursuit. Even if we spend everyday reading the sutras and become extremely articulate in explaining them, our afflictions will still increase. In this way, we will end up in the three bad paths. This is obviously wrong!

True practitioners do not attach to words, to what has

been said, specified, or thought. They use their intuition. They seek purity of mind, the non-discriminatory true mind that is our original true nature. They seek supreme, perfect enlightenment.

For Pure Land practitioners, it is also our goal to attain constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha: the mind of purity and equality. To have constant mindfulness is to have an uncontaminated and non-discriminatory mind. There is no barrier within the true mind.

If we still have discriminatory thoughts and attachments, then we are unable to achieve constant mindfulness. Sever these discriminatory thoughts and attachments, and we will be able to achieve constant mindfulness. This is true cultivation.

> The year after I met Master Yungu, I took the preliminary imperial examination in which Mr. Kong had predicted that I would come in third place. Amazingly, I was first! Mr. Kong's predictions were beginning to lose their accuracy. He had not predicted that I would pass the imperial examination at all, but that autumn, I did!

Liaofan was destined to place third in the examination. But by cultivating kind deeds and accumulating merits and virtues, he was able to improve his placement from third to first. As Mr. Kong's predictions began to lose their accuracy, Liaofan saw firsthand that he was able to change destiny and that there were variables and not just constants.

Next, he made the wish to pass an even higher level of

examination and again his wish came true. To gain something we were not destined to have is to truly have sought and gained.

> Although I had corrected many faults, I found that I could not wholeheartedly do the things I ought to. Even if I did do them, it was forced and unnatural. I reflected within and found that I still had many shortcomings, such as seeing an opportunity to practice kindness but not being eager enough to do it or having doubts when helping others.
>
> Sometimes I forced myself to act kindly, but my speech was still uncontrolled and offensive. I found I could contain myself when sober, but after a few drinks, I would act without restraint. Although I often practiced kind deeds and accumulated merits, my faults and offenses were so numerous that they seemed to outweigh the good that I did. A lot of my time was spent vainly and without value.

We should not expect any reward when we help others, for it is our responsibility to do so. Confucius and other sages taught us the five human relationships and ten moral responsibilities. The five human relationships, which are founded on traditional moral principles, include those between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, friends, and political leaders and the public.

Practicing what we ought to is a virtue of our natures. It is naturally within our responsibility as parents to be protective, to care for and guide our children. It is naturally within our responsibility as children to be filial, to honor and respect our parents. Whether as siblings or friends, all should be respectful towards one another. Friends should be trustworthy, honest, and reliable for we are naturally obligated to be so. And all of us should be mutually caring, respectful, and helpful to each other.

Liaofan understood, although he did not yet practice perfectly and purely, for these actions were still intermingled with personal advantages and disadvantages. If we question whether helping another will adversely affect us, then our thoughts and actions are impure, and we will be unable to wholeheartedly assist others. From this, we know that although we may do kind deeds, we still have not done enough.

Confucius taught of the virtue in assisting others in achieving goodness and that goodness is a virtue. When we find others practicing goodness, we need to help them to accomplish their goal. Why? A good deed can benefit a local community and even the whole society.

For example, when a road needs to be fixed and a person volunteers to repair it, we can enthusiastically assist that person to complete the work. This kind of good deed that benefits society needs support from all of us. Liaofan was able to go along in helping others, but he did not do so wholeheartedly. He was only a little bit willing. He still had doubts when helping others in need.

It is good to help people in trouble, but many of us question whether we should do so. In today's society, we frequently encounter people asking for help. Some of them are frauds asking for money that they will squander on self-indulgence. When this happens, our kind deeds become transgressions. Thus, it is very difficult to do good, for doing so requires both compassion and wisdom. Compassion is the genuine driving force behind our assisting others but wisdom will help us to examine and judge whether we should help or not. If yes, then we can do so. If however, they are trying to cheat us and we know what they are doing, we need to guide them. If they are not old or ill, but are healthy and able, then we can encourage them to engage in proper work instead of using devious means to make a living.

Therefore, correcting our faults to begin anew is not something readily accomplished, but requires time and continuous effort. In the beginning stages, difficulties are unavoidable. To behave in a courteous manner while being careless and thoughtless in speech is a bad habit. Since ancient times, speech has been considered the source of both good fortune and misfortune, so we need to be constantly aware of our speech.

Confucius taught us four studies, the first of which is virtuous conduct that is basic to being a decent person. Today, we would call this moral education. However, this kind of education rarely exists in our society, as people today are less concerned about it. The second study is speech.[26] Confucius stressed the importance of our speaking properly and respectfully so that we would not harm others with our

lack of consideration.

We often hurt others with our careless speech. Those we hurt may take offense and bear grudges. In the future, they will seek revenge. Thus, many problems are created out of misunderstandings and resentments arise because of what we have said. "The speaker had no such intention, the listener interpreted it to be so." We need to be careful and restrained in our speech. And very frankly, there is no need to talk a lot. In talking less, we will commit fewer mistakes.

For our self-attainment, chanting "Amituofo" is enough. We should also encourage other Pure Land practitioners cultivating purity of mind to chant "Amituofo" as well. In this way, when we find ourselves subjected to hearing gossip, we would just respond with "Amituofo." If they gossip more, then again say, "Amituofo." Let them hear this several times. After they are finished talking, we will have listened but disregarded what they said. We will only have said "Amituofo" to them. This is good for it is best not to say much. We have seen that Liaofan had the bad habit of talking too much.

The restriction on intoxicants is one of the five major precepts in Buddhism. The Buddha prohibited alcohol because many people behave foolishly when intoxicated. Therefore, the precept clearly states that we are not even supposed to take one drop. Why? There was the fear that we would lose control and this leads to problems such as breaking additional precepts. If we can drink a moderate amount of alcohol and not become intoxicated, then there is an exception to this precept.

In the past when I was studying in Taizhong, Taiwan, my late teacher, Mr. Li Bingnan lectured on the *Book of Rites.*[27] Mr. Zheng Kangcheng, a learned scholar who lived during the East Han dynasty, wrote a commentary on the *Book of Rites* that combined insight with virtue. Mr. Zheng was a student of Mr. Ma Rong who in his own time was also an exceptional scholar. However, being narrow-minded, Mr. Ma would become extremely displeased whenever one of his student's achievements surpassed his and Mr. Zheng's achievements did precisely that. Unable to resign himself to the situation, Mr. Ma hired someone to kill his outstanding student!

When Mr. Zheng took leave from his teacher, Mr. Ma took all his students to a pavilion several miles out of town for a farewell gathering and encouraged everyone to start toasting. Eventually, Mr. Zheng drank three hundred toasts! Mr. Ma had planned to get Mr. Zheng drunk, to make it much easier for the killer to carry out the plan. He had no idea that alcohol would have no effect on Mr. Zheng, who remained courteous and proper. Mr. Li said that if everyone was able to drink this much without being affected, then Sakyamuni Buddha would never have needed to establish this precept!

We need to understand why Sakyamuni Buddha gave us this as well as other precepts. When lay Buddhist practitioners cook, it is all right to use cooking wine for flavoring, because they will not become intoxicated. Also, as alcohol can improve poor blood circulation, it is permissible for the elderly to drink a glass at mealtimes. These are simply

exceptions, not violations of the precepts.

Similarly, there are five pungent vegetables that Buddhists are discouraged from eating: onion, garlic, chives, green onions, and leeks. Garlic especially. Why did the Buddha prohibit these? The *Surangama Sutra* explains that purity of mind is most important in our cultivation. However, if we have not reached a certain level of attainment, our intake of food and drink can adversely affect our judgment. Once we have achieved a certain level and are master of our minds, we will be able to affect the environment instead of being affected by it. Then there will be no obstacles.

The Buddha told us that when we eat these five vegetables raw, it increases our irritability. Eating them cooked can increase our hormone production and sexual urges. So, there are reasons why the Buddha set up these precepts. Whether eaten raw or cooked, the five vegetables are forbidden because they increase afflictions.

Some laypeople have said that if they cannot eat these five vegetables, then they are not interested in becoming vegetarians. We need to understand the purpose behind this prohibition. If these vegetables are used as seasonings, like when we use one or two cloves of garlic to flavor our cooking, then it will not cause any harm. Thus, when we understand the reasoning, we will see that Buddhism is very logical, flexible, and sensible.

There are exceptions to strictly observing the precepts even after we have received them. These exceptions enable us to introduce Buddhism to others and to get along happily with everyone. Therefore, at certain functions, we need to

behave wisely, to adapt ourselves to the circumstances. Because it is an unimaginably rare opportunity for one to encounter the teachings, we should make use of opportunities to introduce the teachings to others. Even over drinks and during mealtime, we can explain Buddhism to them, to plant the root of goodness. These are rare educational opportunities not to be wasted.

> It took me more than ten years to complete the three thousand meritorious deeds I had vowed to do. I was unable to dedicate the merits from these three thousand good deeds at a temple until I returned to my hometown in the south, a few years later. At that time, I had the opportunity to ask two monks to dedicate them for me.

Because Liaofan had a post with the army that required constant traveling, he did not have a chance to dedicate the merits. It was not until the year after he had fulfilled his pledge of three thousand good deeds that he had the chance to do so. He engaged the services of some monks at a temple to dedicate the merits on his behalf. When he had made his pledge, he expressed his sincerity and earnestness in turning over a new leaf and in accumulating merits and virtues. Upon completion of his three thousand virtuous deeds, he dedicated them to repay his gratitude and for the fulfillment of his wish.

> Then, I made my second wish and that was for a son. I vowed to complete another three thousand

> good deeds. A few years later, your mother gave birth to you and named you Tianqi.

Liaofan was not destined to have a son, but having made the wish for one, found it was fulfilled. "Proper seeking will enhance the gain." He attained his wish due to correct seeking and cultivation. Before he had completed the second three thousand good deeds, his wife gave birth to their first son, Tianqi. From this, we can see that if we sincerely and properly make a wish, it will come true. Although he had gained a son before completing his pledge of the three thousand good deeds, he still honored it. It was the same as what had previously transpired. He took the imperial examination, but before he could fulfill his pledge, he came in first instead of the destined third place. This is to be in accordance and the results from such accordance are truly inconceivable.

> Every time I performed a good deed, I would record it in a book. Your mother, who could not read or write, would use a goose feather dipped in ink. She made a red circle on the calendar for every good deed she did. Sometimes she gave food to the poor or bought living creatures in the marketplace and freed them in the wild. She recorded all of these with her circles on the calendar. At times, she could accumulate more than ten circles in one day!

If we have the heart to free captive animals, we need to be

careful not to be deceived. Many people go to pet stores to buy the animals just to release them. However, these animals were specifically captured for this purpose. If we did not create the demand, the stores would not try to fill it by capturing more! This puts increased numbers of animals at risk and causes more harm than good. As a result, we accumulate offenses rather than merits and virtues.

Therefore, when we want to free animals, we need to do so only with those that we inadvertently come upon when we go grocery shopping. Do not seek them deliberately for to do so is to have an intention instead of doing it naturally. As we happen to come upon one, we need to determine if it will be able to survive on its own. If not, it would be best not to buy it but instead use the money to accomplish some other merits and virtues. We need to act wisely, not impulsively or emotionally.

The meaning of freeing captured creatures does not just include setting animals or birds free. It also includes becoming a vegetarian and encouraging others not to kill living beings but to care for them. For example, we can print and freely distribute copies of the book called the *Love of Life*. This book can help more children nurture their love for living creatures. Doing this, we will truly achieve the essence of freeing living creatures.

We need to understand the spirit and the profound meaning behind what we are taught, not just do something for the sake of doing it. As for the practice of giving, there are many kinds, including the giving of wealth, teaching, and fearlessness. Each has its own inconceivably vast and

profound meanings.

Both Liaofan and his wife had refrained from wrongdoing and practiced good deeds. Obviously, they were accomplishing their goals much faster than before when they were sometimes unable to accomplish one good deed a day, but took several days to do so. This is why it took ten years to complete the first pledge of three thousand virtuous deeds. But now they were able to accomplish more than ten a day, which was a vast improvement. It is very difficult to reform but they both had the perseverance and the patience to do so. Without the willpower and the determination, it is not easy to eradicate our bad habits and faults, and this is why many of us regress more than we progress on the path to enlightenment.

> Everyday we practiced like this and in four years, the three thousand deeds were completed. Again, I invited the same two masters to make the dedications, this time at our home. On the 13th day of the ninth month of that same year, I made my third wish and that was to pass the highest level of the imperial examination. I also vowed to complete ten thousand meritorious deeds. After three years, I attained my wish and passed the examination. I was also made the mayor of Baodi county.

It only took four years, from 1580 to 1583, to complete the second pledge of three thousand good deeds, whereas it had taken over ten years to accomplish the first similar

pledge.

Liaofan was not destined to pass this particular examination. His destiny also did not include having a son but he attained one through his seeking and practice. It would also be a variable if his wish to pass the examination were to come true although he was not destined to pass it. Everything that Master Yungu had taught him proved to be true. Now he pledged to complete ten thousand good deeds. In 1586, only three years after his pledge, as expected, he attained his wish in passing the examination.

After this, he was assigned by the imperial government to be the mayor of Baodi county, which was close to Beijing. This position had not been in his original destiny. Previously, he had been destined to be a magistrate in a county in Sichuan county, in southwest China, far from Beijing.

> I prepared a small book to record my merits and faults, and called it the *Book of Cultivating the Mind*. Every morning, when I began work in the office, my servant would bring the book and have the guard place it on my desk. I would record my every deed—good or bad—no matter how small. At night, I set up an altar in the courtyard and put on my official uniform to emulate the way of Mr. Zhao, an officer in the Song dynasty. I burned incense and reported all my deeds to the heavens.

This helps us to understand how he felt about managing public affairs after he came into office and of his wish to create good fortune for others. At the time, city or county

mayors were not elected but were chosen by the imperial government. Liaofan was a very good county mayor.[28] He refrained from wrongdoing, cultivated good deeds, and accumulated merits and virtues.

At the beginning of his term of office, he prepared a blank book and named it the *Book of Cultivating the Mind*. He used it every day to record his good or bad thoughts and deeds, so that he could be watchful over them to see when he would be able to fulfill his pledge of ten thousand good deeds.

At night, he openly reported to the gods and spirits everything he had done throughout the day, a practice followed by many people. To be pure in body and mind, they would honestly admit to everything. Buddhists call this "confessing and apologizing to the public."

> Once, your mother was concerned when she saw that I had not accumulated much merit. In the past, she had been able to help me in our accumulation of good deeds and we were able to complete the three thousand meritorious deeds. Now, I had made a vow to complete ten thousand more deeds but there were fewer opportunities to practice them at the government residence. She worried about how long it would be before my vow could be fulfilled.

Before he became a government official, Liaofan was not as busy with work. It was also easy for his wife to assist him in doing good acts. But, as an official, he and his wife lived in a

government residence. At the time, there was little contact between those in the official residence, especially their family members, and the public. Therefore, his wife was no longer able to help him in his cultivation and accumulation. She worried when they would be able to fulfill the pledge.

> That night, I dreamed of a heavenly being and told him of my difficulty in completing the ten thousand good deeds. The heavenly being reminded me that upon becoming mayor, I had reduced the taxes on the farmlands. That one good deed was worth ten thousand merits. My vow was already fulfilled!
>
> When I became mayor, the farmers in Baodi county were highly taxed so I reduced the tax by nearly half. But, I felt bewildered and still had doubts. How could just one deed be worth ten thousand merits?

The tax reduction was substantial and had benefited all the farmers in the county. Actually, far more than ten thousand farmers in the county had benefited; thus, this had easily fulfilled the pledge. However, he was uncomfortable for two reasons. How had the heavenly being known what he had done, and how could this one act have been worth so many merits and virtues?

From this, we can see why it is said that a position in the government is a good place to accumulate merits and virtues. Average people usually do not have this kind of opportunity

to cultivate such good fortune and merit. If Liaofan had not become a county mayor, how many years would it have taken him to complete his pledge? At that time, he had the opportunity to benefit thousands of farmers with one deed because he held a government office. Thus, his one good deed was equivalent to ten thousand.

It is easy to accumulate merits and just as easy to commit wrongdoings. If a public policy does not benefit people, but proves harmful, this act will become ten thousand offenses. Good fortune or misfortune depends on our thoughts. The higher our position, the greater are the possibilities for creating good fortune or misfortune. For example, a leader of a country can implement one policy, which if it proves beneficial to all the citizens will actually accomplish thousands, even millions, of good deeds. On the other hand, if the leader implements a policy that proves harmful, then he or she will have committed thousands, even millions, of bad deeds.

As most people's opportunities are more limited, they are restricted in the good or bad they can do. If a person has status, and thus has the opportunity, he or she needs to be cautious in his or her every action. By cultivating good deeds, he or she will have a bright future. To do otherwise will ensure that he or she will fall into the three bad paths to suffer there. Why? Due to his or her high status, the results from that person's actions are more far-reaching than those of average citizens.

Coincidentally, the Zen Master Huanyu was

> traveling from Wutai Mountain and stopped in Baodi. I invited him to the government residence, told him of my dream, and asked whether it was believable. Master Huanyu said: "If one does a good deed with such a true and sincere heart without expectation of reward, then one deed can indeed be worth the merits of ten thousand. Besides, your act of reducing the taxes in this county benefits more than ten thousand people!"

Not long after he had his dream, he happened to meet a Zen master and asked him if the fulfillment of the pledge was possible. It would have been wonderful if his pledge was indeed completed! If it was not true, then he would gradually work to accomplish these deeds. Master Huanyu told him yes, one deed sincerely done can be worth the merits of ten thousand good deeds.

This principle, "to cultivate one is to cultivate all" was explained in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. It is the learning and cultivation of non-hindrance. Everything arises from our true nature. If the cultivation is in accordance with the true nature, then it can be regarded as cultivating all. If we do good deeds that are not from our true nature and because we are seeking, we will only receive what we seek—nothing more. If we seek from the true nature, then not only will we attain what we seek, but also we will gain infinite benefits.

What is the nature of the mind? An example, which is easy to understand, is called purity of mind in the Pure Land school. When our minds are pure, all of our deeds will be

good. Thus, we will accumulate far more than just ten thousand good deeds. Amitabha Buddha is a name of millions of virtues. As we gradually come to understand the true reality, we will realize that what Master Ouyi said was logical, that Amitabha Buddha encompasses all the infinite ways of practice. He said: "If we are able to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha, then we will understand all the wisdom of the Buddhist Canon. We can also attain awakening with the guidance of the seventeen hundred stories of the Zen school."

The practice of Zen Buddhism and the other schools all are encompassed within Amituofo. Master Ouyi also said that three thousand kinds of dignified manners, eighty thousand minute courtesies, and three divisions of precepts are all within Amituofo. All the precepts, all the Buddhist teachings, and all worldly teachings are also included within Amituofo. All methods and ways of practice are within this name for "one is all, all is one." When we have achieved purity of mind, then we will have perfectly achieved innumerable methods. There are still many who do not yet know the infinite advantages found in the name Amituofo.

When we give rise to thoughts, all the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spirits of heaven and earth know them. Since the true mind has no limit or boundary, when we do even the slightest good deed, if this one thought arises from our true nature it will accord with the true mind. Then, no matter how small the deed, the result will benefit the entire universe. Liaofan had yet to reach this state of mind. He had only benefited the public in the phenomenal aspect.

When we do a good deed with a sincere heart, this deed can indeed be worth the merits of ten thousand good deeds. Master Huanyu told Liaofan that his act of reducing the taxes in the county had relieved the suffering of heavy taxes on all the farmers and had benefited more than ten thousand people. However, Liaofan had yet to understand this, as his completion of the ten thousand good deeds was done from the phenomenal aspect. If he had done so from his true nature, that is if he had cultivated from his true mind, then that one good deed would not have been worth just the merits of ten thousand but of innumerable good deeds!

If we see someone in need and unreservedly give him one dollar, then the merit of this accords with our true nature because at that time we did not have differentiating thoughts of others and us. We did not distinguish between receiver and donor. We were not attached. In this way, the merits from giving one dollar are infinite for they are the uncovering of our virtuous natures.

The merit from giving millions of dollars may be less than that of one dollar sincerely given. Why? We may have given this money from our eight consciousnesses. This mind of discriminatory thoughts and attachments is limited and thus, we are unable to break through this obstacle of discrimination.

The reason why our merits cannot compare with those of Buddhas and bodhisattvas is the differences in our minds, in our intentions. The environment changes according to the mind. As ordinary people, we are very narrow-minded; thus, no matter how much good fortune or how many merits we

cultivate, we are bound by our discriminatory thoughts and attachments. But these no longer bind bodhisattvas and arhats. Even when they perform a small deed, their merits are infinite. In understanding this principle, our every thought will be perfect, and our merits and virtues will be infinite. Liaofan could not yet even imagine this state of mind. So, he practiced from the aspect of phenomena, and thus, he benefited only ten thousand people.

> Upon hearing this, I immediately gave all my savings for him to take back to Wutai Mountain. I asked him to use the money for a food offering for ten thousand monks and to dedicate the merits for me.

It was rare to see a person like Liaofan, who without having to think gave his savings to provide meals for ten thousand monks. Usually, when laypeople wished to be generous they would provide meals for one thousand monks or nuns,[29] but Liaofan wanted to do so for ten thousand, to fulfill his great vow of ten thousand good deeds.

Mr. You explained in his commentary: "Someone who makes such a quick decision to give generously, without the slightest reluctant or miserly thought, will gain infinite good fortune in return." Such spontaneous generosity showed that Liaofan was an honest official and not at all corrupt, for he gave all of his savings to provide food for ten thousand people. How much money could he have had? He came from a poor but honest family. And he was so unusual in that he deeply understood and believed in the law of causality.

He would never have taken anything that was not his, something not readily achieved by most people. When we do acts of goodness, most of us do very little. For example, we might give one hundred dollars to a good cause and feel very pleased with ourselves. Liaofan gave everything he had. He was a very rare person indeed.

> Mr. Kong had predicted that I would die at the age of fifty-three. However, I survived that year without illness although I did not ask the heavens for a longer life. Now I am sixty-nine.

Liaofan was destined to die at the age of fifty-three. It was an extremely accurate prediction. After encountering a severe misfortune, he would die in his home on the 14th day of the eighth month between one and three o'clock in the morning. Liaofan wrote his book at the age of sixty-nine. He had not sought to live beyond fifty-three but he passed that year in good health without encountering any severe misfortune.

Obviously, the issues of birth and death, and of long life, are of the utmost importance in our lives. If long life can be sought, what is there that cannot be sought? Without long life, it would be difficult to seek the attainment and enjoyment of fame, wealth, prestige, and children. This seeking has to be done properly, in accordance with the teachings, from the mind and heart of utmost sincerity. In this way, everything can be attained.

If we were to seek from outside of ourselves, then as Master Yungu said, we would lose from both within and

without. Everything that is properly and sincerely sought is attainable, whether we are Buddhists seeking good fortune, wisdom, and birth in the Pure Land or others seeking good fortune, long lives, and birth in heaven. Indeed, we can seek to attain more good fortune, an even longer life, and grandchildren. Nothing is unattainable. We have seen that Liaofan gained good fortune, long life, and children to totally surpass the constant in his destiny. These were what he gained through cultivation, not because they were destined.

> The *Book of History* explains: "Destiny exists but it is changeable."

The *Book of History*[30] is China's oldest historical record of the systems of decrees and regulations in ancient times. Our destinies can be accurately foretold, by the calculation of the numbers. The constant, predestination, does exist, but it is very difficult to believe that it will stay that way because there are variables due to addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

Liaofan had refrained from committing wrongdoings and began to cultivate good deeds, thereby gradually decreasing his bad deeds and increasing his good ones. His act of reducing taxes became one of multiplication not addition. Thus, ten thousand good deeds were perfectly completed in a matter of days.

If however, he had done much evil, then in an instant, it would have become an act of division not subtraction. Therefore, there are indeed actions resulting in addition and subtraction as well as those resulting in multiplication and

division that result from our thoughts and actions. These are what create considerable variances. There are constants, but they are not fixed; they change.

The *Book of History* explains that destiny exists but is difficult to be believed by most people because it is changeable. *Accounts of Request and Response* further explains: "Neither misfortune nor good fortune will come without reasons and conditions; we incur them." In other words, they are the retributions from our past actions.

> "Destiny is not set, but is created and determined by ourselves." All this is true.

This is also from the *Book of History* and stresses the importance of virtuous cultivation and of how variables can surpass constants. The teachings of ancient sages and virtuous ones are the truth and therefore are unchangeable. Then as now, we call them sutras. When we apply the teachings today, they are still true.

If we do not believe in them and choose instead to follow our opinions and thus commit wrongdoings, we will only increase our offenses. Even if we were to gain some small benefit, we would only gain something that we were destined to have. If we do not know how to cultivate virtues, then we will not be able to keep what we attain. Not only can we not hold on to our wealth, we cannot even hold on to our lives! And if we cannot hold on to our lives, then what is the use of having great wealth?

This world may be beset with disasters anytime. We may lose our lives any moment. Think about it, what is the point

of having anything else? It would all be useless, even if we owned everything. It is clearly expressed in the "Chapter on the Vows and Practices of Samantabhadra" from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. As we breathe our last breath, we are unable to take anything with us to the next life. Whether it is family members, friends, prestige, or wealth; we take none of these! What we are able to take with us are the ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, to constantly keep them with us and to guide us to the Pure Land.

It is said in Buddhism that "Nothing can be carried over to the next life except our karma." These are critical words of caution. Knowing that our karma will follow us like a shadow, we need to be diligent in cultivating good deeds and to not carry our negative karma with us, for to do so will lead us into the three bad paths. Good karma will lead us to be reborn in the three good paths. And pure karma from constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha will lead us to be born in the Western Pure Land. From this, it is clear what we need to do in this life. We need to broaden our perceptions and expand our thinking instead of being concerned with trivialities or calculating our gains and losses. Life is very short. It would be of tremendous merit, if in this life we were to do more goodness, to benefit more people.

If after reading the teachings of ancient sages and virtuous people, we are able to believe, accept, and abide by them, then we will receive inexhaustible merits and benefits. If we are unable to believe in the teachings, thinking that they are unreliable fairy tales, then this is due to our karmic obstacles. Because of this, we will miss this unsurpassable and

outstanding opportunity.

> I came to understand that both good fortune and misfortune are the results of our own actions. These are truly the words of sages and virtuous people! If someone said that good fortune and adversity are determined by the heavens, I would consider that person ordinary.

These were Liaofan's words of awakening. Great sages and virtuous people have true wisdom and are able to clearly see the true reality. Buddhas and bodhisattvas are unsurpassed sages.

This statement talks about a constant. What Mr. Kong had foretold of Liaofan's destiny was based on common theories. What Master Yungu taught him for changing his destiny were the teachings of sages and virtuous people. Knowing this, why would we need to have our fortunes told? Do we need to seek advice from feng shui masters? Of course not! We need to believe in the teachings of sages and virtuous people, to know that our destiny is within our control and that we can re-create our futures to be bright and splendid.

> Tianqi, my son, I wonder what your life will be like? We should always prepare for the worst. Therefore, even in times of prosperity, act as if you were not. When things are going your way, be mindful of adversity. When you have enough food and clothing, be mindful of poverty.

Liaofan's destiny had been accurately foretold but his son's was not; thus, he did not know what would happen to him. In actuality, there was no need to know. Liaofan taught him that it was important to remember that even in times of prosperity, he was to act as if he was not. Even if he obtained great wealth and social position, and became a high-ranking official with power and influence, he needed to remember the times when he had none. Why? Because in the future, even if we become prosperous, we will be able to remain humble and courteous, and not arrogantly think that we have wealth and prestige while others do not. If we can remain modest, then we will nurture true virtue and good fortune.

Even when everything is going very smoothly, we need to remember the difficult times. In this way, when things are going our way we will remain cautious. Today, even when we have more than enough food and clothing, we need to be thrifty. If we constantly do this when we have wealth and prestige, then we will be able to improve both our moral and caring conduct.

A good example is Mr. Fan Zhongyan who was from a very poor family. When he was young and studying at temples he had little to eat. Living in a state of impoverishment, he cooked a pot of porridge every day, divided it into four portions, and ate one portion a meal. When he prospered later in life and became prime minister, he was under the direct supervision of the emperor and was in a higher position than everyone else. But he still maintained his simple manner of living and changed very little. When he earned more, he thought of those who were

poverty-stricken and helped them. From his biography, we know that he supported over three hundred families! With his income helping to provide for so many, we know that he must have lived in impoverished conditions.

He was truly one of China's great sages. The esteem that Great Master Yinguang had for him was second only to Confucius. Mr. Fan's descendants continued to prosper until the early part of the 20th century because he had fostered merits and virtues to last over one hundred generations. The family of Confucius is foremost as an old and well-known family, followed by that of Mr. Fan whose family lineage remained strong for eight hundred years due to his exceptional cultivation and accumulation of merits. His descendants continued the family tradition of helping others. Throughout Chinese history, few families have accumulated this much great virtue.

We need to understand that great good fortune is that which we share with others for in this way our ensuing good fortune will become inexhaustible.

> When loved and respected by all, remain apprehensive and conservative. When the family is greatly respected, carry yourself humbly. And when your learning is extensive and profound, always feel that the more you learn the less you know.

There is an old saying in China about being overwhelmed by an unexpected favor. It is good for others to love and protect us. However, we need to think. Are we worthy of this

care and respect? We need to be constantly apprehensive about our deficiencies, to constantly reflect, to progress in our cultivation of virtues, and not disappoint other's expectations of us.

Being humble and feeling that we are not knowledgeable enough will help to eradicate our arrogance. Arrogance is one of the five major afflictions and is related to the other four of greed, anger, ignorance, and doubt. We can practice humility to begin eradicating afflictions. If we do so completely, we will be able to uncover our virtuous natures and to truly achieve in our cultivation of merits.

> For the past, we can think of how to advocate the virtues of our ancestors. For the present, we can think of how to conceal the faults of our parents. For the country, we can think of how we can repay its kindness to us, and for the family we can think of how to bring about its good fortune. For other people, think of how to help those in need around us, and for within ourselves think of how to prevent improper thoughts and actions from arising.

Here, Liaofan gives us an important key to re-creating destiny. Our thoughts will provide the guidelines for increasing our virtues and morality, and for developing good deeds. In the past, Chinese education taught of the relationships between humans, between humans and spirits, and between humans and nature. It taught us to constantly think far into the past to honor and make known the virtues

of our ancestors. If we are respected by society for our moral principles, knowledge and work, then we are honoring our ancestors.

In today's society, what is the driving force behind hard work? Wealth, fame, and prestige. Most people will do whatever is necessary to acquire these. If there were no wealth to gain, how many would be willing to work hard? Very few! In the past, the driving force behind people's hard work was filial piety. In their mindfulness of ancestors and parents, they did their best to accumulate merits and virtues on their behalf, and to honor them. This driving force is much worthier and nobler than that of wealth, fame, and prestige! This has been the tradition of Chinese culture and Confucian teaching for several thousands of years.

Buddhism is also based on the foundation of filial piety. Thus, the ritual of making offerings to ancestors and the establishment of ancestral memorial halls are highly regarded, as filial piety is the ultimate root and foundation of Chinese culture. If we are able to be filial towards parents and ancestors, able to remember our roots, then we will naturally be able to think and conduct ourselves properly and to refrain from wrongdoings.

"For the present, we can think how to conceal the faults of our parents." This refers to those who are close to us. When the children are filial and have contributed to society, then even if the parents had committed minor offenses, people will overlook these and praise the parents for having raised such filial children.

"For the country, we can think of how we can repay its

kindness to us." Above us is the country or government, which has the mission of being a responsible leader, parent, and teacher to its citizens; of providing a place where people can live and work in peace and contentment. In return, the citizens can be loyal and dedicate themselves to their country.

"For the family, we can think of how to bring about its good fortune." Below us is the family. Being mindful of the family does not just mean the nuclear family, but the whole family as it was thought of in the past. As a member, we need to be mindful in creating good fortune for the whole family, not just for the immediate part. Therefore, when one person achieves good fortune, the extended family can also benefit from it.

"For other people, think of how to help those in need around us." Always bear in mind the interests of society. We need to do all we can to serve society and to create good fortune for all others. Today, the most urgent need is reviving and developing moral education.

"For within ourselves, think of how to prevent improper thoughts and actions from arising." We need to suppress wandering and deviated thoughts, be mindful of what we are supposed to do, and let go of excessive ambitions. If all of us can do so and fulfill our responsibilities, society will be fortunate and harmonious, and the world will be at peace. Mencius explained: "If people of noble character and integrity can meet their responsibilities, then the truth can be revealed."

In Confucian teaching, this accountability refers to the five

human relationships including those between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, friends, and political leaders and the public. We need to fulfill our responsibilities towards society and others earnestly and diligently in order to create good fortune for our family and society.

> We need to find our faults daily and to correct them immediately. If we are unable to detect our faults, we will think that everything we do is right. When we are unable to correct our faults, improvement will be impossible.

Awakening—the beginning of enlightenment—is being able to detect our faults daily. We begin this process when we first bring forth our vow to become an equal-enlightenment bodhisattva. As we discover our faults daily, we need to correct them. This is cultivation. It is the true achievement in the cultivation of great sages and virtuous people, and is the key to changing our destiny, to leaving suffering behind, and to attaining happiness. When most people are unable to become virtuous people and sages in one lifetime, and are unable to achieve in their cultivation, they will find that the problem lies here.

To know our faults daily is to awaken daily. Once we discover a fault, we sincerely correct it; this is how we will build our strength of cultivation. We need not do much. If we were to find and correct one fault a day then we would become a sage or virtuous person in three years.

As practitioners who chant the Buddha's name, if we are able to correct one fault daily and be mindful of Amitabha

Buddha, then in three year's time we will be born in either the high or middle levels of the Pure Land. This is the way to cultivate to become a Buddha. The question is whether we are willing to do so earnestly. We are fooling ourselves if we are unable to find one fault daily. In failing to know them, we will fail to correct them. How can we hope to improve in this way? When there is no improvement, there is regression. To regard ourselves as infallible and that everything we do is correct is the most horrible way to live.

> There are many intelligent people in the world who cannot improve in either their cultivation of morality and virtues or in their work. Their failures in this life are owed to a single word: procrastination.

If we live for the present and procrastinate, we will remain bound by our destiny. How we are born and die, where we will go after we die all accords with our destiny. Master Yungu called people like this ordinary, philistines who blindly follow what has been destined. They are what the Buddha called "pitiable beings." These principles that Liaofan taught his son are the principles for worldly education as well as Buddhism and must not be ignored.

> Tianqi, the teachings of Master Yungu are most worthy, profound, real, and proper. I hope that you will learn them well and practice them diligently. Use your time wisely and do not let it slip by in vain.

Liaofan carefully wrote down the principles and methods that the master had taught him in changing his destiny and passed them on to his son, hoping that he too would cultivate following this method. Liaofan had received remarkable results from this practice and thus firmly believed in all the principles and methods that the master had taught.

We need to be very familiar with Master Yungu's teachings, to ponder and appreciate them. When we are constantly mindful of the teachings, we will savor them, use them as the basis for our behavior, and practice them diligently. Do not waste this lifetime.

The Second Lesson: Ways to Reform

The Reasons to Reform: To Avoid Misfortune and Accumulate Good Fortune

A Sign for Good Fortune and Misfortune

The first lesson, which is about cause and effect, concentrates on building up the confidence in an individual's ability to alter destiny and the ways in which to do so. The second and third lessons emphasize the methods to accomplish this; thus, they are concerned mainly with the ways to refrain from wrongdoings and the ways to accumulate virtues.

> During the Spring-Autumn Period,[31] China was divided into several small nations. Many prestigious advisers of these nations were able to accurately predict whether a person's future would be fortunate or unfortunate based on their observation of that person's speech and behavior. Many of these are recorded in *Spring and Autumn Annals*.[32]

Liaofan told Tianqi that there were many advisers during this period who could accurately predict whether a person's future would be good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate based on their observations of the person's speech and behavior. On an individual basis, they could predict a person's success or failure. On a much larger scale, they could predict a

country's rise and fall.

These individuals in this period had such exceptional abilities in observing others because they understood the law of causality. When our speech and actions are good, and we are dignified and considerate, 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 dismal. Even if we seem to be doing well now, this period of success will be short-lived, like a briefly blooming flower. Since our speech and actions determine our future, we need to be cautious in everything we say and do.

> As a rule, there are signs that signal impending danger or the coming of good fortune. These signs rising from within are due to one's thoughts and feelings being revealed in his or her behavior.

This applies to individuals as well as to countries. Preceding every occurrence is a sign that originates from the initial intention and is seen in thoughts and behavior. This is why calm and logical people are able to observe and then predict future changes. They can see a nation's rise and fall through its people's desires and actions. Just by observing what people of all levels of society think and do, 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 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 wise and

knowledgeable people.

> Usually a person is more fortunate when tending toward kindness but invites trouble when tending toward cruelty. Ordinary people often do not know what is really happening. It is as if their vision were blurred. Since they cannot see the truth, they claim that good fortune and misfortune are unpredictable.

"Kindness" refers to our hearts and behavior. Truly kind people will help others even when they themselves are harmed in the process. Those who are strict with themselves but lenient with others are bound to have an abundance of good fortune later in their lives. On the other hand, a person invites trouble when he or she is cruel. Those who are self-indulgent and disdainful of others are planting the seeds for future misfortune, but they cannot see the signs.

For ordinary people, it would seem that their vision is blurred or their eyes have been blindfolded. It seems that there is no way to foretell destiny when actually, all the signs are right before their eyes. Who seeks advice from fortune-tellers? These ordinary people.

What Liaofan told his son next is very important and we need to pay close attention and learn from it.

> When we are sincere and honest, our hearts will accord with the will of heaven.

This is the main principle. We must be sincere in all our

actions, neither cheating others nor fooling ourselves. The "will of heaven" is what Buddhism calls the true nature. It is the state of having no wandering thoughts, only those that are virtuous. When we are absolutely honest and truthful, our hearts will agree with the will of heaven. Even if we are presently undergoing hardships, they will soon be over and then we will enjoy abundant good fortune. Therefore, everything we think, say, and do needs to arise from sincerity.

"The sincere and honest heart" is the essence of the eight guidelines taught by Confucius. We accomplish this by severing our desires and uncovering our true nature. Failing to 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, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and thought and the five desires for wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep. If these desires cannot be reduced, our hearts will be constantly affected by our surroundings. How can such a heart remain sincere?

Even if we cannot completely discard these desires, we can work to gradually lessen them. Most of us are immersed in wandering thoughts that accomplish nothing. It would be best if we can abandon these thoughts and some of the enjoyments that we experience through our six senses, and be more considerate of others. If we welcome others to share in our good fortune, then it will become even greater good fortune. Once we understand this, we need to act on it.

When I began studying and practicing Buddhism, a dedicated Buddhist, Mr. Zhu Jingzhou gave me a copy of *Liaofan's Four Lessons*. After reading it, I reflected on my

life and realized that I had the same faults and destiny as Liaofan. I too was supposed to have a very short life. Many people who were able to know the future, including Ganzhu Living Buddha,[33] told me that I would die young. I believed them and was convinced that I was not going to live past the age of forty-five. Therefore, when I became a monk, I based my studying on my presumed early death because that was all the time I had. I did not ask for a longer life. As expected, at forty-five I fell seriously ill.

At that time, Master Lingyuan from Gilong's Dajue Temple was holding a summer retreat and invited me to lecture on the *Surangama Sutra*. I had only reached the third chapter 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, chanted "Amituofo," and quietly waited for my death and subsequent birth in the Pure Land. However, after a month, not only did I not die, I even regained my health! In all these years, as I practiced according to this method and began to see the results, I have felt increasingly confident in the principle of changing destiny. Now, I have let go of everything and I feel even more liberated.

Therefore, in order to gain, we must first let go. If we are reluctant to let go, then we will not be able to gain. In the sutras, we read that to give is to gain. We first give up something in order to gain something in return. Without giving, 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

accomplish this? Just let go, and we will receive everything we are seeking.

First, we must let go of all our desires and wandering thoughts. Liaofan said, "When we are absolutely honest, our hearts will accord with the will of heaven." We discard from the root: to eradicate our selfishness, we completely extinguish thoughts of benefiting ourselves. Instead, all our thoughts should be of how to benefit 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; and by observing our immorality, they will foresee approaching misfortune.

Thus, both good fortune and adversity have signs. Others know that good fortune is about to be ours when they see that our hearts and behavior are good, for we invite others to share in our good fortune. But, if we are unkind and selfish, robbing others of their benefits and never relinquishing our own, then our benefits and good fortune will eventually be used up. Once this happens, we will encounter misfortune. So, as long as we continue with our reckless behavior, others will know that we will soon meet with adversities.

This principle of observation is applicable to an individual, a family, a society, a nation, and even to the world. As long as we remain calm and alert, we will be able to see everything clearly. Therefore, it is possible to predict good fortune and misfortune, happiness and suffering, the

rise and fall of a country, and the stability or turbulence of the world.

The Ways to Reform:
A Perfect Awakening of Three Hearts

A Shameful Heart:
Knowing Shame Can Give Rise to Great Courage

> If we wish to gain good fortune and avoid misfortune, we first need to reform before we even talk about doing good deeds.

Only those with pure minds and deep concentration can see the signs of good fortune and misfortune. Deep concentration is not limited to Buddhists. The person can be a Taoist, a Confucian, or simply someone with a pure mind. The deeper the concentration, the farther they will see. This is why Buddhist sutras often say that an arhat can see five hundred past lifetimes and five hundred future lifetimes.

Actually, since all living beings possess this innate ability, this is the way it should be. However, this ability has now been lost because our minds are distracted. Various wandering and discriminatory thoughts, attachments, and afflictions have confused the mind and caused it to lose its natural ability. Buddhism teaches us how to eliminate such pollutants and hindrances so we may uncover our original true nature.

Once we understand the principles, we then decide how

to change. There are several effective methods to do this. Most of us would like to attain good fortune, happiness, and wisdom while avoiding adversity. Good behavior is the cause that results in good fortune, the effect. But, if we do not first eliminate our karmic obstacles, good fortune will be difficult to obtain. Thus, our first objective is to eradicate our negative karma.

Ordinary people seek outside of themselves, that is, they seek through the constants, but this will not help them receive what they seek. On the other hand, we are now confident in the knowledge that variables exist. However, the variables do not surface immediately. Then how do we reach our goals? We first need to purify our mind. The mind that is pure and serene is the mind of foremost goodness. But if the mind is impure, all good deeds will be tainted and the amount of good fortune that can be received will be limited.

In other words, karmic obstacles have not yet been thoroughly removed. From this we can see that a virtuous and pure mind is of utmost importance. How do we return our mind to its natural state of purity? We first need to know our faults and correct them, following which we need to know the correct methods of doing good deeds.

> There are three ways to reform our faults. First, we must be able to feel ashamed.

Many ancient Chinese sages and virtuous people taught that knowing shame is close to possessing courage. Confucius often spoke of great wisdom, great kindness, and great courage. By knowing what is shame, we will truly reform and

improve ourselves. If we do not know what shame is, we will not have good futures.

When striving to improve ourselves, we do not use ordinary people as our standards; instead, we use Buddhas and bodhisattvas. They were people just like us but they became Buddhas and bodhisattvas. It is a major humiliation that we are still trapped in samsara.

> Think of all of the ancient sages and virtuous people whose names and teachings have lasted for hundreds of generations. They were people just like us, but why is my name worthless like a broken roof-tile?

If we can often think this way and ask ourselves this question, then the shameful heart will take shape. This is the first step and the motivation in changing our destiny. What is the force behind this motivation? It is an inconceivable primal ability. We can readily identify with what Liaofan was explaining here. There were several great Chinese sages during ancient times: Confucius, Mencius, Zhou Gong, and Yiyin.[34] We can think: "They were great men, well I'm great too. They were human. Well, so am I. If they can do it, why can't I?" This is where and how we begin to reflect.

Transcending our world, others have become arhats, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. They have lived an infinite number of lifetimes. So, have we. Why is it that after countless lifetimes of practicing Buddhism, they have succeeded in becoming bodhisattvas or Buddhas, whereas, we are still mired in the six paths? This is the worst shame,

unmatched by any other.

In this world or beyond, these sages have become teachers of heavenly and human beings. One of the ten names for all Buddhas is Teacher of Heavenly Beings and Humans. Here, a teacher is essentially a role model. He or she can set a good example and be a good role model for all living beings. We can use this example to examine our behavior. Why have our names and reputations become tarnished or ruined? Such is the price we pay for our offenses.

One of Liaofan's virtues was that he did not attempt to hide any of his faults. He did not talk about other's mistakes, only his own. As soon as he realized his faults, he immediately began to correct them. This was his strength and the crucial element that led to his later achievements.

We are clinging to worldly desires.

This is our underlying fault or ailment. We still long for and cling to "worldly desires" because our minds have been seriously polluted. Worldly desires refer to the five desires and the six dusts of form, sound, scent, taste, texture, and thought. The word dust is used here as it carries with it the meaning of pollution.

For example, if we do not wipe the furniture daily, it will be covered with dust. To wipe it everyday is to rid it of dust or pollution. This is similar to our pure minds being polluted by desires and dust. Wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep are the desires that give rise to the emotions of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and

doubt, the elements of pollution. This is why the Buddha called the external environment the six sense objects or six dusts. These impurities contaminate our pure mind and are the root of our illnesses.

If we wish to recover the pure mind of our true nature, we must let go of clinging to these desires and dusts. Letting go is the hardest thing for us to do. But, if we can let go of one degree of desire, our minds will become purer by one degree. If we can let go of two degrees then our minds will become purer by two degrees, and so on.

The Buddha taught us that there are fifty-one levels of bodhisattva practice. Each level is based on the amount of emotions the bodhisattva has discarded. Once we can let go of all fifty-one dusts and desires, we will become Buddhas. If we still have one degree of desire, we will become equal-Enlightenment bodhisattvas. These dusts and desires are actually our karmic obstacles.

The Pure Land school often speaks of carrying our remaining karma with us to the Pure Land. This means that if we have been unable to let go of all of our worldly desires before our deaths, we will carry our remaining karma along with us. In the past, some people believed that the Pure Land method does not allow one to be born in the Pure Land if there is any remaining karma. They felt that the phrase should have been "eliminate all our karma and be born in the Pure Land." This stunned Pure Land practitioners around the world. This interpretation of needing to eliminate all karma is incorrect for it is not what the sutras mean.

Although the phrase "carry our remaining karma with us to the Pure Land" is not in any sutra, the truth of that statement is very clear. If we believe that we can only be born when all of our karma has been eliminated, then upon reading the *Infinite Life Sutra*, we would wonder why we would even need to be born in the Pure Land if we had eliminated all of our karma! Equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas still have one degree of remaining ignorance and are not yet totally free of all desires. They still have a tiny fragment of remaining karma. Thus, bodhisattvas are called enlightened sentient beings.

Actually, there is only one being with a perfectly pure mind—a Buddha. Even equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas still possess one degree of remaining karma. They still have some of the six dusts. However, they do not cling to these emotions and this is why they are called enlightened sentient beings.

The phrase "carry our remaining karma with us to the Pure Land" was said by the patriarchs and is based on the meaning of the sutras. This is especially so in the Pure Land school. We can still be born in the Western Pure Land even when we have not removed all our karma. We have seen and learned of numerous Pure Land practitioners who passed away only to be born in the Pure Land. Thus, we need to realize the true reality and not be affected by deviated views. We accord with the teachings in the sutras, not with individual people for individuals can misinterpret the sutras.

Secretly, we do many improper things while

thinking others will not know about them and then are shamelessly proud of ourselves! One day, we will be reborn as an animal without realizing it.

"Improper" refers to things that we should not do: something illegal, illogical, or against moral standards or customs. Many people behave improperly and think that others will not know about it. Frankly, some people would not know. Who? Those, whose minds have been clouded by ignorance and who are deluded. On the other hand, those who possess proper thoughts, wisdom, and a serene mind will be able to see. We cannot hide from them or from the beings and spirits of heaven and earth who are always present.

Heavenly beings and spirits have five extraordinary abilities that they are born with; these abilities are not achieved through practice. So, if heavenly beings and spirits know, needless to say, bodhisattvas and Buddhas will as well. They are aware of every thought of every being within samsara. After reading this in sutras and books written by the sages, we would tremble in fear to realize that we cannot hide anything from them. Would it not be better to regret on our own? Since they know everything even without our confession, it would make us feel a little less guilty if we voluntarily feel felt contrition.

Instead, we are shamelessly arrogant. Shameless refers to someone who is without remorse and who ignores his or her conscience. If we feel guilty after a wrongdoing, we are still all right. Although we hide our bad deeds from

others, our conscience is heavy. There is still hope for our turning back. However, if we have no guilty feelings after committing a wrongdoing, then we are hopeless. Only the person who feels ashamed of his or her wrongdoings can be helped.

When we are shameless and arrogant, one day we will be reborn in the animal realm. Although we are presently in the human realm, we will eventually fall into the three bad paths because of our negative karma. We may not know this, but the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and beings and spirits of heaven and earth do.

At times when we are in a state of bad fortune, evil spirits will start to harass us. They do not arbitrarily harass anyone, but select their targets according to the person's behavior. They dare not bother those who will be reborn in the three good paths and they are extremely respectful to people with kind hearts and compassionate behavior. But, they torment those who are evil. They will be insolent and sarcastic as they ridicule and bully such people because bad spirits know that these people will eventually fall into the three bad paths.

True Buddhist practitioners understand these principles. Once we too understand, we will naturally be watchful over our thoughts and behavior because not only do we not want to fall into the three bad paths, we want to transcend samsara. There is only one way to accomplish this in the present lifetime: we need to seek birth in the Pure Land. Therefore, we need to have firm and unshakable determination.

How do we attain this birth? Through firm belief, vows, mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha, and the cultivation of purity of mind. We should sever our worldly attachments. We do not need to completely let go of everything for if we did, we would become Buddhas. However, the more we let go the better off we will be. Sever unnecessary clinging. Then, focus our mind on Amitabha Buddha and transform our thoughts from those that only benefit our families and ourself to those that benefit all others. In so doing, our minds will become pure.

The difference between enlightened beings and sentient beings is that enlightened beings think of all sentient beings instead of themselves, while sentient beings who are ordinary people only think of themselves. Even if we do not consciously try to sever our self-attachment, by constantly thinking of benefiting all sentient beings, it will gradually diminish by itself. Once we no longer have self-attachment due to our success in Buddha chanting, we will attain the level of one mind undisturbed in mindfulness and achieve a higher level of birth in the Land of Expedient Liberation. In this way, we are assured of being born in the Pure Land.

We need to begin from here and practice earnestly, to set our sights far ahead, and to not only consider our immediate future or even just this lifetime, for they are illusory and impermanent. The *Diamond Sutra* said it well: "Whatever takes form is an illusion." Nothing is permanent or worthy of worry. As for family members

and relatives, we can share with them the proper teachings and encourage them to practice accordingly.

Once an anxious practitioner asked me for help regarding his child who wanted to study abroad. He asked me what to do. I told him to let go of all wandering thoughts and to have the family recite the *Infinite Life Sutra* and chant "Amituofo" to find the answer. He replied, "That won't help, I need to handle this first before my mind can settle down to reciting and chanting."

I replied that if he thought that way, there was no hope for him in this lifetime. He asked why. I explained that he was handling the issue incorrectly, that his method was within the control of his karma and he did not have the strength from the help of the Three Jewels.

We need to know how to use the strength from the Three Jewels and to give up relying on just our own strength because we cannot achieve in this way. We need to use our pure mind to seek help from the Three Jewels. When we do this, we will attain inconceivable help from them. This is very important. As I said previously, we need to use the variable, not the constant that is destined. The variable can be used to re-create our destiny.

In doing this, we seek from within our mind. This is the true mind, not the illusory one. When our mind is constantly filled with wandering thoughts, we are using our illusory mind that exists because of the constants, not the variables. If we use our true mind, then the variables come into play. We can see this very clearly in the sutras

and in *Liaofan's Four Lessons*.

How do we seek help from Buddhas and bodhisattvas? We do not negotiate with them. For example, we do not ask them to help us gain wealth and say that in return, we will offer them half of the money. This is not right! Do we really think that they would agree to this? Ordinary people request help from the Buddhas, bodhisattvas and the Three Jewels by trying to strike a deal with them. This is wrong because there are no deals to make.

What is important now is for us to recover our original pure mind. Master Huineng said, "Why bother to seek outside of ourselves when everything already exists within the true nature. Since everything exists within our true nature, if we seek inwardly, we can attain everything. When there is a sincere request, a response will follow."

The Three Jewels act as a catalytic condition. We seek and attain something our true nature originally had. If it were not already within the true nature, even the Three Jewels could not help us. In Buddhism, it is said that whatever is properly sought can be attained. If we believe that whatever is sought will be attained, including the vow to become a Buddha, then certainly everything else can be achieved.

But, as ordinary people, we do not realize this for we use our worldly intelligence in pursuing everything. We mistakenly think we are obtaining fame, wealth, and prestige, but are actually committing bad deeds. Whatever is attained was already destined to be ours. It is

not worth the price we will have to pay in the future for we will suffer the consequences from our wrongdoings.

Buddhism teaches us about the ten Dharma realms. Within each of these exists another ten Dharma realms. Currently, we exist in the human realm. Within this realm, ten Dharma realms exist. This moment, if we are single-mindedly mindful of Amitabha Buddha and seek birth in the Pure Land, then for this moment, we are in the Buddha realm. Being mindful of a Buddha is the cause; becoming a Buddha is the consequence.

At this moment, if we are mindful of bodhisattvas and of cultivating the six paramitas, we are in the bodhisattva realm. Similarly, if we are mindful of virtue, morality, and humanity, we are in the human realm. But, if we are greedy, constantly scheming to make money and to possess materialistic enjoyments, we are in the hungry ghost realm. If our thinking is confused and deluded, and we are drifting along through life, we are in the animal realm. And if we are displeased and angry with everyone and everything, we are in the hell realm.

Although we are currently in the form of a human, we can still be in any of the other nine realms. When Buddhas, bodhisattvas and spirits see us, they know very well whether we are Buddhas, bodhisattvas or any other beings. Once we realize that there are ten Dharma realms within each Dharma realm, we will know how to choose. The choice rests in our hands.

There is nothing else in the world that calls for

> more shame and remorse than behavior such as this. Mencius once said, "Shame is the most important word in a person's life." Why? Because one who knows shame will put forth his or her best efforts into correcting faults and will eventually attain sagehood or become a virtuous person. One who does not know shame will be just like an animal: unrestrained and immoral. This is the key to correcting our faults.

It is shameful for us to still be mired in samsara while others have become Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Nothing is of greater shame than this. The word shame has a very close connection with humans. Why? By being ashamed, we can become a virtuous person or a sage. By being unashamed, we will doubtlessly fall into the three bad paths. So, we can see how closely connected the word shame is to our future. By knowing shame, we will tirelessly strive to eliminate it and replace it with the inspired enthusiasm to become a sage or a virtuous person.

By not knowing shame, we will be a dishonorable person engaging in immoral activities. Only those without shame still have greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. But by knowing shame, we will no longer have these four poisons. The mind of greed will lead us into the hungry ghost realm. The mind of anger and hatred will lead us into the hell realm. The mind of ignorance will lead us into the animal realm. What is there for us to be proud of? Compared with Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we are unimaginably far behind them! By

understanding this, these afflictions will naturally diminish and vanish.

Frankly, it is shameful to fall behind others in performing virtuous deeds and attaining good results. If we know shame, we will strive to improve ourselves.

A Fearful Heart:
From Fear Comes Sincerity and Respect

> The second way to reform is to know fear. Celestial beings and earthly spirits hover over our heads in observation. There is no way for us to deceive them.

Constantly having this fearful mind will enable us to discipline ourselves so that we will no longer dare to commit wrongdoings. It will help us to be constantly apprehensive. What are we fearful of? Above us, there are celestial beings with extraordinary abilities who see very clearly our every movement. Below us, there are earthly spirits who also have five extraordinary abilities.[35] Although their abilities cannot compare with those of the celestial beings, their senses such as hearing and sight are much keener than ours.

It is probably difficult for us to believe that even with these abilities earthly spirits are not cleverer and wiser than us. We know that many animals possess unique senses. For example, a dog's senses of smell and hearing are keener than ours. But, they are less intelligent than we are. Since animals

surpass us in various abilities, it should not be surprising that ghosts and spirits do so as well. Nor is it difficult to believe that ghosts and spirits have five kinds of extraordinary abilities. But, why do they still suffer? They are not as wise as us and most do not possess as much good fortune as we do. We need to remember that all around, there are spirits and ghosts that are perfectly aware of our every thought and our every act.

> Even when my wrongdoings are done in a concealed place, the beings and spirits of heaven and earth are present. They see all my faults. If my bad deeds are serious, then all kinds of adversities will befall me. If my fault is minor, it will still reduce my current good fortune. How can I not feel fear?

Even if we are committing small faults in the most concealed place where nobody can witness them, there are beings and spirits who can clearly see everything. This is terrifying! But the abilities of these beings are still not great, for their abilities are incomparable to those of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Fortunately, Buddhas and bodhisattvas have great compassion, loving-kindness, and purity of mind. When these compassionate beings witness our wrongdoings, they will not cause problems for us.

However, Dharma protectors, spirits, and ghosts are ordinary beings who will cause trouble for those who have committed wrongdoings. Becoming angry upon seeing our improper behavior, they can cause us trouble. They are

more prone to punish us for our severe wrongdoings; thus, adversities will befall us. Understanding this, how can we not be afraid?

There are several passages in the *Infinite Life Sutra* that call for respect and fear. There are an infinite number of beings in the Pure Land. All have the heavenly eye and can see everything without any obstruction. All have the heavenly ear and can hear every sound throughout the universe, in the past, present, and future. They see what we cannot see. They hear what we cannot hear. When we think about it, we will realize that we cannot hide anything from these utmost virtuous people. If we cannot deceive spirits and other beings, then how could we even think of deceiving Amitabha Buddha, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva? It is impossible!

Once we understand this and deeply realize that we need to seek birth in the Pure Land, it does not matter how we perform our merit dedications. All the beings there know our aspirations. There is no need for us to verbally say, "We seek birth in the Pure Land." They knew it the instant that we first gave rise to the thought. We need to honestly chant "Amituofo." There is no need for unnecessary words. We just need to seek one mind undisturbed and the highest level of birth in the Western Pure Land. In so doing, we will be foremost in wisdom, merits, and virtues.

> Even when we are alone in our room, the beings and spirits watch us very carefully and record everything. Even if we try to conceal our improper

> acts with clever speech, the spirits and celestial beings can see into our hearts as clearly as seeing into our lungs or liver. We are just trying to deceive ourselves and others. In actuality, others have seen through us, and we thus become worthless [in their eyes]. When we think about this, how can we not be afraid?

Previously, we read about being with others. Here Liaofan wrote of being alone in our room and behind closed doors. We become careless, behaving as we wish, not realizing the importance in cultivating alertness even when alone. When with others, we tend to restrain ourselves. When alone, we tend to relax.

My late teacher, Mr. Li Bingnan, told me of an occurrence that happened almost two thousand years ago. Mr. Zheng Kangcheng and a group of classmates were reflecting on their faults. As each reflected, they found that they had many shortcomings. Only Mr. Zheng could not think of any. After thinking for a long time, he remembered. One time, when he went to the bathroom, he forgot to put on his hat. This was his shortcoming![36]

It is obvious that in the past, even when alone people were constantly watchful over their thoughts and behavior, and their appearance would be as neat as if they had company. Today, people would say why bother. But this was how people used to behave, for they knew that even when alone, beings and spirits of heaven and earth could still see them. It would have been impolite to be careless and behave as they

pleased. Even a concealed spot is visible to the beings and spirits. Thus, our demeanor should always be respectful as we refrain from self-indulgence.

Even in our room, it should seem as if innumerable pairs of eyes were watching us and innumerable fingers were pointing at us. We should be as watchful of our behavior as if we were in public, not daring to behave as we please. There is no use in trying to conceal our behavior or cover up our faults with glib talk. It is as if our internal organs were visible to all. This is how clearly the spirits can see us.

We may think that we have secrets, but we are only deceiving ourselves for the spirits of heaven and earth can see through everything. Any attempts to hide our faults are useless. Realizing this, how could we not be fearful?

> However, as long as we still have one breath left,
> we have the chance to regret even the worst deeds.

When we are ashamed, our hearts are respectful and fearful. This will enable us to reform and eradicate our bad deeds. Many Buddhists attend repentance ceremonies daily throughout their lives trying to repent and eradicate karmic obstacles. Not only do some fail to eradicate such obstacles, but the more ceremonies they attend the more their karmic obstacles increase. Why? They do not know how to sincerely regret, but instead conceal their bad deeds even more. To truly cultivate is to be able to feel ashamed, to have respect, and to know fear. It is essential for us to understand this and to change our improper thinking.

Those who have committed the greatest transgressions

such as the five deadly offenses or the ten bad karmas[37] are destined for the hell realms. Can they be helped? Yes, even with only one remaining breath, if they feel remorseful, they can be helped. By being genuinely ashamed, sincerely giving rise to a respectful and apprehensive heart, deeply regretting their ways, vowing to be born in the Pure Land, and properly chanting "Amituofo" one to ten times, they are assured of being born in the Pure Land. For example, during the Tang dynasty, a butcher named Zhang Shanhe chanted "Amituofo" just ten times at the last moment before his death, and was born in the Pure Land.

Also, in the *Visualization Sutra* we learn that in ancient India, King Ajatasatru killed his father, egregiously mistreated his mother, and caused dissension in the Sangha. He would stop at nothing. We learn more of him in the *Ajatasatru Sutra*. At the last moment of his life, with just one remaining breath, the king truly regretted and attained single-mindedness of Amitabha Buddha as he sought birth in the Pure Land. He was born in the second highest level of the Pure Land. Inconceivable!

From this, we know that there are two ways to be born in the Pure Land. One way is to cultivate and accumulate merits and virtues daily, and to follow the regular way of practice to seek birth in the Pure Land. The other way is for those who have committed egregious evil deeds to be deeply remorseful at the last moments of their life.

Therefore, do not look down on those who have committed wrongdoings. Perhaps at the last moment of their lives, their ability to feel deep remorse will be so strong that

they may attain a higher level of birth than we can. This is very possible. It is said that a prodigal who returns home is more precious than gold. Ordinary people cannot be compared with them. Thus, we cannot look down on those who have committed wrongdoings.

Understanding this, we should not even think of counting on our luck as we continue to commit transgressions, thinking that we can always regret at the last moment and still be born in the Pure Land. Such thinking will guarantee our falling into the three bad paths. It is extremely difficult to accomplish this last-minute change of heart. A deluded person who is able to maintain a clear mind during his dying moments is someone who had deeply cultivated good roots in his previous lifetimes.

Visit a hospital and you will understand. Look around. How many people are still alert in their last moments? Being able to maintain a clear mind is the first criterion. If we are in a coma, unable to feel remorse and to chant, we will fall into the three bad paths. Rarely is one out of thousands of people lucid upon death. Can we guarantee that at the instant of our deaths we will remain fully conscious?

The second criterion is to encounter someone who can remind us to chant "Amituofo." And the third is to be able to turn back immediately at that instant, to deeply regret, to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha, and to seek birth in the Pure Land. Can we guarantee that all these conditions will exist at that precise critical moment? If not, then we need to honestly and sincerely cultivate daily to accumulate merits and virtues. This is the only truly reliable and safe way.

If ten thousand people practice the Pure Land method accordingly, ten thousand will be born in the Pure Land. Mr. You said in his commentary that "By laying down the butcher knife, one can become a Buddha right then and there. If we have the heart to regret our wrongdoings, then we can begin again." The earlier we awaken the better, so please, make haste in turning back and do not commit any more wrongdoings.

> There are cases in history where people who had committed numerous bad deeds but who later deeply regretted them during their dying moments were able to pass away peacefully.

There are many examples of this, some of whom were Buddhist practitioners. Recently, one that we personally witnessed was that of Mr. Zhou Guangda, a businessman in Washington, D.C. in the United States. Mr. Zhou had been a good person who had not committed bad deeds. He proved to us that one may encounter Buddhism in one's last moments of life, chant "Amituofo" one to ten times, and be born in the Pure Land.

Mr. Zhou did not encounter Buddhism until a friend introduced him to the Pure Land teachings just three days before he passed away. He was elated upon hearing the teachings and accepted them without the slightest doubt. He vowed to be born in the Pure Land and chanted "Amituofo" wholeheartedly. This was the result of his good roots from past lifetimes. Once he had vowed to be born in the Pure Land, he no longer felt the pain from his illness.

This is the reward for good behavior. Once the true mind is developed, the Three Jewels will help. Although Mr. Zhou was in critical condition, he felt uplifted due to the strength from his vows and the joy of practicing Buddhism. His energy and strength came from within himself and from Amitabha Buddha. Thus, Mr. Zhou was able to chant "Amituofo." After chanting for three days, he was able to see the three sages of the Western Pure Land who had come to escort him to the Pure Land. This happened recently. How can we not believe it?

In our practice, the essence or what is in our heart and mind is important, not formalities. Mr. Zhou had never listened to Buddhist lectures or read the sutras. He had not taken the Three Refuges or the five precepts. He just had a kind friend who encouraged him to chant "Amituofo," and Amitabha Buddha and the sages came to escort him to the Pure Land. Thus, what matters in our cultivation is our true hearts and minds.

In Mr. You's commentary, we read: "It is never too early to begin practicing or too late to regret. To pass away peacefully is an observable fact of transcendence." It is not too late to regret at the time of our death. Every time a person dies well, he or she is assured of going to a good place. Die well, be reborn well. The fifth of the Chinese five good fortunes is to be able to pass away peacefully without suffering, thus assuring rebirth into one of the three good paths.

> If a person can have a determined and courageous kind thought at the most important moment, it can cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated offenses. This is like only needing one lamp to bring light into a valley that has been dark for a thousand years. It does not matter how long one has been committing misdeeds. If one can reform, he or she is exceptional!

Both Buddhists and Confucian scholars have spoken this truth. We need to be courageous and determined in regretting and reforming. Whether the offense is major or long-standing, it can be regretted and eradicated. Having an overwhelming and courageous kind thought as we are dying is to genuinely regret and to eradicate karmic obstacles. In this way, it can indeed cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated misdeeds.

We only need one lamp to light a valley that has been dark for a thousand years. This compares the lamp and the brightness to our bravery and determination in reforming, and in our ability to wash away long-accumulated misdeeds. Thus, regardless of how serious our bad deeds are or how long we have been committing them, what is important is that we reform.

It is often said in Buddhism that true Dharma repositories are rare. If we are not true repositories, we will be unable to maintain the continuance of Buddhism. For example, a cup has to be well cleaned for the water it holds to be drinkable. If it is not clean, but is tainted with just a trace of poison and

we drink from it, we will be poisoned. Poison is the negative karma. To become true Dharma repositories, we first need to eliminate our afflictions to receive the Buddha's teachings so we will be able to benefit not just ourselves but others as well.

To do this, we reform and then cultivate good fortune. Why do we need to reform first to become a Dharma repository? So that we will be able to receive all of the good fortune that Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and beings and spirits of heaven and earth bestow on us. This is true good fortune. If our repository is not clean, but is filled with afflictions and negative karma, then the good fortune bestowed on us by Buddhas and bodhisattvas will turn into even deadlier poisons.

If we do not reform our erroneous ways, the good fortune we cultivate will lead us to commit even more offenses. Why? Lacking good fortune, we only commit small transgressions since we do not have the opportunity to create greater ones. However, with great good fortune, the wrongs we commit will be even graver. In the future, this will lead us deeper into the hell realms, to bear even more severe sufferings.

Although poor people may have thought of committing transgressions that are more serious, they are generally unable to carry them out. The transgressions that wealthy people create are more serious than those of average people.

We first need to reform to eradicate misfortune so we can enjoy genuine good fortune. If we do not eradicate our accumulated bad habits before this cultivation, then as our

good fortune increases, we are likely to commit worse deeds. In passing on knowledge, will a truly benevolent teacher accept this kind of student? No! Why not? The teacher knows that it will harm the student for he or she is not a Dharma repository.

This is not to say that only a very smart or wise person is suitable to be a Dharma repository. If a person has a pure mind and a kind heart without greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance, then he or she is a Dharma repository.

We read in Master Tanxu's memoirs about a monk who took moldy candles outside to dry in the sun. He was very slow-witted and without any wisdom. But his mind was pure, he was honest, and he did not harbor ill feelings for anyone. The old master took a liking to him. He was a Dharma repository so the master taught him to prostrate three thousand times a day to the relics of Sakyamuni Buddha at the King A Yu Temple.

After three years, the monk was awakened and was even able to compose poetry. Extremely articulate, he eventually lectured on sutras and was widely welcomed. But although he had achieved attainment, he still lived thriftily, remained very humble, and was courteous towards others. This is the way to be a Dharma repository and is true good fortune.

By choosing a successor, a teacher can either harm a person or help him or her to succeed. Since ancient times, good teachers, whether Buddhist or otherwise, have been selective in choosing their successors. The most important criterion for selection is virtuous conduct. Other qualities that can be nurtured are not considered. Thus, we need to

begin by reforming if we truly want to achieve attainment, to be born in the Pure Land, and to benefit others and ourselves. As Liaofan said, "It is of utmost value to be able to change."

> We live in a constantly changing and chaotic world. Our bodies, made of flesh and blood, are perishable. If our next breath does not come, then this body will no longer be a part of us. Then, even if we want to reform, it will be too late.

This encourages us to grab hold of the opportunity to regret and reform while we still can. This is an ever-changing world. The sutras tell us that life is only a breath. If our next breath does not come, this life is over and the next one has begun. Then it will be too late for regrets. Knowing that this is our most crucial concern, we need to treasure this opportunity and not waste any more time. Reflect daily, regret earnestly, and reform. This is true cultivation.

Unfortunately, many people think that cultivation is simply reciting sutras, prostrating to the Buddha, or chanting a Buddha's name daily. These are merely formalities and have no impact on reducing our negative karma. Cultivation is not simply reciting a sutra. It is to not give rise to wandering thoughts as we focus on the text during recitation. Neither should we attempt to analyze the meanings, because to do so is also to have wandering thoughts. The goal of cultivation is to halt our thoughts and to attain purity of mind. Reciting sutras, chanting mantras, and chanting a Buddha's name all share this goal. When the mind is pure, the body

will be pure.

Over the years, I have truly taken to heart that with purity of mind, the body will become pure and remain healthy. Naturally, we still need to be careful of what we eat and drink, and how we live. Although we are advancing in age, with a pure body and surroundings, and the absence of worries and afflictions, we will not fall ill or become inactive.

Mr. Li Bingnan was an excellent example of this. Even in his nineties, every day was a rush of lectures, appointments, and social engagements. From his example, we can see how a person who is advanced in years, can remain perfectly competent while living a healthy, long life. Many younger people cannot accomplish this. It was all due to the purity of his mind and thus, his body.

> When we commit a wrongdoing, our retribution in this world is a bad reputation that will last for hundreds, even thousands of years. Even filial and loving descendants cannot restore our honor. In a future life, we might end up in hell suffering from immense pain.

If we do not know to regret and to correct our wrongdoings, then we will be burdening future generations with our bad reputations. Even our filial and virtuous descendants will not be able to clear our names.

We are currently unable to see the hells, but be assured that our negative karma will lead us to them and they are truly terrifying. Sutras talk of the hells and provide us with many explanations of how long we will remain in them. One

day in hell is equivalent to twenty-seven hundred years on earth.

The Chinese often proudly tell of their five thousand years of history. But this is only two days in the hell realms. And think how terrifying hell is! The shorter life spans are thousands and millions of years! Please understand the magnitude of this! The suffering is ceaseless. We will not be able to emerge for hundreds and thousands of eons. And in this lifetime, it is very easy for us to create the cause of going to the hells. Once we have fallen into them, it is unimaginably difficult to get out. Therefore, if we believe that the Buddha only tells the truth, how can we continue to act rashly and blindly commit bad deeds!

> When even the sages, virtuous people, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas cannot help us escape from our bad consequences, how can we not be afraid?

Even the Buddhas and bodhisattvas with their great compassion and loving-kindness are unable to help us when we fall into the hell realms. Can Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva who presides there help us when we fall into hell? Very honestly, he can only help those who possess abundant, solid good roots and good fortune, and who can accept and accord with his teachings. Only they are able to honestly regret and mend their ways to transcend the hell realms.

Moreover, when we are suffering from intense pain, it is virtually impossible to accept good words. The more we suffer, the more malicious thoughts and angry feelings we will have. Then, even when others say something pleasant to us,

we may feel that they have insulted us and hate them even more for it. This is true for those who are suffering in this world let alone those in the hell realms! Thus, more often than not, those suffering in the hell realms will commit worse deeds, making the transcendence from the hell realms more difficult and this is why even Buddhas and bodhisattvas cannot help us.

What kind of people is Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva able to help? He can help those who truly possess good roots and good fortune, but who fell into the hell realms because of one wrong thought in their last moments. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva can advise and encourage them. Because they are willing to listen, to regret and be awakened, it is easier for them to transcend from the hell realms. Otherwise, there is no way to help them. Even Buddhas and bodhisattvas are helpless in this matter. Understanding this, how can we not be afraid?

The second way to reform teaches us to have a fearful heart. We cannot hide even the slightest of our faults from the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, much less from all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. So, even in a dark room, we would do well not to give rise to deviated thoughts. In this way, we naturally will not commit any bad deeds. This is simply the truth! When we regret and reform, we need to begin from our hearts. When our hearts and minds are virtuous and kind, our speech and behavior will naturally be likewise. When our hearts are immoral and uncaring, regardless of how well we pretend, our speech and behavior will still be false.

A Determined, Courageous Heart: From Courage Comes Inspiration

> The third way to reform is to have a determined, courageous heart.

We need to be courageous in regretting and reforming. The first way to reform, which is to know shame, is close to being courageous. Having a sense of shame is to be awakened; not having a sense of shame is to be deluded. Therefore, a sense of shame is the condition for awakening and courage is the condition for diligent cultivation. Feeling ashamed is awakening from within ourself. Having a fearful heart is the external force that helps us to refrain from wrongdoing; this also reflects the deep shame in our true nature.

There are eleven virtuous Dharmas in the *Treatise on the Door to Understanding the Hundred Dharmas*, one of which includes shame, which is the state of mind of feeling ashamed. Fear is the state of mind of being conscience-stricken. Feeling ashamed and being conscience-stricken are two virtuous states of mind. If we can feel ashamed, then we are bound to achieve. Throughout his life, Great Master Yinguang said that he was "constantly shameful." He constantly had a shameful and fearful heart. Cultivating from this frame of reference, he was able to be diligent and courageous in improving himself. In this way, he attained a determined, courageous heart.

> When we hesitate to reform our faults because we do not really want to change, we are content with what we can get away with. For a reform to take place, we must be resolute and resolve to change immediately. We should not hesitate or postpone until tomorrow or the day after.

Most of us drift along day to day, regressing instead of advancing. Without the heart to keep improving in our virtuous conduct, we are not genuinely trying to improve. Today, those who are resolute and diligent in advancing also seek the five desires, the six dusts, and the five poisons, without knowing the fearful consequences caused by their actions. Sages of this world and beyond taught us to concentrate on moral improvement and to gain wisdom, the original wisdom that flows from the true nature. This wisdom is higher than the academic study and skills of worldly intelligence.

Today, we advance resolutely and diligently, but in the wrong direction! We are going into the three bad realms and remaining mired in samsara. Sages of this world and beyond teach us that we need to transcend samsara, the six realms, to free ourselves forever from the cycle of rebirth, to catch up with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. As Liaofan said, we must strive to completely eradicate doubt and resolve to change immediately, to lift our spirits, and diligently advance. Do not delay, resolve and begin now.

> A minor fault is like a thorn piercing our flesh and should be quickly removed.

Because a thorn piercing our skin is very painful, we will do whatever we can to quickly extract it. But a minor fault in our mind is even more painful. We need to become aware of it as well. Remaining unaware is like having no sense of feeling, not knowing that something is piercing our body and is causing us pain. Now it is our conscience, not our flesh, that is numb.

> A big fault is like our finger being bitten by a poisonous snake. We must quickly cut off the finger to prevent the poison from spreading and killing us. If we consult the *I Ching* and receive the wind-thunder symbol, it means that our strong determination in reforming assures us of success.

This is just an example to show us how determined we need to be in correcting our shortcomings. When we are listless every day, it is due to our karmic obstacles. When we constantly have wandering thoughts, afflictions, and worries, and find that nothing is going our way, it is also due to our karmic obstacles.

We often speak of these because they are the cause of our nightmares and irregular patterns in our daily living. When this happens, we need to earnestly reflect and be vigilant. If we can correct all of our faults, our karmic obstacles will be eradicated. With fewer obstacles, we will be filled with the Dharma bliss and will feel light in body and mind. We will have no burdens. Our afflictions will diminish and our minds will naturally be pure and continuously give rise to wisdom. This will enable us to clearly see and understand everything

around us, whether spiritual or physical, worldly or beyond. We need to have the determination and aspiration to examine our motives and feelings, to find our faults and fearlessly correct them.

The *I Ching* contains sixty-four hexagrams, each of which has six explanations or predictions. The wind-thunder symbol represents benefit and is concerned with determination. If we are resolved to correct our erroneous ways and to cultivate kindness, this will enable us to gain true benefit. If we can immediately reform without hesitation, then we will have done what the wind-thunder symbol said we would.

> If we can follow the three ways of shame, fear, and determination to reform, then we will surely be transformed.

In reforming, we need to have shame, fear, and courageous determination. To have a shameful heart is to be awakened. To have a respectful and fearful heart is to be conscience-stricken. Only when we have both of these, do we give rise to the courageous and determined heart that enables us to regret and reform. Realizing this, why are we unable to correct our faults? Since we have yet to possess a shameful and fearful heart, we do not have the motivation that gives rise to a courageous and determined heart. If we do not know shame, then we will not be afraid of being laughed at by others so there is little incentive for us to cultivate kindness.

How do we nurture these three qualities of shame, fear,

and courageous determination? Why do we choose the *Infinite Life Sutra* for everyone to practice? It is not that the other sutras are not good, they just do not explain as perfectly as does the *Infinite Life Sutra*. The *Infinite Life Sutra* completely explains phenomena and principles, cause and effect. It is not too lengthy so it is easy for modern people to practice, and it is the essence of all sutras!

Our *Morning and Evening Ceremony Recitation Book* was specially compiled for fellow practitioners at the Amitabha Buddhist Societies. Ancient virtuous people originally edited the older version of the recitation book. It was compiled to cure the problems of practitioners of that time. Thus, the old version was effective for them. However, our problems are different and so we need to modify the morning and evening recitations. For the morning ceremony, we recite chapter six of the *Infinite Life Sutra*, in the hope of having the same mind and vow as that of Amitabha Buddha.

For the evening ceremony, we recite chapters thirty-two through thirty-seven. These six chapters explain the five offenses of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming intoxicants, and the ten bad karmas. They also describe the five sufferings that we bear in this life and the five burnings that are the consequences we undergo in the hells in future lives. These sufferings and burnings are retributions.

As we recite these chapters daily, they can help us to reflect, regret, and reform. Reciting them is essentially the same as reciting the repentance verse. After our recitation, we need to be vigilant and awakened, to sincerely mend our

ways and follow the chapter's guidance in understanding and cultivation. In this way, we will benefit from this kind of recitation practice. Therefore, it is important for us to have these three qualities of shame, fear, and courageous determination.

> There is no need to worry. It will happen as assuredly as the spring sun will melt a thin layer of ice.

If we have these three qualities, we will immediately amend our faults. It is as natural as the ice in springtime becoming thinner as the weather becomes warmer. As we amend our faults, our wisdom will grow and our karmic obstacles will be eliminated.

Three Methods of Practice in Reforming

Changing through Behavior

> There are also three methods of practice to help us reform. The first is changing through behavior, the second is changing through reasoning, and the third is changing from the heart.

Since the methods are different, the effects will also be different. For example, if I used to kill living beings in the past, I vow never to kill them again. If I used to get angry and yell at others in the past, I vow never to do so again. This is

changing through behavior by refraining from repeating a wrongdoing committed in the past and vowing never to do it again.

Previously Liaofan spoke of principles. Now he provides us with the three general methods of practice. First is "changing through behavior." If we lose our temper and yell at others or use abusive language to attack others, we can change through behavior and refrain from repeating a wrongdoing by vowing never to do it again, finding and then correcting the faults one by one. This was how Liaofan first began to change. It took him more than ten years to accomplish his first goal of three thousand good deeds. Not good enough. He accomplished the second similar pledge in only four years, when he sought and attained a son. But this was still too long. Through the change of behavior, the result attained was as sought.

In Buddhism, one can change through behavior by keeping the precepts. In China, there are eight schools in Mahayana Buddhism and two in Theravada Buddhism; all ten begin cultivation through precept keeping. This is especially true for the Theravada precepts that emphasize behavior more than thoughts.

This is different from the Mahayana precepts like those found in the *Brahma Net Sutra*. This somewhat lengthy sutra was not completely translated into Chinese. Only the most important chapter, the "Mind Precept Chapter," was brought to China. The first section, which explains the state of mind of a bodhisattva, describes how to change from the mind. The second section, which explains the bodhisattva precepts

and behavior, describes how to change through behavior. What is important is the state of the mind. To change from the mind as well as through behavior is the best way.

> Trying to force ourselves to suppress our faults is extremely difficult because we have not permanently uprooted our faults, merely temporarily curbed them. Therefore, changing through behavior cannot help us to permanently eliminate our faults.

The root of our problems lies in our minds. If we only suppress our faults instead of eliminating them, they will simply reappear at another time. Therefore, changing through behavior is a short-lived solution that only treats the symptoms. This is like treating the head when there is a headache or treating the foot when there is a foot pain. The behavior seems to be correct but the mind is still polluted because the root problem remains.

Changing through Reasoning

> Instead, we can try to reform by understanding why we should not do something; for example, killing. To love all living things is a virtue of heaven. Understanding that all living beings love life and fear death, how can I be at peace with myself by taking another's life to nurture my own? At times, animals such as fish or crabs have been cooked alive. Such pain and suffering reach down

> into their very bones. How can we be so cruel?
>
> When we eat, we use many expensive and tasty things to nourish ourselves, enough to fill the whole dining table! But once the meal is done, even the best delicacies will become body waste and be excreted. The result of our killing accomplishes nothing. Consuming vegetarian foods can fill and nourish us just as well. Why let our stomachs become a graveyard and reduce our good fortune through killing?

Here, Liaofan wrote of changing through reasoning by understanding the true reality and its principles. Achieving this, we will naturally no longer bear to eat the flesh of another sentient being. Before, since we were unclear of why we should not do something, we grudgingly tried to stop. Trying to force ourself to do something is extremely difficult. Unhappy and unwilling, we will end up painfully struggling with ourselves.

But once we understand the principles and the logic, we can reconcile these problems. We need to constantly bear in mind that loving all living things is a virtue of heaven. It is natural that we do so. Today, scientists are gradually beginning to understand that having a natural ecological balance is the same as loving all living things. If our naturally balanced ecological system becomes unbalanced, every living being in the world will suffer from the devastation. A wise person would refrain from doing anything that would harm our ecological system.

Actually of all the animals, humans are the worst for we are the cruelest, the most evil. Animals only kill when hungry. After satisfying their hunger, they ignore other animals that walk near them. This shows that they kill from the natural instinct of hunger and thus create little negative karma. On the other hand, humans slaughter at will even though we have no need to kill. The negative karma created by humans is unequaled by animals! When we consider this, we will realize that there is nothing in samsara for us to be proud of.

Although it is of great suffering to fall into the animal realms, those who do so are reducing their negative karma. If we do not practice Buddhism when we obtain our human forms, then what is the good of having them? We commit wrongdoings daily. Animals reduce their negative karma. We create it. After reducing their karma, they will emerge and be reborn into the three good paths. On the other hand, our negative karma has increased and when it comes into fruition, we will fall into the three bad paths. Animals prepare to emerge from the three bad paths whereas we prepare to go into these paths. What is there for us to be proud of?

We also need to remember that all sentient beings, including animals, are mortally afraid of death. We are able to kill them because they are unable to fight back. This is the weak being the prey of the strong! Animals are unable to resist, but are they willing to be killed? If not, be assured that they will have resentment and hatred. How are we going to avoid revenge that will in turn breed further revenge?

Once, a fellow practitioner came to me and asked, "Is there any use in transcending the spirits of aborted babies?"

I said, "No use! You think transcending them will solve anything?"

The practitioner asked, "But if the child is born deformed or retarded, would he or she not undergo much suffering? Would it not be better to abort?"

I replied, "We need to understand that bearing a deformed or retarded baby is bearing one who has come to demand payment of a debt. You owe a debt. By aborting the baby, not only are you stopping the debt from being claimed, you have killed him or her. The debt you owed in the past has now been multiplied. In a future life, it will be even worse. Right now scientists only see what is in front of them, they do not know of the cause and effect of the next lifetime. Cause and effect are linked through the past, present, and future. This is a grave offense."

The practitioner persisted, "But the baby has yet to take shape. It is only in the first or second week of gestation."

I explained, "No, the baby comes at the time it is conceived, it has nothing to do with taking shape or not. Upon conception, it has found you. You have an affinity with it from the past, whether it is repaying gratitude or a grievance, demanding payment of a debt, or repaying a debt. If the baby has come to repay gratitude and is killed by you, you will be returning kindness with ingratitude. He or she will become your enemy in the future.

I continued," Perhaps, it was a filial child or a virtuous grandchild who had come to repay kindness. By killing it,

you have turned the fetus into a mortal enemy. This is terrible! You think you can transcend the baby through the little merit gained from spending some money for a plaque. Nothing is this easy! You are only deceiving yourself."

If everyone could just see the past cause and the resultant effect, we would be terrified! We have to be careful, to understand the principles and know the true reality. It is a grave transgression to kill or harm another sentient being just to nurture ourself. However, today, people regard this as perfectly normal. Some people even believe that animals are creations of God given to them to eat.

If these sentient beings were intended for us to eat, then would we not question whether God truly has the virtue of loving all living things? Such wrong thinking leads us to commit many transgressions. And we do not even know how very wrong we are. When killed and slaughtered, all beings cry out from their fear and pain. When we listen to their terrified cries, how could anyone think that they willingly submitted to their deaths?

It is stated in the sutras: "A human dies and becomes a sheep. A sheep dies and becomes a human." Life after life they will kill each other seeking vengeance. Thus, it is said that if we eat one pound of flesh, we will pay back one pound of flesh. A debt of money must be repaid in cash, and a life owed must be repaid in kind. This is the inescapability of the law of causality. Once we truly believe and accept this, we will never again think of harming any being because we do not wish to pay with our life in the future.

Nor will we seek ill-gotten wealth. Why? Because we

know that in the future we will have to repay the debt. By understanding the true reality, we naturally will abide by the law, be contented with what we have, and be honest in all that we do. Be assured that this is neither passive nor regressive. It is doing our best to create a beautiful and bright future for ourself. It is seeking a good life, not only for this lifetime, but for all of our future lifetimes as well. Without wisdom and knowledge of the true reality, we will be unable to attain what we seek.

In this segment of the text, Liaofan wrote about eating meat, of seeing sentient beings killed, and of witnessing their pain and suffering that reach down to the bones. How could we bear to take their lives to nurture our own? Once we have finished eating, even the most delicious foods become body waste. People long for delicacies and for food that tastes good; but no matter how we cook it the only thing that will enjoy the taste is our tongue, nothing else. Just for a few seconds of enjoyment we have killed countless sentient beings and committed innumerable transgressions!

Eating vegetarian food can be just as filling and nourishing. Some may say that vegetarian food is not nutritious, but many vegetarians have lived long and healthy lives. Monks and nuns who became vegetarians when they were young are strong and healthy. To say that being a vegetarian is unhealthy is incorrect. When we take the life of another sentient being and eat them to nurture ourselves, we not only make enemies and incur their hatred, but we also reduce our good fortune. A truly intelligent person would never do this.

> Think of all the living beings with flesh and blood. Like us, they are self-aware. They and we are one entity. Although our cultivation of virtue has not yet reached the state that will enable these beings to respect us and feel safe around us, we can at least not harm them or make them hate us. If we think about it, we will naturally feel sorrow for these animals and thus be unable to swallow their flesh.

All living beings have self-awareness; they are no different from us. No one other than Buddhas and bodhisattvas would understand this. From this segment of the text, it is logical to assume that Liaofan's family was vegetarian because he understood the reasoning and knew the truth.

Today, some people still misunderstand and think that while adults can be vegetarians, children cannot. Parents, afraid that their children will be malnourished, want them to eat more meat. This is incorrect. Actually, it is more like thinking that their children might not have enough karmic obstacles or might have too few enemies, so we should help them incur even more karmic foes. This is what it amounts to! If we try to explain to them, they may doubt what we say or even criticize us, saying that we are out of touch, and are ignorant of science and nutrition.

In fact, they are mistaken, for this is not the case at all. It is best to awaken as early as possible; the younger our children become vegetarians the better off they will be. It will help them to build a solid foundation of good fortune and

merits. As was explained in the *Infinite Life Sutra* and *Ananda Asks the Buddha is Practicing Buddhism a Good Deed*, the ancestors were ignorant. The ancestors here are the older generations. Lacking wisdom, they have led us to unwittingly commit transgressions, creating much negative karma. This matter of our eating meat is appalling for this is a serious offense.

> Another example of changing through reasoning is an easily angered person. He or she can stop and think that we all have our strengths and weaknesses. If I touch on someone's weakness, I should feel sad about their failing and forgive any shortcomings. If someone offends me for no reason at all, it is that person's problem and has nothing to do with me. There is no reason for me to become angry.

Instead of losing our tempers and becoming angry, we should sincerely reflect and remind ourselves that we are only human and that each of us has faults. If we cannot forgive others' shortcomings, how can we expect them to forgive ours? Thinking in this manner, we will no longer condemn others but will instead feel empathy for them. People only make mistakes due to their ignorance. They lack the ability to distinguish between true and false, proper and deviated, and between harmful and beneficial. Thus, they cannot correct themselves, end their erroneous ways, or cultivate kindness. We should feel sympathy for them, not be reproachful. In so doing, we follow the Buddha's and

bodhisattva's way of relating to people and situations.

Liaofan said that when someone offends us for no reason at all, it is their problem, not ours. If someone attacks us unfairly, it does not concern us. Even if they attack us physically, there is no reason to become angry. This body is not "me." Purity of mind will never be hurt by attacks, as purity of mind by its nature contains nothing. It is a shame that we do not employ purity of mind when we interact with others or circumstances.

What we use is the illusory mind not the true self. Buddhism teaches us to seek the original self. This true, pure mind does not give rise to any wandering thoughts. Our surroundings will not affect the pure mind. If it does not concern us, why should we worry about it? Why should we be so attached to it? Once we sever all wandering discriminatory thoughts and attachments, what is there to concern us? Nothing.

By understanding the logic, our mind will be settled and no longer affected by external conditions, and we will achieve perfect peace of mind. Regardless of what happens around us, we can remain calm. When we encounter favorable conditions, we do not give rise to the heart of greed. Encountering unfavorable conditions, we do not give rise to the heart of anger. Regardless of the circumstances, we are able to maintain the mind of purity, equality, and compassion to genuinely reform ourselves.

> I also think that no great person thinks that he or she is always right. Nor do intelligent people

> blame their faults on others. When things do not go the way we wish, it is because we have not cultivated our virtues and morals, and have not accumulated enough merits to move others!
>
> We should always reflect upon ourselves first. In so doing, criticism can become a training ground to refine our character and to strengthen our abilities. We should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism and guidance. What is there to be angry and complain about?

This teaches us the best way to change: to reform from the heart. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the purpose of the fifty-three visits of Sudhana was to practice and learn from experience. Our best way to change is to cultivate and reform from the mind. To do this, we need to earnestly reflect.

In Buddhism, Buddhas and bodhisattvas are great heroes. They stand out among others and do what others cannot do.[38] They regret and reform. Able to correct all errors, they are great heroes. There are no self-righteous Buddhas or bodhisattvas. There are no arrogant great sages or virtuous people. They are all humble, patient, and agreeable. This humility and respect are a revelation of their virtuous natures.

An intelligent person never blames others or the heavens. They have true learning, which is wisdom revealed from the true nature. This learning may be Buddhist or Confucian. The wisdom spoken of in Confucianism also flows from our original nature; thus, it is called the sincere and honest mind.

Sincerity is the true mind, for it flows from the sincere mind. It is wisdom; it is true learning. Therefore, learned and wise people never complain about or blame others, nor blame the heavens for their misfortune.

When we do not succeed in our endeavors, when our speech and behavior are criticized, when others slander us, and things are not going our way, do not blame others. Instead, we need to reflect and understand that it is because we have not yet succeeded in our cultivation of morals and virtues, and this is the reason why we are unable to move them.

We need to first determine if we have mistreated others. When people verbally abuse, criticize, and slander us, we should accept it with a grateful heart rather than a vengeful heart. Why? They have provided us with invaluable assistance that can help us reflect and correct our mistakes immediately if we do have these faults, or guard against them if we do not. If we are not at fault, do not blame these people; instead be encouraged to make further improvements. Sudhana adopted this method when visiting his fifty-three advisors to correct all of his shortcomings and to eventually become a Buddha.

The fifty-three visits are examples of training the mind through experience, through the interactions with circumstances and others in our daily lives. Everything and everyone provides us with the means to contemplate. No matter who the individuals are, we should regard them as our teachers. We should regard what they teach us as lessons taught by Buddhas and bodhisattvas. We want to earnestly

reflect, learn, and practice. There is only one student—me. Everyone else is my teacher, my advisor, a Buddha or a bodhisattva. They do not have faults, only I do. This is how Sudhana became a Buddha.

We learn from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, that Sudhana did not need to wait until a future lifetime to become a Buddha. He became one in his current existence! He began as an ordinary person and continued to practice until he reached supreme, perfect enlightenment in one lifetime. If we can acquire this ability and method, then we too are assured of becoming a Buddha in this body, in this lifetime.

How did Sudhana cultivate? How do we cultivate? First, do not blame anyone or anything. Blame only ourself. If other people are disagreeable to me, it is because my karmic obstacles have surfaced. All other people are Buddhas and bodhisattvas without the slightest faults. Whatever I see that incurs my dislike is my karmic obstacle, my fault.

As the sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Huineng, said, "It is our shortcoming if we see the faults of others, as we will regress also." When we mind the faults of others, our karmic obstacles will surface and we will regress. Master Huineng also said that a true practitioner does not see the faults of others. Sudhana was a true practitioner. He did not see the faults of others, only his own. He was afraid of not having enough time to correct his own, much less having the time to find the faults of others. He saw everyone as a virtuous person, as a bodhisattva, a Buddha. In this way, he himself became a bodhisattva, a Buddha. If we still see the faults of others, it is our fault, our karmic obstacle materializing. In

the eyes of a Buddha, everyone is a Buddha. In the eyes of ordinary beings, even Buddhas and bodhisattvas are ordinary beings. Thus, the best way to reform is from within.

Criticism can actually be a good thing. It is not easy for us to discover our faults even when we try to. When others find them and tell us about them, it will save us a great deal of trouble. Therefore, we should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism, as this is our training ground to refine our character and to fulfill our goals. They have come to help us, to be our benevolent advisors. If we can accept things in this way, we will see that there is nothing to be angry or complain about. How can we be angry? How can we not accept criticism? How can we give rise to the heart of revenge? This is a serious offense! They are our benefactors, and yet we want to repay them with reprisals!

When the Chinese speak of filial piety, we think of Emperor Shun,[39] who is known as a model of filial piety. His profound filial piety was able to move heaven and earth. Who helped him to achieve this? His parents and half-brother. After his mother died, Shun's father remarried. When his stepmother mistreated him, his father sided with her. Then, years later after his half-brother grew up, he mistreated Shun as well and the three even tried to kill him!

But through it all, Shun did not change his gentle heart, but constantly questioned why he could not make his parents and brother happy. He regarded their actions as his own fault for he did not see those of others. Everyday he reflected on his shortcomings, on how to regret and correct them. In the end, he finally influenced and reformed his whole family. He

did not try to run away from home or think of revenge. When Emperor Yao learned of Shun, he chose him as his successor and married his two daughters to him. For if Shun could influence his family, then surely he could influence the whole country.

In the sutras, we read of Endurance Celestial Being. Who helped him to attain achievement? Kaliraja. Sakyamuni Buddha spoke of this example briefly in the *Diamond Sutra* and provided further details in the *Great Nirvana Sutra*. Kaliraja is a Sanskrit word meaning a self-indulgent unprincipled tyrant. The celestial being was cultivating on a mountain when for no reason, Kaliraja lost his temper and put the celestial being to death by dismemberment.

Endurance Celestial Being did not have the slightest trace of hatred. Instead, he perfected the paramita of patience. He did not view any person or matter as evil. Try to imagine the level of purity of mind that he had attained. What do we learn from practicing Buddhism? The importance of attaining purity of mind through endurance.

People might say that we are insensitive if we do not differentiate good from bad. In fact, it is not that we do not understand what is happening around us. We do. Understanding the law of causality enables our hearts to be pure and without any attachments or discriminatory thoughts. As for Endurance Celestial Being, his mind was pure because he had found the truth. But because sentient beings have afflictions, it is necessary to explain to them the principles in a progression of ideas.

We understand that the four attachments of self, others,

phenomena, and time are not real; that everything is equal, without the slightest difference. Therefore, in this state, differentiation and non-differentiation are the same because there is no duality—everything is one. When we differentiate, we do not do so for ourself but as a method to help others.

Since sentient beings have not yet found their true nature, we teach them to end their erroneous ways and cultivate good deeds. When we have uncovered our true nature, there will be no erroneous ways to be ended and no good deeds to be cultivated, for our minds will be in a state of purity and equality—the One True Dharma Realm—the state of non-cultivation and non-attainment. Within such states, we still do whatever is needed for cultivation and attainment. But, we do not attach to either extreme of emptiness or existence.

If we uncover our true nature, or purity and equality, but do not practice, then we will fall into the extreme of emptiness. If we are attached to the appearance of matters and do not thoroughly understand the principle, do not see into our original nature, then we fall into the extreme of existence. We should not attach to emptiness or to existence.

As Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva explained, we should concentrate the six senses on uninterrupted pure thoughts. With concentration of the six senses, we will not fall into the extreme of existence. With uninterrupted pure thoughts, we will not fall into the extreme of emptiness. In this way, our minds are pure and nondiscriminatory, with everything in accordance with the true nature. We chant "Amituofo" continuously, without interruption day and night, and without attaching to either existence or emptiness.

> Likewise, in the face of slander, we should maintain the mind of stillness. Although the slanderous rumors and tale bearing spread like a huge fire, like a torch, they will eventually burn themselves out.

This tells us how to behave when others insult and slander us. If we remain calm and unaffected, everything will naturally pass. When others verbally abuse us, we do not need to respond in kind. When they curse us, we need not say anything. After a few hours, they will get tired and stop. This is a very effective method to handle this type of situation.

I learned this from a classmate when I was a teenager studying in school. At that time, I was very caustic like Liaofan. I loved to ridicule people and play tricks on them. However, that classmate became my good advisor. I was arrogant towards him and even ridiculed him in public. But he never responded in kind. This continued for an entire year and in the end, he got through to me. This person was truly amazing! He did not return one blow or one insult. I learned this skill from him and have used it my entire life.

It can also serve to improve our self-cultivation and help accumulate good fortune, for average people will praise us, saying that we are truly good practitioners! If it was not for those people insulting and slandering us, we would not have the opportunity to practice endurance. They have come to help us succeed in our practice. Why would we refuse their help? If someone treats us like this at work and we can

interact with them with a pure mind, our supervisors will appreciate us, our co-workers will respect us, and our opportunities for promotion will improve. This person has greatly benefited us. How can we refuse such help?

When I was in school, if two students quarreled, the teacher would usually punish both by having them kneel on the ground. We felt that this was so unfair and would think, "I was obviously right, why did the teacher also punish me?" Later on, I realized that in any argument or fight, both parties are at fault and are at the same level. If one is high and the other is low, then the argument would not have taken place. For example, an adult would not fight with a baby. It was very logical. Now, when we are insulted or slandered, we can tell whether the practitioner's level of cultivation is high or low.

When insulted or slandered, we need to remember that these individuals are benefactors who come to give us a gift. We cannot return this kindness with ingratitude. First, they have come to test our level of cultivation. Second, we will accumulate good fortune and are about to gain the praise and respect of others. Therefore, these benefactors are not bad people, but are actually good friends whom we do not want to wrongly accuse.

> If we become angry and try to defend ourselves when slandered, it would be like the spring silkworm spinning its own cocoon and suffocating itself. Becoming angry does not benefit us; it harms us.

This applies to worldly teachings as well as to Buddhism.

The first of the two essential practices of the six paramitas of bodhisattvas is giving. This is to cultivate good fortune. We cannot live without good fortune and this is even truer for Buddhas. We call the Buddha, Respected One with Perfect Wisdom and Good Fortune. His wisdom and good fortune are unsurpassed. It is very natural that we seek these also, as our true nature originally contained infinite wisdom and good fortune.

As we have said, there are three kinds of giving: wealth, teaching, and fearlessness. Practicing these will result in having what everyone seeks: wealth, wisdom, and healthy, long lives, respectively. By planting good causes, we are assured of harvesting good results.

The second essential practice is the paramita of patience, which enables us to retain our good fortune. If we practice giving and gain good fortune, but do not practice this second paramita, we will lose our good fortune. The *Diamond Sutra* tells us: "everything is attained through patience." We need to cultivate patience to safeguard our achievements, worldly and Buddhist.

We often read in the sutras of the fire burning our forest of merits. What is this fire? It is anger and hatred. When we lose our tempers, we lose our merits as well. If you want to know how much merit you have, think of the last time you became angry. With one angry thought, the fire burns our forest of merits.

If Pure Land practitioners were to become angry at their last moments of life, all would be lost! This is why the Buddha taught us not to touch the body of the deceased

within eight hours of passing away. Although the person has breathed his or her last breath, the spirit has not left the body. To touch the deceased would cause great pain and possibly anger. If they were to become angry at this critical moment, all of their merits would be lost. Thus, merits are extremely difficult to accumulate for they can be lost at any time. Our good fortune and virtues however, will remain.

What is merit? It is purity of mind, concentration, and wisdom. Think about it, if we lose our tempers, how can we maintain our concentration and wisdom? Impossible. As for good fortune, it is our wealth and intelligence. When our mind attains constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha or one mind undisturbed, we can accumulate merits and virtues. But with just one outburst of temper, all is lost: no more constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha, much less one mind undisturbed. Therefore, we need to remain vigilant so as not to lose our merits.

In our cultivation on the path to awakening, our karmic creditors will often try to create trouble. Why? They have an overwhelming need for revenge. They see that we are about to succeed in our cultivation and know that once we have succeeded, they will no longer have the opportunity for revenge. Thus, they will do all they can to block our progress. And the way they do this is by making us burn our forest of merits. But, if we are determined not to have our merits destroyed, then no external force can do so.

Sometimes, when we find ourselves in unpleasant circumstances or have personal problems, we become unhappy and lose our tempers. Once we do this, our merits

are burnt. What or who makes us so unhappy and angry? Probably all those unfavorable conditions, enemies, and people stirring up trouble. This is an example of "The speaker had no such intention, the listener interpreted it to be so." Perhaps the speaker had no intention to upset us, but we interpreted what was said to be deliberate and feel miserable. We may burst out in anger or we may manage some control and keep it inside. Either way, our merits are gone.

Why would all of our merits be destroyed with just a little anger? Because we have lost our purity of mind. Therefore, all the teachings and attainments are based on patience and deep concentration. They are not only the key to our cultivation in transcending samsara, but the key to worldly matters as well. "To remain unmoved by slander" is deep concentration and is the revelation of wisdom. To become angry due to slander is a manifestation of karmic obstacles. We can choose whether to have our wisdom revealed or our karmic obstacles materialize.

Are these encounters good for us? For practitioners, yes! It is good training to have someone constantly causing trouble for us and to not have things going our way. Without these adversities, how would we achieve concentration? Adverse conditions and affinities provide us with just the right opportunities to discipline ourselves and to practice the paramita of patience. We cannot be thankful enough for these opportunities, much less complain about them or get angry.

In the past, the method used in helping a person to learn

discipline was to teach him or her to practice the paramita of patience. Those who were believed to be potential Dharma repositories would be tested. They would be picked on at every opportunity and treated unpleasantly as if they were disliked. This was to see if they were able to remain patient and to endure the harassment. If they were unable to endure and left, so be it. If we cannot endure or be patient, then we cannot achieve attainment. Even if we are exceptional in all other areas, if we do not have the patience to endure, our achievements will be limited.

In *The Valuable Teachings of Zen*, we read of an old monk who severely mistreated one particular student. He constantly reproached and verbally abused the student at every opportunity. One time, when the student was washing his feet, he poured dirty water all over him, but the student still would not leave his master. Later, the old monk really got angry, kicked him out, and refused to allow him to come back! The student had no alternative. Unable to stay near his master, he camped out at a distant hallway of the temple. When the old monk lectured, the student would hide himself outside the window and listen to his master.

One year later, it was time for the old monk to pass on the teachings, to retire and choose a new abbot to take his place. No one knew whom he would choose. The old monk asked those who were present to bring in the student who was listening outside the window so that he could pass on the teachings and position to that student. Only then did everybody realize that for all those years, the old monk had actually been training his successor!

If we want to give up every time we encounter some small unpleasantness, and are unwilling to be patient and accept the torment, then we will not achieve anything, regardless of how outstanding we may be in other areas. The key to success or failure lies in patience. If we can endure, we will achieve deep concentration. We will then uncover our true wisdom and be no longer affected by our external conditions.

Sometimes we see new people with excellent qualities staying at a Buddhist center. But after a short time, they leave. The residents would smile, thinking that it does not matter. If people lack the patience to endure, they cannot achieve. But would it matter much whether one person, who could not achieve, were to stay? Those who are shortsighted would consider the loss of such a talented person as regrettable. But, in the end, it is not so. A truly talented person is one who has attained deep concentration and wisdom for only with these will we be able to pass on the wisdom of the Buddhas, and thus, enable Buddhism to remain in this world. Without endurance, we will not attain deep concentration and without deep concentration, we will not attain wisdom.

With wisdom, we will recognize a true cultivation center with good teachers who can help us on the path to enlightenment. Then no matter how they may mistreat us, we will endure and not leave until we learn everything. This is the way to truly learn the teachings. If we are unable to endure the least disagreeable circumstance and just walk out, then we are useless and it will be pointless to keep us.

This passage from the book is very important for it

provides a wonderful way to end slander and disputes. We simply ignore them! Even the worst will fade. When slandered, do not dispute or debate it, or we will bind ourselves further. Thus, it is said that no benefit is derived from getting angry, only harm.

At work, a superior will not give an important job or a promotion to someone who is easily angered. Usually, when assessing a subordinate, the superior will observe the way the person interacts with others daily to decide whether this person is a promising employee and worth training. Upon observing that we are easily angered, they will know that we are not good candidates because our anger will only cause difficulties.

> There are other faults and offenses we can change. If we understand the principle behind the need for reform, we will not repeat our mistakes.

These are the main principles underlying our ability to change. Mahayana Buddhists adopt this method, as it is faster to reach achievement with it. Theravadans tend to change themselves through behavior, which is akin to slowly removing a tree by plucking off each leaf and branch. To reform in this way is difficult because we will have to correct each fault one by one which is very painstaking and time consuming. It is much wiser to change through reasoning than through actions for the mind is the root from which everything arises.

> What does "changing from the heart" mean? Although we have thousands of different faults, they all stem from the heart, from the mind.

Positive and negative karma as well as the entire universe are created from our mind. The Buddha told us in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: "The nature of the Dharma realms arises from the mind. Nature is essence and essence is the mind." How do Mahayana Bodhisattvas enter the hell realms to help the beings there? These enlightened beings do so by understanding the principle that everything arises from the mind. We learn from the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* that to break through the doors of the hells, one needs to understand that everything arises from the mind. What is Hell? A creation of our minds. Understanding this, we will learn that there are no gates to hell—we can come and go freely!

We can correct our faults by beginning to change from our mind and practicing good deeds. If we practice from our mind, then even a small good deed such as unreservedly giving a penny to a person in need would be of infinite merits and virtues. Why? This deed comes from the great compassion in our true nature, thus the broadmindedness is boundless. The good fortune is infinite for the good deed arises from our mind and accords with our true nature. However, if the good deed arises solely from our actions, then it is a small merit for it did not arise from our true nature.

How then do we reform ourselves from our mind? We

sincerely cultivate by wanting to correct our offenses, practicing goodness, and refraining from wrongdoings. When we correct from our mind, there is no such thing as should or should not. Reforming ourself by reasoning and realizing the principle is conditional. However, when we reform from the mind, it is unconditional, pure, and sincere. In this way, giving rise to even the slightest of kind thoughts will be in harmony with our true nature. Knowing that everything arises from the mind, we need to correct our faults by beginning from the mind.

> If my heart is still of thoughts, then actions will not arise and faults can be avoided.

This is an unsurpassed principle. Purity of mind can suppress the negative karma accumulated over infinite past eons. How can we attain purity of mind, stillness of thought? We can do so through the unmoved mind that is in deep concentration. This is called one mind undisturbed in the method of mindfully chanting the Buddha's name. Once we attain this state, all of our negative karma will be suppressed. However, when a new wandering thought arises, our negative karma will again materialize.

For example, if we switch off the television, there is no longer a picture but a blank screen. When we turn on the television again, the picture reappears. The karmic phenomena stored in the minds of sentient beings are the same. When our minds are in deep concentration and calm, none of the karmic phenomena will manifest. When our minds give rise to wandering thoughts, the karmic obstacles

will again materialize. Understanding this, we will nurture purity of mind, the state of not giving rise to a single wandering thought. As Master Huineng said, "The true mind originally contains nothing and collects no dust." Karmic obstacles exist in the illusory mind, not in the true mind. The true mind has always been pure.

An example is wearing eyeglasses. Originally, our eyes were pure. When our glasses are covered with dust, our vision is blurred. There is nothing wrong with our eyes; the problem is on the glasses. Where are our karmic obstacles? They are the dust, the contamination on the glasses. There is no obstacle within our eyes. Whenever we can do without glasses and eradicate the contamination, we will have pure vision to see clearly. This is the same as uncovering our true nature to become Buddhas. If we wear glasses, the barrier remains. Then we are ordinary people, sentient beings. Once we can rid ourselves of these obstacles, we are Buddhas.

What kind of mind are we using now? The deluded mind, not the true mind. There is no hindrance in the true mind. With the deluded mind, when we try to see something with our naked eyes, we cannot see it clearly. It is like looking through distorted glasses, seeing the external environment through a layer of delusion. This delusion is the eight consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects; the glasses have been heavily contaminated. We then interact with the external environment through these consciousnesses and mind objects. Therefore, the environment has changed to that of the six dusts. If we do not apply these consciousnesses and mind objects to see the external environment, then we

do not see the environment of the six dusts but that of the true nature.

The big problem is that we cannot rid ourselves of these distorted eyeglasses that are the eight consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects. The goal of our practice is to teach us to let go of these and to transform consciousness into wisdom. Wisdom is the functioning of the true nature. Consciousness is the functioning of the deluded mind, the functioning of the eight consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects.

Arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and Theravada bodhisattvas still use these consciousnesses and mind objects. They have yet to clarify their true nature to become Buddhas. They know how to regret through actions and through understanding the principles. But they do not yet change from the mind. Why? They do not know where their minds are.

We learn in the *Surangama Sutra* that in the beginning of the Surangama assembly, Sakyamuni Buddha asked Venerable Ananda, who was very intelligent, where his mind was. Ananda could not find it for he did not know what or where it was. How can we regret from our minds if we do not even know what our true minds are?

Mahayana bodhisattvas who have begun to uncover their true nature cultivate feeling regret from the mind. We will better understand once we study the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, particularly Sudhana's visits to the fifty-three good spiritual teachers. How did Sudhana practice? These fifty-three spiritual teachers represent bodhisattvas of perfect Teaching from the level of first dwelling to the highest, the level of

equal-enlightenment. They manifested as young and old, and as men and women from all walks of life.

How did the fifty-three spiritual teachers cultivate? The genuine practice of Buddhism is comprised of principles, examples, and practical applications for us to follow. Although we cannot study the complete *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the "Chapter on the Vows and Practices of Samantabhadra" from the peerless forty-chapter version is very important. We need to know how to apply this most outstanding Mahayana teaching so that as modern people, we can incorporate it into our daily lives. This is an excellent sutra for sincere cultivation and is worth propagation.

Following this principle, ancient virtuous people taught us how to give rise to the bodhi mind and be constantly mindful of Amitabha Buddha. Single-mindedly chanting "Amituofo" day and night will reduce all of our wandering thoughts into one thought of "Amituofo." Is "Amituofo" good or bad? Neither. It has nothing to do with the duality of good and bad for it accords with our true nature. The duality of good and bad only exists in our conscious minds, not in our true minds. With prolonged practice, we will naturally attain enlightenment if we are constantly mindful of Amituofo. Among eighty-four thousand methods, this method is unsurpassed.

If we cannot attain supreme, perfect enlightenment due to our insufficient efforts, it is all right as long as we can go to the Pure Land and meet Amitabha Buddha for then we will uncover our true nature. This convenient and suitable method cannot be found in any other teaching. In others, if

we do not achieve enlightenment, we will not be considered as having achieved attainment.

When we practice mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha, it is not necessary for us to be able to see the true nature. As long as we can see Amitabha Buddha, we will have achieved attainment. All our negative karma will be suppressed when we sincerely and single-mindedly chant. How can Amituofo have any negative karma? It is true and perfect goodness, not that of good or bad for such goodness is relative. True goodness has no duality and is the absolute great goodness.

> Practitioners do not have to try to eradicate faults such as the desire for fame, sex, profit, or anger, one by one.

This is just to give us some examples. We have millions of faults; but we do not have to find each of them one by one. Practitioners specialize in precept keeping by reflecting on what went wrong and the many mistakes they commit every day. They carefully look back and then correct them one by one. They not only reflect upon their behavior daily, but may also keep a record of their merits and faults.

This method of record keeping can work well for some. Each of us has a different personality related to our habits accumulated over innumerable lifetimes. Mahayana practitioners do not practice this way while Theravada practitioners are very fond of this method and can benefit from it. Different people have different characters; thus, different principles and methods are used.

Many practitioners in China, [and northern Asia] who

practice Mahayana Buddhism refrain from wrongdoings and perform acts of kindness through reasoning and awakened hearts. However, in South Asia, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, most practitioners are Theravada Buddhists and while they likewise refrain from wrongdoing and practice kind deeds, they change through behavior.

> All we need is a sincere heart to practice good deeds. As long as our hearts are virtuous and kind, then naturally our minds will not have any improper thoughts.

This is an excellent, simple, and clear method. However, if we do not have true wisdom, we still cannot achieve this state. Why? Because of doubts. We wonder how it is possible for us to eradicate all the offenses that we have committed. We doubt, we do not believe, we cannot accept. When we are advised to concentrate our mind on Amitabha Buddha and seek birth in the Western Pure Land, we suspect that with so many wrongdoings, we cannot possibly go to the Pure Land. We would be ashamed to see Amitabha Buddha!

Some do not even dare to pay their respects to his image at the cultivation center, considering their offenses too numerous and heavy. It would be embarrassing to see the Buddha! If we think this way, then it would be better to regret and reform through behavior for at least if we discovered and corrected one fault, our minds would be more settled.

Those who can accept the Pure Land method possess

good roots, good fortune, and good causes and conditions. If we did not already have the best root nature, it would be impossible for us to accept the Buddha mindfulness chanting method. Those who can accept it and practice earnestly can neutralize the transgressions accumulated over infinite lifetimes with the merits of their chanting. The Pure Land is a gathering place for the utmost virtuous people. Once born there, we will be a member of this assembly and the equal of such virtuous people as the Bodhisattvas Samantabhadra, Manjusri, Avalokitesvara, and Mahasthamaprapta.

As Mr. Huang Nianzu said in his commentary on the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the Pure Land method is for sentient beings of supreme root nature. Who has the utmost root nature? Those who can believe, vow to go to the Pure Land, and practice mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha have the utmost root nature. Master Huineng only taught those with supreme root natures. However, his students, although very successful, could not maintain their level of attainment. Pure Land practitioners with foremost capabilities will never regress, for they have perfectly achieved in the three non-regressions. The students of Master Huineng achieved the three non-regressions, but not perfectly.

The Pure Land method is unsurpassed. We are unbelievably fortunate to have encountered it; but this is no coincidence. It is due to the maturing of our good roots, good fortune, and good causes and conditions that we have accumulated over infinite eons.

To practice good deeds with one sincere mind means to have an absolute proper and virtuous thought as the first

thought. There are no wandering second thoughts. To chant "Amituofo," is to single-mindedly practice constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha and wholeheartedly seek birth in the Pure Land. The most marvelous way to reform and reduce our karmic obstacles is to have no wandering thoughts. This does not mean to not have any proper thoughts. Without proper thoughts, we become ignorant. Wandering thoughts are discriminatory thoughts and attachments. It is not easy for average people to achieve the state of no wandering thought. However, everyone can achieve this by practicing the Buddha mindfulness chanting method.

What does proper thought arising mean? It is Amituofo: the most truthful and ultimate proper thought. The only important issue in our life is to constantly maintain proper thoughts, to not cling to deviated or erroneous ones, and to be constantly mindful of Amitabha Buddha day and night, without interruption. If we can continue our cultivation in this way, then in three months we will receive wonderful results. If we can constantly maintain mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha, with this one thought we are assured of reducing our wandering, discriminatory thoughts.

It is impossible for us to not have any wandering thoughts. Do not be afraid of them so long as thoughts of Amitabha Buddha can occupy us the most; such as sixty percent of our thoughts of Amitabha Buddha with only forty percent that are wandering. If we are not constantly mindful of Amitabha Buddha, then our minds will be filled with wandering thoughts.

If we can continue this practice for three months, increasing the thoughts of Amitabha Buddha and decreasing our wandering thoughts, we will be at ease and free in spirit. Our mind will become more serene and our joy from practicing the teachings will show that our karmic obstacles have been reduced. In the past, our mind was filled with afflictions and worries, and our future looked dark. Now we can be happy, confident, and wise as our life become interesting, and our future becomes bright.

As we continue our chanting for half a year, we will receive even better results, which in turn will increase our confidence and determination. Anyone who really wants to go to the Pure Land will find that it is achievable after three years of cultivation of constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. Numerous people have achieved this.

There are those who have said that they cannot practice this method because they are afraid that they will die in three years. What can we say? Honestly speaking, many people dare not practice this method for they are still clinging to this world, unwilling to give up rebirth in samsara. These people are shortsighted. They do not know that the happiness and enjoyment of the Pure Land are peerless; that the human and heavenly realms and even all other Buddha-lands are incomparable. Such a wonderful place but they do not want to go? They prefer to stay here and continue to suffer. What can I say?

People with true aspiration and profound insight need to know that seeking birth in the Pure Land wholeheartedly and meeting Amitabha Buddha is the perfect and complete

accomplishment of life. We should let go of attachments to worldly activities, both physical and mental, and rid ourself of differentiating thoughts. There is nothing worthy of worry and nothing worthy of greed. We accord with conditions and do not seek affinities in our daily lives. How happy and free we will be for we will have truly achieved.

This is what worldly people are unable to think of: to turn affliction into awakening and to live or die at will; not just to pass away when our time is up but to leave as we wish. If we feel there is a need to remain in this world for several more years, there is no harm in so doing. However, the only reason to remain is because we still have affinities with those who are here and we need to stay here to encourage them to go to the Pure Land with us. In this way, our time spent here will be to help others.

If it were just for ourselves, then we would rather leave earlier for the Western Pure Land. The purpose of staying here is to help all sentient beings, to propagate the Pure Land method. If there is someone who can assume the task of advocating this method, and to continue this teaching, then we can pass on the job to him or her.

We can leave first and let them carry on with this weighty responsibility of guiding sentient beings to transcend samsara. This is freedom! Thus, everyone needs to know that those who had succeeded in their practice and left this world in three years had no Dharma affinities, and had nobody to teach. Those who cannot leave have no alternative but to stay.

As long as we single-mindedly chant the Buddha's name

without doubts, without intermingling, and without interruption, we are assured to succeed in three years. Consider the student of Master Dixian who relied only on the chanting of "Amituofo" and was ignorant of everything else. After becoming a monk, the master did not require him to be ordained, for the master was worried that due to the student's advanced age, he could not withstand the hardship [of the long training session]. Also, he was uneducated and illiterate, and so it was not necessary for him to attend the lectures. He did not even live in the temple to work with the others. If they made fun of him and should he lose his temper, it would have been very difficult for him.

He was sent instead to the countryside to live alone in an abandoned temple. For three years, he chanted "Amituofo" day and night. He knew beforehand when he would die. How did he accomplish this? As Liaofan told his son, "As long as our hearts are virtuous and kind, then naturally our minds will not have any improper thoughts." This is the attainment from sincerely chanting the Buddha's name!

Average people cannot compare to Master Dixian's student who was soon born in the Pure Land because he did not have the ability to teach Buddhism to others. Illiterate and with no knowledge of Buddhism, he succeeded in his practice and was born in the Pure Land. He did not suffer any illness or pain and knew in advance his time of death. He died in a standing position and remained so for three days, waiting for Master Dixian to take care of his memorial service. Amazing! He is a role model for Pure Land practitioners.

Some may feel that the Pure Land method is not a good practice, but what other method of practice can show us something like this? Which other method enables us to be clear-headed at the time of death and to remain standing for three days, waiting for others to take care of our funeral arrangements? This is truly our testimony.

The method that I would offer to everyone is to single-mindedly chant "Amituofo." While our bodies remain in this world, we have no choice but to make a living to support ourselves. But after work, we can let go of thinking about work and be mindful of the Buddha. When we work, concentrate on working. Once finished, begin chanting. While at work, when there is no thinking required, we could silently chant or play a cassette to listen to the chanting of "Amituofo" while working. When thinking is required, we can temporarily lay aside chanting to concentrate on work. When again thinking is not needed, we can chant or listen to the Buddha's name while working. Chanting the Buddha-name is the major issue in our life! Everything else is unimportant, unworthy of concern. This is the way to regret our wrongdoings and to reform from our minds. A learned practitioner would do so from the root, from the basics.

> "Demons do not appear during the day."[40] This is the essence, the key to our change. Since all mistakes stem from the heart, we change from the heart. It is like getting rid of a poisonous tree. If we want to put an end to it, we uproot it altogether so it cannot grow again. Why exert ourselves to no

> avail by pulling out its leaves one by one and cutting it twig by twig?

An analogy of changing through behavior is cutting down the branches and the twigs of a tree one by one, or pulling off the leaves one by one. To change from the heart is to uproot the tree. Thus, we need to know the key method to change ourselves.

If everybody can memorize and uphold the teaching of Great Master Ouyi, and change from the heart, then all the transgressions accumulated over infinite past eons will be absolved. "Amituofo" can reform all wrongdoings. By sincerely chanting "Amituofo," we perfectly practice all the virtuous teachings, be they worldly or Buddhist. Cultivating one is cultivating all. Changing one is changing all. Truly inconceivable!

Many people are rather skeptical and have doubts. They think that this method is not very reliable or that there is an even better one. I smile after hearing this, place my palms together, say "Amituofo," and am not swayed by them.

> The best way to reform our faults is through cultivating our hearts for purity will surface right away.

The foremost way for us to change is from the heart. If we are able to let go of everything and continuously chant "Amituofo" for three months or even six months, our minds will be purified, and the results will come forth. As for people learning to lecture on the Buddhist sutras, I always

encourage them to learn just one sutra. By reciting one sutra daily, we can attain purity of mind in three to five months.

If we were to study many sutras simultaneously, we would not attain purity of mind in the same amount of time and thus our learning would be useless. Few people realize that the solution is specialization.

A genuine practitioner will experience a purer mind and fewer afflictions with the passing of time. We will be less ignorant and gain wisdom as our faces glow with health. These are the effects of genuine practice!

We need to remember what Great Master Lianchi said, "Let others be awakened by all of the Buddhist Canon." The books in the library are for others to read, not for ourself. We offer them so many books because they do not believe, so let them read. If they want to travel so many roads, let them.

We will take a different route, a specialized short cut. They change on the appearance and only on minor details. We change from our hearts because wrongdoings originate from our hearts. From here, we can tell the differences in views and wisdom between the two.

> If my heart is pure, I can recognize and stop an improper thought as soon as it arises. The immoral idea will disappear the moment I am conscious of it.

This talks of changing from the heart. Wandering thoughts are afflictions and karmic obstacles. As soon as they begin to rise, we will recognize them and change them into

"Amituofo." As the six senses encounter the external world and a wandering thought, which may be pleasurable or unpleasant, virtuous or unvirtuous, arises, we immediately replace it with a second thought of either "Amituofo" or "Namo Amituofo." Although the first thought is wandering and deluded, the second thought is "Amituofo." This is to awaken. This awakening needs to be immediate so there is no room for delusion to grow. This is how we will effectively uncover our wisdom.

If we are able to persevere like this for six to twelve months, we will attain wisdom. Our eyes will be bright and our six senses will be intelligent and sharp. We will be able to completely understand everything that we encounter. Others may read and study extensively to be able to analyze matters, but they still may not reach the right conclusion. Whereas, having uncovered our wisdom, we may only need to see something once to perfectly understand it. Ordinary people do not have this kind of ability for this is the ability of bodhisattvas: the true wisdom the Buddhas taught us to seek.

When we have the heart to propagate the true teachings, the key is for us to harbor sincerity, purity of mind, and compassion. There is really no need to search for reference materials and study how to lecture. We do not want to use our sixth consciousness of discrimination for we may misinterpret the Buddha's true meaning. As I have said so many times before, there is no [specific] meaning within the sutras. All the Buddhas will protest that they have been wronged if we ponder the meanings within the sutras. Therefore, we only need to honestly recite the sutra without

seeking or analyzing its meanings. We just need to honestly recite to purify our minds and uncover the wisdom in our true nature.

If someone asks us the meanings within sutras, we can tell them that the meanings are infinite. By not purposely seeking the meanings, the infinite meanings will surface; this is a revelation of the wisdom in our true nature. When we lecture on the sutra in this manner, the flow of the talk will naturally be conducted perfectly whether it is simple or profound, short or long.

After the lectures, when people ask what we have said, we really would not know. Why? When no questions arise, there is no meaning; with questions, the meaning emerges. The emergence of infinite meanings is to benefit others. Having no meaning is to benefit ourselves so that we are cultivating pure minds, with no thoughts arising but "Amituofo." Lecturing on sutras is to propagate the teachings to benefit others not ourselves. Thus, there is no need for the lecturer to remember what we just lectured. Knowing nothing, the mind will be pure.

When we lecture on the teachings to benefit others, we can choose to read the commentary on the *Infinite Life Sutra* by Mr. Huang Nianzu and three commentaries on the *Amitabha Sutra*. The commentary by Great Master Lianchi is very well written and perfect; Great Master Ouyi praised it as broad and profound. Reading this commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra* would be the same as reading the Buddhist Canon. Great Master Lianchi used both worldly and Buddhist teachings for reference; thus, the content is rich.

Great Master Yuanying and Master Baojing[41] also wrote explanatory notes on Great Master Ouyi's commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra*. The above would be enough reference material to propagate the Pure Land school. Once we have thoroughly comprehended these commentaries, not only would we have thoroughly comprehended all the Pure Land sutras but also the Buddhist Canon and even the teachings of all other Buddhist schools. On the other hand, if we study many schools, our minds will become scattered and our wisdom will remain covered.

These four commentaries are sufficient for those who give rise to a compassionate heart to propagate the Pure Land method. There is no need to look into additional references. Do not be afraid there is insufficient material to lecture on. On the contrary, with shorter, more concise reference material, we would require less time to lecture. Why struggle to try to talk for a lengthy period of time? When we speak for a shorter time, we will only talk of the essence. The more the essence is refined, the more wonderful it is. Each moment will be valuable, as we do not waste any of the audience's precious time. If we compiled a talk using many reference materials, as if to make up one giant platter of hors d'oeuvres, the listeners will not be able to savor any particular flavor. This wastes our time and energy as well as those of others.

> If I am unable to succeed at reforming my faults through changing the heart, then I will try at the level of understanding, knowing the reasons why I

> need to make the change. If I cannot succeed with this, then I will try to reform by changing through behavior. The best way is to cultivate the heart and understand the reasons behind the need to change. It is foolish to confine ourselves to reforming through behavior. This is the inferior way. Instead we should be reforming from the heart, for this is the best way to change.

If we are unable to achieve using the best method, then we have no choice but to try the less effective way, which is to try to understand why it would be best to change. When problems occur, remain calm and contemplate why it would have happened. Once the condition is clear and the reason is determined, our mind will instinctively calm down, our wandering thoughts will lessen, and our anger will dissolve.

However, if as beginners, we have little sense of reasoning and cannot succeed through understanding, what can we do? We could use an even more basic method of reforming by changing through behavior and in this way, force the thought to dissipate by putting a check on our every action, finding our faults, and correcting them one by one. If we cannot do this, we will find ourselves in trouble, creating even more severe negative karma, and thereby bringing even greater suffering upon ourselves. This is why beginning practitioners were required to strictly abide by the precepts for they could not understand the reasoning. The spirit of abiding by the precepts is to refrain from committing further wrongdoings.

The best way to reform is to cultivate the heart and

understand the need to change. An alternative way is to force ourself not to commit the wrongdoing again. When we attain purity of mind and understand the logic, we will be able to uphold and maintain good conduct. This is the best way to change. As we cultivate, we attain purity of mind while serving as a role model for beginners. Until we can do this, all three methods may have to be used to correct a fault.

Some people become inflexible when keeping the precepts. They are unable to progress in cultivation because they are attached to behavior and to the formality of cultivation. Actually, the precepts are very flexible. When we uphold them, we need to understand the logic behind them and even more importantly, to strive to attain purity of mind that is the mind without wandering and discriminatory thoughts, and attachments. The purpose of keeping the precepts is to attain this deep concentration.

If we are overly attached to the formality of keeping the precepts, then it will be difficult for us to achieve deep concentration because we will tend to differentiate and be attached to the appearance: the formality of keeping them daily. How can we succeed in doing this? Only by severing our discriminatory thoughts and attachments are we able to attain deep concentration. This concentration is still a means, a way; so do not be attached to attaining it, for to do so will result in our wisdom remaining hidden.

Theravada practitioners are attached to achieving concentration. The Buddha talked about the mind state of arhats in the *Surangama Sutra*. They have attained the ninth level of concentration and are partial to the state of empty

nirvana. Due to their attachment, they cannot let go of the gentle and serene state; they are still differentiating, still attached to extinguishing all the contaminants.

For example, when Theravada practitioners try to sever their afflictions, virtually all their change is through behavior. Sometimes, they will concurrently try to change through behavior and through reasoning, but not from the mind. The sutras tell us that trying to sever attachments by changing through behavior is as difficult as "trying to cut off a raging waterfall forty miles high."

This is as difficult as trying to remove a tree by plucking off one leaf at a time and is a good example of why changes should be made from the mind. How then should we proceed? Wise people would go straight to the root and pull up the tree. Then, the leaves would naturally wither and fall. Why bother to pluck the leaves and cut off the twigs, one by one?

The Desired Result of Reform

> But even when we vow to change, assistance is needed to truly reform. We will need constant reminders from genuine friends who witness our actions in everyday life. As for our good and bad thoughts, we can ask the beings and spirits of heaven and earth to be our witnesses. We also need to be diligent and to sincerely regret day and night. If we can honestly regret for one to two weeks, one to three months, then in this way, we

are assured of attaining good results.

We need to have the shameful heart, fearful heart, and courageous determined heart, for they are the inner, direct causes and conditions for reforming. But we still need catalytic factors, such as good spiritual friends who are on the path to awakening to remind us, and to help us from the outside as our visible assisting factors. If we have a virtuous and sincere thought of trying to correct our faults, all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will be happy and all benevolent spirits will praise and respect us as they unobtrusively assist us at the same time. It becomes clear that one virtuous thought can result in inconceivable results.

Therefore, we need to truly change through actions when the condition is right. Day and night, we need to be diligent and sincere in our regretting. If we are not, then we will inadvertently create negative karma. So, we cannot be remiss!

To accomplish this, it is best if our cultivation hall provides chanting for twenty-four hours a day. In the temples of ancient patriarchs and masters, the chanting continued night and day. During the day, everyone participated; at night, they practiced in groups of four with each group taking a turn.

Although we may not currently have such a cultivation hall where we live, we can make use of cassette tapes or chanting machines. We simply chant along with it, as if participating in a big assembly. The volume need not be so loud that it disturbs others, nor should it be so soft that we cannot hear clearly.

We can also listen to it when sleeping. Sometimes, we can even hear it when we dream, so we can chant in our dreams. This is similar to "hearing the drum play or the thunder rumble in our sleep." It will be wonderful if we can hear the chanting in our sleep. It will be as if we are participating in a seven-day retreat.

Liaofan spoke of sincerely regretting for one week. Participating in a seven-day retreat, in which the chanting is limited to certain periods each day, may not be as effective as gathering a number of like-minded fellow cultivators in a quiet place to chant continuously for seven days. A seven-day retreat should continue non-stop day and night.

Also, when we attend our first retreat, it is best not to participate for all seven days, because most people have difficulty meeting the full schedule. We can try one day and night, a full twenty-four hours. After we feel this is effective for several times, we can try two days and nights, then three days and nights, and so on.

Thus, to truly cultivate, we can chant once a week for three days and nights. If we are unable to do this, we can try a shorter period. The merit accrued from this would be effective and outstanding. *Liaofan's Four Lessons* tells us how we can create our destiny. When there is a sincere request, a response will follow. If we sincerely seek a center that is a good environment for cultivation, we should be able to obtain what we seek. If this kind of cultivation effort can be sustained for one to three months, then the desired results will be seen.

> What are the benefits of contrition? We may feel very much at ease and our hearts may feel light and generous. An unintelligent person may suddenly become wise. Another might maintain a clear and relaxed mind even in a disturbing and confusing environment. We would also feel able to understand everything or to eradicate our hatred upon seeing an enemy while we remain happy.

There are many examples of desired results. If we were depressed or unhappy in the past, we can become cheerful instead. If we have many worries, they can be lifted from our mind after we reach understanding, and instead, we can become liberated and free. If we are confused, we can become intelligent and no longer be foolish.

When we find ourselves in circumstances that are disturbing or agitating, or when we encounter many diverse and hard to solve matters, we can easily resolve them even if they overwhelm others. We have seen examples of this with some of our fellow practitioners. Some are able to settle matters they undertake without any apparent difficulty, while others find it extremely difficult to resolve them.

Mr. You said in his commentary, "This is a sign of good fortune, merits, and wisdom." For example, former enemies who resented us are now friendly towards us. This is due to our merits from cultivation, of being able to influence and change others unobtrusively. It is said that a kind-hearted person has no enemies and has the appearance of good

fortune, merits, and wisdom.

> We may dream of spitting out black things, or having ancient sages or virtuous people encourage and escort us. We may dream of flying in space or of colorful pennants and ornately decorated canopies. Such phenomena are indications of a successful reform and a dissolving of past offenses.

"Black things" are pollutants or karmic obstacles. In the past, we may have had nightmares or confused dreams, but not anymore. Although we still dream, what we see is as clear as in daylight. This is obviously very good. We may also dream of ancient sages or virtuous people offering their help.

As Buddhists, we would dream of Buddhas and bodhisattvas teaching us about the sutras and guiding us in our practice. We may also dream of flying in space, or of colorful pennants and canopies. These are indications of success in our attempts to improve. Whether in our daily lives or in our dreams, all these responses are signs that our karmic obstacles are gradually being reduced and eradicated, and that our good fortune and happiness are steadily materializing.

> However, we must not consider seeing these phenomena as signs of perfection. Instead, we must resolve to further improve ourselves and work even harder to reform.

We should not be proud that we have made progress. If

we become arrogant, then we will once again regress just as our karmic obstacles are being reduced and eradicated. We need to guard against becoming arrogant, to increase our resolve to attain even further self-improvement, and work even harder at reforming. If we become satisfied with our accomplishments, further improvement will be impossible.

Be constantly diligent and never stop improving. Even when we are born in the Pure Land, we need to continue to improve. How can we be content? While we can be satisfied in our manner of living, we should never be satisfied but continue with deep-felt confidence when seeking improvements in our virtues and cultivation.

> [An example is Qu Boyu] At twenty, he was already mindful of his faults, had analyzed them, and tried to thoroughly correct them. At the age of twenty-one, he felt that he still had not completely corrected all of them. At twenty-two, he felt as if twenty-one was wasted, without any real improvement. Thus, year after year, he continued to correct his faults. When he reached fifty, Boyu still felt that the past forty-nine years were filled with wrongdoings. This was how particular our ancestors were regarding the correction of faults!

During the Spring-Autumn period in China, a senior government official in Wei named Qu Boyu awakened when he was only twenty. He knew his faults and vowed to reform. At twenty-one, he felt he still needed to improve. This was further proof of the previous passage: "We should not

consider seeing these phenomena as a sign of perfection. Instead, we must resolve to further improve ourselves and work even harder to reform." Boyu had accomplished this. Every year, every month, and every day he reflected and reformed. He is an excellent example of how diligent people used to be. Their resolve and patience in reforming highlighted that their endurance and efforts are qualities to emulate.

> We are all just ordinary people with mistakes as numerous as a porcupine's spines. Often when we look back, we do not even see our faults because we are careless and do not know how to reflect on our actions. It is as if a cataract is growing in our eye.

Liaofan taught his son to think about his ancestor's behavior and then to examine his own. We are ordinary people with innumerable faults. Thinking back over today or yesterday, or over last year or before that, if it seems that we have not committed any great mistakes or done anything seriously wrong, then this thinking is due to carelessness. It is as if we have cataracts blocking us from seeing our faults. This results in our failure to improve and is why we will forever be one of the crowd.

This is why Great Master Lianchi taught beginners to use a merit-fault chart so that they would watch every thought and deed. Only when we discover our many faults, will we be truly afraid. We need to change primarily from the heart and reinforce this with changing through reasoning so that we are

concurrently practicing both the primary and secondary ways to reform.

> All these are symptoms of having accumulated too many offenses! Our hearts may feel confused and oppressed, lacking energy. We will become extremely forgetful and filled with worries even when nothing is happening.

We will benefit by practicing Buddhism. Signs of others as well as our own great or small karmic obstacles can be detected. [When we commit too many offenses] our hearts may feel heavy and we may become extremely forgetful at work or study and be unable to lift our spirits. When those who are young unexpectedly begin to forget things like elderly people do, it is due to karmic obstacles. True cultivators in their eighties and nineties will find that their memories are still good.

Needless worrying is also an indication of karmic obstacles. The past is past, what is the use of dwelling on it? Tomorrow is yet to come, to wonder about it is to have wandering thoughts. Some people are extremely good at worrying and wondering about the past and the future. They can do so all day long. This is to make a mountain out of a molehill, and this is a karmic obstacle.

> [We will] feel embarrassed and depressed upon meeting a virtuous person, or become displeased at hearing proper reasoning. When kind to others, we will be met with hostility. We may have

> nightmares where everything is upside-down, and talk incoherently and behave abnormally. These are all signs of misfortune.

If we are sincere, we will not be embarrassed or conscience-stricken, listless, or dejected when we meet a genuinely good person. If we are not sincere, we will become displeased at listening to the teachings of the Buddha or Confucius [or to any other moral teachings].

In the earlier years of the Qing dynasty, everyone in the imperial court recited the *Infinite Life Sutra*, but due to the Empress Dowager's discomfort in hearing it, the recitation was abolished. Perhaps her karmic obstacles made her uncomfortable when hearing about the ten bad karmas and their consequential sufferings in the human and hell realms.

When being kind to others, we may be met with hostility. For example, upon giving someone a gift, not only do they not thank us, they may even resent us for it. Another sign of misfortune is having nightmares where everything is confused, and our speech and behavior are abnormal. Such dreams mean that when our speech is nonsensical and disjointed and our behavior becomes psychotic, we have come up against a major karmic obstacle. These are all signs of significant transgressions.

> If we have any of these symptoms, we must immediately reinforce our willpower to correct all of our faults. It is necessary to start anew and not delay!

The presence of any of these signs means that we need to earnestly regret and to rid ourselves of bad habits. We no longer have the time for procrastination or carelessness. If we do not change, there will be no future for us. Therefore, upon discovering any of these symptoms, we need to immediately correct our faults. Do not go astray on a deviated path and waste this lifetime. Only when we truly rid ourselves of bad habits and faults will we be able to accept the teachings, cultivate good deeds, and accumulate merits.

When imparting the teachings to others, it is important to choose those with fewer faults, purity of mind, the courage to reform, and wisdom. Without these qualities, it is useless to teach someone. For example, one might teach a person who lacks virtue and good intentions. With increased knowledge and abilities, this person might be enabled to commit serious offenses! In this case, the wrong person was selected.

If he or she did not receive this knowledge, then there would have been less risk of harming others and creating negative karma. Therefore, teachers need to determine whether the person is qualified to inherit their knowledge and ability, and if not, they should not impart the teachings. This is not withholding knowledge, but using good judgment. On the other hand, if we are unwilling to teach a suitable person, then we have overlooked and possibly wasted a proper Dharma repository. So, if a person is suitable, we teach them; if they are unsuitable, we do not.

In summary, how do we accumulate merits? First, we correct our faults to have the abilities and conditions to be able to accept the great teachings. But before accepting them,

we need to perform more good deeds to meet the qualifications for being a Dharma repository. Then we can accept the great teachings.

The Third Lesson:
The Ways to Cultivate Goodness

A Family That Accumulates Good Deeds Will Have Abundant Prosperity

Ten Accounts of Virtuous People

> We read in the *I Ching*: "Families who perform good deeds will accumulate prosperity that can outlast many generations." An example is the Yan family. Before they married their daughter to the man who was to be Confucius's father, they inquired about the family. After finding that they practiced goodness and accumulated virtues, the Yan family felt confident that they were marrying their daughter into a family that would prosper and have outstanding descendants.

The *I Ching* introduces the principle in this lesson. A family that accumulates good deeds will have prosperity to spare. If we do not enjoy all our good fortune, we will have enough left over for our descendants to enjoy for generations to come.

In the past, the parents and a matchmaker decided whether two people would marry. When we compare today's freedom of love with the traditional way, the latter had its advantages. Parents who were virtuous and wise chose the most promising spouse for their child. The disadvantage was that uneducated parents who did not know better, often sold

their daughters out for a good price.[42] These children complied with their parent's wishes, married and were unhappy for the rest of their lives. Thus, this system had both advantages and disadvantages.

The Yan family member spoken of here is Confucius' maternal grandfather. He knew that the Shu family had accumulated virtues and practiced good deeds for several generations. This is an example of a good match made by the parents and the matchmaker.

In ancient times, all those who held power, from the emperor to a village mayor, faithfully followed three guidelines: to act as leader, as a parent, and as a teacher. First, it was necessary to act as the leader of the governed area. Second, to act as a parent meant to protect and to care for all the citizens that he was responsible for, as if they were his family. Third, to act as a teacher meant to teach and serve as a role model for all.

These three responsibilities fell upon the shoulders of the ruler. If he fulfilled them, then he would have performed infinite goodness. Unfortunately, these three guidelines are no longer adhered to.

> In another example, Confucius had praised Shun for his filial piety by saying: "Due to his great filial piety and sincerity, Shun deeply moved even his ancestors to accept his offering.[43] His accumulation of merits and good fortune would last for many generations." This principle is confirmed by many examples.

Shun is unsurpassed for his great filial piety. He saw only his own faults, not those of others. For Buddhists, he exemplifies a good practitioner. In the *Platform Sutra*, we learned that a true practitioner does not see the faults of others. Shun accomplished just this. History has shown that the virtues he accumulated guaranteed his descendant's prosperity. And as they continued his practice of honoring ancestors, these descendants continued to accumulate goodness and virtues. Even the ancestors of others benefited as Shun's practices were gradually adopted by generations of Chinese.

> The following are some additional examples of how merits can be attained through performing good deeds.[44] In Fujian province, a man named Yang Rong[45] held a position in the Imperial Court as the Emperor's teacher. Yang Rong's ancestors were boat people who made a living by helping people cross the river.
>
> One year, a storm lasted so long that violent flooding swept away people, animals, houses, and belongings. The other boaters took advantage of the situation to collect the floating belongings. Only Yang Rong's grandfather and great grandfather rescued the drowning people, and ignored the belongings. The boaters laughed and thought the two to be very foolish. Later, when Yang Rong's father was born, the Yang family gradually became wealthy.[46]

> One day a heavenly being who had manifested as a Taoist monk told the Yang family that due to their ancestors' accumulation of hidden merits, their descendants would enjoy wealth and prominence. He then suggested a special place where they could build the ancestral tomb. They followed his suggestion. Today it is called the White Hare Grave.

Feng shui is an ancient science of placing buildings, furniture, and so on, in a way that will take maximum advantage of the natural energy of the land. However, receiving such good or bad advice depends largely on our good fortune, virtues, and conditions. If a person knowledgeable in feng shui has advised us, it will only enable us to receive what we are destined to receive sooner rather than later. If we do not deserve good advice, then not only will we not benefit from it, it will actually bring us misfortune because we do not have the good fortune to enjoy it. Therefore, do not be too happy when good things happen. First, think whether we deserve them.

Upon reading *Liaofan's Four Lessons*, we will realize that everything that happens does so for a reason and that for an ordinary person, "One sip, one bite, everything is destined." In my lifetime, I have seen many things that were confirmed by Buddhist and Confucian principles. If we do not believe this, and fail to correct our faults and practice good deeds, then there will be no variables in our lives—only a constant. Only when we truly understand the way to accumulate

goodness and reform our faults will we be able to change our lives.

> Shortly after, Yang Rong was born. He passed the imperial examination when he was only twenty years old and later received the imperial appointment of Master. The emperor even bestowed the same imperial honors on his grandfather and great grandfather. Today, his virtuous and prosperous descendants are still prominent.

Since males became adults at the age of twenty, this passage reveals how unusual it was for someone so young to pass the highest-level imperial examination, the *Jinshi*. Today, this would be equivalent to earning a doctorate degree. His appointment was likewise extremely high, similar to that of a national affairs advisor. As an advisor to the emperor, his was obviously a very prestigious position. Later, he received the rank of imperial teacher.

Due to Yang Rong's achievements, the emperor also conferred the same honors on Yang Rong's deceased grandfather and great grandfather. This was the traditional way to honor and pay respect to ancestors when an individual became an imperial official.

Today, we also reward outstanding actions as governments commend people for their accomplishments. But frankly, the methods used in the past were more effective because they had a deeper educational meaning. As the ancestors had indirectly contributed to the country, the

emperor would bestow the same honor on the three previous generations as well as on the individual.

We may not see any reason to honor someone who died so many years ago but our achievements are most likely based upon the good deeds and merits that were accumulated by our ancestors. We have been rewarded with the good fortune that stemmed from them. Realizing this, why would there be any reason not to practice good deeds?

If the emperor honored the ancestors when they were in samsara, they would still receive the honor regardless of which realm they were in. If they were in the hungry ghost realm, then all the ghost kings would respect them. As great virtuous persons, they would gain the respect of heavenly beings and spirits. This reward system provided a valuable education for it was an excellent incentive for people to practice goodness. Consequently, the true merits and virtues from this education are inconceivable.

Yang Rong's descendants held official positions, and were prosperous and prominent even in Liaofan's time. This was the result of generations of ancestors accumulating goodness and building a solid foundation, and of generations of descendants having virtue.

> Yang Zicheng, from the county of Yin in Zhejiang province, is another example. He worked in the county courthouse and was kind, fair, and honest. Once, the county magistrate[47] punished a criminal by beating him until he was bleeding profusely.
>
> Zicheng knelt and pleaded with him to stop. The

> infuriated magistrate retorted: "It's all right for you to plead, but how can I not be angry when he has broken the law!" Zicheng replied that when government leaders do not follow the proper path, ordinary people would lose their way. Realizing this, we should feel sorrow and not pleasure [at solving the case]. And we should certainly not become angry. A case like this called for more understanding. Moved by Zicheng's plea, the magistrate ceased the beating.

Mr. Yang Zicheng, who was generous and impartial, had a low-level position in the county courthouse. When the criminal refused to tell the truth and even talked back, the magistrate became enraged and beat him for the extremely serious offense. When Zicheng saw this, he compassionately pleaded with the magistrate to stop.

This took a great deal of courage because what he said was a direct accusation of the government. If the superior officer had disagreed and reprimanded him for his bluntness, Zicheng could have been in serious trouble. If however, the superior officer was virtuous and wise, he would not become angry, but would appreciate that one of his staff was only reminding him to be reasonable.

When Zicheng spoke of government leaders, he was referring to provincial and city magistrates. He said they did not follow the proper path, meaning that the government failed to properly educate the citizens. What is the proper path? It is when the ruler follows the three guidelines of

acting as leader, parent, and teacher. When a district official in charge of local administration did not meet these guidelines, he had not properly looked after the people and this was why they broke the law. This was why Zicheng said that when leaders did not follow the proper path, the citizens would become lost because they had no guidelines to follow and no one to advise them. If the administration behaved properly, then the people would have a standard to follow.

During the Han dynasty, the teachings of Confucius and Mencius replaced those of hundreds of scholars. Confucianism thus became the basis for the educational system. Before this time, during the Spring-Autumn period, there were so many philosophies that it was difficult for people to know which ones were appropriate. All of the books written by hundreds of scholars had their own distinct points of view. Each seemed to make sense; however, people were at a loss as to which to choose.

It became crucial to select one as the model while keeping in mind that the chosen teaching had to be widely accepted by people with different cultural backgrounds. Once this model had been chosen, the works of other scholars were used for reference. Through this process, the educational objectives were established.

This system of moral standards became the basis of the teachings for the Chinese and was used from the Han dynasty until the beginning of the twentieth century. Confucius and Mencius taught us the five human relationships and the ten moral responsibilities, which are the proper path. The five human relationships concentrate on

the relations among people and the responsibilities that people are obligated to fulfill. They include the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, friends, and political leaders and the public.

The first is the basic relations between married couples. A husband should fulfill his responsibilities as a husband and a wife should do likewise for the couple to remain harmonious. This is the basis of all prosperous families.[48] Next is the family, in which parents hold a position over us, children under us, and siblings around us. Each different role has its own responsibilities that are innate moral principles and are not created or assigned by another.

Beyond the family are society and the country. At the head is the leader of the country and below the leader are government officials. Our friends are on the same level as us. When we expand these five relationships to include everyone, we will see that we are all brothers and sisters. Therefore, the five relationships unite the country as one big family and are the proper path.

To the ancient sages and virtuous people, government officials were considered great people and addressed as such. They had the responsibility to educate people, and to nurture and lead them in proper thoughts and behavior by establishing moral guidelines. As long as people followed these guidelines, there would be no wrongdoing. In addition to these guidelines, they were to teach proper moral principles [such as loyalty, filial piety, humanity, faith, and honesty].

The basic educational goals in Confucianism are to sever

material desires, obtain awakening, uphold a sincere mind and a virtuous heart, develop self-discipline, have a harmonious family, govern a country, and foster world peace. Today, schools do not emphasize these principles or the humanities, but stress technology. No wonder our thoughts and behavior have no guiding principles. We are not taught that when we see the misdeeds of others, we are to take a hard look at ourselves and see if we have fulfilled our duties as leaders.

Once we know the motive behind a criminal offense, we need to feel compassion for the offender rather than feel satisfaction at having solved the case, because we ourselves have yet to fulfill our responsibilities. And if we should not feel pleased, then we certainly should not become angry. At the time of this account, government officials such as county magistrates were well educated and had passed an imperial examination. Therefore, when Zicheng bravely spoke on behalf of the prisoner, the magistrate immediately realized his error and ceased being angry. From this example, we can see that Zicheng had considerable wisdom, virtue, and insight. It was appropriate for him to accumulate virtue and merits in the court because he could do many good deeds.

> Although Zicheng's family was poor, he refused all bribes.[49] If the prisoners were short of food, he would take some from his own home to give it to them even if it meant going hungry himself.
>
> One day, it was time for several newly arrived prisoners to be fed, but Zicheng himself had little

> food. If he gave the prisoners what he had, his family would go hungry; if he kept the food for his family, the prisoners, would have nothing to eat—an appalling dilemma. He felt that the prisoners needed the food more than his family did. He discussed it with his wife who asked where the prisoners were from. Zicheng told her that they were from Hangzhow.

Although Zicheng only held a very low rank in the county government, he refused all of the gifts that were offered to him. Sometimes relatives of the prisoners would offer him bribes in exchange for a lighter sentence or preferential treatment. However, he refused all of these offers and always acted fairly although it was very difficult to be honest in such a tempting environment.

At the time, prisoners were given a meager amount of food. In this example, they walked maybe fifty or sixty kilometers a day in shackles and had spent several days on the road. Zicheng was very sympathetic, but, if he gave them his small amount of rice, then his family would go hungry. If he gave the rice to his family, then the prisoners would have nothing to eat. After discussing the situation with his wife, they decided to make rice porridge and share it with the prisoners.

> Later, Zicheng had two sons. The elder son, Shouchen, and the younger one, Shouzhi, both held important government positions. Zicheng's eldest grandson became vice minister in the

> Ministry of Justice and his second grandson was a highly placed member of the government staff in Sichuan province. They too were prominent. Today, their descendant Yang Chuting, also a government official, is known for his virtuous deeds.

The two sons received the good fortune accumulated by their parents. Their government department was one of six ministries. Today for example, there are over a dozen such ministries in Taiwan. Thus, the positions held in ancient times were higher and entailed greater responsibilities than those of today.[50] This account illustrates that the goodness accumulated by this couple benefited their descendants.

> Another account took place during the Zheng-Tong period, [the time of Emperor Yingzong]. In Fujian province, many intellectuals had joined a group of rebels. The emperor appointed Imperial Censor Zhang to stop them. He tricked the rebels and captured their leader.
>
> Later, Imperial Censor Zhang dispatched General Xie to put an end to the remaining rebels in the eastern part of the province. The general obtained a list of the insurgents and ordered white flags to be secretly given to everyone not on that list along with instructions to place the flags on their doors when the imperial army came to town. He ordered the soldiers not to harm the innocent and with this one

> thought of goodness, he saved tens of thousands of people from being killed.
>
> His son Xie Chian placed first in the imperial examinations and eventually became an advisor to the emperor. His grandson Xie Pi placed third in the imperial examinations.

In this account, which happened over five hundred years ago, the rebels were actually a revolutionary army preparing to rebel. This section of the book is about the effects garnered from preventing unnecessary killing. Looking back at Chinese history, we find that very few descendants of famous generals had good fortune. Why? They made too many enemies and caused too many deaths! Probably less than ten generals had descendants who received good fortune, and General Xie was one of them.

Another prime example of the law of causality is the famous General Guo Ziyi who lived during the Tang dynasty. Due to his accumulation of goodness and virtues, his descendants prospered. During the Song dynasty, there were two generals under the leadership of Emperor Taizu: Cao Han and Cao Bin. The descendants of Cao Han had so little good fortune that it did not even last three generations. The daughters became prostitutes and many family members became destitute. Cao Bin, on the other hand, was a very caring general who did not kill innocent people. His descendants were all prosperous.

If a general failed to discipline his troops so that they hurt civilians, the burden of blame was his. This example shows

the consequence of unnecessary killing. General Xie wisely taught his troops how to distinguish the rebel supporters from the civilians. In this way, he did not mistakenly cause the deaths of innocent people. The prestige and prosperity of his descendants are good examples of cause and effect.

> Another example is the Lin family from Putian in Fujian province. Among their ancestors was a very generous elderly lady. Every day she made rice balls for the poor and gave away as many as they wanted. An immortal who manifested as a Taoist monk came daily for three years and always asked for six or seven. Her ceaseless generosity convinced him of her deep sincerity.

This is another example of an ancestor who accumulated good fortune for her descendants. She treated everyone equally and gave the rice balls to whoever asked for them. It is easy to be good occasionally, but to do so every day is very difficult. The heavenly being knew that she was tireless in her good deeds, and that she sincerely wished to help those who were poor. Sincerity is an accumulation of virtues and giving is an accumulation of goodness.

> He told her: "I have eaten your rice balls for three years and have done nothing to show my gratitude. Perhaps I can do so now. On the land behind your house is a good place for your grave. If you are placed there when you die, the number of your descendants who will have imperial

> appointments will equal the number of seeds in a pound of sesame seeds." Her son followed his recommendations.

The Taoist knew feng shui and suggested a good place for her grave. If his advice was followed, then an unimaginable number of her descendants would receive imperial appointments. Just imagine how many sesame seeds there are in a pound!

> The first generation after that, nine men passed the imperial examinations and it continued that way for generations. It was said in Fujian that the surname of Lin was always on the list of those who had passed the imperial examination.

Because of the good fortune that the elderly lady had accumulated, not only did she have many descendants, but they were prosperous and became the largest family in the province. This is the effect garnered from the cause of sincerely giving away food to the poor.

> Another example is Mr. Feng, the father of the imperial historian, Feng Zhuoan. One winter many years ago, Mr. Feng was on his way to school when he saw someone lying in the snow. Finding that the man was barely breathing, he quickly took off his coat, wrapped it around the man, carried him back home, and revived him.[51]

> That night, Zhuoan's father dreamt that a heavenly being told him: "Out of complete sincerity, you helped a dying man. This is a great virtue. I will have the famous General Han Qi of the Song dynasty to be reborn as your son." Later, Zhuoan was born and was named Qi.

When we see a person in dire circumstances, no matter who they may be, as long as we sincerely try to save his or her life, it will be considered a great act of goodness. Han Qi was a famous general during the Song dynasty. He was greatly admired and honored by the emperor. Since General Han Qi was highly regarded, the heavenly being arranged for him to be reborn into the Feng family. Thus, because Zhuoan's father saved someone's life, he was rewarded with a good son. This is an excellent example of rebirth.

> Also, there was Mr. Ying, a minister who lived in Taizhou. When he was young, he studied in remote mountain areas. At night, he often heard the sounds of ghosts and spirits but was never afraid of them. One night, he heard one ghost happily say to another: "There is a village woman whose husband left home a long time ago and has not returned. Her in-laws think that their son is dead and are forcing her to remarry. Tomorrow night, she is going to commit suicide and will replace me. Then I will be reborn!"

In the past, scholars often lived in temples, because only

temples had extra rooms and a good library, usually called the Sutra Collection Chamber. At a time when there were no public libraries, the temple library usually had the *Four Books*, the *Five Classics*, and probably material from the numerous schools of thinkers from the late Zhou dynasty.[52] Most scholars preferred to reside in these temples, which were usually located in the mountains or in wooded areas, for these provided a quiet and refreshing environment for study.

Ghosts not only exist, they live among humans. They usually appear in sparsely populated areas or when a person's energy is low. As Mr. Ying's mind was pure and honest, he neither paid much attention to nor feared them. One day he overheard one ghost telling another that a young woman was going to commit suicide. Anyone who has committed suicide needs to find a replacement before he or she can be reborn. If no replacement can be found, the ghost will undergo much suffering.

It is necessary for the replacement to commit suicide in the same spot and manner for the ghost to be set free. The same applies to car accidents. Although the deceased did not commit suicide but was an accident victim, he or she would also need to find a replacement.

This example is about a ghost who had hung himself, when he was a human. He knew in advance of the death of the young woman whose husband was long overdue from a business trip. The parents, knowing nothing of their son's whereabouts, were forcing his wife to remarry. She did not wish to and planned to commit suicide in the same spot the

next day. The ghost's chance for freedom was soon to materialize because she was to be his replacement.

> Upon hearing this, Mr. Ying immediately set out to sell some land that he owned. He received two hundred grams of silver for it. He then made up a letter from the daughter-in-law's husband, and sent it to her home along with the silver. The parents knew that the letter was not in the son's handwriting, but examined the silver and said: "This letter may be false, but the silver is not. Perhaps our son is alive." Consequently, the daughter-in-law was not forced to remarry. After a while the husband returned home and the couple resumed their lives together.

Mr. Ying saved the breakup of a family, an act of great merit. When he sold the land and sent the money, he was not thinking of accumulating merit. He simply acted out of compassion by wanting to help the woman, to save her life, and to keep the family intact. He thought no further of what he had done and returned to the temple to continue his studies.

> Next, Mr. Ying heard the ghost say, "Originally, I was supposed to leave here and be reborn, but Mr. Ying messed up my chance!"
>
> The other ghost asked: "Why don't you get even with him?"

> The first ghost replied: "I can't. The heavenly beings have recognized his goodness and he is going to receive a prominent position in the future. How can I hurt him?"

Since the heavenly beings had already recognized Mr. Ying's goodness, the ghost could not do anything. From this, we know that if a spirit or a heavenly being can harm us, it is because we have done something to deserve it. If we have not done anything wrong, then the spirits are unable to hurt us.

An old Chinese proverb says that there is a thirty percent possibility that people may be afraid of ghosts but a seventy percent probability that ghosts are afraid of people! So it is silly for us to be afraid of ghosts because they are much more afraid of us. We only need to be afraid when we have done something wrong, because only then are they able to harm us. If our conscience is clear, then malevolent spirits can do nothing to us.[53]

Seeing Mr. Ying's goodness, the heavenly beings had already planned for Mr. Ying to hold a prominent position in the government as a minister. Later in his life, Mr. Ying did indeed hold the position of minister. Having overheard the ghost, he knew some of his future in advance.

> Upon hearing this, Mr. Ying became even more diligent in practicing goodness and accumulating merits. Whenever there was a famine, he gave grain from his storehouses to those who needed it. He always helped relatives in emergencies. When things did not go his way, he always reflected within

himself rather than complain of others. Thus, he always quietly complied with conditions. Even today, his descendants are prominent.

If people were rude or took advantage of him, Mr. Ying always examined his own actions to see if he was at fault. Tolerant and able to take everything in stride, he was never argumentative or resentful. Not only did he become a minister, his accomplished and virtuous descendants also prospered. All this was the result of his keeping a family together.

Another person, Xu Fengzhu, lived in Jiangsu province. Whenever there was a famine, his wealthy father would be the first to waive the rent on the rice fields, hoping that other wealthy people would follow suit.[54] He also donated grain from his storehouses to those who were hungry.

One night, he heard ghosts outside his home say, "A county scholar in the Xu family is going to pass the provincial imperial examination!" This went on for several nights and indeed that year his son Fengzhu passed the examination. After that, Fengzhu's father became even more diligent in accumulating good deeds.

He paid for the repair of roads and bridges, and provided food for monks as well as for the poor. He did all he could to help others. Sometime

> later, he heard the ghosts again. They said: "The provincial scholar from the Xu family is going to hold a high position in the government." Eventually, Fengzhu became the governor of Zhejiang province.

Sometimes ghosts can be clearly seen or heard. Outside the house of the Xu family, ghosts sang that a family member was going to pass the provincial imperial examination. Later the son Xu Fengzhu did so. Good fortune is the reward for good deeds. Those who understand this will try even harder to accumulate goodness. The ghosts also sang that Fengzhu would receive a high position in the government. He eventually became an imperial judge on the Supreme Court, then governor of Zhejiang province. This was the result of sincerely helping the poor.

> Another example is Tu Kangxi who lived in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province. Mr. Tu worked in the courthouse and would spend nights in the prison cells, talking with the inmates. Instead of making a name for himself, he would write secret reports to the minister of justice, telling him why certain prisoners were innocent. The minister would then question the prisoner accordingly and clear the cases. Through Mr. Tu's efforts, more than ten innocent people were released and all of them were extremely grateful to the judge praising the minister of justice for his wise judgment.

Regardless of how careful one might be when examining a case, there was always the possibility of a wrong verdict. Even when the error is unintentional, it is still a misdeed. From this, we can see how difficult it is to be a good lawyer or judge.

What Mr. Tu did was very rare. He would spend nights with the prisoners to learn everything about each case. When the prisoners were questioned in the courtroom, they sometimes became so frightened that they could not adequately defend themselves.[55]

When he stayed with the inmates to find out the truth behind each case, he did not take the credit himself. Instead, he wrote out the details of the case and gave them to the minister of justice so that all the credit went to his superior officer who was very pleased, for when he tried the cases at dawn, he already knew the truth. After detailed questioning, he acquitted over a dozen innocent men. This was the talk of the imperial city and everyone praised the minister.

> Soon after, Mr. Tu made a report to the imperial judge saying: "If innocent people are imprisoned here, there must be many more throughout the country.[56] I recommend that investigators be sent to check the prisons for innocent people every five years. The sentences can be canceled to prevent the innocent from remaining in prison." The minister, Mr. Tu's superior, took the report to the emperor, who agreed with Mr. Tu's suggestion. Mr. Tu was subsequently chosen as one of the

special agents in charge of reducing sentences for those who were found innocent.

One night, he dreamt that a heavenly being came to him and said: "Originally, you did not deserve a son in this life, but this act of reducing prison sentences for innocent people accords with the wishes of the heavens. You will be bestowed with three sons and they will all attain high positions." His wife later gave birth to three sons who all became prominent.

Similar to Liaofan, Mr. Tu was not destined to have sons. Liaofan sought a son and received one. Mr. Tu received three sons due to his accumulation of good deeds.

Another example of attaining good results from practicing kindness is Bao Ping who lived in Jiaxing. Ping was the youngest of seven sons of the magistrate of Chizhou, Anhui province. He married into the Yuan family in Pinghu county, Zhejiang province, and was a good friend of my father. Bao Ping was knowledgeable and talented, but always failed in the examinations. He spent his time studying Buddhism and Taoism.

Once, while traveling to Lake Mao, he came to a village and saw a temple in dire need of repair. The statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva was wet from the rain that leaked through the roof. Ping

> took out all his money and gave it to the abbot, so that he could restore the temple.
>
> The abbot replied: "It is a major project, I am afraid this is not enough." Bao Ping then took out all his expensive clothes and handed them to the abbot. His servant tried to persuade him to keep his best outfit, but he refused, saying: "It does not matter to me. As long as the statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva remains undamaged, I do not care if I have to go without clothes."

Ping, who had failed to pass the examinations, had given up the hope of a government career. Fortunately, his father was head of the local government so the family's finances were adequate. Once, when he saw a Buddhist temple in need of repairs, his immediate thought was to help. He took out sixteen ounces of silver, which was all the money he had, and gave it to the abbot—an act of pure sincerity. When told that it was not enough, Ping took out four bolts of cloth and some clothing from his luggage so the abbot could trade them for silver.

> The abbot, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed, "To give up money and clothing is not difficult, but your deep sincerity is truly rare." After the temple was repaired, Bao Ping asked his father to visit it and together they spent the night there. The temple's Dharma Protector, Qielan, came in his dream to thank him and said: "Since you have

> accumulated these merits and virtues, you will have many generations of descendants who will receive imperial appointments." His son and grandson both passed high examinations and were appointed as imperial officials.

Like the other examples, the good fortune he received was also rewarded to his descendants.

> Zhi Li from Jiashan county, in Zhejiang province is another example. His father used to be a clerk in the provincial courthouse. Once, when Zhi Li's father learned that an innocent man had been given the death penalty, he tried to save the man's life. When the prisoner heard about this, he told his wife: "I am greatly indebted to this man who has spoken on my behalf, but I have no way to show my gratitude. Will you invite him to our house and offer yourself to him? Perhaps this will please him and increase my chances to live."

Zhi Li's father, knowing of the prisoner's innocence, sympathized with him and pleaded with his superior to spare the inmate's life. If he could save the prisoner, he would also save the family.

> The wife cried as she listened to his request, but there was no other way to help. The next day when the clerk came to visit, she offered him wine and told him of her husband's wish. The clerk

> refused, but continued to do all he could for the man. When at last the prisoner was released, he and his wife went to the clerk's house to thank him. He said: "One with such virtue as yours is truly rare these days, how can I show my gratitude? Since you do not have a son, allow me to offer my daughter in marriage to you. Please accept for this is the only way that I can repay you."

Zhi Li's father refused the prisoner's offer of his wife because he did not wish any reward. He had acted out of a sense of morality and justice, feeling that it was part of his job. Married for many years, he and his wife had no sons. So, the prisoner offered his daughter to be a second wife to the clerk hoping that she would be able to bear him a son and continue the family name, an accepted custom at the time.

> The clerk accepted and soon afterwards, she bore him his son, Zhi Li. He passed the highest level of the imperial examinations when he was just twenty years old and later was appointed to an important government position. His son Gao, grandson Lu, and great grandson Dalun, all passed the examinations and received imperial appointments as well.

> These ten examples all tell of the deeds cultivated by different people. Although their actions

differed, their intent was the same—to perform goodness.

Zhi Li's final appointment was similar to a First Secretary today, a prominent position. This was his reward for saving an innocent life. In this lesson, Liaofan provided ten examples of how good fortune is the result of accumulating goodness and is not a coincidence. These events were close to Liaofan's time. Some he knew of personally while others were related to his family. All of them are about cause and effect: goodness will result in good fortune and evil will result in misfortune.

Understanding Goodness

How to Recognize Goodness

If we carefully think about goodness, we will realize that there are many different types—real and false, honest and crooked, hidden and visible, apparent and actual, proper and improper, full and half, big and small, and difficult and easy.

These different types each have their own causes that need to be understood. If we try to practice good deeds but do not know how to distinguish between right and wrong, we may end up doing more harm than good and all of our efforts will have been in vain.

True sincerity in practicing goodness is to do so without asking for anything in return and is the crucial factor in such matters. Good acts that have conditions attached are wrongdoings, not goodness.

For instance, some people, especially Buddhists, do not understand that Buddhism teaches us to eliminate wandering thoughts and attachments. When they go to a temple to pay their respects to the bodhisattvas, they do so to ask for something. If they do not want anything, they do not go. They burn incense in front of the bodhisattvas and pray for assistance and guidance. If the bodhisattvas can just grant what they want, they will return the favor with special offerings. This is trying to strike up a bargain! Not only are they insincere, they think the bodhisattvas will accept bribes. Obviously a serious offense!

Zhi Li's father was virtuous. The prisoner's offer of his wife as a reward was immoral but Zhi Li's father was not offended and continued to help the prisoner. Thus, it was fitting that he received such good fortune.

The previous ten accounts are examples of good actions. Now, we will look at the concepts that they illustrate. We need to know the principles and proper ways to accumulate goodness.

> What are "real goodness" and "false goodness?" In the Yuan dynasty, a group of scholars went to visit Master Zhongfeng.[57] One said: "We hear in Buddhism that the karmic reward for good and bad is 'like a shadow, following the form wherever

> it goes.' But why is it that although some people practice goodness, their families and descendants are not prosperous? On the other hand, while others behave immorally, their families and descendants do very well. What has happened to cause and effect? Are there no standards in the Buddha's teachings?"

Several scholars, who visited the master, said that both Buddhism and Taoism taught that the law of causality was true and inescapable. But, the fact that descendants of good people sometimes had problems while descendants of immoral people sometimes prospered seemed to contradict the law of causality.

> Master Zhongfeng replied: "Ordinary people are blinded by worldly viewpoints and not having cleansed their minds of impurities are unable to see clearly. Consequently, they look upon real goodness as wrongdoing and mistake wrongdoing as goodness. This is very common today.

Ordinary people view everything as ordinary. Their minds are impure due to worldly emotions and they are still bothered by many wandering thoughts and attachments. Not having the Buddha's eyes of wisdom to discern the truth, they often confuse good with bad. Although many people were like this, the master just said courteously that such people did exist.

> "Moreover, these people do not blame themselves for failing to understand, and unfairly blame their misfortune on the heavens." The scholars questioned how good and bad could be mistaken for each other.
>
> The master then asked each of them to voice their thoughts on what was bad and good. One scholar said that to yell at and hit others was bad; to respect and treat others in a polite way was good. The master replied, "Not necessarily." Another scholar said that being greedy and taking another's money was bad while being generous and behaving properly was good. Master Zhongfeng again replied, "Not necessarily." The remaining scholars expressed their views on what was bad and good, but Master Zhongfeng always concluded, "Not necessarily."

The master said that their standards were unreliable and disagreed with their answers. With that, everybody asked him to explain his standards, since his differed from theirs.

The Definition of Goodness

> Master Zhongfeng said: "To do things for the benefit of others is good; to do things for self-benefit is bad. If what we do is for the sake of benefiting another, then it does not matter if we yell at or hit them; it is still good. But, if our

> intention is for self-benefit, then regardless of our appearance of respect and courtesy, it is bad."

This talks of the Buddhist standard for good and bad. Anything done with the intention to benefit others is good, even if a certain amount of corporal punishment is involved, while anything done with the intent to benefit ourself is considered bad. It does not matter how courteous we may be towards others for our intentions may be tainted. For example, we may be courteous to ingratiate ourselves with others or fawn on them to gain something for ourself.

> The master continued: "Practicing goodness solely to benefit others is considered public benefit and is real goodness. If we only think of ourselves while doing good acts, then that is considered private benefit and is false goodness."

This is the true standard for goodness: to benefit and provide goodness for every living being. If in the act of doing good, we are still concerned about our own welfare or reward, then the act is no longer sincere or pure, but has become tainted. In addition to goodness that is "real or false" there is goodness that is "full or half." To understand full and half goodness, we need to be able to differentiate between goodness that is "full or pure" and "half or mixed."

All the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, sages, and virtuous people think not of themselves but of others. This is true and full goodness. A good example of this is Fan Zhongyan. Exemplifying true and perfect goodness, he was an excellent

role model for he was not concerned for himself. He wanted to create good fortune for others so that they could benefit the country and all of society.

When we read his biography, we can see that his descendants also practiced and accumulated good deeds. Mr. Fan and two of his five sons became prime ministers. The emperor appointed another son as a high scholar. When Mr. Fan died, there was not enough money for his children to purchase a coffin. Where had all his money gone? He had given it to others. This was why Great Master Yinguang praised Mr. Fan as having virtuous conduct second only to Confucius. His descendants prospered for eight hundred years, until the early 1900s. This is the result of accumulating abundant virtues and goodness.

Today, when we practice good deeds, we do so sparingly. We exert just a fraction of our potential effort but consider ourselves good people. Not only that, we expect great benefits in return for our little bit of goodness. Many people go to temples to burn incense and make offerings. Why? Because they believe this can profit them the most: a dollar invested for millions in return. So, they burn incense and worship the Buddha thinking that they will gain good fortune in return. If they donate a dollar today, maybe they will win ten thousand dollars in the lottery tomorrow. Such thinking degrades the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

When we see these apparently sincere people, their families, and even descendants suffering misfortunes, we will know why. They do not intentionally view the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as evil, but subconsciously they view them as

beings who take bribes. This is obviously a serious mistake! Sometimes when some people want something from an influential person, they offer a bribe. This is the same as offering money to the Buddha in hopes of receiving what we want. People who accept the bribe are unethical. If a Buddha accepted the bribe, would he not also be unethical?

> Master Zhongfeng explained further: "When goodness springs from the heart, it is real goodness. But, when we do something good just because others are doing so, it is false. When we do good without expecting anything in return, it is real goodness. But, when we practice good deeds for some purpose other than to benefit others, it is false. Those who wish to practice real goodness need to consider all these differences."

Goodness springing from our hearts arises from true sincerity and is true goodness. What is true goodness and false goodness? We must look into our hearts to see if we are genuinely practicing goodness. "False goodness" is simply following others, it is to act without sincerity while wishing for a return. "True goodness" is to wish for nothing in return.

The scholars said greed and excess possessions were bad, but Master Zhongfeng said, "Not necessarily." To use money and possessions to do good, to benefit the public, is considered good not bad.

Today, when we encourage people to practice good deeds, they may be unwilling to do so. However, if we set out to trick or to lie to them to get them to perform a good deed,

they would be perfectly willing to do it. Where does the problem lie? It lies within us. Do we really have the same intentions as bodhisattvas? If we cheat others out of their money with the intent of enjoying ourself, then it is wrong.

If we see things superficially, then it is difficult to distinguish between good and bad. It all depends on the heart. The accumulation of great goodness and merits arises from the heart of sincerity. This is especially true for great bodhisattvas who appear as ordinary people. They do not think of the fact that they are bodhisattvas or about trivial matters. They think purely of benefiting all beings and thus, their views are very different from ordinary people.

> What are "honest goodness" and "crooked goodness"? People today often look upon an extremely conservative and nice person as good and kind.

"Honest" means being virtuous, dignified, and just. "Crooked" means being dishonest. When we see a sycophant who is very respectful and acquiesces to others, we may think he is a good person. Many employ such people because they are willing to do whatever they are told. People think this type of person is good and often like to have them around. But he is just a lackey obeying every command and attending to every need with a respectful demeanor.

> However, the ancient sages and virtuous people have shown that they preferred those who were aspiring and dignified. As for those who appear to

> be compliant and careful in their actions, everyone may like them, but sages often speak of them as "thieves of virtue." From this, we can see that the viewpoint of ordinary people on good and bad differs greatly from that of sages and virtuous people.

Although most people prefer and consider as good those who appear to be compliant and careful, great sages and virtuous people prefer those who have ability although they may be stubborn, arrogant and sometimes, even a little rude. Why? These individuals possess particular skills and although they may disagree with us, they are capable of high achievement. Sometimes, compliant people cannot accomplish given tasks because they lack initiative. Thus, sages and virtuous people prefer those with courageous and aspiring characters who are not caught up in trivialities.

Although compliant people are well liked, sages often call them "thieves of virtue" because in their confusion about the truth, they cannot distinguish right from wrong. Virtue refers to proper customs and morality. People who cannot differentiate between right and wrong have broken the moral tradition, like thieves who have broken the law.

> Because of this, our judgment could be erroneous. Beings and spirits of heaven and earth all look upon good and bad from the same viewpoint as the sages and not that of ordinary people.

We cannot always distinguish between real goodness and

false goodness. Why do spirits and beings of heaven and earth have the same standards as the sages and virtuous people? They do because they all have the same views and intentions.

> Therefore, when we wish to accumulate merits, we must not give in to greed or be affected by the things around us. As soon as improper thoughts arise, we need to be aware of them and then purify them.
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> Honest goodness is to be respectful and comes from the thought to sincerely help all others. Crooked goodness is to act without sincerity and arises from the thought to flatter others to obtain what we want. To love others is honest, and to hate others and be jealous is crooked. These all need to be very carefully differentiated.

We need to avoid all that is evil and embrace all that is good. We begin with ourselves. First, we cannot allow ourselves to be affected by worldly phenomena. In other words, we must not be attached to the five desires and the six sense objects but let go of them, for as long as we cling to them, we will never eradicate our selfishness. These thoughts of self-benefit are the root of all negative karma. All good deeds that are done out of evil intentions will become evil. This is why Master Zhongfeng did not agree with what the scholars categorized as good because good things done with selfish intent are impure and false. Therefore, we must

become less attached to worldly desires to reduce our selfishness.

Slowly, one by one, try to reduce each desire until they no longer affect us. In this way, we will be able to detect the desire as soon as the thought arises and immediately curb it. Also, we should eradicate the deviant and impure feelings in our heart. The *Infinite Life Sutra* explains this as "cleansing our hearts and correcting our past erroneous ways" so as to attain a pure and bright mind that is filled with wisdom.

Honest goodness comes from sincerely trying to help others. It takes only one sincere thought to benefit all beings. We help others to understand the true reality, to eliminate delusion and attain awakening. As soon as they do this, they will naturally learn how to eliminate evil and practice good. The foremost merit in Buddhism is that which helps people to learn about the truth of life and the universe so they will be free to choose which of the ten Dharma realms they will be reborn into.

The Buddhas will not interfere with our choice or try to change our minds, nor do they insist that becoming a Buddha is the best goal for all beings. It is their hope that eventually we will become Buddhas, but they will not force us to do so. If we prefer to be reborn as human beings, then the Buddhas will teach us the principles to become good people. If we wish to be reborn into the three bad paths, then we can just immerse ourselves in greed, anger, and ignorance and smoothly sail into the three bad paths. Buddhas will not try to stop us. They only teach people how to eliminate delusion and attain awakening. This is honest goodness and

is the supreme benefit.

Crooked goodness arises from thoughts of flattering others so that we can obtain what we want, for example, fame and wealth. Obviously, this is wrong and any good acts performed out of such motives would be crooked and not honest. We need to be careful and respectful when interacting with others and circumstances. Acting without sincerity is a fault. To correct it, we need to recognize it.

> What are "hidden goodness" and "visible goodness"? Goodness is hidden when no one knows about it and visible when our good acts are known by others.

Ancient sages and virtuous people taught us to accumulate hidden virtues instead of visible goodness. When we do something and are praised for it, that praise was our good fortune. For example, receiving an award is good fortune.

The best way to accumulate goodness is to let our good deeds remain unknown. Just keep accumulating, while asking for nothing in return. Once people know about what we have done, then the related good fortune will begin to diminish as soon as they reward us. If we receive an immediate reward for every good deed we do, then not only is there no accumulation of goodness, we might begin to accumulate faults without realizing it and the more faults we accumulate, the worse things will be.

> Those with hidden virtues will naturally be known

> by the heavens and be rewarded. Those who practice visible goodness will be known by people and enjoy fame. Fame itself is good fortune, but heaven and earth shun fame. Those who have great fame, but lack the virtue to support it will eventually encounter overwhelming adversities. Those who have not done anything wrong but are falsely accused will have descendants who often suddenly become prosperous and successful. From this, we can see how important it is to understand hidden and visible goodness.

If we desire popularity and fame, getting them can be considered good fortune and they may be seen as our reward. But actually, they are not considered a good return because they can cause envy among people as well as among beings and spirits of heaven and earth. Worse yet is for us to take credit for virtuous conduct that we did not do, for this will inevitably be followed by adversity.

On the other hand, if we have done nothing wrong but are being wrongly accused or reviled by others, then we are actually accumulating goodness. The more jealous people slander us, the better it is. Why? Such slander and hindrances will reduce our negative karma. So, when we accumulate virtues, it is best to do so quietly with no one knowing about it. There is no need to seek praise or respect.

When all of our negative karma has been eliminated, our accumulation of goodness will become even stronger and our good fortune even greater. This will result in the sudden

prosperity of our descendants. When we carefully observe those who suddenly attain fame, we can see that their ancestors possessed many hidden virtues. Once we understand this, we will appreciate the value of such virtues.

> What are "apparent goodness" and "actual goodness"? In the Spring-Autumn Period, the country of Lu made a law that rewarded those who paid the ransom to free their fellow citizens who were servant-slaves. At that time, Confucius had a rich student named Zigong who, although he paid the ransom to free people, did not accept the reward for doing so.

This example addresses the difficulty of distinguishing between "apparent goodness" and "actual goodness" because ordinary people's standards are different from those of sages and virtuous people.

Why would someone become a servant-slave in the homes of the nobility? They had broken the law and were sent to these homes to serve their sentences. The government passed a law stating that as long as someone paid their fine, they would be freed. It then encouraged the wealthy to pay the fines in the hope that the criminals would reform.

> Upon hearing this, Confucius was very unhappy and scolded Zigong: "You acted wrongly. When sages and virtuous people do something, it is to improve morality and teach people how to

> behave. We do not do something for self-benefit or reputation. In Lu, the poor outnumber the wealthy. Since you refused the reward, others will think that accepting reward money is being greedy and if this happens, no one will pay the ransom to free our people."

Confucius was displeased because Zigong had not seen the situation from the standpoint of a virtuous person but from that of an average person. The teachings of virtuous people are for the benefit of everyone, not just for certain individuals. From an individual's standpoint, Zigong's action was praiseworthy; however, he had erred by going against local customs and disrupted the government's plan.

At that time in Lu, the poor greatly outnumbered the rich. The reward plan was designed to motivate average citizens. When Zigong refused the reward, everyone praised him. But he had set a harmful example because anyone who similarly performed a good deed would also likely refuse the reward. To accept it could result in others thinking that the deed was done solely for the reward. This refusal to accept rewards would ruin the government's system. Since the purpose was to encourage everyone to perform good deeds, Zigong should have accepted the reward, not to benefit himself, but the public. This shows how sages and virtuous people interpret things differently from average people.

> Another student of Confucius, Zilu, once saw a man drowning in the river and rescued him. Later, the man thanked him by giving him a cow. When

Confucius heard that Zilu had accepted the gift, he was happy and said: "In the future, people will be eager to help those who are drowning."

In the eyes of ordinary people, Zigong's refusal of the reward money was good, while Zilu's acceptance of the cow was not. Who would have expected Confucius to praise Zilu and scold Zigong! From this, we can see that those who practice good deeds must not only consider the current outcome but that of the future as well. Neither should we only consider our own gain and loss but think about the impact made on others.

When Zilu accepted the cow, Confucius praised him because when others realized that saving a life might result in a reward, it could become an incentive for people to be braver in helping others.

When Confucius praised Zilu instead of Zigong, his viewpoint was very different from that of ordinary people. However, he had sound reasons for doing so. Looking at sages and virtuous people, we will see that their vision is more pervasive than ours. With our limited vision, we do not realize the long-term effects that our actions may cause. We need to consider matters from the aspect of benefiting society, the country, and even the world, as well as how history will regard events. When we realize the broad scope involved, our views will be very different than before, and we will understand that Confucius was correct. Therefore, good and bad cannot always be determined by present actions.

We need to consider whether the long-term results will be positive or negative in order to judge wisely.

> What we do now may be good, but in time, may prove harmful. Thus, what seems like goodness may actually be bad. What appears to be bad may actually have positive long-term effects, turning out to have been good after all. Thus, what seems like a bad deed may actually be goodness.
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> For example, apparent responsibility may be actual irresponsibility, apparent propriety may be actual impropriety, apparent trustworthiness may be actual untrustworthiness, and apparent kindness may be actual unkindness. We need to carefully differentiate to make proper choices.

Something we view superficially may appear to be good, but actually, it is not. Or it may be good for a specific individual or for a particular time. However, it may not be good for society as a whole or for future generations. This is why in Buddhism the determination of good and bad is never based on current action. What has been good throughout history is the real goodness, for the good has benefited generations. That which is good now but is not good for future generations, or that which has destined us to be reborn into the three bad paths is not true goodness.

Before the First World War, world leaders were discussing peace in an atmosphere of apparent trustworthiness. After the war began it became clear that

some had acted with actual untrustworthiness.

High technology has allowed the development of weapons of mass destruction. The intent of keeping the peace through might is apparent responsibility. But the terrifying reality that countless people now have the means to destroy our world and every living being in it makes it clear that such development may well prove to be the ultimate actual irresponsibility and high technology may not be true goodness at all.

In the case of Zilu, accepting the reward might not have seemed to be good at the time; however, since the long-term results were good, it was good. This is a good example of apparent goodness and actual goodness. What are responsibility and propriety? What are trustworthiness and kindness? There are apparent and actual goodness in each of these. If we cannot distinguish between them, then it is likely that we have committed serious offenses while believing that we were doing good. If we wish to practice to accumulate good fortune, we must first possess wisdom. Without it, no matter how hard we try, we will not obtain good fortune.

> What are “proper goodness” and “improper goodness"? Lu Wenyi was a prime minister in the Ming dynasty. When he grew old, he retired to his hometown where he was well loved and highly respected. Once, a drunken villager went to his home and began to yell insults at him. Mr. Lu calmly told his servant, “This man is drunk, don’t argue with him.” With that, he closed the door

and ignored the onslaught of insults.

A year later, the same man committed a grave crime and was sentenced to death. Hearing this, Mr. Lu remorsefully said: "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 trying to be kind but I inadvertently encouraged his arrogance and cruelty. Now, he has been sentenced to death." This is an example of having good intentions but doing something bad.

Mr. Lu's virtuous conduct and great merits had earned him respect from virtually everyone. When a disgruntled man who had become drunk came to his home and verbally abused him, Mr. Lu did not take the incident to heart. He tolerantly told his servant to just close the door. Later, Mr. Lu heard that the drunkard had been given the death sentence. Mr. Lu remorsefully believed that he had mishandled the situation. Had he pressed charges and sent the man to jail, things might have been different.

We see many examples of "having good intentions but doing something bad." This is especially true of today's young parents who unwittingly spoil their children, so much so that when the children grow up, they may not respect their parents and may even break the law. It may be too late when the parents realize their grave mistake.

Children need to be properly taught when they are young for the child is the father of the man. If children are not

disciplined when they are young, it will be too late to do so when they have grown, for they will most likely rebel against their parents' wishes.

In ancient China, a criminal sentence could be issued under the heading of parental rights. If a parent went to the judge, complained that the child had not fulfilled his or her filial duties, and wanted the child sentenced to death, the judge would 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.

Parental rights existed through the mid 1900's. With such a law, no child dared to ignore filial duties. They could not even ask for a lawyer because no defense was allowed.

> There is also an example of those who achieved goodness although they had acted from improper intentions. Once, after a devastating famine, people were reduced to stealing food in broad daylight. A wealthy family reported this to the authorities who did nothing. As the poor grew more daring, chaos was imminent. The family, taking the law into their own hands, caught and punished the thieves. In this way, peace was restored and the thefts were stopped. If this had not been done, chaos would have erupted.

When a famine strikes, the 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. When the thieves became more daring, the authorities had no way of controlling them. So, the wealthy people took matters into their own hands and in this way, 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 benefit from understanding this.

Good intentions are proper and bad deeds are improper. In the previous example, Mr. Lu had done a bad deed although his intention was good. This is the "improper within the proper." The standard for good and bad is determined by the effect an action has on morality and society as a whole.

For instance, becoming a vigilante and punishing someone on our own is obviously not considered good. However, in this situation, the authorities had not acted and things were getting out of control. Something needed to be done to protect lives and possessions. By taking the law into their own hands, the wealthy family restored order as 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 are "half goodness" and "full goodness"? We read in the *I Ching*: "People who do not accumulate virtuous deeds will not achieve honor while people who do not accumulate bad deeds will not bring about self-destruction." And from the *Book of History* we learn that "Zhou, who was the last emperor of the Shang dynasty, committed horrible crimes." The dynasty ended with his death.

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

> It is like collecting objects in a container. With diligence, it will soon be full but if we slack off and stop collecting, then it will be only half full. This is an example of full and half goodness.

Imagine that we are trying to fill a container with goodness. If we are persistent, we will eventually succeed. But if we are not persistent, it will not become full. This illustrates the importance of accumulating goodness. And

most importantly, we must not accumulate wrongdoings or we will destroy ourselves.

> Once a woman visited a Buddhist temple and wished to make a donation. Being extremely poor, she only had two cents but she unreservedly gave these to a monk. To her surprise, the abbot himself came to help her regret for past offenses and to dedicate her merits. Later, she was chosen to enter the imperial palace, and obtained wealth and prestige. Clad in her riches, she returned to the temple to make a donation, this time bringing a small fortune.
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> To her dismay, the abbot sent another monk to help dedicate her merits. She did not understand and questioned the abbot: "In the past, I only donated two cents, yet you personally helped me regret my past offenses. Today, I have brought much money but you will not help me perform my merit dedication. Why?"
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> The abbot replied: "Although you gave only a little in the past, it came from a true and sincere heart. It was necessary for me to repay your sincerity by personally performing your dedications. Today, your donation is much greater, but the heart of giving is not as sincere. Therefore, it is enough that my student performs your dedications for you." This is an example of how thousands of

silver coins are only considered "half goodness" and two cents are "whole goodness."

This is a true account found in Buddhist records. A laywoman wished to make an offering, but she only had two cents to give. Due to her sincerity, the abbot personally helped her to dedicate the merits from this good deed. Later, she returned with a large amount of money but the abbot did not greet her personally. Being 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 behaving improperly. In the past, those with high moral standards judged people by their sincerity. If people were sincere, then no matter how little they donated, the abbot personally performed the dedications. If the donors were not sincere, then the abbot was not obligated to do so. With sincere hearts, the donors nurtured good fortune by making offerings to the Buddha and only had to donate a little to gain infinite benefits in return.

However, in this example, the woman had gained wealth and prestige, and her sincerity had been clouded by her new way of life. By sending his student to greet her, the old abbot was trying to awaken her. This was the greatest kindness. He was trying to show her where she had erred, in the hope that she would feel remorse, acknowledge her mistake, and correct her behavior.

When the woman had initially donated two cents, 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 practicing to accumulate good fortune, it is important to realize that the determining factor is not the amount of money or the number of good deeds but the heart of sincerity. As long as we do things with utmost sincerity, 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 and I wish to attain clarity of mind to uncover my original true nature. Second, I dedicate my merits to awakening and 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 hope that all beings will be able to eliminate delusion and attain enlightenment, to eradicate selfishness and suffering, to gain happiness. I hope that all will become Buddhas and that upon attaining buddhahood that they will help others to do the same. I dedicate my merits for all others, not for myself."

If this is truly our intention, then with this thought, we will achieve full merits and virtues. But, if there is the slightest thought for ourselves, for fame or wealth, then we will not gain merits and virtues, 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 Quan Zhongli, an immortal of the Han dynasty, who was teaching his student, Lu Dongbin, the art of transforming iron into

> gold. They would use it to help the poor. Dongbin asked his teacher if the gold would ever change back to iron. Zhongli said: "After five hundred years, it will return to its original form." Dongbin replied: "Then I do not want to learn this art for it will harm those who possess the gold in five hundred years."

Zhongli offered to teach Dongbin alchemy, the art of turning iron into gold. Upon learning that the transformation would not be permanent, Dongbin declined, for in the end the transformation would have hurt people. Today, most people are only concerned with what they can get now and 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.

> Zhongli 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 account 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 of Buddhism. We Buddhists must possess purity of mind before we can achieve true understanding and practice, and become a Dharma repository. Taoists do not seek the pure

mind; they seek the compassionate heart, the heart that regards all with equality and that is unselfish. Of the two, the pure mind is more difficult to cultivate.

With this single good thought, Dongbin had instantly accomplished the virtuous deeds required to practice immortality. His concern to not harm any sentient beings had actually surpassed three thousand kind deeds. Thus, one single thought was enough to fulfill the requirement. This is similar to what Liaofan did when he had reduced the taxes on the farmers, for that one kind thought alone fulfilled his vow of ten thousand kind deeds. This is the benefit from practicing from our hearts.

> When we perform a good deed, it is best not to attach to what we have done. If we practice in this way, then all of our good deeds will reach fulfillment and success. But, if we always think of the good that we have done as we look for a reward, then no matter how diligently we practice, even for an entire lifetime, the deeds will still be considered half goodness.
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> For example, when we donate money, we can practice "pure donation." We do not linger on the thought of "I" who is giving, on the importance of the object that is given, or on the one who has received. We simply give out of true sincerity and respect. When we practice pure donation, one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune and the merits from giving one cent can wipe away the

transgressions of a thousand eons.

> But, if we always think of the good that we have done and expect rewards for our actions, then even a donation of one million dollars would not bring us the reward of a fully good fortune. This is another way of explaining whole goodness and half goodness.

If we try our very best, then we will achieve full goodness, but if we have any reservations and do not do all that we can, we will achieve only half goodness. Therefore, when accumulating virtuous deeds we need to do everything with complete sincerity.

Many people do not understand the true reality, so consequently they have doubts about Buddhism. This doubt is one of the five poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt. These people seem to believe and act according to what we have told them. However, they are unable to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to practicing good deeds. In donating, they still want to reserve something, to hold something back. They do not have the understanding, wisdom, or determination to practice full goodness. They can only achieve half goodness. This is why although many people are doing good deeds, they do not obtain good fortune in return or see any immediate results.

If we truly want to practice for good fortune then we must fully understand and believe in Buddhism without the slightest doubt. Sometimes, people will say that we are foolish and deluded, and when we think about it, we may

believe that to be so. 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 views. When we truly believe and act accordingly, then the results will become easily recognizable.

The results will be so much more than what was described in *Liaofan'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 can gain a return of a thousand fold for a fraction of our effort. However, if we act with the hope of gaining a lavish return for our efforts then we do not act with the heart of sincerity. We can give everything that we have but we will only gain half of the good fortune, not the whole. Also, by thinking of our good acts, we will be unable to eliminate all of our longings, 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 causality is a reality and as natural as the laws of heaven and earth. If we perform goodness 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 uncover everything that is already in our true nature. Is this not being free and having great contentment?

We will still gain something if we perform good deeds as we seek, but it will be incomplete. All the prestige, wealth, health, and long life that we have gained through practicing

goodness will eventually be gone because it is limited. When we no longer have desires, our heart 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 will be incredible. And the most wonderful of all is that we will be able to go to the Pure Land, the Flower Adornment world![58]

Only a virtuous nature is similar to the 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, for no ordinary person would be willing to do so. This is why we only find bodhisattvas and Buddhas practicing true great merits; even arhats do not practice them. Arhats are inclined to avoid trouble. And if we wanted to help someone and they rejected, slandered, or embarrassed us, we would become angry and abandon the attempt! The goodness would be incomplete.

However, bodhisattvas are very different. They know all about the bad habits, problems, and rebellious ways of people. Not minding these obstacles, bodhisattvas use their patience and compassion to help all beings. Therefore, the heart of a bodhisattva is different from that of an arhat or a pratyekabuddha. The latter two still use the illusory heart while a bodhisattva uses the true heart. We seek wealth and prestige not realizing that these do not have to be sought as they are already within our true nature. People who practice Buddhism are trying to uncover their true nature and the abilities within.

Therefore, one of our goals as a Buddhist is to return to

reality, to uncover the intrinsic true nature that already contains everything including infinite and inexhaustible wisdom and abilities. There is no need to seek outside, only within. Everyone has this true nature; we do not yet realize it and until we do, we can rely upon the Buddha to teach us how to develop it. This is why his benevolence towards us is so magnificent!

We need to understand the true reality that as long as we are sincere in every good deed, then unreservedly giving one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune because it fulfills the integrity of the true nature. And the good fortune from unreservedly offering one cent to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha can suppress the transgressions of thousands of eons.

We read in the *Surangama Sutra* that: "During the Dharma-Ending Age, the number of deviated teachers will be as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges River." They may appear to be teaching Buddhism, but their behavior is that of demons. Then where should we go when we want to plant the seeds of good fortune and to practice virtuous deeds? What if people with deviated views run the temple we visit? Might we not only fail to plant the seeds for good fortune but commit bad deeds instead?

Buddhism is a teaching of practicing within. If our genuine intention is to go and pay our respects to the Buddha, then the Buddha will be Amitabha Buddha or Sakyamuni Buddha, according to what our heart is giving rise to. If our hearts are genuine and truthful, then even if we go to a temple run by bad spirits, the Buddha will be true. But if

our hearts are improper to begin with, then even if we are practicing at a proper temple, we will still be according with deviated people.

This is not to say that there are no good places to practice Buddhism during the Dharma-Ending Age but that the real place is within our hearts. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* tells us: "A sincere heart is a cultivation place, a pure heart is a cultivation place, and a compassionate heart is a cultivation place." A proper cultivation 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 place for cultivation. As long as our heart is proper, then no matter where we go, there will always be proper teachings. Thus, the environment around us changes according to our mind. If we can understand this and be diligent in our practice, then society and countries will be enveloped in good fortune. If we do not eradicate our wandering thoughts and our attachments to our good deeds, then even if we give away a million dollars, our merits will not be full.

> What are "big goodness" and "small goodness"? Once, an important official, Wei Zhongda was led into the underworld for judgment. When the records that the judge had ordered to be brought out arrived, Zhongda was astounded at the courtyard filled with his bad records and the single scroll of his good deeds. The official then ordered them to be weighed. Surprisingly, the bad records, which had filled the courtyard, were lighter than

> the single scroll of good deeds that was as thin as a chopstick!
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> Zhongda asked the judge: "I am barely forty years old, how could I have committed so many offenses?"
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> 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 to be counted as a wrong."

Good fortune and kindness come in both big and small sizes. All of us have committed both good and bad acts during our lifetimes. All of these are recorded and kept with the king of the underworld and the ruler of the spirit world. This is why Liaofan taught us to have respect and fear within our hearts.

When the records of Zhongda were placed upon a scale to see which was heavier, the one thin scroll of good deeds outweighed the scrolls of wrongdoings! Zhongda had probably committed many minor faults but no serious offenses. Therefore, one great kind deed can offset countless minor faults. When he saw the results, the judge was quite pleased, for Zhongda was a good person after all.

When Zhongda questioned how he had been able to commit so many faults, the judge explained to him that an improper thought was still recorded as a fault even if the corresponding action was not taken. Thus, even if we do not actually commit any major transgressions, we may have

thought about them. Luckily, Zhongda had one great good deed that outweighed all his lesser faults.

Zhongda then asked the judge what was recorded on the single scroll.

The judge replied: "Once the emperor planned to build a great stone bridge. You opposed the project due to the hardships it would cause the tens of thousands of people needed for the work. This is a copy of your objection."

Zhongda said: "I did make the proposal, but the emperor dismissed it and proceeded with the project. What I said had no effect on the matter. How can it bear so much weight against all my offenses?"

The judge replied: "Although the emperor rejected your suggestion, your one thought of kindness for all those people was very great. If the emperor had accepted your idea, 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 scroll contained a description of the major good deed that Zhongda had performed. He had foreseen that the project would waste money and cause hardships. From this, we can see that what matters most is our original intention.

Zhongda's concern was not for himself, but for the citizens who would suffer from such a major construction project, for even if they did not have to contribute in labor, they would have had to pay heavy taxes to offset the building costs. If the idea had been abandoned, everyone would have benefited.

From this, we can see the magnitude of goodness behind this single thought. Although the emperor did not listen to Zhongda's suggestion, this did not alter the fact that it was sincerely made from the true heart and was an example of full and complete goodness. Of course, had the emperor accepted the proposal, the significance of the act would have been even greater.

The difference between big and small goodness lies in our intentions, by whether we are thinking of all the beings in the world or whether we are just thinking of ourself and our family. We need to understand this when we dedicate the merits after we recite sutras or chant a Buddha's name. Usually we dedicate the merits to a particular person, wishing that the Buddha would help him or her to gain various benefits. This is small goodness and the benefits gained will be small as well.

In fact, we are not even sure if the person being dedicated to will actually gain any benefit. Therefore, in cases like this, when a family member is in a crisis, we should recite sutras

and chant a Buddha's name, and then dedicate the merits to all beings throughout the universe. We should wish that all living beings will no longer suffer, but be happy and healthy. When we are sincere in this thought, our family members will gain as well. Why? Because our heart is truly pervasive![59]

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 flame to light those of others, so that the whole world is bathed in brightness. This results in great benefit for all with no loss to ourselves. 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 true buddha-nature.

> What are "difficult goodness" and "easy goodness"? Scholars of the past said that one who wishes to conquer greed and desire should begin with what is most difficult to overcome. When Confucius talked about our cultivation of humanity, he also said to begin 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 bad habits and desires, and that we need to begin with whatever is the most serious. If we can overcome our most serious faults, then we will overcome other matters that are trivial in comparison. When we want to eliminate the bad and practice the good, we must know where to begin. This is another reason why when Confucius was teaching the cultivation of humanity, he believed that we should begin with what is most difficult to practice. The following are a few examples.

> For example, an elderly teacher, Mr. Shu of Jiangxi, gave two years earnings to a poor man who owed money to the government. If the man had been sent to prison, the family would have been torn apart.

This is a very good example, for Mr. Shu did something that was difficult to do and gave up something that was difficult to give up.[60]

> Another example is Mr. Zhang from Handan. He gave what had taken him ten years to save to a poor man who owed money to the government. This saved him from going to jail and enabled him to remain with his wife.
>
> Such examples as Mr. Shu and Mr. Zhang are rare, for they gave what is most difficult to give. What others would not sacrifice, they did so willingly.

People depend on money and material objects to survive. Therefore, to give away money is extremely difficult especially when it is all that we have. This is to "begin with what is most difficult to overcome . . . most difficult to practice." Practicing in this way will help us to curb our desires.

> Another example is Mr. Jin from Jiangsu province who was old and without any sons. His neighbors offered him their young daughter in marriage so he might have descendants to continue his family.[61] Mr. Jin refused the offer and sent her home. This is another example of being able to overcome what is most difficult to conquer in oneself.

Mr. Jin recognized the great age difference, and although he deeply wanted a son, he felt that he could not ruin the girl's future and happiness to serve his own purpose. This is another good example of restraining one's desires especially when it is most difficult to do so.

> Therefore, the heavens showered down especially good fortune on 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 goodness when the opportunity presents itself, then it would truly be a shame. For those who are without wealth or status, doing good things for others is

very difficult. However, if one can help others in the face of difficulties it will be even more valuable.

We should grasp every opportunity to practice goodness and accumulate merits. Once the opportunity is lost, we may not get another chance when we want to do that which is good. Wealth does not last forever. Our luck changes every five years, and in our lifetimes 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. But, if the worst five years occur during our old age, then the hardships will be even more difficult because we will already be at a physical disadvantage.

Thus, we should practice goodness at an early age, to let everyone share in our good fortune because once we share it, we will still gain in the future whatever we are destined to have. When young and strong, we would do well to not selfishly exhaust all of our good fortune on ourselves so that it will remain 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 old age. This is why we must learn to cultivate and accumulate good fortune for our old age.

It is most important that as Buddhists, we know exactly why we are practicing—to accumulate the ultimate good fortune for our last moments of life. What is ultimate good fortune? It is to know that when our time is up, we can leave this world without illness, in a sitting or a standing position, and that we know exactly where we will be going. This is the

greatest good fortune, but most people are unaware of this. Practitioners should constantly remind themselves to share their good fortune with others. That way the good fortune will be even greater.

When we have prestige, it is easier to help others more and to accumulate merits. But we must not use this prestige against others. If we have the means to practice goodness but do not, we are throwing away a wonderful opportunity. On the other hand, when we are poor and do not have the means but still try to help others, the difficulty of the task makes the act even more valuable.

Practicing the Ten Good Deeds When Conditions Arise

There are many ways to help others whenever the opportunity presents itself. These can be simplified into the following ten important categories.

1) To support the practice of kindness.
2) To revere love and respect.
3) To help others succeed in practicing goodness.
4) To persuade others to practice kindness.
5) To help those in desperate need.
6) To develop public projects for the greater benefit of people.
7) To practice merits by giving wealth.
8) To protect and maintain proper teachings.

9) To respect elders.
10) To love and cherish all living things.

We need to be pleased about other's virtuous deeds and not be jealous or hinder them in any way. Instead, we should do everything possible to help them when the right opportunity arises. Because there are so many kinds of virtuous conduct that can be accomplished, they have been summarized into ten categories.

> What does "to support the practice of kindness" mean? Emperor Shun lived during the Yao Period. One day, before he became emperor, Shun was watching some fishermen on Lake Leize. He noticed that all the younger and stronger fishermen took the spots where the water was deep and the fish were abundant, while those who were older and weaker were left with the rapids and shallow water, where there were very few fish.
>
> When Shun saw this, he sympathized with the older fishermen. He joined in the fishing and whenever he saw younger fishermen grab the good spots, he said nothing. But whenever some yielded to others, he praised them everywhere he went and emulated their humble and polite manner. He did this for one year until the fishermen got into the habit of yielding the good spots to others.

Feeling saddened by the situation, the patient Shun thought of a way to remedy it by "concealing faults and praising kindness."

Today, good deeds are often ignored as people emphasize improper conduct. As soon as someone acts differently or breaks the law, the media publicizes it. When this happens, there is bound to be more bad than good people, for when goodness is ignored, there is little incentive to practice it. In fact, it gives even more encouragement to practice wrongdoings.

We should follow the examples set by ancient sages and virtuous people. They did not speak of the faults of others but waited for those people to reflect until they had awakened. This is the proper way to teach people. Everyone has a conscience although it can be overwhelmed by the desires for wealth and power. As long as we use a skillful way to help others see the truth, they will eventually come around. This was what Emperor Shun did with the fishermen. In the following passage, we can see why sages and virtuous people acted as they did.

> A wise and capable man such as Shun could have easily influenced others with a few words. Why did he not simply say something instead of trying to change others by setting a good example? Shun's painstaking and good intentions were like the expert artisanship that results from long practice and hard work.

Shun did not want to use words to influence others, but

wisely preferred to set an example instead. Although it took a longer time, the effects were much more lasting because actions speak louder than words.

> In today's era of low morality, social breakdown, and loss of proper thinking, it is extremely difficult to find a good standard of behavior. Therefore, when those around us have shortcomings, we do not use our strengths to point out their deficiencies. When others are unkind, we do not use our kindness to compare ourselves to them. When others are less capable, we do not purposely surpass them. Even when we are intelligent and competent, these are to be kept hidden. Instead of boasting, we need to behave even more modestly. When someone makes a mistake, we tolerate and do not reveal it. This provides the opportunity to reform without the loss of self-respect.

Having advantages that others lack does not mean that we can gloat. We must be all the more careful to conceal our abilities and to accommodate the faults of others. To remember this and not flaunt our skills and intelligence is true broad-mindedness and tolerance. If we need to show off every time we can do something, then we will accomplish little. If we are capable of great achievements, we need not be as superficial as many people are. By being tolerant and not speaking of the faults of others, but instead praise the goodness of others, we will truly uphold the precepts and

cultivate good fortune.

> When we allow others to keep their dignity, they will be even more careful of future actions. When we see strengths or small kindnesses in others, we can learn from them and praise them to others.

If we can set an example with our behavior to the extent that others learn moderation, then we have done very well. When we see the slightest goodness displayed by others, we should be happy about it, and praise the person more for it.

When I first met my late teacher, Mr. Li Bingnan, he taught me not to talk about the faults of others and better still, to hide them. I understood because I realized that discussing the faults of others was not good. However, he also told me not to praise others and that confused me.

Later, he explained: "When you praise others, the harm you cause can be even greater than when you scold them for their faults." How could that be? He continued: "It takes great wisdom to know how to praise others. Thoughtless praise can cause great harm. If we excessively praise people when they display even a little ability, they may become proud and think that they are incredible. This will prevent them from further progress. And to not progress is to regress. Now, haven't you done more harm than good?" After thinking about this, I understood.

So, what sort of a person should we praise? In Buddhism, we praise those who can remain unaffected by the eight emotions of gain or loss, fame or disgrace, praise or blame, pleasure or pain. We can praise these people because they

will not be affected. In fact, the more we praise such people, the more modest they become and the more they will try to improve. We can give special praise to these people.

Therefore, we should be very careful with our praise, not inadvertently allowing our good intentions to create bad deeds. Now we can see how much care Emperor Shun used in taking an entire year trying to help the young fishermen correct their faults and bad habits.

> In daily life, we can refrain from speaking and acting with selfish intentions, but instead, seek to benefit society. We can help set standards for others to follow. These are the qualities of a great person; someone who thinks of public welfare as more important than his or her own.

We need to set good examples for others to follow. What are the qualities of a great person that Liaofan wrote of? A great person disregards his or her own welfare and thinks only of benefiting others. The selfish person only thinks of benefiting himself or herself. In the *Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings*, "great beings" refers to the bodhisattvas and the eight kinds of realizations. The sutra tells of their conduct and practice.

> What does "to revere love and respect for others" mean? Sometimes it is hard to tell on appearance whether someone is an honorable person or a fraud, since frauds pretend to be honorable. The difference is as obvious as black and white. As

> Mencius said, the difference between honorable people and ordinary people lies in their intentions.

Confucianism talks about honorable persons, sages, and virtuous people. Buddhism teaches of numerous Buddhas and bodhisattvas. What differentiates all of them from ordinary people are their respective intentions. It is extremely difficult to distinguish just by appearance and this is why we have often misunderstood virtuous people.

For example, in the past, there were three monks from Tiantai Mountain in Zhejiang province, named Hanshan, Shide, and Fenggan. It was recorded in the *Diary of Tiantai Mountain* that at the time, everyone viewed the three monks as suffering from mental disorders because of their unusual behavior. Nobody associated with them. This shows how appearances can be so deceiving.

Fenggan's job was to pound the rice in order to remove the husks. This was also what Master Huineng did while he was in Huangmei. Fenggan, who was actually the transformation body of Amitabha Buddha, husked the rice to feed everyone. Hanshan and Shide were the transformation bodies of Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, respectively. They also worked in the kitchen, lighting fires for the stoves and performing other miscellaneous chores. They went shoeless, dressed in rags, and acted absurdly. Everyone felt that they were worthless. It is true that judging by appearances alone, it is difficult for ordinary people to determine who is truly

virtuous. Fenggan was the one who revealed that they were actually transformations of the three great virtuous people.

At that time, there was a local government official, Magistrate Lu, whose mother fell ill while they were traveling to where he was to report to his office. Mr. Lu became very anxious after several doctors failed to help his mother.

When Fenggan was passing through the neighborhood, he sought out Mr. Lu and said, "Someone in your household is ill. I can cure that person." Naturally, the magistrate felt immense gratitude toward Fenggan afterward. Since Fenggan was a monk, he inquired as to which temple he was from.

Fenggan replied, "I live on Tiantai Mountain."

Mr. Lu asked, "Are there any sages or virtuous people residing in your temple?"

Fenggan answered, "Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva live there."

Mr. Lu then asked, "How will I be able to recognize and learn from them?" Fenggan said that one was named Hanshan and the other Shide.

A few days after Magistrate Lu assumed his new appointment, he went to Tiantai Mountain to pay his respects to the two great bodhisattvas. Upon arrival, he found them working in the kitchen and acting strangely. He immediately knelt on the ground and paid his respects to them. The two monks seemed to ignore him, then quickly turned on their heels, and ran. Magistrate Lu ordered his attendants to run after them and see where they went.

The two monks ran to the base of a mountain and the mountain opened up! The monks entered and the mountain

closed up again. But, before they vanished inside the mountain, they were heard saying, "Amitabha Buddha talks too much." Magistrate Lu then realized that Fenggan was actually Amitabha Buddha! The two bodhisattvas were complaining that Amitabha Buddha should not have meddled and revealed their identities. So, these three persons were actually great sages.

At that time, the temple held an important ceremony twice a month to recite the precepts. Hanshan and Shide often stood outside the temple, made fun of the other monks, and were therefore disliked by all. When the other monks realized that Hanshan and Shide were actually the transformation bodies of bodhisattvas, they felt ashamed that every day these three great sages had served them their food. This shows how the intentions of bodhisattvas differ from those of ordinary people.

> The heart of a genuinely honorable person is filled with loving-kindness and respect for others. There are thousands of different types of people in this world, some close to us while others are strangers. Some have prestige while others have none. Some are smart while others are not, and some are virtuous while others are corrupt. Nevertheless, we are all humans and are thus, all one entity. We should neither hate nor disrespect anyone.

The first of the ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is to equally respect all Buddhas and things. From the aspect of principle, despite the apparent

differences among people, all people are one to those who understand. From the aspect of phenomenon or appearance, we know that differences exist. But regardless of this, we are all part of humanity, all part of one another. Realizing this, we will view others as we view ourselves.

The Buddha said: "Throughout all time and space, there is only the one self." Thus, the kindness and compassion of the Buddha is "unconditional affinity in great kindness and the embodiment of all in great compassion." This is wisdom and we need to understand, respect, and pass it on. We are to have loving-kindness and respect for all beings, sentient and non-sentient.

> When our hearts are filled with loving-kindness and respect for others, it is the same as if our hearts were filled with loving-kindness and respect for the sages and virtuous people. When we understand and agree with others, it is the same as if we understand and agree with the sages and virtuous people.

In ancient times, well-educated people knew how to respect the sages and virtuous people. Today, our technological society is immersed in greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. When we show respect, our thoughts and intentions are different from those of people in the past. Their respect was sincere, and the sages and virtuous people were role models for society. Upon seeing a sage, others would immediately emulate the sage to correct their own behavior. Today, people often go through the formalities of

paying respect to the bodhisattvas, heavenly beings, and spirits, in the hope of gaining something in return. All too often, this is the sole intention.

Liaofan said that understanding and agreeing with others is the same as understanding and agreeing with the sages and virtuous people. Their main objective is to create goodness and happiness for all people. Who would not prefer to live in a peaceful and prosperous society? Most people wish for the five good fortunes of wealth and prestige, longevity, merits and virtues, happiness and no adversities, and a good death.

But what most people wish for are just the good results. What they do not know or have forgotten is that good results come only after we have accomplished good causes. If we do not practice good causes and perform goodness, then it is illogical to expect good results. The sages and virtuous people want everybody to attain good fortune. These virtuous people possess great wisdom whereas we ordinary people are confused and ignorant. So, the virtuous people teach everyone how to practice good deeds and accumulate merits in order for everyone to receive good fortune.

Practicing goodness and accumulating merits begins from our learning to have loving-kindness and respect for all beings and circumstances. This loving-kindness and respect must be genuine. This is why the first of the ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is to equally respect all Buddhas and things.

Why? Because all the virtuous people and sages

> want people to obtain what they wish for. If we can have loving-kindness and respect for people, and help them to achieve in their endeavors, we are acting as a sage or a virtuous person.

The sole intention of sages, virtuous people, and bodhisattvas is to teach all beings how to properly obtain what they want. For those who are outstanding, intelligent, and so-inclined, the virtuous people will try to teach them to be a Buddha or a bodhisattva. For those who are not so-inclined, the virtuous people will try to help them achieve what they wish for. Therefore, we too would do well to have loving-kindness and respect for all beings.

> What does "helping others to do good" mean? If we tossed aside a piece of raw jade, it would remain a worthless stone. But if we carved and polished it, it would be transformed into a valuable object.

We need to help others achieve in their endeavors. Helping others is a virtue of the true nature and enhances our merits. Jade is used as an example for it is considered one of the most delicate and beautiful of all stones, and when carved and polished, it can become extremely valuable.[62]

> So, when we see people whom we feel have the potential to practice goodness or to work towards a proper goal, we can guide, support, praise, and encourage them, thus helping them to succeed.

This is about nurturing talented people. When we see others whose hearts are kind, whose natures are loyal and generous, and whose goals are virtuous, we should help them in every possible way. We need to encourage them to follow the right path and support them until they achieve their objectives.

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* is a very good example of this. We see Sudhana, who as a student had fifty-three good spiritual teachers. Although he was young, he is to be considered as our elder, a senior in high standing. His virtues, merits, and knowledge are truly deserving of respect. We can learn much from him. As Sudhana met each of the spiritual teachers, he bowed and paid his respects. Each advisor would then ask him, "Where did you come from, why did you come here, and what is it that you seek?" All fifty-three teachers asked Sudhana the same question and all received the same answer. Therefore, this question and answer is memorable.

The first part of the answer is, "I have vowed to attain supreme enlightenment and I wish to achieve unsurpassed bodhi, but I do not know how to practice or what intent to have. Thus, I have come to ask for your guidance." Setting a goal is what we mean by making a vow. If the goal is worthy and the student is diligent, then we must do our best to help him or her. Therefore, as long as we have a proper goal, then no matter whether the teachings are of this world or beyond, we will have a bright future and great accomplishments. If we see others who have this potential, we can encourage and assist them in their endeavors. If they suffer hardships, we should alleviate their difficulties so that they can concentrate

on accomplishing their learning.

> If others wrongly accuse them, we can try to clear their name and share their burden of slander. Only when we have helped them back on their feet to become a functioning part of society, will we have fulfilled our responsibility in helping others to do good.

During the practice to become a sage, regardless of whether in this world or beyond, people are bound to encounter jealousy and slander. This can confuse and even discourage them from pursuing their studies. This would be a tragic loss and to keep it from happening we need to share in their problems and worries. When others slander them, we need to help them to clear their name, to do all we can to help. If we can achieve this, we will have accomplished great knowledge, wisdom, virtues, and merits, for these people will contribute to society partly because we have helped them to reach their goal. However many virtues and merits they may accumulate, the person who helped them to achieve will receive an equal amount.[63]

Why would others want to cause trouble for us if we are good? Good things do not come easily. There are many obstacles for those trying to be virtuous. If someone wants to commit evil deeds, then Mara[64] will be very happy because he loves evil. Not only will Mara not get in the way of the person, he will also do all he can to help [the person commit evil]. On the other hand, if we want to perform virtuous deeds, then that would be going against Mara's wishes so he

will do everything he can to deter us.

Mara is one factor that causes trouble; another is our karmic creditors from past lifetimes. When they see that we are practicing well and might transcend samsara, they will want to stop us. This is because we have not repaid what we owe them from the past. This debt may be money or a life. These creditors will not stand idly by and watch us succeed in our practice but will create obstacles to deter us. Thus, the path to awakening is filled with obstacles.

Through innumerable eons, we have created infinite karmic obstacles. How are we to rid ourselves of them? We should dedicate our daily practice to our karmic creditors, to share our merits with them. By passing merits on to them, we will achieve full virtue. What do we want? Nothing. If we do not commit to this vow, it will be difficult for us to achieve awakening without encountering karmic obstacles.

> Most people dislike those who are different from them.

Most of us prefer those who are like us. For instance, those who practice Buddhism feel closer to Buddhist practitioners than to others. This is especially noticeable within a family. If our parents and siblings are not practitioners and we are the only vegetarians, then there will be conflicts. Since, this is actually our own fault, we need to determine what we are doing wrong.

Why would other family members disapprove of us practicing Buddhism? Sometimes, when fellow Buddhists visit us, we may seem closer to them than to our families.

We might appear happier with them than with our own mothers who upon seeing this could understandably become unhappy. Therefore, we should love and care for our families in the same way that we do other practitioners. Then our families will not oppose our practicing Buddhism. There are many cases where family conflicts have arisen when only one member practiced. Often, that one member did not consider his or her behavior and did not see what was the cause of the discontent. Only when we are objective, can we see the problem.

When other practitioners come to visit us, we should show even more respect to our parents so that our families will feel better. In this way, family members will no longer object to our practice. They might even come to like it and encourage friends and relatives to follow suit. Therefore, when interacting with family members, we should not use verbal education, but learn from Emperor Shun and use behavioral education to set good examples. Then, as they see the good results from practicing Buddhism, they will automatically help us to advocate it.

> There are always more bad people around than good people, so those who are good often have difficulty standing on their own.

Immoral people are in the majority and have more power than those who are honest. Because of this, decent people often have problems standing on their own. It becomes more difficult for them to be good because others will use their power to create obstacles.

Ever since the Buddha, the above situation has occurred for each succeeding generation of Buddhists. An example is Master Huineng. After he had attained enlightenment, he went into hiding with a group of hunters for fifteen years. Why? Because of the jealousy and obstacles he encountered.

Ethical people often lack the opportunities to learn and are impeded by those who are immoral. This is why sometimes ethical people who are trying to stand on their own may not get the opportunity to practice goodness as much as they wish to. While they may be able to keep themselves unpolluted and pure, they lack the strength to help others. If we want them to be able to create goodness for the entire world then those of us who possess wisdom, good fortune, and virtues must do our best to help them.

> Good people have abilities and virtues that enable them to become famous. They usually pay little attention to their appearance. They can easily be wrongly accused, so striving to do good turns out to be a challenge. When this happens, it is entirely up to virtuous people and elders to protect and help those who are moral to stand on their own. They can do this by providing what the people need to practice goodness. The merits of the virtuous people and elders who do this will be great.

Those who have unusually good abilities and virtues usually achieve fame. Locally, they are well known. Their lives are easy and they pay little heed to details, and this

unfortunately often offends others. When we practice Buddhism, we must be extremely respectful to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. However, we need not be overly concerned with inconsequential matters, for to do so will interfere with our practice. We should feel and show respect; but if we see others who are disrespectful, we should not mind them. In our practice, we need to believe that "the pure heart will give rise to the pure land." Night and day, always remember to chant "Amituofo." Everything else is immaterial.

Neither should we attach to formalities in our practice. For example, those who are older and less agile do not need to kneel when reciting a sutra. To seek a bond between Amitabha Buddha and ourself is of the utmost importance. We can continue our practice even when lying down. The weak or aged can use the most comfortable position while chanting "Amituofo" or reciting the sutra, be it kneeling, sitting, or walking. If weak, we can lie down and listen to the sutra on a tape. Lying in bed listening to the sutra or chanting "Amituofo" can achieve the same merits as when we are sitting or walking. But, it is not good to chant aloud while lying down because it is harmful to our health.

Mahayana Buddhism is flexible and without many restrictions. So, what are all the rituals and rules for? They are used as behavioral education to help others feel respect and to motivate their wish to practice Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism, on the other hand, emphasizes self-discipline.

Exceptionally talented people are not bothered by minor details, and consequently can easily offend others and cause

gossip. Therefore, striving to do good turns out to be a challenge because good people often suffer from accusations and slander. When this happens, those who are trying to be good must depend on virtuous people or elders with wisdom and virtue to help them overcome their difficulties so that they can contribute to society. Virtuous people and elders will achieve the greatest merits because they are not helping just an individual, but all of society, so that everyone may enjoy the same good fortune. This is truly a great merit.

If we are able to encourage, nurture, and help a Dharma master so that he or she can teach Buddhism to others, the merits would be incomparable. However, many people do not know this. They believe that if they donate money to restore a temple, the merits would be greater. Actually, such merits are limited. In fact, sometimes we may have even committed a bad deed in spite of our good intentions. Therefore, only in nurturing talented people do we truly achieve great merit. Only with these masters can we guarantee the propagation of the teachings so that Buddhism will remain in our world.

It is extremely difficult to encourage and help talented teachers of Buddhism. They must seek self-enlightenment as well as help others to achieve enlightenment. Their minds must be pure, non-discriminatory, and void of selfish thoughts. These are the necessary qualities for someone to teach Buddhism. If we encounter such a true Buddhist successor, we should do our utmost to help him or her. Once this person is accomplished and able to contribute greatly to Buddhism, the merits we have achieved in helping

will be equal to his or her own.

Why are there so few Buddhist teachers? The opportunity to teach others may not have yet presented itself. Or the individuals may not be sincerely dedicated to propagating the teachings to help all beings. Their vows lack conviction and their characters are flawed. And often laypeople like to flatter and listen to older masters, and do not go to listen to newer ones. This can cause the newer masters to become discouraged so that they might turn to conducting ceremonies. This happens because the laypeople did not fulfill their responsibilities in providing proper opportunities. Therefore, when newer masters vow to lecture on the sutras, we should go and listen if what they teach is accurate.

However, if their teachings are inaccurate, we should not listen. When they see this, they can reflect and correct their faults. Once they have done so, we can then listen and encourage them to propagate the teachings. This is the proper way to praise newer masters and encourage them in their vows to pursue enlightenment. We need to provide a suitable learning environment for them. The value of this merit is boundless because it can extend the life of Buddhism.

> What does "persuading others to practice kindness" mean? As humans, we all want to be good and to have a conscience, but chasing after wealth and fame has kept us so busy that we have stopped listening to our consciences. This is the

> result of having to survive in a world filled with hardships.
>
> 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 everyone would prefer to be good. Even the worst person will usually say that he or she would like to practice goodness. From this, we can conclude that a good heart and behavior is the true nature of humanity. Buddhism teaches us that this is a virtue of our true nature. If this is the case, why do people resort to immoral conduct? Two reasons. First, people commit bad deeds because of their afflictions and bad habits. Second, they do so because of bad conditions. While they are committing bad deeds, most are bothered by their conscience, unfortunately, they do not have any good friends to help them to reform, and so they become more deluded and confused.

As Liaofan said, although we want to practice goodness, the necessity of surviving in a 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. Thus, the environment that we live in strongly influences our behavior. This could become disastrous in our immoral society.

For example, many people like to gamble. Their obsession will harm themselves, their families, and society. This dangerous trend is slowly affecting the entire world. Due to the media's influence, such negative influences keep spreading until they reach the farthest corners of the world causing much damage. Thus, when we see our friends or relatives in trouble, we should do our best to help them see reason and to lead them away from bad influences. We can encourage them to begin by reading *Liaofan's Four Lessons* because the principles in this book are all true.

Sometimes, we may find it quite easy to make money in the stock market. But, the wealth we gained from trading stocks was destined to be ours. If our destiny does not include wealth, then the money will soon be gone. In terms of handling money, if we carry it 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 between our money vs. others' money deposited in a bank? When we think about it, we will realize that wealth only increases our greed, anger, and arrogance.

All that we need is enough food, adequate clothing, and a safe place to live. Would it not be better if we were to use our good fortune a little at a time rather than exhaust it all at once? If our family members or friends try to obtain wealth through improper means, we need to use reason to help them realize that such methods are improper and that we

should not engage in speculation or adopt improper ways to obtain wealth. This is the proper path for it can last a long time.

We must help others with what is most beneficial to them. In helping others to learn and to attain awakening, Buddhism is accommodating and skillful so others are happy to listen and open to accepting what we say. In this way, we will be able to help others understand how they can reform and be led away from confusion. When they suddenly become vigilant, it will be similar to awakening in Buddhism. This is like eliminating the roots of all afflictions. All that remains is a sense of serenity and freedom. This is wisdom.

> A scholar named Hanyu 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." Depending on what is appropriate in the circumstances, we can use either speaking or writing.

This illustrates the flexible and expedient method of teaching. When we explain the principles and advise others in order to help them to awaken, we do it by word of mouth but this only benefits them in this lifetime. If we wish to guide many others as well as future generations, then the best way would be through writing. By recording our good words and deeds, we can pass these down for future generations. This will ensure the preservation of these good words.

An example of this is *Liaofan's Four Lessons*. Liaofan's objective in writing the book was to alert his son to the dangers of committing bad deeds. Liaofan had not intended these four lessons to be widely read for many generations and so he has unintentionally performed a great deed of goodness. Many people who followed his teachings have succeeded in changing their destiny from that of suffering to happiness, thus, benefiting greatly from Liaofan's written words. This thin volume is a prime example of teaching people to be good. He used his own life as an example for his descendants, hoping that they would understand and learn to practice goodness. This is the most effective, profound, and all-encompassing goodness.

We may think that we are unqualified to write but this is not so—we are all qualified. If we can just record one or two occurrences that we hear or see each day, the outcome would be like the lessons in this book. We can see that persuading people by speech and persuading generations by writing are not difficult as long as our hearts are sincere and our determination is unshakable.

> To encourage virtue, we can persuade others through speech or writing. Compared with teaching others through behavior, speech and writing are more direct and clear. Sometimes, we do not have time to teach others through behavior. Then verbal or written education will be more effective. Furthermore, 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.

We should interact with those whom we are trying to help and use our actions as examples to inspire others, similar to what Emperor Shun did with the fishermen.

In Buddhism, the four all-embracing methods are used to guide and influence all sentient beings. The first method is giving unsparingly to establish a good affinity and amicability with others. Once we have honestly earned the confidence of others, then what we say or do will create a positive effect on them and they will be more open to what we say and do.

The second method is to use kind words. This does not mean we use flattery or persuasive words to sway others. Kind words means to act with flexibility with others and to make them feel comfortable. As explained by Master Zhongfeng earlier in this lesson, when our motivation comes from loving-kindness for others, then even if we scold or punish 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 because it is overdone, then our words will have a negative effect. Therefore, when we speak to others of their faults, we should make sure that no one else is present so that they will not feel embarrassed or be antagonized. This is an example of being flexible and helping the person feel comfortable.

The third method is beneficial action. This means that

our words and actions must truly be to help others. The fourth and last method is comradeship and cooperation, which means that we participate in proper activities with others and guide them by being good examples.

When the Buddhas guide sentient beings, they primarily follow these four methods. When we encourage others to be good, we are using verbal education. When we join others to teach them kindness, we are using behavioral education.

> 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 but we tried to] we need to think and find the wisdom not to repeat the mistake.

When we are able to advise someone but do not, we have lost an opportunity to teach. If a person has the potential to practice goodness but we do not lead him or her to the right path, then we have lost that person. On the other hand, if someone is inflexible and will not listen to us but we persist in trying to convince him or her, 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. As Master Huineng said 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 does "helping those in desperate need" mean? People often suffer from serious difficulties. If we meet someone like this, then we immediately help that person as if we were the one who was suffering. If a person has been wrongly accused or convicted, then we should plead on their behalf as well as help in any way we can. The scholar Mr. Cui 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 misfortune during his or her life.[65] We are now living in a relatively peaceful world; however, will we always enjoy such peace? If we look realistically at the way we are currently headed, the future looks bleak. It would be most unfortunate if the hardships were to occur during our middle years 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 ourself, we must tell others and enlist their assistance. The scholar Mr. Cui said that it is not important 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

should provide assistance in an emergency, poverty is a different issue. The best way to assist those in poverty is to help them learn ways to earn a living so that they can support themselves and become independent. This is the greatest act of kindness.

> What does "developing public projects for the benefit of others" mean? Small construction projects are needed for villages and big construction jobs are needed for cities. As long as they help people, they 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 to help everyone.

We should do anything that benefits the local community. Only when everyone has good fortune, do we have it as well. If we alone enjoy good fortune while others are suffering, then adversity is not far behind. As a Chinese proverb says, one family's wealth can cause resentment from thousands of families. If we share our good fortune with others, it 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, it is a sign of great wisdom, good fortune, and virtue. Today, when we speak of "developing public projects for the benefit of others," we can do so by encouraging others to practice the teachings in *Liaofan's Four Lessons* and the teachings of 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 inspire 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 or become discouraged when the job becomes difficult. Do not allow the jealousy and hatred of others to weaken our resolve to do what is virtuous.

In the past, agriculture was the foundation of every country, and so, 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 were 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 full and absolute good deed.

There may be opposition at the beginning of such a project but once it is finished and everyone has benefited, they will know its value and appreciate the efforts put in. Thus, our vision must be pervasive and comprehensive. We need to have wisdom, loving-kindness, and perseverance in order to accomplish goodness, the standard of which is to benefit all sentient beings. To be selfish and benefit only ourself is not goodness. This was Master Zhongfeng's

standard for good and bad.

> What does "accumulating merits and good fortune by giving wealth" mean? 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 to practice. For the sake of simplicity, Buddhism has organized these infinite ways into six major practices called the six paramitas. The Buddha often taught the six paramitas of infinite practices. If we summarize them, all six become the first paramita: that of giving. Keeping the percepts, or moral self-discipline, and patience can both be considered the giving of fearlessness. Diligence, deep concentration, and wisdom can be considered the giving of teaching. Thus, the three types of giving encompass all the methods of practice in Buddhism.

No matter how many other ways there are, they are all encompassed in giving. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha taught us not to be attached in our 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 healthy, long lives. 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. A good death is good fortune because it can in turn lead to a good rebirth. 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 we only need to practice according to the *Infinite Life Sutra*. And if we lead our lives according to the guidelines of both the *Infinite Life Sutra* and *Liaofan's Four Lessons*, we will attain the great liberation in both this world and beyond. Thus, we are encouraged here to practice good fortune through giving.

> What is giving? Giving is letting 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, we 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, 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 physically. How can we detach ourselves from our physical

body? Even if we are able to discard our body, it will still 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 that we do not have any attachments or discriminations and are not tempted by external phenomena. We learn in the *Diamond Sutra*: "Do not attach to form—remain unmoved within." Not attaching means letting go of the six senses. Once we have severed our attachments within and without, we will no longer be deluded but will have uncovered our true nature and become Buddhas.

In innumerable past lifetimes, we have been deluded and thus remained mired in samsara. But from now on, we will not create any more life-and-death karma. Therefore, those who are wise will want to transcend our world of suffering, to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha, and to be born in the Western Pure Land. We will maintain clarity of mind and await Amitabha Buddha 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 can only reduce suffering, not transcend a spirit into the Pure Land.

For example, Master Baozhi was the manifestation of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. He transcended the spirit of Emperor Liang Wudi's favorite wife. But, he could only transcend her spirit to the second level of the Desire Heaven and no further. He could not help her to be born in the Pure Land. Although we wish that we could transcend others to

Pure Land, it cannot be done. It is only a wish. Being born in the Pure Land depends on our belief, vow, and practice. So, we must do our best to learn the ways of practice while we are still healthy and strong, chant Amituofo, and vow to be born in the Pure Land.

To let go is to do so from the mind. It is to detach ourself from the five desires and the six dusts of the mind. We should learn to not have attachments to our body or our mind. As ordinary people, we are filled with wandering, discriminatory thoughts and attachments, and find it extremely difficult to sever them. The Pure Land way of practice is to change our thinking, so that we are mindful only of Amitabha Buddha. Then, we will finally be free. Truly cultivating the bodhisattva way is concentrating only on Amitabha Buddha and chanting only his name.

> We can give away anything. When we find ourselves unable to do so, we can begin 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 give spontaneously, we can cure stinginess while helping others in dire need. However, for many this is very difficult to do, especially at first. But, gradually the more we give the more natural it will become. This is the best way to cure selfishness and to eradicate attachments and stinginess.

The *Diamond Sutra* tells us: "Everything with form is

illusory and 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 begin by giving away our wealth so that we are not affected by it.

This is also the method that the Buddha taught us to enable us to escape the cycle of birth and death, to transcend samsara, 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 and 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 until it becomes natural. Everyone will experience such a stage in his or her learning and cultivation.

As we give, we will eventually experience a lessening in worries and stinginess, and when we no longer attach to wealth or enjoyments, our bodies, hearts, and minds will feel great contentment and liberation. This is when our true nature will begin to be uncovered and we will gain complete contentment and freedom.

The law of causality never changes, either in this world or beyond; the more wealth we give, the more wealth we will gain. We do not even know where this wealth will come from, but it will come. 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, and illness and short lives are the result of not giving fearlessness.

The five good fortunes are all gained through the cause of giving; therefore, to gain the good result, 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.

> What does "protecting proper teachings" mean? 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 succeed in their practice? 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 samsara?

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

In China, when we protect the proper teachings, we first safeguard those of Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi, [66] for they provide the foundation for Buddhism. This was no problem during Liaofan's time because all scholars 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 ourself. If we cannot even be a good person, how can we become a bodhisattva, much less a Buddha? Our learning and practice to become Buddhas and bodhisattvas are built on the foundation of the humanities.

Although we may not have read completely the *Four Books*, which are *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*, we should at least read the first three so that we will know how to conduct ourselves. This is the foundation of Buddhism. We can compile good excerpts from the commentaries from the past to present times and distribute them widely. In the past, the versions of the books we printed were the stone-printed books of China. They included the non-copyrighted commentary of the *Four Books* written by the scholar Zhu Xi. It would be good if we printed, distributed, and advocated them.[67]

Today, schools emphasize technology and have largely forgotten the humanities. But, no matter how advanced our technology, if we do not study the humanities, then as the ancient people questioned, what is the difference between humans and animals? If we do not know morality, benevolence and honor, then there will be little difference between animals and us.

Actually, humans are the cruelest of all the animals. Therefore, in order to help all beings, we must be helped first. If we can turn back from that which is bad to do that

which is good, then all beings will be fortunate and happy. Only then, can each being achieve what each wants. This is the goal of the sages and the virtuous people in educating and reforming sentient beings.

Proper teachings include those of Confucius and the Buddha. They have been the standard of truth that 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 and the earth nurtures. Heaven and earth have shown great kindness to all beings, sentient and non-sentient. Once we understand this, not only will we not harm the natural environment, we will do all that we can to help the natural ecological balance to become perfect so as to enable all beings to receive what they need.

The merits of heaven and earth are vast and great. Those who are genuinely moral and knowledgeable 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 Buddhists, we learn that "If we can transform objects and beings, then we are just like a Buddha."

To transform objects means to change our views, to let go of selfishness, and to participate in the light of the sky, earth, sun, and moon. To let go of our selfishness and to wholeheartedly help all beings is the true cultivation. Buddhas and bodhisattvas propagate the teachings and help all beings by teaching them how to eliminate delusion and attain the truth. It is like heaven and earth nurturing all beings. The merit from this is immeasurable. When we are able to transcend delusion and are liberated from

confinement, we will end all of our afflictions and worries, uncover our wisdom, and transform delusion into awakening.

We can use the behavior of sages and virtuous people as examples. The teachings of sages are the classics and sutras. The thoughts, words, and deeds of sages are correct and without error, and 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 Sakyamuni Buddha instructed and helped the people of that time. Today, as we read the sutras, we still feel that every sentence spoken by the Buddha is logical and is to be practiced accordingly. This is especially true for Pure Land sutras, which teach people how to transcend this world by attaining birth in the Pure Land in one lifetime.

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. And as it moves to western and westernized countries, it is still appropriate.

Similarly, the *Four Books* consist 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, and the entire country. As the *Four Books* are introduced abroad, people in other countries nod their heads in agreement after understanding what they teach. These teachings are timeless and beyond the boundaries of space.

This is why the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi are said to surpass the dimensions of time and space, and are genuine sutras and teachings on how to properly govern the country. There have been many teachings on how to govern. Upon careful comparison, we can see that those of Confucius, Mencius, the bodhisattvas, and Buddhas are unsurpassed.

Among all the Buddhist sutras, the *Infinite Life Sutra* is flawless, for it attains the highest level. The essence of traditional Chinese culture[68] is contained within the *Four Books*. The contents of the *Four Books* are very similar to that of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which provides principles, methods, and behavior for us to emulate. Of the *Four Books*, *Doctrine of the Mean* provides the principles and *Great Learning* provides the methods. *Analects* and *Mencius* tell us of the lives of Confucius and Mencius, respectively, and teach us how to apply the principles and methods in our daily lives. Thus, *Analects* and *Mencius* are just like the fifty-three visits of Sudhana, for they also provide us with good examples. And we too are to be good examples to help guide others.

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; but, with one thought of delusion, we are again in this world. With another thought of awakening, we again transcend.

Therefore, whenever we see temples, memorials,

> or pictures of past virtuous people or sages, or Buddhist texts, we should be respectful. If they are in need of repair, we should repair them.[69]

The teachings of the sages have a direct bearing on the thoughts of individuals, trends in cultural behavior, the overall well being of a group, and societal happiness and peace. Since ancient times, wise and virtuous people have analogized the teachings of the sages as the guidance for heavenly beings and humans. How do we protect and uphold them? Buddhist centers are institutions of Buddhist education while schools are institutions of worldly education. Both need to be protected and sustained. But today, schools have largely abandoned moral education and this is why we have such unhappiness and suffering. If we fail to awaken to this, our world will be destroyed.

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

In the early 1900s, the Chinese government abolished

Chinese classics education. At the time, many wise and virtuous people felt deep sadness. 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! For if Confucian and Taoist teachings cannot be safeguarded then Mahayana Buddhism cannot be propagated. Buddhism has flourished for two thousand years in China because it was based on the foundation of Confucianism and Taoism. But today we are digging away the roots and destroying the foundation. If this continues, the teachings of the Buddha will become mere empty words.

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

We need to help propagate proper teachings such as those of Confucius and the Buddha, and to encourage others to do so as well. In this way, we will benefit others and repay our gratitude to the Buddha. 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 Buddhist centers to teach others and to allow them 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 do this ourselves.

We establish a Buddhist center in the hope of providing the opportunity for more people to encounter and learn Buddhism. Today, the best way to do this is with television and the Internet as they have the potential to bring Buddhism into so many homes. We can invite caring teachers to choose the sutras that will benefit society the most and let them take turns lecturing. Since Mahayana Buddhism is built on the foundation of Confucianism and Taoism, we can lecture first on the *Four Books*. Next, we lecture on Mahayana Buddhism.

In this way, people will be able to thoroughly absorb and digest the teachings; thus, preventing them from becoming mere empty words. So, if we truly wish to help Buddhism flourish, it will be helpful to learn about the Chinese classics such as the teachings of Confucius. We begin by nurturing Dharma repositories and establishing Buddhist centers.

Establishing such a center does not mean spending a large amount of money on a building that may 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 begin to learn and practice Buddhism, and then attain wisdom, we will realize that wealth is like a puff of smoke, a fleeting cloud, for 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, we would be able to keep it instead of passing it to someone else. And yet, when we

receive money, we pass it on. It was ours for a very short time. Thus, we should not place much importance on wealth.

A fellow Buddhist 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 *Liaofan's Four Lessons*. Losing something 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 is a sad waste of time. Those who understand this and possess wisdom should instead use their precious time to chant a Buddha's name. We need to understand the principles. If we are diligent in our practice and propagate the teachings to help others, we will gain infinite merits. Then, all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will praise us.

> What does "respecting our elders" mean? It is to make an extra effort to be attentive to and respectful of parents, older siblings, leaders, superiors, elders, and those of great virtue and learning. When taking care of our parents at home, we are to do so gently with loving hearts and obliging demeanors. 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, for these are the outlines of the teachings. Thus, the child is the father of the man, for 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 who will provide for a moral society and a wisely governed country.

Since ancient times, this has been the Chinese social tradition. The Chinese say that education is essential in establishing a new government, training its leaders, and governing its people. If the basic quality of education is not clearly recognized and implemented, incorrect views can destroy the entire culture, country, and even its people! All the government officials in ancient China studied the works of wise sages and virtuous people. Even if some had selfish intentions, their wrongdoings were probably limited. They would have only bent the rules so much before they started feeling regretful. Today, sexual misconduct, wrongdoings, even criminal acts are all viewed as matter of fact. We no longer have a shameful heart or feel remorseful. We have lost our sense of morality and our conscience. And this is deeply troubling because all that separates us from animals is a 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, and to be diligent and dependable in meeting our responsibilities as individuals, members of society, and as citizens. As Liaofan said, habits become our nature. Once a good habit is formed, our hearts will be gentle and this will touch the heart of heaven, for when we are peaceful, kind, and agreeable, we will move the beings and spirits of heaven and earth.

Today, we have forgotten the ethical teachings of the human relationships and so we are no longer honorable. Instead, most people are mired in greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. Malevolent spirits, beings, and demons have descended. Why? Our improper thinking has formed a connection with them so naturally Buddhas and bodhisattvas will not come. Humans have already been 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 and when this happens, there may be many deaths. Only when we personally experience these grave occurrences, will we be awakened from delusion and improper views, regret our wrongdoings, and return to the proper 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 history and view the chaos in the world from a historian's viewpoint so as to realize the source of good occurrences as well as disasters. This will enable us to detect the occurrences of any effects due to the law of causality before they happen. What are people thinking and

doing today? Knowing this, we will know the future. The results that we are currently seeing come from causes created decades ago and the results of the causes that we are now repeatedly creating 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 escalation of these bad causes is resulting in a shortening of the maturity period and an increase in magnitude. This is horrifying! Good causes will always result in good consequences and bad causes will always result in bad consequences. The principle of cause and effect is correct and inevitable.

> When working for our superiors or the government, we should follow the rules and not do as we please 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 be just. We should not abuse power or be cruel because our superiors do not know what we are doing. When with our supervisor, we should show him or her the same respect as if we were facing the heavens. [As the proverb says,] "This is the correct behavior handed down from our ancestors." It has an important bearing 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. We can follow their

example and practice with caution.

A person who cultivates the virtues of loyalty and filial piety will have descendants to last for a long time, but today, parents and children are more like companions. Children no longer respect their parents or feel gratitude for all that they have done. This is destroying moral principles. Confucianism and Taoism teach us that ethical principles are the nature of virtue and a close examination of Buddhism will show 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 also the revelation of our virtuous true nature. When this true nature is revealed, it will be the same as that of Confucius. It is the same as light. When another's lights up, mine does as well. One light intermingling with another light to become one is the revelation of the true nature. This is true greatness, is truly inconceivable, and is the perfect and virtuous true nature.

Filial piety and respect are the tools we use to reveal our virtuous true nature to become enlightened. In Buddhism, it is said that the most important requirement for uncovering our true nature is to give rise to the bodhi mind. The same is true for Confucianism for it also teaches us to practice the sincere and virtuous mind. We need to honestly interact with others and circumstances with filiality, respect, and sincerity. To do things quietly by ourself is the genuine way to practice goodness and accumulate merits. As Liaofan said, filial piety and respect have an important bearing on our hidden virtues.

The reality of causality can be witnessed throughout history. Do not think that others will not know what we think or do. Other people may not know, but the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, and all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will know.

Liaofan told us earlier that to reform and correct our faults, we need the shameful heart, the fearful heart, and the determined, courageous heart. To become a sage, a virtuous person, a bodhisattva, or a Buddha, we simply need to truly give rise to these three hearts to realize our goals in this lifetime.

> What does "loving and cherishing all living things" mean? A compassionate heart makes a person. A person seeking the virtues of loving-kindness and compassion cultivates his or her heart of compassion. A person who wants to accumulate merits also cultivates a compassionate heart.

A compassionate heart cares for all beings and things. When we see animals suffering, we naturally feel sympathy for them. Do we all have this heart? Yes, everyone does. If we shed tears while watching a sad movie, this is the compassionate heart. We are empathetic even when we know that the movie is not real! So, it goes without saying that when we see real people or animals suffering, we will try to help them.

Not only do human beings possess the heart of compassion, animals do too. This is truly the virtuous original nature. The nature of animals is no different from

ours, but because they are even more deeply deluded than we are, they have been reborn as animals. All the beings in the ten Dharma realms share the same true nature. This is why the Buddha, in the Mahayana sutras, spoke of "unconditional great compassion and the kindness of realizing that we are one entity."

The compassionate heart is the heart of great loving-kindness and is the revelation of the true nature. It is what a person in search of the virtues of compassion and the accumulation of virtues is seeking. It is broadening the heart to love and care for others, to truly be able to love all beings and objects, and to do our best to help them.

> It is stated in the *Book of Rites*: "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 were used in major sacrificial ceremonies: cows, sheep, and pigs. Out of compassion, females were not used for offerings that were made in the spring, because if the female animal was pregnant, two lives would have been taken.

> 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 teaching the three pure meats rule. We do not eat animals if we saw or heard the killing, or if the animal was

killed for us.

In ancient India, monastics went on almsrounds. They ate whatever was provided: no discrimination, attachments, or preferences. To accept and eat whatever is offered is true compassion, according with conditions, and not seeking affinities.[70] Today, alms seeking is still practiced in Theravada countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka.

But when the Dharma masters were invited to China, the Chinese viewed the practice of asking for food as begging. It would have been inappropriate to tell the masters to go out and beg for food, so instead, they were offered food in the palaces. The practice of going out to ask for food never really took hold in China. But at that time, the three pure meats rule was observed when offering food to the masters.

Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty initially advocated vegetarianism for Buddhists. Today, most Chinese practitioners whether they are monastics or laypeople are vegetarians. However, the tradition of Buddhism is to practice the three pure meats rule and not vegetarianism. Vegetarianism protects nature as well as the compassionate heart. It is the practice 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 our efforts to advocate its practice.

Mencius taught us not to go near the kitchen, so that we will not see or hear the killing and will be more at ease when eating. But, the compassionate heart would still be uneasy. It is best to not eat the flesh of once living beings, especially today when we often hear of meat containing toxins that

cause strange diseases. Ancient people said that illness enters through the mouth. Mr. Li Bingnan often sighed as he said that people were taking poison at all three meals. How can we not get sick!

> Our ancestors did not eat meat under four circumstances: if they heard the killing, saw the killing, had the animal killed, or raised the animal themselves. If we cannot yet stop eating meat, we can still follow these four guidelines. In this way, we are gradually increasing our compassion. We should not only refrain from killing any animals, but insects as well, for they are also living creatures.

> Man makes silk from the cocoons of silkworms that have to be boiled in water 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 food and clothing. We kill to provide for ourselves so to waste food and clothing is as serious an offense as killing.

This speaks of the three pure meats with an additional rule that monastics may not raise animals. To raise, kill, and eat animals is truly unacceptable. If we cannot become vegetarian, we can practice the three pure meats and the four circumstantial meats rules to cultivate compassionate hearts.

Our life spans in this world are short, only a few decades long; yet, in order to nurture ourself we kill others. We are

steeped in debt to all beings, regardless of whether we have harmed them intentionally or unintentionally. Imagine how much negative karma we have created! This is why the Buddha said: "If negative karma had shape and volume, then even the entire universe could not contain it." Only when we realize that we have an inconceivable amount of karmic obstacles, will we become more careful. How can we be responsible for all living beings between heaven and earth? Do not kill, be careful, and do not waste anything.

Modern people advocate consumption by saying that if people do not spend money then factories would close and economies would collapse. Do you believe this? If Master Zhongfeng heard this, he would say, "Not necessarily." Actually, this is incorrect for many countries that promote consumption, and thus waste, are experiencing declining economies.

Only through thrift will people and our world become wealthy, prosperous, and peaceful. If no one saves money, how can countries become prosperous and strong, and citizens have stable lives? When we find ourselves out of work and without savings, we will have to depend on the country for financial aid and thus increase its financial problems. If however, we are in the habit of saving, then even if we became unemployed or suffer adversities, we can still maintain ourselves. Being aware of this, we will value our resources and strengths.

> 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: "For love of the mice, we often leave them some rice and in pitying the moth, we will not light the lamp." This is compassion!

Today, most people would strongly disagree with this. How can we "love mice"? They are harmful and must be exterminated. Most people do not understand. When we kill mice, they will seek revenge and this cycle of revenge will continue, growing worse each time. Killing solves nothing. Are there no other solutions? There is no such thing as walking away unpunished from a murder or not repaying our debts. By understanding that cause and effect connects our past, present and future lives, we will never again harm any living beings. This is how we attain peace of mind. Only true sincerity, purity, and compassion can solve our seemingly insurmountable problems.

> I cannot begin to talk of all the infinite types of goodness. If we can expand the ten previous categories, we can make them into a multitude of good deeds and virtues.

The Fourth Lesson:
The Benefits of the Virtue of Humility

Arrogance Invites Adversity
While Humility Gains Benefits

Five Accounts of Virtuous People

Humility enables us to preserve our good rewards. Without it, we will lose what we have accumulated and all of our efforts will have been in vain. We need to rely on humility for it enables us to preserve our goodness.

The *Diamond Sutra* explains that we should use endurance to preserve what we have accumulated from our practice of giving. If we cannot endure, then no matter how much we have cultivated and accumulated, all will be lost. Confucius also taught that the way to retain what we have cultivated is to practice the virtue of humility.

> In the *I Ching*, the hexagram for humility stated that: "The laws of heaven take from the arrogant and benefit the humble. The laws of earth bring flowing water from areas that are full to those that are lower as it passes by. And the laws of spirits bring harm to those who are arrogant and good fortune to those who are modest. Even the laws of people despise those who are arrogant and prefer those who are modest."

A good example to help us understand the laws of heaven

is the waxing and waning of the moon. Once the moon is full, it begins to wane. Before it becomes full again, it gets brighter and brighter each day. This gradual increase is the virtue of humility. From this, we can understand natural laws and the will of heaven.

The laws of earth are natural laws. For example, water will move from higher areas that are filled to those that are lower. The laws of spirits can be seen in the behavior of some spirits. When they see that we have become successful, they become jealous and try to cause problems for us; but, when we are destitute, they feel sorry and try to help us. People are the same. The laws of people prefer modesty to arrogance.

During the Qing dynasty, Zeng Guofan, who held the highest post as governor-general of four provinces, was almost like an emperor of a small region. Well-educated, he knew that he had already advanced very high and that this was not good, so he named his study The Room in Which Imperfection is Sought.

Most people seek perfection, but Mr. Zeng sought moderation. He sought to lack a little, to not have too much. He believed that as one's position was elevated, one should be more modest. In this way, he was able to maintain what he accumulated. Due to his accumulated merits, virtuous conduct, and the following of his teaching by his descendants, the family has remained prosperous.

> In the *I Ching*, only the humility hexagram contains solely good outcomes.

The *I Ching* has sixty-four possible hexagrams. Every one

of the explanations or predictions has the possibility of good fortune and misfortune invariably mixed. Only the hexagram for humility—High Mountain Under the Ground—has no possibility for misfortune. Thus, the higher we are, the more modest we need to be.

> The *Book of History* also explained: "While arrogance invites disaster, humility gains benefit."

Those who are the most modest receive the most benefits and advantages.

> I often went to take the examinations accompanied by others and every time I would meet scholars who were very poor. I realized that before they passed the examinations and became prosperous, their faces radiated such humility that I felt I could almost hold it in my hands.

Based on his own experiences, Liaofan found that the *I Ching* and the *Book of History* were correct. At every imperial examination that he and his companions had attended, those who were the most modest passed. Realizing this, he could even predict who would pass.

> Several years ago, ten of us from the village went to take the preliminary imperial examination. The youngest, Ding Jingyu was extremely humble.
>
> I told one of the applicants, Fei Jinpo, that Jingyu would undoubtedly pass the examination. Fei

> Jinpo asked how I could tell and I told him: "Only those who are humble receive good fortune. My friend, look at the ten of us. Is there anyone as honest, generous, and uncompetitive, as Jingyu? Do you see anyone who is as respectful, tolerant, careful, and humble as Jingyu? Do you see anyone like him, who when insulted does not talk back or who when slandered does not argue? Any person who can achieve such humility will receive protection from the earth, heaven, and spirits. There is no reason he will not become prosperous."
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> Sure enough, when the test results came out, Ding Jingyu had passed.

One year, Liaofan went with several others to take the examination. He commented that based on his observations, Ding Jingyu, who was the most humble, would pass despite his youth because he was respectful and modest, a rare person indeed who remained undisturbed and tolerant even when humiliated or offended. Those with great tolerance possess tremendous good fortune.

> One year in Beijing, I stayed with a childhood friend, Feng Kaizhi. Always humble, he had a kind and accommodating appearance. He was no longer the arrogant person I had known years ago. His friend, Li Jiyan, was very blunt and outspoken, and often scolded him for his

> mistakes, but Kaizhi just calmly accepted the accusations without talking back.

Feng Kaizhi had become a completely different person. Li Jiyan, a good friend of his would immediately criticize Kaizhi as soon as he noticed any faults. It did not matter to Kaizhi whether Jiyan was right or wrong in correcting him, for he accepted everyone's criticism.

If we have a fault we need to correct it, if we do not we need to guard against it and correct any mistakes that we have made. When corrected for a non-existent fault, we should not become resentful because it is good to be admonished. Actually, only those who reproach us genuinely care about us. We would reproach our children if they make mistakes. So why do we not admonish those of our neighbors? Remember that although an accusation may be unjust, it still comes from a heart of loving-kindness. We need to accept criticism willingly and to be grateful for the teaching.

> I told Kaizhi: "Just as there are signs that tell of coming good fortune or misfortune, we can see that prosperity or adversity come to those who have cultivated their causes. Heaven will help those whose hearts are humble. You, my friend, will doubtless pass the imperial examination this year!" Later, he did just that.

Liaofan told him that good fortune and misfortune could be predicted. Liaofan had mastered the art of prediction. But knowing how to predict a person's good fortune or

misfortune is still secondary. When we end our erroneous ways, and accumulate merits and virtues, we rewrite our destiny.

> There was a young man from Shandong province named Zhao Yufeng who passed the preliminary level of the imperial examinations before he was even twenty. But, try as he might, he could not pass the succeeding examinations. When his father moved to Jiashan to accept another government post, Yufeng went with him and came to greatly admire a well-known scholar in the village named Qian Mingwu.
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> Yufeng brought his work to Mr. Qian who picked up his calligraphy brush and made many corrections to the essay. Not only was Yufeng not angry, he gratefully accepted all of Mr. Qian's corrections and immediately made the recommended changes. The following year, Yufeng passed the imperial examination.

If this happened to us, we would probably feel terrible or become offended. Even if our work were not that good, surely it would not deserve that many corrections! Not only did Yufeng not become angry, he was extremely grateful and humble, for he sincerely wanted to learn from Mr. Qian. Because of his modesty, respectfulness, and diligence, he made significant improvement and passed the examination the following year.

> One year, I went to the capital to pay my respects to the emperor and met a scholar named Xia Jiansuo who had all the qualities of a great man without a trace of arrogance. I felt the intense aura of his virtue and humility. When I returned home, I told a friend: "When heaven wants a person to prosper, it first bestows him with wisdom that can make a pompous person honest and well disciplined. Jiansuo is gentle, kind, and good. Surely, heaven will now make him prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Jiansuo had passed the examination.

It was in the year that he went to meet the emperor that Liaofan met Xia Jiansuo and was struck by his humility and respectfulness. The important message in this account is that before heaven brings us good fortune, it first brings us wisdom. If we lack wisdom, then regardless of our cultivation, we will not accumulate good fortune. There is real and false good fortune as well as half and full. If we fail to understand the differences between them, we will commit serious offenses, all the while believing that our efforts are worthy of merit.

The most important point is to learn and understand what a field of merit is so that we will know how to properly accumulate good fortune. Once we uncover our wisdom, we will naturally restrain ourselves, as we become calm and dignified, kind and modest, respectful and gentle. By possessing these characteristics, Xia Jiansuo passed the

examination.

> There was a scholar named Zhang Weiyan from Jiangyin who was well educated, wrote good essays, and was well known among scholars. One year, while taking his examination in Nanjing, he stayed at a temple. When the test results were posted and he found that he had failed, he became furious and loudly accused the examiner of being blind to obvious talent.
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> A Taoist monk who saw this began to smile. Weiyan immediately redirected his anger towards the monk who said the essay must not be good. Weiyan got even angrier and demanded how he knew it was not good when he had not even read it! The Taoist replied that he had often heard that the primary element in writing good essays was a peaceful mind and a harmonious disposition. Weiyan's loud and angry accusations clearly showed that his mind and disposition were violent so how could he possibly write well? Weiyan accepted this and asked for the Taoist's advice.

The Taoist explained that good writing only comes from a peaceful and harmonious mind but Weiyan was bad tempered and arrogant. Fortunately, he was also intelligent so he recognized the logic in what the Taoist said and asked for his advice. From this, we can see that Weiyan was capable of change once he realized that he was at fault. This is true

learning and practice.

> The Taoist said that whether or not one passes depends on destiny. If someone is not destined to pass, then no matter how good the paper is, he or she will fail.

The law of causality is infallible. Whether we pass or fail depends on our destiny, not on the quality of what we have written. It is the same with wealth, fame, and so on, for everything depends on our destiny and not on how we plan and manage our lives. When people are destined to be wealthy, it does not matter whether or not they know how to obtain wealth; they will just receive it. If they are not destined to become wealthy, then regardless of what they do, they will fail.

Today, people who do not know of or believe in destiny, think that they can commit all kinds of offenses, and still obtain good results and good fortune. Where is the logic in that! Why is it that in ancient times, most people could see the results from their offenses quickly, while today, we do not seem to suffer from our wrongdoings? People are committing so many offenses that there are too many to let us receive our retributions one by one, so the debts will be collected all at one time.

Our education, abilities, good fortune, long lives, a peaceful death—everything—depends on destiny, thus changing it is the wisest thing we can do. If we fail to understand and seek what we are not meant to have, then all of our time and efforts will be wasted. This would be tragic.

> When the Taoist concluded that Weiyan needed to make some changes, Weiyan asked how he could change destiny. The Taoist replied that although the power to form our destiny lies in the heavens, the right to change them lies within us. As long as we practice goodness and cultivate hidden virtues, we will receive what we seek.

If Weiyan wanted to change his destiny, he had to do just as Master Yungu had taught Liaofan. Liaofan had learned that he alone could change his destiny. If we break the bad habit of committing offenses and instead cultivate goodness and accumulate merits, then we create the variables to change destiny. But, if we fail to do this, we will remain bound by destiny.

> Weiyan said that he was only a poor scholar and questioned his ability to practice goodness. The Taoist explained that practicing goodness and accumulating hidden virtues depended on the heart. As long as one intended to practice goodness and accumulate virtues, the merits would be infinite! He used the example of the virtue of humility that cost nothing. Weiyan needed to look within instead of berating the examiner for being unfair.

The Taoist said that money was not necessary to practice goodness. Very often, those who are poor are able to accumulate great merits while the wealthy may not

necessarily do so. The Taoist used Weiyan's behavior as an example, saying that Weiyan had been very arrogant. If he could instead be modest, then he would be virtuous and it would cost him nothing. When he failed an examination, he should not blame the examination official, but reflect upon himself and change. It is obvious that good or bad, good fortune or misfortune, all lie in an instant of thought.

> Weiyan listened to the Taoist monk and from then on suppressed his arrogance. Every day, he tried harder to practice goodness and to accumulate more merits.
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> One night, three years later, he dreamed that he had entered a very tall house and saw a book with many names as well as many blank lines. He asked the person next to him about it and was told that the names belonged to the applicants who had passed the examination that year. When Weiyan asked about all the blank lines, he was told that the spirits of the underworld checked on the applicants every three years. Only the names of those who were faultless and practiced goodness remained in the book. The blank lines had contained the names of those destined to pass, but due to recent offenses, their names had been removed.
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> The person pointed to a blank line and said that for the past three years Weiyan had been very

careful and so disciplined that he had not made any mistakes. Perhaps his name would fill the blank. He hoped that Weiyan would value this opportunity and continue his faultless behavior. That year, Weiyan passed the examination and placed one hundred and fifth.

Dear readers, if you believe in these matters, you are fortunate. The spirits of heaven and earth are closely linked with our world in our every gesture, word, and smile. This is the truth and not delusion. When Mr. Zhu Jingzhou was still alive and I was a Buddhist novice, he told me many stories that he had experienced first hand. No one dies by accident, not even in a war. No one dies unjustly. Life or death is destined. How we will die is recorded in the underworld. Although we live in a high-tech environment and know much of science, we cannot escape death when that is our destiny. This is the truth; it is time for us to awaken. We need to believe what the sages have taught.

Humility and Modesty are the Foundation for Good Fortune

We now know that spirits and heavenly beings are three feet above our heads. Obtaining good fortune and preventing misfortune is up to us. As long as we have good intentions, refrain from wrongdoings, do not offend the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, are tolerant and not arrogant, then the beings and spirits of heaven and earth will

feel compassion for us. Only then will we have a foundation for future prosperity.

There are beings and spirits of heaven and earth who constantly watch us. We alone are responsible for our every good or bad deed and every good or bad result, so we need to be awakened in every thought. Sakyamuni Buddha taught us to be awakened instead of deluded, to be proper instead of deviated, and to be pure instead of polluted. We are also to sever all attachments and to practice giving. We need to be extremely careful in our every thought, word, and deed, and to accord with the teachings and codes of behavior. Practicing Buddhism is setting a good example for all sentient beings. To perfectly have a kind heart, do kind deeds, say kind words, and be a good person is to be a Buddha, a bodhisattva.

Since we choose to practice the Pure Land method, we need to incorporate the teachings from the *Infinite Life Sutra* into our thinking and behavior. Then, there truly will be no difference between Amitabha Buddha and us. This is practicing the true teaching of the Buddhas for we mold ourselves by according with the mind, vow, understanding, and conduct of Amitabha Buddha.

Liaofan's Four Lessons can be an invaluable aid in our learning while the *Infinite Life Sutra* is our main course of study. When we abide by the precepts and practice Buddha Name Chanting, we are practicing both the primary and supporting learnings. This will assure us of being born in the Pure Land where we will never again regress, and where we

will become Buddhas and never reduce our eagerness to benefit all beings.

In the past, Zen practitioners said, "have some tea." Today, I teach, "become a Buddha." We can become one. This is the truth. If we sincerely practice Buddhism, beings and spirits of heaven and earth will protect us.

> Those who are filled with conceit are not destined for greatness. Even if they do prosper, their good fortune will be short lived.

When we look at wealthy people around the world, we see that few of them are genuinely happy or know how to properly use their wealth. Some live in hiding to feel safer. Such wealth is suffering not joy. Living a truly happy life is genuine prosperity and enjoyment.

> Intelligent people would never be narrow-minded and refuse the good fortune they are entitled to. Those who are humble always increase their opportunities to learn and in this way, their good deeds are boundless! Those who wish to cultivate and improve their virtues cannot do without the virtue of humility.

It is essential for us to learn modesty for it is the key to cultivating and improving our virtue. We need to realize that others are better than us and that they excel in what they do. When we are false and conceited, other people may not see this; however, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the beings and

spirits of heaven and earth see us very clearly. Thus, our modesty must be sincere and come from deep within.

We are not better than others and if they accumulate merits and we do not, then they are better than us. Even when we dare not commit offenses, others are still better than us. This is perfect modesty and it is the practice of the teaching of humility in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. I am the only student; everyone else is my teacher. Sudhana learned about humility from the fifty-three visits and perfectly attained Buddhahood.

> The ancients said: "Those who have their hearts set on success and fame will surely attain them just as those who have their hearts set on wealth and position will attain what they wish for." A person who has great and far-reaching goals is like a tree with roots. They must be humble in every thought and try to relieve other's burdens even if the occurrence is as insignificant as a speck of dust.
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> If we can reach this level of humility, we will naturally touch the hearts of heaven and earth. I am the creator of my own prosperity. Look at the applicants who sought fame and wealth. Initially, they were insincere and what they sought was a passing impulse. When they wanted something, they sought it but when their interest waned, they stopped seeking it.
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> Mencius once said [to Emperor Xuan of Qi]: "If

> you can expand from the heart that seeks personal happiness, to sharing happiness with all your subjects and make them just as happy as you are, then surely the nation will prosper!" This is also true for me in seeking to pass the imperial examination. [I alone can seek and thus change my destiny.]

Once we set our goals, we must work towards their accomplishment. If we do so, then naturally, our humility will touch the hearts of heaven and earth, and we will attain what we seek. Liaofan used a quote from Mencius for his conclusion. When we are enjoying our happiness, why not share it with others for to do so is genuine happiness and good fortune.

Today, many people are caught up in the drive to obtain wealth. The governments of the world would do well to realize this and join with people to create wealth, prosperity, and happiness so that all can enjoy it together. "To like what others like and dislike what others dislike." In so doing, we will be according with the hearts of all beings. We should use wisdom as we accumulate merits to create wealth so we may help those who have none, for if we only accumulate wealth for self-enjoyment then trouble lies ahead. This is a most important and worthwhile endeavor, and it is worthy of our sincerest efforts.

APPENDIX

LIAOFAN'S FOUR LESSONS

By Yuan Liaofan

The First Lesson:
Learning to Change Destiny

My father passed away when I was young. My mother persuaded me to learn medicine instead of studying and passing the imperial examinations because it would be a good way to support myself while helping others. Perhaps, I could even become famous through my medical skills; thus fulfilling my father's aspiration for me.

One day, I met an elderly but distinguished looking gentleman at the Compassionate Cloud Temple. He had a long beard and the look of a sage. I immediately paid my respects to him. He told me: "You are destined to be a government official. Next year, you will attain the rank of Learned First Level Scholar. Why are you not studying for the examination?" I told him the reason.

I asked the elderly gentleman for his name and where he was from. He replied: "My family name is Kong and I am from Yunnan province. I have inherited a very sacred and accurate text on astrology and prediction. The text, written by Shaozi, is called the *Imperial Standard of Governing the World*. By my calculations, I am supposed to pass it on to you and teach you how to use it."

I invited Mr. Kong to my home and told my mother about him. She said to treat him well. As we tested Mr. Kong's ability at prediction, we found that he was always correct whether it was for big events or for minor everyday matters. I became convinced of what he had said and again began to think of studying for the examinations. I consulted

my cousin who recommended Mr. Yu Haigu, who was teaching at the home of a friend, and became Mr. Yu's student.

Mr. Kong then did some more calculations for me. He told me that as a scholar, I would be placed fourteenth in the county examination, seventy-first in the regional examination, and ninth in the provincial examination. The following year, I placed exactly where Mr. Kong had said for all three examinations.

I then asked him to make predictions for my entire life. Mr. Kong's calculations showed that I would pass such and such a test in such and such a year, the year that I would become a civil scholar, and the year that I would receive a promotion to become an Imperial Scholar. And lastly, I would be appointed as a magistrate in Sichuan province.

After holding that position for three and a half years, I would then retire and return home. I would die at the age of fifty-three, on the 14th day of the eighth month between one to three o'clock in the morning. Unfortunately, I would not have a son. I carefully recorded and remembered everything that he said.

The outcome of every examination turned out exactly as predicted. Mr. Kong had also predicted that I would only be promoted after receiving a ration of ninety-one *dan* and five *dou* of rice. However, I had received only seventy dan when the Commissioner of Education, Mr. Tu, recommended me for a promotion. I secretly began to doubt the prediction. Nevertheless, it turned out to be correct after all, because Mr. Tu's replacement reversed the approval for my

promotion.

It was not until some years later that a new Education Commissioner, Mr. Yin, reviewed my old examination papers and exclaimed: "These five essays are as well written as reports to the emperor. How can we bury the talents of such a great scholar?" The new Commissioner wanted the magistrate to issue an order for me to become a candidate for Imperial Scholar under his authority. After undergoing this eventful promotion, my calculations showed that I had received exactly ninety-one dan and five dou of rice. From then on, I deeply believed that promotion or demotion, wealth or poverty all came about in due time and that even the length of one's life is pre-arranged. I began to view everything in a detached manner and ceased to seek gain or profit.

After being selected as an Imperial Scholar, I was to attend the University at Beijing. During my yearlong stay in the capital, my interest in meditation grew and I often sat in silence, without giving rise to a single thought. I lost interest in books and stopped studying.

The following year I went to Nanjing. Before I was to enter the National University there, I paid a visit to Master Yungu, a venerable Zen master at Qixia Mountain. We sat in meditation, face to face in the Zen hall for three days and nights without sleep. Master Yungu said: "The reason why ordinary people cannot become sages is because of all their wandering thoughts. In our three-day meditation, I have not observed a single thought arise in you. Why?"

I replied that Mr. Kong had clearly predicted the entire

outcome of my life. I had seen that the time of life, death, promotion, and failure are destined so there was no need for me to think of anything. The master smiled and replied: "I thought you were someone of remarkable capabilities! Now I realize you are an ordinary person!"

Feeling confused by what Master Yungu had said, I asked him to explain. He told me that an ordinary person's mind is forever occupied by wandering and imaginary thoughts, so naturally his or her life is bound by the mathematics of destiny. We cannot deny the fact that destiny exists, but only ordinary people are bound by it. Destiny cannot bind those who cultivate great kindness or those who have committed flagrant wrongdoings. Since I had lived my life just as Mr. Kong had predicted and done nothing to change it, I had been bound by destiny. Thus, I was a typical ordinary person.

Taken aback, I asked Master Yungu if we could change our destiny. He answered: "We can re-create our own destiny and seek good fortune. It is the true teaching and is found in the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of History*. In the Buddhist teachings, it is written that if we wish for and seek wealth, a high position, a son, a daughter, or long life, we can attain it. Since the Buddha told us that lying is one of the greatest transgressions, we can be assured that Buddhas and bodhisattvas would not deceive us."

I told Master Yungu that I had heard that Mencius once said: "Whatever is sought can be attained. The seeking is within ourselves." This refers to inner qualities such as virtue, integrity, and kindness. These are all values we can work

toward. However, when it comes to outside factors such as wealth, fame, and prestige, how can we seek to attain them?

The master replied that Mencius was right, but that I had misunderstood his meaning. Master Yungu said that Master Huineng, the sixth Patriarch of the Zen school, taught: "All the fields of merit are within one's own heart. If one seeks from the true mind within, one can be in touch with all that one wishes for." By seeking within ourselves, we will not only attain the inner qualities of virtue, integrity, and kindness; we will also attain [external benefits such as] wealth, fame, and prestige. To be able to attain both inner qualities and external benefits is invaluable.

Master Yungu then told me that if one does not reflect inside one's own heart; but, instead blindly seeks fame, fortune, and long life from outside sources, no matter how one schemes to pursue them, one can only attain, at most, what had been destined. Seeking from the outside, one might lose both inner purity and what one was destined to have; thus, the seeking would have been in vain.

Master Yungu next asked about Mr. Kong's predictions for the rest of my life. I honestly told him everything. He asked if I felt that I deserved imperial appointments or a son. Reflecting on my past deeds and attitudes, I answered no I did not. Those who received imperial appointments all had the appearance of good fortune but I did not. I also did not work towards accumulating virtues to build up my good fortune. I was very impatient and narrow-minded, and would show off my intelligence and abilities by putting others down. I behaved as I pleased and spoke without restraint. These

were all signs of scant good fortune and virtue. How could I possibly receive an imperial appointment?

There is an old saying that "Life springs from the dirt of the earth while clear water often harbors no fish." The first reason why I felt that I did not deserve a son was that I was obsessive about cleanliness. The second reason was that while harmony is the cultivator of life, I was quick-tempered. Third, although loving-kindness is the cause of fertility and harshness the cause of sterility, I was selfishly concerned about my reputation and would not sacrifice anything for others.

The fourth reason was that I talked too much and this wasted a lot of energy. Fifth, I drank too much. And sixth, I did not have a son because I often stayed up all night and wasted my energy. Aside from these, I had many other faults that were too numerous to mention.

Master Yungu said: "According to you then, there are many other things in life you do not deserve, not only fame and a son! Those who have millions of dollars in this life cultivated the good fortune worthy of that amount in the past. Those who have thousands of dollars must also have the good fortune worthy of that sum. Those, who die of starvation, were in fact meant to die in that manner. The karmic result today is simply the fruit of their own deeds and has nothing to do with external powers.

"For example, if a person has accumulated enough merits and virtues to last a hundred generations, then he or she will have a hundred generations of descendants. One who accumulates enough merits and virtues to last ten generations

will have ten generations of descendants to live out that good fortune. The same applies to three or two generations. Those who have no descendants had too little merits and virtues.

"Now that you recognize your shortcomings, you need to do all that you can to change and correct your misdeeds that caused you not to have a child or not to become an imperial official. You need to cultivate virtue and tolerance, and to regard others with good will and compassion. You also need to care for your health and conserve your energy and spirit. Live as if everything in the past dissolved yesterday and a brand-new future begins today. If you can accomplish this, then you are a person born anew, a person of virtue and sincerity.

"If even our body is governed by destiny, then how can a body of virtue and sincerity not evoke a response from heaven? As is said in the 'Tai Jia Chapter' in the *Book of History:* 'One may run away from the retribution of heaven, but one can never escape the retribution for one's misdeeds.' It is said in the *Book of Songs:* 'To permanently accord with the mind of heaven and to seek our own great good fortune.'"

The master then told me: "Mr. Kong had predicted that you would not receive an imperial appointment or have a son. These are the retributions of heaven, but even they can be changed. You only need to develop your virtue, diligently strive to practice goodness, and work to accumulate many hidden merits and virtues.

"These are your ways to re-create good fortune. How then

is it possible that you will not get to enjoy it? *I Ching, the Book of Changes*, was written to help people accrue good fortune and to avoid adversity. If everything is destined with no room for change, how can we hope to do this?

"The first chapter of the *I Ching* says, 'Families who often perform good deeds will have an excess of good fortune to pass on to the following generations.' Do you believe this?" I replied, "Yes." I gratefully accepted his advice and paid my respects to him by prostrating. Then I began to regret all my past wrongdoings, large and small, in front of the Buddha's image. I wrote down my wish to pass the imperial examinations and vowed to complete three thousand meritorious deeds to show my gratitude towards my ancestors, earth, and heaven.

Upon hearing my vow, Master Yungu showed me a merit-fault chart and taught me how to keep a daily record of all the good and bad deeds I had done. He warned me that bad deeds would neutralize the good ones. The master also taught me to recite the Zhuenti Mantra. Only with a mind of purity and concentration could I attain what I sought.

Master Yungu explained that it had been said by specialists in drawing talismanic figures, "Those who are considered experts in the art of drawing charms but do not know the right way to do so will be laughed at by spirits." The key to drawing charms is having no thoughts from beginning to end. Understanding this, begin the first stroke with a still mind after the primal darkness. In the process of drawing, one must let go of all wandering thoughts. Only in this way can a charm be effective.

"When one prays for and seeks for something or tries to change one's fate, it is important that one does so without giving rise to a single thought. In this way, one will easily receive a response. Mencius wrote, 'there is no difference between long life and short life.' At first glance, one would find it hard to understand how they can be the same; however, when there is no thought, there is no duality in short or long life.

"Upon careful analysis, there is also no duality between a good or a bad harvest. Understanding this, we will be content with our present situation, be it one of wealth or poverty. And with understanding that there is no duality between poverty and wealth, our minds will be content with our present status in society, be it high or low. Also, there is no duality between long and short lives. Understanding this, we will be content with our existing lifespan, be it long or short. The most important concern for human beings is that of life and death. Thus, early death and longevity subsume all conditions, whether favorable or unfavorable, and whether of gain or loss.

"We have to wait until our cultivation reaches a certain level, then our destiny will change. This change depends on the accumulation of merits, on seeking a response from the heavens. When cultivating, we need to be aware of our faults and resolve to correct them as if we were curing a sickness. While waiting, let go of the thought of desiring something that we are not supposed to have and the thought of wishing for a reward. At this level it would be a state of reaching the 'innate nature of no thought' that is the actual learning and

practice of wisdom.

"I know that you are still unable to accomplish the state of no thought, but you can practice reciting the Zhuenti Mantra continuously without counting the number of recitations and without interruption. When you reach a higher level of constant mindfulness, you will be able to achieve the level of 'to not recite when reciting and to recite when not reciting.' When you no longer have wandering thoughts, the mantra will become effective."

My name used to be Xuehai, which means "broad learning." But after receiving these teachings from Master Yungu, I changed it to Liaofan, which means "transcending the ordinary." It signified my understanding of the fact that we could re-create our destiny and that I did not wish to be like ordinary people who were controlled by destiny. From then on, I began to be very cautious in whatever I thought or did. Soon, I felt quite different from before. In the past, I had been careless and without self-discipline. Now, I find myself being naturally watchful and conscientious.

I maintain this attitude even when alone, for I know that there are spirits and heavenly beings everywhere who can know my every thought and deed. I am cautious not to offend them with my thoughts. Even when I encounter people who dislike or slander me, I bear their insults with a patient and peaceful mind, and do not feel compelled to quarrel with them.

The year after I met Master Yungu, I took the preliminary imperial examination in which Mr. Kong had predicted that I would come in third place. Amazingly, I was first! Mr. Kong's

predictions were beginning to lose their accuracy. He had not predicted that I would pass the imperial examination at all, but that autumn, I did!

Although I had corrected many faults, I found that I could not wholeheartedly do the things I ought to. Even if I did do them, it was forced and unnatural. I reflected within and found that I still had many shortcomings, such as seeing an opportunity to practice kindness but not being eager enough to do it or having doubts when helping others.

Sometimes I forced myself to act kindly, but my speech was still uncontrolled and offensive. I found I could contain myself when sober, but after a few drinks, I would act without restraint. Although I often practiced kind deeds and accumulated merits, my faults and offenses were so numerous that they seemed to outweigh the good that I did. A lot of my time was spent vainly and without value.

It took me more than ten years to complete the three thousand meritorious deeds I had vowed to do. I was unable to dedicate the merits from these three thousand good deeds at a temple until I returned to my hometown in the south, a few years later. At that time, I had the opportunity to ask two monks to dedicate them for me. Then, I made my second wish and that was for a son. I vowed to complete another three thousand good deeds. A few years later, your mother gave birth to you and named you Tianqi.

Every time I performed a good deed, I would record it in a book. Your mother, who could not read or write, would use a goose feather dipped in ink. She made a red circle on the calendar for every good deed she did. Sometimes she

gave food to the poor or bought living creatures in the marketplace and freed them in the wild. She recorded all of these with her circles on the calendar. At times, she could accumulate more than ten circles in one day!

Everyday we practiced like this and in four years, the three thousand deeds were completed. Again, I invited the same two masters to make the dedications, this time at our home. On the 13th day of the ninth month of that same year, I made my third wish and that was to pass the highest level of the imperial examination. I also vowed to complete ten thousand meritorious deeds. After three years, I attained my wish and passed the examination. I was also made the mayor of Baodi county.

I prepared a small book to record my merits and faults, and called it the *Book of Cultivating the Mind*. Every morning, when I began work in the office, my servant would bring the book and have the guard place it on my desk. I would record my every deed—good or bad—no matter how small. At night, I set up an altar in the courtyard and put on my official uniform to emulate the way of Mr. Zhao, an officer in the Song dynasty. I burned incense and reported all my deeds to the heavens.

Once, your mother was concerned when she saw that I had not accumulated much merit. In the past, she was able to help me in our accumulation of good deeds and we were able to complete the three thousand meritorious deeds. Now, I had made a vow to complete ten thousand more deeds but there were fewer opportunities to practice them at the government residence. She worried about how long it

would be before my vow could be fulfilled.

That night, I dreamed of a heavenly being and told him of my difficulty in completing the ten thousand good deeds. The heavenly being reminded me that upon becoming mayor, I had reduced the taxes on the farmlands. That one good deed was worth ten thousand merits. My vow was already fulfilled! When I had become mayor, the farmers in Baodi county were highly taxed so I reduced the tax by nearly half. But, I felt bewildered and still had doubts. How could just one deed be worth ten thousand merits?

Coincidentally, the Zen Master Huanyu was traveling from Wutai Mountain and stopped in Baodi. I invited him to the government residence, told him of my dream, and asked whether it was believable. Master Huanyu said: "If one does a good deed with such a true and sincere heart without expectation of reward, then one deed can indeed be worth the merits of ten thousand. Besides, your act of reducing the taxes in this county benefits more than ten thousand people!" Upon hearing this, I immediately gave all my savings for him to take back to Wutai Mountain. I asked him to use the money for a food offering for ten thousand monks and to dedicate the merits for me.

Mr. Kong had predicted that I would die at the age of fifty-three. However, I survived that year without illness although I did not ask the heavens for a longer life. Now I am sixty-nine. The *Book of History* explains: "Destiny exists but it is changeable. Destiny is not set, but is created and determined by ourselves." All this is true. I came to understand that both good fortune and misfortune are the

results of our own actions. These are truly the words of sages and virtuous people! If someone said that good fortune and adversity are determined by the heavens, I would consider that person ordinary.

Tianqi, my son, I wonder what your life will be like? We should always prepare for the worst. Therefore, even in times of prosperity, act as if you were not. When things are going your way, be mindful of adversity. When you have enough food and clothing, be mindful of poverty. When loved and respected by all, remain apprehensive and conservative. When the family is greatly respected, carry yourself humbly. And when your learning is extensive and profound, always feel that the more you learn the less you know.

For the past, we can think of how to advocate the virtues of our ancestors. For the present, we can think of how to conceal the faults of our parents. For the country, we can think of how we can repay its kindness to us and for the family we can think of how to bring about its good fortune. For other people, think of how to help those in need around us, and for within ourselves think of how to prevent improper thoughts and actions from arising.

We need to find our faults daily and to correct them immediately. If we are unable to detect our faults then we will think that everything we do is right. When we are unable to correct our faults, improvement will be impossible. There are many intelligent people in the world who cannot improve in either their cultivation of morality and virtues or in their work. Their failures in this life are owed to a single word:

procrastination.

Tianqi, the teachings of Master Yungu are most worthy, profound, real, and proper. I hope that you will learn them well and practice them diligently. Use your time wisely and do not let it slip by in vain.

The Second Lesson:
Ways to Reform

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

As a rule, there are signs that signal impending danger or the coming of good fortune. These signs rising from within are due to one's thoughts and feelings being revealed in his or her behavior. Usually a person is more fortunate when tending toward kindness but invites trouble when tending toward cruelty. Ordinary people often do not know what is really happening. It is as if their vision were blurred. Since they cannot see the truth, they claim that good fortune and misfortune are unpredictable.

When we are sincere and honest, our hearts will accord with the will of heaven. By observing our goodness, others will be able to foresee the coming of good fortune; and by observing our immorality, they will foresee approaching misfortune. If we wish to gain good fortune and avoid misfortune, we first need to reform before we even talk about doing good deeds.

There are three ways to reform our faults.

First, we must be able to feel ashamed. Think of all of

the ancient sages and virtuous people whose names and teachings have lasted for hundreds of generations. They were people just like us, but why is my name worthless like a broken roof-tile?

We are clinging to worldly desires. Secretly, we do many improper things while thinking others will not know about them and then are shamelessly proud of ourselves! One day, we will be reborn as an animal without realizing it. There is nothing else in the world that calls for more shame and remorse than behavior such as this. Mencius once said: "Shame is the most important word in a person's life." Why? Because one who knows shame will put forth his or her best efforts into correcting faults and will eventually attain sagehood or become a virtuous person. One who does not know shame will be just like an animal: unrestrained and immoral. This is the key to correcting our faults.

The second way to reform is to know fear. Celestial beings and earthly spirits hover over our heads in observation. There is no way for us to deceive them. Even when my wrongdoings are done in a concealed place, the beings and spirits of heaven and earth are present and see all my faults. If my bad deeds are serious, then all kinds of adversities will befall me. If my fault is minor, it will still reduce my current good fortune. How can I not feel fear?

Even when we are alone in our room, the beings and spirits watch us very carefully and record everything. Even if we try to conceal our improper acts with clever

speech, the spirits and celestial beings can see into our hearts as clearly as seeing into our lungs or liver. We are just trying to deceive ourselves and others. In actuality, others have seen through us, and we thus become worthless [in their eyes]. When we think about this, how can we not be afraid?

However, as long as we still have one breath left, we have the chance to regret even the worst deeds. There are cases in history where people who had committed numerous bad deeds but who later deeply regretted them during their dying moments were able to pass away peacefully.

If a person can have a determined and courageous kind thought at the most important moment, it can cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated offenses. This is like only needing one lamp to bring light into a valley that has been dark for a thousand years. It does not matter how long one has been committing misdeeds. If one can reform, he or she is exceptional!

We live in a constantly changing and chaotic world. Our bodies, made of flesh and blood, are perishable. If our next breath does not come, then this body will no longer be a part of us. Then, even if we want to reform, it would be too late.

When we commit a wrongdoing, our retribution in this world is a bad reputation that will last for hundreds, even thousands of years. Even filial and loving descendants cannot restore our honor. Then, in a future life, we might end up in hell suffering immeasurable pain. When even

the sages, virtuous people, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas cannot help us escape from our bad consequences, how can we not be afraid?

The third way to reform is to have a determined, courageous heart. When we hesitate to reform our faults because we do not really want to change, we are content with what we can get away with. For a reform to take place, we must be resolute and resolve to change immediately. We should not hesitate or postpone until tomorrow or the day after.

A minor fault is like a thorn piercing our flesh and should be quickly removed. A big fault is like our finger being bitten by a poisonous snake. We must quickly cut off the finger to prevent the poison from spreading and killing us. If we consult the *I Ching* and receive the wind-thunder symbol, it means that our strong determination in reforming assures us of success. If we can follow the three ways of shame, fear, and determination to reform, then we will surely be transformed. There is no need to worry. It will happen as assuredly as the spring sun will melt a layer of ice.

There are also three methods of practice to help us reform. The first is changing through behavior, the second is changing through reasoning, and the third is changing from the heart. Trying to force ourselves to suppress our faults is extremely difficult because we have not permanently uprooted our faults, merely temporarily curbed them. Therefore, changing through behavior cannot help us to permanently eliminate our faults.

Instead, we can try to reform by understanding why we should not do something, for example, killing. To love all living things is a virtue of heaven. Understanding that all living beings love life and fear death, how can I be at peace with myself by taking another's life to nurture my own? At times, animals such as fish or crabs are cooked alive. Such pain and suffering reach down into their very bones. How can we be so cruel?

When we eat, we use many expensive and tasty things to nourish ourselves, enough to fill the whole dining table! But once the meal is done, even the best delicacies will become body waste and be excreted. The result of our killing accomplishes nothing. Consuming vegetarian foods can fill and nourish us just as well. Why let our stomachs become a graveyard and reduce our good fortune through killing?

Think of all the living beings with flesh and blood. Like us, they are self-aware. They and we are one entity. Although our cultivation of virtue has not yet reached the state that will enable these beings to respect us and feel safe around us, we can at least not harm them or make them hate us. If we think about it, we will naturally feel sorrow for these animals and thus be unable to swallow their flesh.

Another example of changing through reasoning is an easily angered person. He or she can stop and think that we all have our strengths and weaknesses. If I touch on someone's weakness, I should feel sad about their failing and forgive any shortcomings. If someone offends me for

no reason at all, it is that person's problem and has nothing to do with me. There is no reason for me to become angry.

I also think that no great person thinks that he or she is always right. Nor do intelligent people blame their faults on others. When things do not go the way we wish, it is because we have not cultivated our virtues and morals, and have not accumulated enough merits to move others!

We should always reflect upon ourselves first. In so doing, criticism can become a training ground to refine our character and to strengthen our abilities. We should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism and guidance. What is there to be angry and complain about? Likewise, in the face of slander, we should maintain the mind of stillness. Although the slanderous rumors and tale bearing spread like a huge fire, like a torch, they will eventually burn themselves out.

If we become angry and try to defend ourselves when slandered, it would be like the spring silkworm spinning its own cocoon and suffocating itself. Becoming angry does not benefit us; it harms us. There are other faults and offenses we can change. If we understand the principle behind the need for reform, we will not repeat our mistakes.

What does "changing from the heart" mean? Although we have thousands of different faults, they all stem from the heart, from the mind. If my heart is still of thoughts, then actions will not arise and faults can be avoided.

Practitioners do not have to try to eradicate faults such as the desire for fame, sex, profit, or anger, one by one. All we need is a sincere heart to practice good deeds. As long as our hearts are virtuous and kind, then naturally our minds will not have any improper thoughts.

"Demons do not appear during the day." This is the essence, the key to our change. Since all mistakes stem from the heart, we change from the heart. It is like getting rid of a poisonous tree. If we want to put an end to it, we uproot it altogether so it cannot grow again. Why exert ourselves to no avail by pulling out its leaves one by one and cutting it twig by twig?

The best way to reform our faults is through cultivating our hearts for purity will surface right away. If my heart is pure, I can recognize and stop an improper thought as soon as it arises. The immoral idea will disappear the moment I am conscious of it.

If I am unable to succeed at reforming my faults through changing the heart, then I will try at the level of understanding, knowing the reasons why I need to make the change. If I cannot succeed with this, then I will try to reform by changing through behavior. The best way is to cultivate the heart and understand the reasons behind the need to change. It is foolish to confine ourselves to reforming through behavior. This is the inferior way. Instead we should be reforming from the heart, for this is the best way to change.

But even when we vow to change, assistance is needed to truly reform. We will need constant reminders from

genuine friends who witness our actions in everyday life. As for our good and bad thoughts, we can ask the beings and spirits of heaven and earth to be our witnesses. We also need to be diligent and to sincerely regret day and night. If we can honestly regret for one to two weeks, one to three months, then in this way, we are assured of attaining good results benefits.

What are the benefits of contrition? We may feel very much at ease and our hearts may feel light and generous. An unintelligent person may suddenly become wise. Another might maintain a clear and relaxed mind even in a disturbing and confusing environment. Our minds will be clearer and our compassion will increase enabling us to no longer feel anger upon seeing an enemy while we remain happy.

We may dream of spitting out black things, of having ancient sages or virtuous people encourage and escort us, or we may dream of flying in space. We may dream of colorful pennants and ornately decorated canopies. Such phenomena are indications of a successful reform and a dissolving of past offenses. However, we must not consider seeing these phenomena as signs of perfection. Instead, we must resolve to further improve ourselves and work even harder to reform.

[An example is Qu Boyu.] At twenty, he was already mindful of his faults, had analyzed them, and tried to thoroughly correct them. At the age of twenty-one, he felt that he still had not completely corrected all of them. At twenty-two, he felt as if twenty-one was wasted, without

any real improvement. Thus, year after year, he continued to correct his faults. When he reached fifty, Boyu still felt that the past forty-nine years were filled with wrongdoings. This was how particular our ancestors were regarding the correction of faults!

We are all just ordinary people with mistakes as numerous as a porcupine's spines. Often when we look back, we do not even see our faults because we are careless and do not know how to reflect on our actions. It is as if a cataract is growing in our eye.

All these are symptoms of having accumulated too many offenses! Our hearts may feel confused and oppressed, lacking energy. We will become extremely forgetful and filled with worries even when nothing is happening, feel embarrassed and depressed upon meeting a virtuous person, or become displeased at hearing proper reasoning. When kind to others, we will be met with hostility. We may have nightmares where everything is upside-down, and talk incoherently and behave abnormally. These are all signs of misfortune.

If we have any of these symptoms, we must immediately reinforce our willpower to correct all of our faults. It is necessary to start anew and not delay!

The Third Lesson:
The Ways to Cultivate Goodness

We read in the *I Ching:* "Families who perform good deeds will accumulate prosperity that can outlast many generations." An example is the Yan family. Before they married their daughter to the man who was to be Confucius's father, they inquired about the family. After finding that they practiced goodness and accumulated virtues, the Yan family felt confident that they were marrying their daughter into a family that would prosper and have outstanding descendants.

In another example, Confucius had praised Shun for his filial piety by saying: "Due to his great filial piety and sincerity, Shun deeply moved even his ancestors to accept his offering. His accumulation of merits and good fortune would last for many generations." This principle is confirmed by many examples.

The following are some additional examples of how merits can be attained through performing good deeds. In Fujian province, a man named YangRong held a position in the imperial court as the emperor's teacher. Yang Rong's ancestors were boat people who made a living by helping people cross the river.

One year, a storm lasted so long that violent flooding swept away people, animals, houses, and belongings. The other boaters took advantage of the situation to collect the floating belongings. Only Yang Rong's grandfather and great grandfather rescued the drowning people and ignored the

belongings. The boaters laughed and thought the two to be very foolish. Later, when Yang Rong's father was born, the Yang family gradually became wealthy.

One day a heavenly being who had manifested as a Taoist monk told the Yang family that due to their ancestors' accumulation of hidden merits, their descendants would enjoy wealth and prominence. He then suggested a special place where they could build the ancestral tomb. They followed his suggestion. Today it is called the White Hare Grave. Shortly after, Yang Rong was born. He passed the imperial examination when he was only twenty years old and later received the imperial appointment of master. The emperor even bestowed the same imperial honors on his grandfather and great grandfather. Today, his virtuous and prosperous descendants are still prominent.

Yang Zicheng, from the county of Yin in Zhejiang province, is another example. He worked in the county courthouse and was kind, fair, and honest. Once, the county magistrate punished a criminal by beating him until he was bleeding profusely. Zicheng knelt and pleaded with him to stop. The infuriated magistrate retorted: "It's all right for you to plead, but how can I not be angry when he has broken the law!" Zicheng replied that when government leaders do not follow the proper path, ordinary people would lose their way. Realizing this, we should feel sorrow and not pleasure [at solving the case]. And we should certainly not become angry. A case like this called for more understanding. Moved by Zicheng's plea, the magistrate ceased the beating.

Although Zicheng's family was poor, he refused all bribes.

If the prisoners were short of food, he would take some from his own home to give it to them even if it meant going hungry himself. One day, it was time for several newly arrived prisoners to be fed. But Zicheng himself had little food. If he gave the prisoners what he had, his family would go hungry; if he kept the food for his family, the prisoners would have nothing to eat—an appalling dilemma. He felt that the prisoners needed the food more than his family did. He discussed it with his wife who asked where the prisoners were from. Zicheng told her that they were from Hangzhow.

Later, Zicheng had two sons. The elder son, Shouchen, and the younger one, Shouzhi, both held important government positions. Zicheng's eldest grandson became vice minister of the Ministry of Justice and his second grandson was a highly placed member of the government staff in Sichuan province. They too were prominent. Today, their descendant Yang Chuting, also a government official, is known for his virtuous deeds.

Another account took place during the Zheng-Tong period, [the time of Emperor Yingzong]. In Fujian province, many intellectuals had joined a group of rebels. The emperor appointed Imperial Censor Zhang to stop them. He tricked the rebels and captured their leader.

Later, Imperial Censor Zhang dispatched General Xie to put an end to the remaining rebels in the eastern part of the province. The general obtained a list of the insurgents and commanded that white flags be secretly given to everyone not on that list along with instructions to place the flags on their doors when the imperial army came to town. He ordered the

soldiers not to harm the innocent and with this one thought of goodness, he saved tens of thousands of people from being killed. His son Xie Chian placed first in the imperial examinations and eventually became an advisor to the emperor. His grandson Xie Pi placed third in the imperial examinations.

Another example is the Lin family from Putian in Fujian province. Among their ancestors was a very generous elderly lady. Every day she made rice balls for the poor and gave away as many as they wanted. An immortal who manifested as a Taoist monk came daily for three years and always asked for six or seven. Her ceaseless generosity convinced him of her deep sincerity.

He told her: "I have eaten your rice balls for three years and have done nothing to show my gratitude. Perhaps I can do so now. On the land behind your house is a good place for your grave. If you are placed there when you die, the number of your descendants who will have imperial appointments will equal the number of seeds in a pound of sesame seeds." Her son followed his recommendations.

The first generation after that, nine men passed the imperial examinations and it continued that way for generations. It was said in Fujian that the surname of Lin was always on the list of those who had passed the imperial examination.

Another example is Mr. Feng, the father of the imperial historian, Feng Zhuoan. One winter many years ago, Mr. Feng was on his way to school when he saw someone lying in the snow. Finding that the man was barely breathing, he

quickly took off his coat, wrapped it around the man, carried him back home, and revived him. That night, Zhuoan's father dreamt that a heavenly being told him: "Out of complete sincerity, you helped a dying man. This is a great virtue. I will have the famous General Han Qi of the Song dynasty to be reborn as your son." Later, Zhuoan was born and was named Qi.

Also, there was Mr. Ying, a minister who lived in Taizhou. When he was young, he studied in remote mountain areas. At night, he often heard the sounds of ghosts and spirits but was never afraid of them. One night, he heard one ghost happily say to another: "There is a village woman whose husband left home a long time ago and has not returned. Her in-laws think that their son is dead and are forcing her to remarry. Tomorrow night, she is going to commit suicide and will replace me. Then I will be reborn!"

Upon hearing this, Mr. Ying immediately set out to sell some land that he owned. He received two hundred grams of silver for it. He then made up a letter from the daughter-in-law's husband, and sent it to her home along with the silver. The parents knew that the letter was not in the son's handwriting, but examined the silver and said, "This letter may be false, but the silver is not. Perhaps our son is alive." Consequently, the daughter-in-law was not forced to remarry. After a while the husband returned home and the couple resumed their lives together.

Mr. Ying next heard the ghost say, "Originally, I was supposed to leave here and be reborn, but Mr. Ying messed up my chance!"

The other ghost asked, "Why don't you get even with him?"

The first ghost replied: "I can't. The heavenly beings have recognized his goodness and he is going to receive a prominent position in the future. How can I hurt him?" Upon hearing this, Mr. Ying became even more diligent in practicing goodness and accumulating merits. Whenever there was a famine, he gave grain from his storehouses to those who needed it. He always helped relatives in emergencies. When things did not go his way, he always reflected within himself rather than complain of others. Thus, he always quietly complied with conditions. Even today, his descendants are prominent.

Another person, Xu Fengzhu, lived in Jiangsu province. Whenever there was a famine, his wealthy father would be the first to waive the rent on the rice fields, hoping that other wealthy people would follow suit. He also donated grain from his storehouses to those who were hungry.

One night, he heard ghosts outside his home say, "A county scholar in the Xu family is going to pass the provincial imperial examination!" This went on for several nights and indeed that year his son Fengzhu passed the examination. After that, Fengzhu's father became even more diligent in accumulating good deeds. He paid for the repair of roads and bridges, and provided food for monks as well as for the poor. He did all he could to help others. Sometime later, he heard the ghosts again. They said: "The provincial scholar from the Xu family is going to hold a high position in the government." Eventually, Fengzhu became the governor of

Zhejiang province.

Another example is Tu Kangxi who lived in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province. Mr. Tu worked in the courthouse and would spend nights in the prison cells, talking with the inmates. Instead of making a name for himself, he would write secret reports to the minister of justice, telling him why certain prisoners were innocent. The Minister would then question the prisoner accordingly and clear the cases. Through Mr. Tu's efforts, more than ten innocent people were released and all of them were extremely grateful to the judge praising the minister of justice for his wise judgment.

Soon after, Mr. Tu made a report to the imperial judge saying: "If innocent people are imprisoned here, there must be many more throughout the country. I recommend that investigators be sent to check the prisons for innocent people every five years. The sentences can be canceled to prevent the innocent from remaining in prison." The minister, Mr. Tu's superior, took the report to the emperor, who agreed with Mr. Tu's suggestion. Mr. Tu was subsequently chosen as one of the special agents in charge of reducing sentences for those who were found innocent.

One night, he dreamt that a heavenly being came to him and said: "Originally, you did not deserve a son in this life, but this act of reducing prison sentences for innocent people accords with the wishes of the heavens. You will be bestowed with three sons and they will all attain high positions." His wife later gave birth to three sons who all became prominent.

Another example of attaining good results from practicing kindness is Bao Ping who lived in Jiaxing. Ping was the

youngest of seven sons of the magistrate of Chizhou, Anhui province. He married into the Yuan family in Pinghu county, Zhejiang province, and was a good friend of my father. Bao Ping was knowledgeable and talented, but always failed in the examinations. He spent his time studying Buddhism and Taoism.

Once, while traveling to Lake Mao, he came to a village and saw a temple in dire need of repair. The statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva was wet from the rain that leaked through the roof. Ping took out all his money and gave it to the abbot, so that he could restore the temple. The abbot replied: "It is a major project, I am afraid this is not enough."

Bao Ping then took out all his expensive clothes and handed them to the abbot. His servant tried to persuade him to keep his best outfit, but he refused, saying: "It does not matter to me. As long as the statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva remains undamaged, I do not care if I have to go without clothes."

The abbot, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed: "To give up money and clothing is not difficult, but your deep sincerity is truly rare." After the temple was repaired, Bao Ping asked his father to visit it and together they spent the night there. The temple's Dharma Protector, Qielan, came in his dream to thank him and said: "Since you have accumulated these merits and virtues, you will have many generations of descendants who will receive imperial appointments." His son and grandson both passed high examinations and were appointed as imperial officials.

Zhi Li from Jiashan county, in Zhejiang province is

another example. His father used to be a clerk in the provincial courthouse. Once, when Zhi Li's father learned that an innocent man had been given the death penalty, he tried to save the man's life. When the prisoner heard about this, he told his wife: "I am greatly indebted to this man who has spoken on my behalf, but I have no way to show my gratitude. Will you invite him to our house and offer yourself to him? Perhaps this will please him and increase my chances to live."

The wife cried as she listened to his request, but there was no other way to help. The next day when the clerk came to visit, she offered him wine and told him of her husband's wish. The clerk refused, but continued to do all he could for the man. When at last the prisoner was released, he and his wife went to the clerk's house to thank him. He said: "One with such virtue as yours is truly rare these days, how can I show my gratitude? Since you do not have a son, allow me to offer my daughter in marriage to you. Please accept for this is the only way that I can repay you."

The clerk accepted and soon afterwards, she bore him his son, Zhi Li. He passed the highest level of the imperial examinations when he was just twenty years old and later was appointed to an important government position. His son Gao, grandson Lu, and great grandson Dalun, all passed the examinations and received imperial appointments as well.

These ten examples all tell of the deeds cultivated by different people. Although their actions differed, their intent was the same—to perform goodness. If we carefully think about goodness, we will realize that there are many different

types—real and false, honest and crooked, hidden and visible, apparent and actual, proper and improper, full and half, big and small, and difficult and easy. These different types each have their own causes that need to be understood. If we try to practice good deeds but do not know how to distinguish between right and wrong, we may end up doing more harm than good and all of our efforts will have been in vain.

What are "real goodness" and "false goodness?" In the Yuan dynasty, a group of scholars went to visit Master Zhongfeng. One said: "We hear in Buddhism that the karmic reward for good and bad is 'like a shadow, following the form wherever it goes.' But why is it that although some people practice goodness, their families and descendants are not prosperous? On the other hand, while others behave immorally, their families and descendants do very well. What has happened to cause and effect? Are there no standards in the Buddha's teachings?"

Master Zhongfeng replied: "Ordinary people are blinded by worldly viewpoints and not having cleansed their minds of impurities are unable to see clearly. Consequently, they look upon real goodness as wrongdoing and mistake wrongdoing as goodness. This is very common today. Moreover, these people do not blame themselves for failing to understand, and unfairly blame their misfortune on the heavens."

The scholars questioned how good and bad could be mistaken for each other. Master Zhongfeng asked each of them to express their thoughts on what was bad and good. One scholar said that to yell at and hit others was bad; to respect and treat others in a polite way was good. The master

replied, "Not necessarily." Another scholar said that being greedy and taking another's money was bad while being generous and behaving properly was good. Master Zhongfeng again replied, "Not necessarily." The remaining scholars all expressed their views on what was bad and good, but Master Zhongfeng always concluded, "Not necessarily."

Master Zhongfeng then said: "To do things for the benefit of others is good; to do things for self-benefit is bad. If what we do is for the sake of benefiting others, then it does not matter if we yell at or hit them; it is still good. But, if our intention is for self-benefit, then regardless of our appearance of respect and courtesy, it is bad."

"Practicing goodness solely to benefit others is considered public benefit and is real goodness. If we only think of ourselves while doing good acts, then that is considered private benefit and is false goodness. When goodness springs from the heart, it is real goodness. But, when we do something good just because others are doing so, it is false. When we do good without expecting anything in return, it is real goodness. But, when we practice good deeds for some purpose other than to benefit others, it is false. Those who wish to practice real goodness need to consider all these differences."

What are "honest goodness" and "crooked goodness"? People today often look upon an extremely conservative and nice person as good and kind. However, the ancient sages and virtuous people have shown that they preferred those who were aspiring and dignified. As for those who appear to be compliant and careful in their actions, everyone may like

them, but sages often speak of them as "thieves of virtue." From this, we can see that the viewpoint of ordinary people on good and bad differs greatly from that of sages and virtuous people.

Because of this, our judgment could be erroneous. Beings and spirits of heaven and earth all look upon good and bad from the same viewpoint as the sages and not that of ordinary people. Therefore, when we wish to accumulate merits, we must not give in to greed or be affected by the things around us. As soon as improper thoughts arise, we need to be aware of them and then purify them.

Honest goodness is to be respectful and comes from the thought to sincerely help all others. Crooked goodness is to act without sincerity and arises from the thought to flatter others to obtain what we want. To love others is honest, and to hate others and be jealous is crooked. These all need to be very carefully differentiated.

What are "hidden goodness" and "visible goodness"? Goodness is hidden when no one knows about it and visible when our good acts are known by others. Those with hidden virtues will naturally be known by the heavens and be rewarded. Those who practice visible goodness will be known by people and enjoy fame. Fame itself is good fortune, but heaven and earth shun fame. Those who have great fame, but lack the virtue to support it will eventually encounter overwhelming adversities. Those who have not done anything wrong but are falsely accused will have descendants who suddenly become prosperous and successful. From this, we can see how important it is to

understand hidden and visible goodness.

What are "apparent goodness" and "actual goodness"? In the Spring-Autumn Period, the country of Lu made a law that rewarded those who paid the ransom to free their fellow citizens who were servant-slaves. At that time, Confucius had a rich student named Zigong who, although he paid the ransom to free people, did not accept the reward for doing so.

Upon hearing this, Confucius was very unhappy and scolded Zigong: "You acted wrongly. When sages and virtuous people do something, it is to improve morality and teach people how to behave. We do not do something for self-benefit or reputation. In Lu, the poor outnumber the wealthy. Since you refused the reward, others will think that accepting reward money is being greedy and if this happens, no one will pay the ransom to free our people."

Another student of Confucius, Zilu, once saw a man drowning in the river and rescued him. Later, the man thanked him by giving him a cow. When Confucius heard that Zilu had accepted the gift, he was happy and said: "In the future, people will be eager to help those who are drowning."

In the eyes of ordinary people, Zigong's refusal of the reward money was good, while Zilu's acceptance of the cow was not. Who would have expected Confucius to praise Zilu and scold Zigong! From this, we can see that those who practice good deeds must not only consider the current outcome but that of the future as well. Neither should we only consider our own gain and loss but think about the

impact made on others.

What we do now may be good but in time may prove harmful. Thus, what seems like goodness may actually be bad. What appears to be bad may actually have positive long-term effects, turning out to have been good after all. Thus, what seems like a bad deed may actually be goodness. For example, apparent responsibility may be actual irresponsibility, apparent propriety may be actual impropriety, apparent trustworthiness may be actual untrustworthiness, and apparent kindness may be actual unkindness. We need to carefully differentiate to make proper choices.

What are “proper goodness” and “improper goodness"? Lu Wenyi was a prime minister in the Ming dynasty. When he grew old, he retired to his hometown where he was well loved and highly respected. Once, a drunken villager went to his home and began to yell insults at him. Mr. Lu calmly told his servant, “This man is drunk, don’t argue with him.” With that, he closed the door and ignored the onslaught of insults.

A year later, the same man committed a grave crime and was sentenced to death. Hearing this, Mr. Lu remorsefully said: “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 trying to be kind but I inadvertently encouraged his arrogance and cruelty. Now, he has been sentenced to death.” This is an example of having good intentions but doing something bad.

There is also an example of those who achieved goodness although they had acted from improper intentions. Once,

after a devastating famine, people were reduced to stealing food in broad daylight. A wealthy family reported this to the authorities who did nothing. As the poor grew more daring, chaos was imminent. The family, taking the law into their own hands, caught and punished the thieves. In this way, peace was restored and the thefts were stopped. If this had not been done, chaos would have erupted.

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 benefit from understanding this.

What are "half goodness" and "full goodness"? We read in the *I Ching*: "People who do not accumulate virtuous deeds will not achieve honor while people who do not accumulate bad deeds will not bring about self-destruction." And from the *Book of History* we learn that "Zhou, who was the last emperor of the Shang dynasty, committed horrible crimes." The dynasty ended with his death. It is like collecting objects in a container. With diligence, it will soon be full but if we slack off and stop collecting, then it will be only half full. This is an example of full and half goodness.

Once a woman visited a Buddhist temple and wished to make a donation. Being extremely poor, she only had two cents but she unreservedly gave these to a monk. To her surprise, the abbot himself came to help her regret for past offenses and to dedicate her merits.

Later, she was chosen to enter the imperial palace, and obtained wealth and prestige. Clad in her riches, she returned to the temple to make a donation, this time bringing a small fortune. To her dismay, the abbot sent another monk to help dedicate her merits. She did not understand and questioned the abbot: "In the past, I only donated two cents, yet you personally helped me regret my past offenses. Today, I have brought much money but you will not help me perform my merit dedication. Why?"

The abbot replied: "Although you gave only a little in the past, it came from a true and sincere heart. It was necessary for me to repay your sincerity by personally performing your dedications. Today, your donation is much greater, but the heart of giving is not as sincere. Therefore, it is enough that my student performs your dedications for you." This is an example of how thousands of silver coins are only considered "half goodness" and two cents are "whole goodness."

Another example is of Quan Zhongli, an immortal of the Han dynasty, who was teaching his student, Lu Dongbin, the art of transforming iron into gold. They would use it to help the poor. Dongbin asked his teacher if the gold would ever change back to iron. Zhongli said, "After five hundred years, it will return to its original form." Dongbin replied, "Then I do not want to learn this art for it will harm those who possess the gold in five hundred years."

Zhongli 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 account is another example of whole goodness and half goodness.

When we perform a good deed, it is best not to attach to what we have done. If we practice in this way, then all of our good deeds will reach fulfillment and success. But, if we always think of the good that we have done as we look for a reward, then no matter how diligently we practice, even for an entire lifetime, the deeds will still be considered half goodness.

For example, when we donate money, we can practice pure donation. We do not linger on the thought of "I" who is giving, on the importance of the object that is given, or on the one who has received. We simply give out of true sincerity and respect. When we practice pure donation, one pound of rice can bring infinite good fortune, and the merits from giving one cent can wipe away the transgressions of a thousand eons.

But, if we always think of the good that we have done and expect rewards for our actions, then even a donation of one million dollars would not bring us the reward of a fully good fortune. This is another way of explaining whole goodness and half goodness.

What are "big goodness" and "small goodness"? Once, an important official, Wei Zhongda was led into the underworld for judgment. When the records that the judge had ordered to be brought out arrived, Zhongda was astounded at the courtyard filled with his bad records and the single scroll of his good deeds. The official then ordered them to be weighed. Surprisingly, the bad records, which had filled the

courtyard, were lighter than the single scroll of good deeds that was as thin as a chopstick!

Zhongda asked the judge: "I am barely forty years old, how could I have committed so many offenses?"

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 to be counted as a wrong." Zhongda then asked the judge what was recorded on the single scroll.

The judge replied: "Once the emperor planned to build a great stone bridge. You opposed the project due to the hardships it would cause the tens of thousands of people needed for the work. This is a copy of your objection."

Zhongda said: "I did make the proposal, but the emperor dismissed it and proceeded with the project. What I said had no effect on the matter. How can it bear so much weight against all my offenses?"

The judge replied: "Although the emperor rejected your suggestion, your one thought of kindness for all those people was very great. If the emperor had accepted your idea, 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.

What are "difficult goodness" and "easy goodness"? Scholars of the past said that one who wishes to conquer greed and desire should begin with what is most difficult to

overcome. When Confucius talked about our cultivation of humanity, he also said to begin with what is most difficult to practice. For example, an elderly teacher, Mr. Shu of Jiangxi, gave two year's salary to a poor man who owed money to the government. If the man had been sent to prison, the family would have been torn apart.

Another example is Mr. Zhang from Handan. He gave what had taken him ten years to save to a poor man who owed money to the government. This saved him from going to jail and enabled him to remain with his wife. Such examples as Mr. Shu and Mr. Zhang are rare, for they gave what is most difficult to give. What others would not sacrifice, they did so willingly.

Another example is Mr. Jin from Jiangsu province who was old and without any sons. His neighbors offered him their young daughter in marriage so he might have descendants to continue his family. Mr. Jin refused the offer and sent her home. This is another example of being able to overcome what is most difficult to conquer in oneself. The heavens showered down especially good fortune on 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 goodness when the opportunity presents itself, then it would truly be a shame. For those who are without wealth or status, doing good things for others is very difficult. However, if one can help others in the face of difficulties it will be even more valuable.

There are many ways to help others whenever the

opportunity presents itself. These can be simplified into the following ten important categories.

1. To support the practice of kindness.
2. To revere love and respect.
3. To help others succeed in practicing goodness.
4. To persuade others to practice kindness.
5. To help those in desperate need.
6. To develop public projects for the greater benefit of people.
7. To practice merits by giving wealth.
8. To protect and maintain proper teachings.
9. To respect elders.
10. To love and cherish all living things.

What does "to support the practice of kindness" mean? Emperor Shun lived during the Yao Period. One day, before he became emperor, Shun was watching some fishermen on Lake Leize. He noticed that all the younger and stronger fishermen took the spots where the water was deep and the fish were abundant, while those who were older and weaker were left with the rapids and shallow water, where there were very few fish.

When Shun saw this, he sympathized with the older fishermen. He joined in the fishing and whenever he saw younger fishermen grab the good spots, he said nothing. But whenever some yielded to others, he praised them everywhere he went and emulated their humble and polite manner. He did this for one year until the fishermen got into the habit of yielding the good spots to others.

A wise and capable man such as Shun could have easily

influenced others with a few words. Why did he not simply say something instead of trying to change others by setting a good example? Shun's painstaking and good intentions were like the expert artisanship that results from long practice and hard work.

In today's era of low morality, social breakdown, and loss of proper thinking, it is extremely difficult to find a good standard of behavior. Therefore, when those around us have shortcomings, we do not use our strengths to point out their deficiencies. When others are unkind, we do not use our kindness to compare ourselves to them. When others are less capable, we do not purposely surpass them. Even when we are intelligent and competent, these are to be kept hidden. Instead of boasting, we need to behave even more modestly. When someone makes a mistake, we tolerate and do not reveal it. This provides the opportunity to reform without the loss of self-respect.

When we allow others to keep their dignity, they will be even more careful of future actions. When we see strengths or small kindnesses in others, we can learn from them and praise them to others. In daily life, we can refrain from speaking and acting with selfish intentions, but instead, seek to benefit society. We can help set standards for others to follow. These are the qualities of a great person; someone who thinks of public welfare as more important than his or her own.

What does "to revere love and respect for others" mean? Sometimes it is hard to tell on appearance whether someone is an honorable person or a fraud, since frauds pretend to be

honorable. The difference is as obvious as black and white. As Mencius said, the difference between honorable people and ordinary people lies in their intentions.

The heart of a genuinely honorable person is filled with loving-kindness and respect for others. There are thousands of different types of people in this world, some close to us while others are strangers. Some have prestige while others have none. Some are smart while others are not and some are virtuous while others are corrupt. Nevertheless, we are all humans and are thus, all one entity. We should neither hate nor disrespect anyone.

When our hearts are filled with loving-kindness and respect for others, it is the same as if our hearts were filled with loving-kindness and respect for the sages and virtuous people. When we understand and agree with others, it is the same as if we understand and agree with the sages and virtuous people. Why? Because all the virtuous people and sages want people to obtain what they wish for. If we can have loving-kindness and respect for people, and help them to achieve in their endeavors, we are acting as a sage or a virtuous person.

What does "helping others to do good" mean? If we tossed aside a piece of raw jade, it would remain a worthless stone. But if we carved and polished it, it would be transformed into a valuable object. So, when we see people whom we feel have the potential to practice goodness or to work towards a proper goal, we can guide, support, praise, and encourage them, thus helping them to succeed. If others wrongly accuse them, we can try to clear their name and

share their burden of slander. Only when we have helped them back on their feet to become a functioning part of society, will we have fulfilled our responsibility in helping others to do good.

Most people dislike those who are different from them. There are always more bad people around than good people, so those who are good often have difficulty standing on their own.

Good people have abilities and virtues that enable them to become famous. They usually pay little attention to their appearance. They can easily be wrongly accused, so striving to do good turns out to be a challenge. When this happens, it is entirely up to virtuous people and elders to protect and help those who are moral to stand on their own. They can do this by providing what the people need to practice goodness. The merits of the virtuous people and elders who do this will be great.

What does "persuading others to practice kindness" mean? As humans, we all want to be good and to have a conscience, but chasing after wealth and fame has kept us so busy that we have stopped listening to our conscience. This is the result of having to survive in a world filled with hardships. 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.

A scholar named Hanyu 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.” Depending on what is appropriate in the circumstances, we can use either speaking or writing.

To encourage virtue, we can persuade others through speech or writing. Compared with teaching others through behavior these are more direct and clear. Sometimes, 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. 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 but we tried to] we need to think and find the wisdom not to repeat the mistake.

What does “helping those in desperate need” mean? People often suffer from serious difficulties. If we meet someone like this, then we immediately help that person as if we were the one who was suffering. If a person has been wrongly accused or convicted, then we should plead on their behalf as well as help in any way we can. The scholar Mr. Cui 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.

What does "developing public projects for the benefit of others" mean? Small construction projects are needed for villages, and big construction jobs are needed for cities. As long as they help people, they should be built. 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 inspire 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 or become discouraged when the job becomes difficult. Do not allow the jealousy and hatred of others to weaken our resolve to do what is virtuous.

What does "accumulating merits and good fortune by giving wealth" mean? In Buddhism, giving is considered the foremost practice among all the methods. What is giving? Giving is letting 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, we can also give away that which we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think.

We can give away anything. When we find ourselves unable to do so, we can begin 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 give spontaneously, we can cure stinginess while helping others in dire need. However, for many this is very difficult to do, especially at first. But,

gradually the more we give the more natural it will become. This is the best way to cure selfishness and to eradicate attachments and stinginess.

What does "protecting proper teachings" mean? 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 succeed in their practice? 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 samsara?

Whenever we see temples, memorials, or pictures of past virtuous people or sages, or Buddhist texts, we should be respectful. If they are in need of repair, we should repair them. We can propagate and pass on the proper teachings, and help others to learn their value. In this way, we can repay our gratitude to the Buddha. We should do our best and encourage others to do so as well.

What does "respecting our elders" mean? It is to make an extra effort to be attentive to and respectful of parents, older siblings, leaders, superiors, elders, and those of great virtue and learning. When taking care of our parents at home, we are to do so gently with loving hearts and obliging demeanors. 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.

When working for our superiors or the government, we should follow the rules and not do as we please 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 be just. We should not abuse power or be cruel because our superiors do not know what we are doing. When with our supervisor, we should show him or her the same respect as if we were facing the heavens. [As the proverb says,] "This is the correct behavior handed down from our ancestors." It has an important bearing 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. We can follow their example and practice with caution.

What does "loving and cherishing all living things" mean? A compassionate heart makes a person. A person seeking the virtues of loving-kindness and compassion cultivates his or her heart of compassion. A person who wants to accumulate merits also cultivates a compassionate heart.

It is stated in the *Book of Rites*: "In January, when most animals bear their young, females of the species are not to be used for sacrificial purposes." Mencius once said: "An honorable person will not go near the kitchen." This is to protect a compassionate heart. Our ancestors did not eat meat under four circumstances: if they heard the killing, saw the killing, had the animal killed, or raised the animal themselves. If we cannot stop eating meat immediately, we

can begin by following these four guidelines. In this way, we are gradually increasing our compassion.

We should not only refrain from killing any animals, but insects as well, for they are also living creatures. Man makes silk from the cocoons of silkworms that have to be boiled in water 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 food and clothing. We kill to provide for ourselves so to waste food and clothing is as serious an offense as killing. 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: "For love of the mice, we often leave them some rice and in pitying the moth, we will not light the lamp." This is compassion. I cannot begin to talk of all the infinite types of goodness. If we can expand the ten previous categories, we can make them into a multitude of good deeds and virtues.

The Fourth Lesson:
The Benefits of The Virtue Of Humility

In the *I Chin*g, the hexagram for humility stated: "The laws of heaven take from the arrogant and benefit the humble. The laws of earth bring flowing water from areas that are full to those that are lower as it passes by. And the laws of spirits bring harm to those who are arrogant and good fortune to those who are modest. Even the laws of people despise those who are arrogant and prefer those who are modest."

In the *I Ching*, only the humility hexagram contains solely good outcomes. The *Book of History* also explains: "While arrogance invites disaster, humility gains benefit." I often went to take the examinations accompanied by others and every time I would meet scholars who were very poor. I realized that before they passed the examinations and became prosperous, their faces radiated such humility that I felt I could almost hold it in my hands.

Several years ago, ten of us from the village went to take the preliminary imperial examination. The youngest, Ding Jingyu was extremely humble. I told one of the applicants, Fei Jinpo, that Jingyu would undoubtedly pass the examination. Fei Jinpo asked how I could tell and I told him: "Only those who are humble receive good fortune. My friend, look at the ten of us. Is there anyone as honest, generous, and uncompetitive, as Jingyu? Do you see anyone who is as respectful, tolerant, careful, and humble as Jingyu? Do you see anyone like him, who when insulted does not talk back or who when slandered does not argue? Any

person who can achieve such humility will receive protection from the earth, heaven, and spirits. There is no reason he will not become prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Ding Jingyu had passed.

One year in Beijing, I stayed with a childhood friend, Feng Kaizhi. Always humble, he had a kind and accommodating appearance. He was no longer the arrogant person I had known years ago. His friend, Li Jiyan, was very blunt and outspoken, and often scolded him for his mistakes, but Kaizhi just calmly accepted the accusations without talking back. I told Kaizhi: "Just as there are signs that tell of coming good fortune or misfortune, we can see that prosperity or adversity come to those who have cultivated their causes. Heaven will help those whose hearts are humble. You, my friend, will doubtless pass the imperial examination this year!" Later, he did just that.

There was a young man from Shandong province named Zhao Yufeng who passed the preliminary level of the imperial examinations before he was even twenty. But, try as he might, he could not pass the succeeding examinations. When his father moved to Jiashan to accept another government post, Yufeng went with him and came to greatly admire a well-known scholar in the village named Qian Mingwu.

Yufeng brought his work to Mr. Qian who picked up his calligraphy brush and made many corrections to the essay. Not only was Yufeng not angry, he gratefully accepted all of Mr. Qian's corrections and immediately made the recommended changes. The following year, Yufeng passed

the imperial examination.

One year, I went to the capital to pay my respects to the emperor and met a scholar named Xia Jiansuo who had all the qualities of a great man without a trace of arrogance. I felt the intense aura of his virtue and humility. When I returned home, I told a friend: "When heaven wants a person to prosper, it first bestows him with wisdom that can make a pompous person honest and well disciplined. Jiansuo is gentle, kind, and good. Surely, heaven will now make him prosperous." Sure enough, when the test results came out, Jiansuo had passed the examination.

There was a scholar named Zhang Weiyan from Jiangyin who was well educated, wrote good essays, and was well known among scholars. One year, while taking his examination in Nanjing, he stayed at a temple. When the test results were posted and he found that he had failed, he became furious and loudly accused the examiner of being blind to obvious talent.

A Taoist monk who saw this began to smile. Weiyan immediately redirected his anger towards the monk who said the essay must not be good. Weiyan got even angrier and demanded how he knew it was not good when he had not even read it! The Taoist replied that he had often heard that the primary element in writing good essays was a peaceful mind and a harmonious disposition. Weiyan's loud and angry accusations clearly showed that his mind and disposition were violent so how could he possibly write well? Weiyan accepted what the Taoist said and asked for his advice.

The Taoist said that whether or not one passes depends on destiny. If someone is not destined to pass, then no matter how good the paper is, he or she will fail. When the Taoist concluded that Weiyan needed to make some changes, Weiyan asked how he could change destiny.

The Taoist replied that although the power to form our destiny lies in the heavens, the right to change them lies within us. As long as we practice goodness and cultivate hidden virtues, we will receive what we seek.

Weiyan said that he was only a poor scholar and questioned his ability to practice goodness. The Taoist explained that practicing goodness and accumulating hidden virtues depended on the heart. As long as one intended to practice goodness and accumulate virtues, the merits would be infinite! He used the example of the virtue of humility that cost nothing. Weiyan needed to look within instead of berating the examiner for being unfair.

Weiyan listened to the Taoist monk and from then on suppressed his arrogance. Every day, he tried harder to practice goodness and to accumulate more merits. One night, three years later, he dreamt that he had entered a very tall house and saw a book with many names as well as many blank lines. He asked the person next to him about it and was told that the names belonged to the applicants who had passed the examination that year.

When Weiyan asked about all the blank lines, he was told that the spirits of the underworld checked on the applicants every three years. Only the names of those who were faultless and practiced goodness remained in the book. The blank

lines had contained the names of those destined to pass, but due to recent offenses, their names had been removed.

The person pointed to a blank line and said that for the past three years Weiyan had been very careful and so disciplined that he had not made any mistakes. Perhaps his name would fill the blank. He hoped that Weiyan would value this opportunity and continue his faultless behavior. That year, Weiyan passed the examination and placed one hundred and fifth.

We now know that spirits and heavenly beings are three feet above our heads. Obtaining good fortune and preventing misfortune is up to us. As long as we have good intentions, refrain from wrongdoings, do not offend the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, are tolerant and not arrogant, then the beings and spirits of heaven and earth will feel compassion for us. Only then will we have a foundation for future prosperity.

Those who are filled with conceit are not destined for greatness. Even if they do prosper, their good fortune will be short lived. Intelligent people would never be narrow-minded and refuse the good fortune they are entitled to. Those who are humble always increase their opportunities to learn and in this way, their good deeds are boundless! Those who wish to cultivate and improve their virtues cannot do without the virtue of humility.

The ancients said: "Those who have their hearts set on success and fame will surely attain them just as those who have their hearts set on wealth and position will attain what they wish for." A person who has great and far-reaching goals

is like a tree with roots. They must be humble in every thought and try to relieve other's burdens even if the occurrence is as insignificant as a speck of dust. If we can reach this level of humility, we will naturally touch the hearts of heaven and earth.

I am the creator of my own prosperity. Look at the applicants who sought fame and wealth. Initially, they were insincere and what they sought was a passing impulse. When they wanted something, they sought it but when their interest waned, they stopped seeking it.

Mencius once said [to Emperor Xuan of Qi]: "If you can expand from the heart that seeks personal happiness, to sharing happiness with all your subjects and make them just as happy as you are, then surely the nation will prosper!" This is also true for me in seeking to pass the imperial examination. [I alone can seek and thus change my destiny.]

THE TEN-RECITATION METHOD

This simple, convenient, and effective way to practice buddha-name recitation is especially suitable for those who find that they have little time for cultivation. It helps us to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha. It brings us quiet joy.

We begin when we wake up. Sit up straight and clearly recite "Amituofo" ten times with a calm and focused mind, aloud or silently. We repeat this process eight more times, each time doing one round of ten recitations. Recite nine times daily at these times:

Upon waking up
Before breakfast, lunch, and dinner
Before and after our morning's work
Before and after our afternoon's work
Upon retiring

The key is regularity; disruption of this practice will reduce its effectiveness. When we recite consistently without interruption, we will soon feel an increase in our purity of mind, wisdom, and serenity. Diligent practice of this method, together with unwavering belief and vows, can ensure fulfillment of our wish to be born in the Western Pure Land.

NOTES

[1] In the past, before the government employed someone, examinations were held for all the candidates. After passing the first entry examination, the students would then be sent to various county schools to study.

[2] [960-1127]

[3] [*Complete Works of the Four Treasuries* includes 3450 titles in 36,000 volumes and covers classics and sutras, history, government management, and literature. Trans.]

[4] [The *I-Ching* is one of the *Five Classics* in Confucianism. It is now used as a manual of divination and has philosophical aspects. Trans.]

[5] At this time, Liaofan's cousin had a friend who was teaching at someone's home. Perhaps, this person was a wealthy individual who had empty rooms in his house that were used as classrooms and who employed teachers to give lessons to his children as well as those of relatives and friends. Liaofan became a pupil of Mr. Yu and began his preparation for the examination. In the past, schools were not common like they are today. Before the Qing dynasty, [1644-1912] lessons were conducted in home schools. Usually there was only one teacher giving lessons to twenty or thirty students. There were no high schools, only public universities. Students studied very hard with a private tutor to pass the examination before attending a government-managed university.

[6] [A civil scholar was similar to a high school student, and an imperial scholar was similar to a university student. Trans.]

[7] At that time, the government provided high school and university students with an allowance and supplemented their living expenses with rice. Similar to a food ration, excess rice could be sold. As every region had a set number of openings, only when there was a vacancy could a person be added to the list.

[8] Imperial students had all of their expenses paid by the government; however, the students were expected to work for the government upon completion of their schooling.

[9] [These are two of the *Five Classics* of Confucianism. The *Book*

of Songs underscores the Confucian valuation of human feelings. The *Book of History* presents kingship in terms of the ethical foundation for a humane government. Encyclopedia Britannica, Britannica Inc., Copyrighted 1999-2000]

[10] [The first of Venerable Master Chin Kung's three teachers. Trans.]

[11] Since ancient times in China, the *Platform Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, and the *Surangama Sutra* have been acknowledged as eminent literary works. The *Platform Sutra* by Master Huineng should not be thought of as solely a sutra of the Zen school for it is an overview of Buddhism and is essentially Master Huineng's report of what he had learned through his study and practice.

[12] [618 to 907.]

[13] [From the Taoist book *The Exalted One Speaks of Accounts of Request and Response.* Trans.]

[14] [The first of the three serious offenses is failing to support our parents when they are alive. Second is failing to give them a decent burial upon their death. The third is the most critical—not producing an heir. Trans.]

[15] [Amitabha Buddha is the Sanskrit name for the Buddha of the Western Pure Land. When we are chanting we can use the Chinese pronunciation "Amituofo." "Amituo" is a name meaning infinite life and infinite light, and "Fo" means Buddha. Trans.]

[16] [Doing this plants the seed for future Buddhahood and in this way saves their life by rescuing them from suffering in the six paths of existence. Trans.]

[17] [206 B.C.- A.D. 229.]

[18] [The bodhi mind is the great compassionate and sincere mind, with every thought to attain complete self-realization for self and others. Trans.]

[19] Tai Jia was an emperor during the Shang dynasty [ca.1766-ca.1125 B.C.]. When he was young, he engaged in immoral activities. After listening to the guidance of the great sage Yiyin, he amended his wrong behavior. The quote was his expression of gratitude to the sage.

[20] [1368-1644]

[21] [Master Lianchi (1532-1612) was the eighth patriarch of the Pure Land school and was one of the four great masters in the Ming dynasty. Trans.}

[22] This method provides us with four benefits. First, we would not forget the Chinese language. This is especially important for those of Chinese descent living abroad as it would enable them to remember their origins. Second, we would be able to understand Chinese characters. Third, we would be well versed in classical Chinese, which would provide us with the ability to read *Complete Works of the Four Treasuries*. Passed down through five thousand years of Chinese history, these books contain the essence of the wisdom and experience of past sages and virtuous ancients. Fourth, we would be able to read Buddhist sutras that serve as the foundation for our practice.

[23] ["Namo Amituofo" is Chinese and means "To pay homage to Amitabha Buddha." Trans.]

[24] It is the same in Buddhism. To show the utmost respect, a monk or nun is addressed by the name of his or her way place or location. Master Zhizhe was addressed as the great master of Tiantai because he lived on Tiantai Mountain. Another example is Master Kuiji who was called Cien because he was from the Cien Temple.

[25] Although this is not a very high level of achievement, attainment of it showed that Liaofan was proceeding correctly and had received a good response.

[26] [The third study is skills for making a living and the fourth is the arts. Trans.]

[27] [Another of the *Five Classics* of Confucianism, the *Book of Rites* was concerned with principles of conduct. Trans.]

[28] Everyday Liaofan handled public affairs and served as an interrogator in the judicial system. This is unlike today where the judicial and legislative departments are separated. In ancient China, the mayor managed judicial and legislative cases.

[29] Buddhism flourished during the Ming and Qing dynasties, several centuries ago, when many monks and nuns lived on the four famous mountains. The ten thousand who lived on Wutai Mt. [symbolizing Manjusri Bodhisattva] was actually not a large number. The mountain with the most people was Putuo,

[symbolizing Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva] with around thirty to forty thousand monks and nuns in residence. And there were over ten thousand living on Emei Mt. [symbolizing Samantabhadra Bodhisattva] and Jiouhua Mt. [symbolizing Ksitagarbha Bodhisattva].

[30] [The *Book of History*, another of the *Five Classics* of Confucianism, is a collection of ancient historical documents. Trans.]

[31] [A time when China was undergoing much change. Trans.]

[32] The *Spring and Autumn Annals*, another of the *Five Classics*, is an historic account of the Lu Nation. Throughout his lifetime, Confucius edited and compiled these records into a book, which has been passed down to this day. This book has commentaries written by many people. The most popular and widely studied one has been extensively footnoted by Zuo Qiuming and is called the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Two other editions are the *Gongyang Commentary* and the *Guliang Commentary*. By far, the *Spring-Autumn Annals* is the most accurate, and best written and footnoted. All three are in the *Thirteen Ancient Chinese Scriptures*.

[33] [Ganzhu Living Buddha was a student of Zhangjia Living Buddha. Trans.]

[34] [Zhou Gong, the Duke of Zhou of the Zhou dynasty, was a role model for good politicians. He was an outstanding regent who helped his nephew, Emperor Zhou Chengwang, to govern the country. Yiyin was a famous minister in the Shang dynasty. Trans.]

[35] [The five abilities are clairvoyance, clairaudience, knowing one's own past lifetimes, physical abilities, and knowing the minds of others. Trans.]

[36] In the past, it was a Chinese custom for a man to always leave his hat on, even at the time of death. To do otherwise would have been a disgrace.

[37] [Five deadly offenses are patricide, matricide, to intentionally cause a Buddha to bleed, to kill a bodhisattva or an arhat, and to disrupt the Sangha's unity. Ten bad karmas are to kill, steal, commit sexual misconduct, lie, use abusive language, bear tales, use enticing words, have greed, anger, and ignorance. Trans.]

[38] Thus, main halls in Buddhist temples are called the Hall of Great Heroes.

[39] [Emperor Shun was a highly respected emperor who lived over four thousand years ago. Trans.]

[40] [In other words, as good thoughts arise, bad thoughts are replaced. Trans.]

[41] [Master Yuanying was a Zen master who, after a lifetime of specializing in the *Surangama Sutra*, recommended the Pure Land method. Master Baojing was a Tiantai master and was the student of Master Dixian. Trans.]

[42] [Upon marriage, the husband's family would give a dowry to the family of the future bride. Families who did not know better often accepted an offer of marriage from the wealthiest family. Trans.]

[43] [Regardless of where our past ancestors are currently, if we are truly filial, then our good deeds can bring them honor and respect from other beings and will thus benefit them even if they are living in one of the three bad paths. Therefore, when we make offerings to them, they will accept what we have done. Trans.]

[44] Liaofan's examples were only a few decades apart and were familiar to everyone of his time. He used them to encourage the practice and accumulation of goodness for these will result in good rewards.

[45] When I was young, I lived in Jianou for six years and often went with my schoolmates to play in what had formerly been Yang Rong's house. It was of an ancient style filled with many antiques and had two stone lions on either side of the front door. Lanterns were also hung in front of the door, similar to those outside of a temple.

[46] The family could not have earned much money. It was an accepted practice in Fujian to not charge a set fee. Students did not even need to pay. But even when passengers did not have any money, they still would be carried across the river. A small container was placed on one side of the boat, and people who had money, put in whatever amount they wished.

[47] At the time of this incident, the county magistrate also handled judicial matters and served as the judge.

[48] [In the Chinese culture, a prosperous family is one that has many male descendants who are virtuous and who are successful in their work. Many descendants are crucial because then there will be people to practice goodness and to bring honor to their ancestors. Trans.]

[49] At the time, government officials in lower positions received a small salary and many of them retired in a state of near impoverishment. If an official retired with a good amount of money, it was highly likely that he had taken bribes or embezzled during his term of office. Where else could the money have come from? Scholars were not taught how to run a business. If one became a high-ranking official and contributed greatly to the country, then he could receive rewards in the form of farmlands and houses.

[50] Zicheng's two sons were both in the Department of Civil Personnel. Their ranks were similar to a vice-minister. Usually, there was one minister and two vice-ministers, one for administrative matters and the other for general matters. Both of the grandsons were well known for doing a good job. A current descendant, Mr. Yang Chuting, also held a government position and was known for his honesty and fairness.

[51] Common sense is needed when treating a person with hypothermia. Northerners are familiar with the procedure; however, southerners are generally not. In such a case, use a towel soaked in cold water to gently rub the body in order to let the cold slowly seep out of the pores.

[52] [The Zhou dynasty that had seen the golden age of Chinese philosophy, lasted almost eight hundred years and collapsed in 256 B.C. Trans.]

[53] There are several books, which tell of such accounts, such as *Notes from Yuewei Chamber* by Ji Xiaolan, *Spiritual Collections* by Pu Sungling, *Twenty-five Books of Official Records*, and *A Record of Response and Retribution in History*, from the first year of the Republic of China. These all provide numerous examples of the law of causality.

[54] At the time, wealthy people who owned all of the land rented it to the farmers. Most of the farmers would be able to survive a bad year as long as they did not have to pay the rent.

[55] Trials usually began at the break of dawn. The atmosphere in the dark courtroom was extremely frightening, like being held for judgment in hell before the king of the underworld. Mr. Tu worked in the judiciary department that is similar to today's Supreme Court. His position, roughly equivalent to that of section chief, was not high.

[56] Since the emperor resided in the imperial city, it was the best governed and the model for the rest of the country. Mr. Tu understood that if it had unjustly sentenced prisoners, then there must be many more such cases outside the city.

[57] Master Zhongfeng lived during the Yuan dynasty. [1280-1368.] His name may be familiar to some of us because he edited the *Thrice Yearning Ceremony Book* that we use in our practice.

[58] The pure land of each Buddha-land is manifested from the true nature. But, if we possess just one longing, then this is no longer a reflection of the true nature.

[59] We can see an example of this in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* where the Brahman girl called Bright Eyes made a vow on behalf of her mother.

[60] During ancient times in China, students used to give their teacher small gifts during holidays. Originally, the gifts were strips of dried meat tied into a bundle. Later, the gifts varied and may not necessarily have been dried meat. Teachers taught at home schools and the number of students varied. Twenty to thirty was a good size while the smaller schools might have had only a dozen or so students, in which case the teacher would receive a meager amount of gifts.

[61] During ancient times, it was an acceptable custom for a man who had no sons to take a second wife to bear him an heir to carry on the family line.

[62] In ancient times, when such objects were often used as tokens of a promise, the most preferred shape was round and flat with a circular hole in the middle. This was called a *bi* while others were called *guei* and *zhang*, with the size of a guei generally being larger than a zhang. They were used as reminders of something important to be done. Several of these jade objects from different dynasties can be found in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan and have extremely high historical value.

[63] In ancient China, a person who recommended a highly valuable individual to the emperor would be rewarded. Why? Because whenever this person contributed to the country and created benefits for others, it was all because of another's recommendation. The good deeds that have been done by this person are the same as the person who recommended him. Therefore, in ancient China, people often recommended those who were good, filial, honest, and talented to the imperial palace so that true talent could be cultivated.

[64] Mara is the representation of all that is evil, a malevolent being who tries to prevent us from doing good or achieving attainment in our practice.

[65] This is especially true during a war when we may be forced to suffer overwhelming losses such as that of our homes. In such situations, as we drift from one place to another, we have no idea of what is going to happen next. Therefore, since the age of ten, all the children in my family were taught to be independent and to take care of ourselves in the event we were separated from our family. Also, we were taught how to survive alone in the woods.

[66] [Laozi, ca.570-ca.490 B.C., is considered the founder of Taoism, a belief system that seeks complete harmony with nature. Taoism teaches us to abandon all struggling and to seek utter simplicity through matters of culture, nature, and mysticism. Zhuangzi, ca.369-ca.286 B.C., was a philosopher who was of great importance to Taoism. Trans.]

[67] Therefore, Buddhists would do well to read the *Four Books*. Truthfully speaking, we can only give rise to the heart that loves the country and its people, if we have completely read the *Four Books* and understand China's historical culture. Today, the Chinese have forgotten about the country and its people due to poor planning of the educational system.

[68] The heart and roots of Chinese culture lie in ancestral memorial halls and the classical Chinese language. The reason China became a country with so much cultural history that extends over thousands of years is due to the strong foundation of the normal human relationships in the Chinese ethical tradition. Classical Chinese must be preserved because without it, the Chinese people will suffer horrendous adversities, and the race can 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.

[69] In the past, books were not privately owned so writing in them was forbidden. They were carefully passed down for generations. Anyone who wished an individual copy would hand copy one. The books were cherished, respected, and protected. If any of these ancient texts were damaged, they would be mended, copied, and distributed, so they would not be lost. This was the greatest merit.

[70] [In the Buddha's time, monastics obtained food by going on almsrounds. The monastics could seek food at no more than seven houses. If they received enough food at the first house, then there was no need to go to any more. But if they did not receive enough food, they could move on to the next house as long as they did not go to more than seven houses. This was to observe the precepts and propriety, and to practice non-attachment to food, clothing, and living necessities. Trans.]

GLOSSARY

affinity. Favorable or unfavorable relationships with others.

affliction. Condition or cause of pain, distress, and suffering which disturbs the body and mind. They can be thoughts of gain or loss, wanting to control others, criticism or slander, worries, doubts, regrets, etc.

alaya consciousness. Our karma repository, the thought database from all of our past and present lives, good and bad.

Amitabha. The name of the Buddha of the Western Pure Land, primarily meaning Infinite Life and Infinite Light. To help all beings attain buddhahood, Amitabha Buddha created the Western Pure Land, an ideal place of cultivation. Sakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha of our world, explained that people in our time would be immersed in afflictions and bad habits. Due to this, virtually the only hope that we have to transcend our sufferings is to properly practice the Pure Land method and thus be born in the Pure Land.

Amitabha Sutra. One of the three primary Pure Land sutras, it describes some of the physical elements of the Pure Land. In this sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha urged people four times to seek birth in the Western Pure Land through buddha-name chanting.

attachments. Strong desires or cravings for family, friends, possessions, sensuous pleasures, erroneous views, life, the idea of the self as an individual, etc.

bodhi mind. This is the goal of Mahayana Buddhism, to ultimately think of others, to uncover the innate compassion and wisdom of the true nature, and to transcend the cycle of rebirth to attain buddhahood. The bodhi mind is the compassionate mind in which every thought is to attain supreme, perfect enlightenment for self and all others.

bodhisattva. One who has vowed to attain supreme, perfect enlightenment for themselves as well as for all beings. While Buddhas symbolize our virtuous nature, bodhisattvas and arhats represent the virtue of practice, without which the innate virtuous nature cannot be revealed.

Buddha. Buddha is a Sanskrit word, meaning "wisdom and enlightenment." A Buddha is one who has reached supreme perfection both in self-realization and in helping others to attain realization. The innumerable Buddhas are not gods to be worshipped but compassionate and wise beings to be respected and emulated.

causality (also know as cause and effect). Everything that happens to us is the result of what we have thought, said, or done. Our current thoughts, speech, and actions will determine what we undergo in our future lifetimes.

constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. The state in which we do not have discriminatory thoughts and attachments. At this point, the mind remembers and does not forget him. After prolonged cultivation, we ceaselessly contemplate Amitabha Buddha.

delusion. False beliefs and views, not understanding the true reality.

Dharma. The teachings of the Buddha (capitalized in English). When lowercased, dharmas refers to things, events, phenomena, everything in the universe.

discriminatory thoughts. Discriminatory thoughts and attachments are the root cause of why we are still subject to rebirth. Discriminatory thoughts occur when we see others and ourselves as two.

dust. All the pollutants that contaminate our true nature. They include form, sound, smell, taste, texture, and mind object.

enlightenment. Often means supreme, perfect enlightenment,

the enlightenment of the Buddhas. It is to see one's true nature and to comprehend the true reality.

filial piety. Filial piety means to take care of parents physically and mentally, and to fulfill their wishes. To further extend and enhance our respect and care for our parents, we have compassion for all beings in this world.

five human relationships. These principles taught by Confucius are founded on traditional moral principles. They are those between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, friends, political leaders and the public.

five practice guidelines. The three conditions, the six harmonies, the three learnings, the six paramitas, and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's ten great vows.

five precepts. The five precepts are to not kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants. The first four offenses are physical transgressions of the true nature. Whether or not we have taken the precepts, it is wrong to commit these acts. For someone who has taken the five precepts, this is a double violation. However, to take intoxicants is different. Only someone who has taken the precepts and then takes intoxicants will have broken this precept.

five Pure Land sutras and one treatise. The *Buddha Speaks of the Infinite Life Sutra of Adornment, Purity, Equality, and Enlightenment of the Mahayana School* (*Infinite Life Sutra*); the *Amitabha Sutra*; the *Visualization Sutra*; "Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Conduct and Vows", from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*; "The Perfect Complete Realization of Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva through Buddha Name Recitation" from the *Surangama Sutra*; and the *Rebirth Treatise*.

forty-eight vows. Different bodhisattvas make different vows. Dharmakara Bodhisattva made forty-eight vows before he became Amitabha Buddha. He wished to create an ideal land for all those who wished to transcend rebirth within the six

paths. These beings would be born in the Pure Land as bodhisattvas who would never again regress in their practice. They would learn all the ways to help other beings transcend birth and death, and to attain buddhahood.

four kinds of kindness. Three jewels, parents, teachers, and all sentient beings.

good fortune. All the goodness in one's life. It may manifest as happiness, friends, family, health, longevity, intelligence, prosperity, position, etc. Good fortune can be carried with us from one life to another but it cannot help us to transcend the cycle of rebirth.

good roots. Good qualities or seeds sown in a good life to be reaped later. The ultimate benefit of good roots for Pure Land practitioners is birth in the Western Pure Land.

Infinite Life Sutra. One of the three primary sutras of the Pure Land school, the *Infinite Life Sutra* is often called the *Longer Amitabha Sutra*. The shorter version is called the *Amitabha Sutra*. The Amitabha sutras are unusual in that they were self-spoken. This was unusual because almost all of the teachings by the Buddha were the result of a question being raised by one of his students. But since the students did not know about Amitabha Buddha and his pure land they were unable to ask, and so the Buddha initiated the teaching himself.

karma. A deed. Karma can be good, bad, pure, or neutral.

Mahayana. One of the two major branches of Buddhism, it is the bodhisattva path of helping all sentient beings to attain enlightenment.

merits and virtues. Merits are accumulated by selflessly doing good deeds without wandering and discriminatory thoughts, or attachments, and the correction of our erroneous thoughts and behavior. Virtues arise from deep concentration and wisdom.

one mind undisturbed. This is the totally focused mind

without any improper thoughts. It is the pure mind that Pure Land practitioners achieve by single-minded concentration on "Amituofo."

one true Dharma realm. The ultimate state of buddhahood without any differentiation between realms for everything is one. With differentiation, we will see ten realms; Buddhas know there is actually only one.

phenomena. Things, events, happenings: everything in the entire universe. Noumenon is the principle or essence while phenomena is the event or form. Noumenon is perceived through intuition or thought while phenomena is perceived through the senses.

precepts. In Buddhism, precepts are rules that were given by Sakyamuni Buddha to guide his students from erroneous thoughts, speech, and behavior. In the more general sense, precepts are rules or principles that prescribe a particular course of action or conduct.

pure mind or purity of mind. The mind without wandering and discriminatory thoughts, or attachments. The pure mind has no thoughts of like or dislike, favorable or unfavorable. It has no greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, or wrong views. It is the calm mind that is no longer affected by the environment. It is the serene and natural state of all beings.

retribution. Karmic consequences from thoughts, words, or deeds.

samadhi. Proper enjoyment. Usually denotes the particular final stage of pure concentration and contemplation. There are many degrees and types of samadhi.

samsara (also known as the six paths). The continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Three upper paths are heavens, asuras, and humans. Three lower paths are animals, hungry ghosts, and hells.

Sangha. A group of four or more people who properly practice the Buddha's teaching together, especially the six harmonies.

Sanskrit. A language of ancient India.

sentient being. A living being that is self-aware and that can experience feeling or sensation.

six harmonies. The six harmonies, the second of our five practice guidelines, are the basis for harmonious interaction whether in the family, the Sangha, at work, etc. They are harmony in having the same viewpoints, observing the same precepts, living together, speaking without conflict, experiencing the Dharma bliss, and sharing benefits.

six paramitas. The fourth of the practice guidelines. Bodhisattvas abide by six guidelines that are called the six paramitas. These teach us how to remedy our major afflictions. The six are giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

six senses. Sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and thought.

ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva personifies the vows and conduct of the Buddhas. He is usually depicted seated on an elephant with six tusks that represent the six paramitas. The ten vows are to respect all Buddhas, praise Tathagata, make offerings extensively, repent karmic obstacles, rejoice at others' meritorious deeds, request the turning of the Dharma wheel, request the Buddha to remain in this world, constantly follow the Buddha's teachings, accommodate all sentient beings, and dedicate all merits universally.

ten virtuous karmas. The ten virtuous karmas are basic to our practice of Buddhism. The Buddha grouped them into three major categories: physical, verbal, and mental to protect the three karmas of body, speech, and mind. Physically, we are prohibited from killing, stealing, and engaging in sexual

misconduct. Verbally, we are prohibited from speech that is false, divisive, harsh, and enticing. Mentally, we are prohibited from having greed, anger, and ignorance.

Theravada Buddhism. The path of strictly abiding by the precepts. The objective is to attain realization for oneself. It is often called the path of the elders and is primarily practiced in southern Asia and the west.

three bad paths. Animals, hungry ghosts, and hells.

three conditions. The first of the five practice guidelines. The first condition embodies the practice of self-discipline. The second condition embodies the practice of deep concentration, and the third condition embodies the practice of wisdom. The First Condition is to be filial to and care for one's parents; be respectful to one's teachers and elders; be compassionate and not kill any living beings, and abide by the ten virtuous karmas. The Second Condition is to take the Three Refuges; abide by the precepts, laws, and customs; and conduct oneself in a proper and appropriate manner. The Third Condition is to give rise to the bodhi mind; deeply believe in the law of causality; recite and uphold Mahayana sutras; and encourage others to advance on the path to enlightenment.

three Dharma ages. The Dharma Perfect Age, during which enlightenment was often attained, began with Sakyamuni Buddha's demise and lasted five hundred years. The Dharma Semblance Age, during which enlightenment was seldom attained, followed and lasted one thousand years. The Dharma-Ending Age began after that and will last for ten thousand years. During this current age, enlightenment will rarely be attained.

three karmas. Created by our body, speech, and mind.

three learnings. The third of the practice guidelines. Precept observation leads to meditative concentration that gives rise to wisdom. The three learnings are the fourth of our five practice

guidelines. To practice according to the teachings is self-discipline; when our minds are settled and focused on one method of cultivation, we will have deep concentration and with deep concentration, we will uncover our innate wisdom

three relationships. These three relationships taught by Confucius are among humans, among humans and spirits, and among humans and the nature.

true nature. Original, true self that all beings still have, but which is currently covered by deluded thoughts and evil karma. In essence, since all beings have the same true nature as Buddhas have, all are equal to the Buddhas. Once delusion is eliminated, we will uncover this true nature and attain supreme, perfect enlightenment.

virtues. See **merits**.

Visualization Sutra. The third of the primary sutras of the Pure Land School. In the *Visualization Sutra*, we learn that when Queen Vaidehi suffered from overwhelming family misfortune, she bitterly said to Sakyamuni Buddha, "Life is filled with suffering. Is there not a place without it? I wish to live in such a world." Sakyamuni Buddha displayed for her all the buddha-lands in the universe. After seeing all the lands, she chose the Western Pure Land and vowed to be born there. Concerned about those who would come after her and be unable to learn directly from the Buddha, she asked on their behalf how to achieve birth in the Pure Land.

wandering thoughts. Afflictions that cloud our true nature. To have no wandering thoughts means to have only virtuous thoughts, not that our minds are empty of all thoughts. As ordinary beings, we use an illusory mind, the mind that arises and ceases, and that has wandering thoughts. Awakened beings use the true mind that constantly dwells on truth.

Western Pure Land. See forty-eight vows.

Dedication of Merit

May the merits and virtues accrued from this work
adorn the Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four kinds of kindness above,
and relieve the sufferings of those
in the Three Paths below.

May all those who see or hear of this
bring forth the heart of
understanding and compassion,
and at the end of this life
be born together in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.