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# The Practical Value of “Bu lǚ xié jīng, bù qī àn shì” 不履邪徑，不欺暗室 of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*

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Respected Venerable Shengmiao and my dear teacher, good morning. My name is Qixuan Zhou and I would like to share with you the topic on “The Practical Value of ‘Bu lǚ xié jīng, bù qī àn shì’ 不履邪徑，不欺暗室”.

This is the contents of today’s presentation. There are 3 parts, which are the meaning of “Bu lǚ xié jīng bù qī àn shì”, what is the practical value to be found in this phrase and conclusion.

Now, the part 1: the meaning of “Bu lǚ xié jīng bù qī àn shì”.

First, let us talk about “Bu lǚ xié jīng”. As explained by the *Shuo Wen jie zi*, the character lǚ 履 means: “what the foot depends on”<sup>1</sup>, intended for the meaning “to trample”<sup>2</sup>; the character xié 邪 refers to a county named Lang Ya<sup>3</sup>, which later extends to “evil”<sup>4</sup>. As for the character jīng 徑, it refers to “path”<sup>5</sup>, which evolved from meaning “small path only for walking”<sup>6</sup>. According to the meaning of these characters, we can roughly get the literal meaning of this phrase, that is, “don’t follow the back roads”.

However, in the Chapter of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*, it has a deeper spiritual connotation. First of all, according to the literal meaning and combined with the following phrase “avoids committing offenses in secret, thinking that no one will know.”<sup>7</sup>, we can deduce the first extended meaning of actual behavior as “not to do even small bad things”. Combining with what is stated at the end of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*: “When one thinks of doing good, even if the act has not yet been done, fortune is already shadowing him. When one thinks of evil, even if the act has not yet been committed, disasters are already standing by.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, we can infer that the second extended meaning of spirit here is “not to bear bad thoughts in mind”.

By understanding the meaning of “path” as referred to by the character jīng, we can reasonably infer that the above-mentioned “small bad things” from the actual behavior or “bad thoughts” from the spiritual mind all refer to some minor things, not the evils. Such understanding provokes the discussion of the meaning of the character xié. The character xié here does not exactly mean

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<sup>1</sup> Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *shuowen jiezizhu* 說文解字注 [The annotation of *shuowen jiezi*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p1607.

<sup>2</sup> Gu Yankui 谷衍奎, *hanzi yuanliu zidian* 漢字源流字典 [Chinese Character Source Dictionary], (Beijing, Yuwen Book Company), p1851.

<sup>3</sup> Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *shuowen jiezizhu* 說文解字注 [The annotation of *shuowen jiezi*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p1190.

<sup>4</sup> Gu Yankui 谷衍奎, *hanzi yuanliu zidian* 漢字源流字典 [Chinese Character Source Dictionary], (Beijing, Yuwen Book Company), p253.

<sup>5</sup> Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *shuowen jiezizhu* 說文解字注 [The annotation of *shuowen jiezi*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p301.

<sup>6</sup> Gu Yankui 谷衍奎, *hanzi yuanliu zidian* 漢字源流字典 [Chinese Character Source Dictionary], (Beijing, Yuwen Book Company), p664.

<sup>7</sup> Yu Yue 俞樾, *taishang ganyingpian zuanyi* 太上感應篇續義 [The annotation of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*], (Shanghai, East China Normal University Press), p10.

<sup>8</sup> Yu Yue 俞樾, *taishang ganyingpian zuanyi* 太上感應篇續義 [The annotation of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*], (Shanghai, East China Normal University Press), p76.

“sinister”, but refers to something which is deviated from the right path. Although it cannot be regarded as “sinister”, it is included in the “bad path” because its deviation.

In summary, based on above analysis, we concluded two levels of the meaning of the “Bu lü xie jing” 不履邪徑, one is not to deviate from the right path even when doing little things in actual behavior, another is not to have bad thoughts in mind. So what is the right path? It is mentioned in the *Analects of Confucius*: “The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain.”<sup>9</sup> It is also mentioned in *LiaoFan's Four Lessons* that “If it is for the public, then it is real goodness. If we only think of ourselves while doing good acts, then that is considered private benefit and that is false goodness.” It can be seen that standard for judging deviation depends on whether the behavior or thought is ultimately for justice or for private benefit. If it is for one's own interests, then such behavior and thought are regarded as in the “bad path”.

Next, let us see the meaning of “bu qi an shi”. Compared with “bu lü xie jing”, it is more straightforward, which is what Confucianists call “self-discipline”. For example, In *The Book of Rites: the Doctrine of the Mean*, it is mentioned: “The gentleman is cautious where no one sees him and where no one hears him. From the most subtle and tiny words or deeds, one's quality can be seen. So the gentleman should learn to be prudent when alone”<sup>10</sup> Here we can see that the reason why a gentleman can be self-discipline is because he understands that there is no space totally secret. As the disciple Zeng said, “What ten eyes behold, what ten hands point to, is to be regarded with reverence!”<sup>11</sup> There is more specific descriptions in *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*. For example, at the beginning of the chapter, it is mentioned that “Depending on the severity of a person's individual offenses, the spirits of justice shortens his or her original lifespan in proportion to the level of wickedness involved.”<sup>12</sup> Not only that, the chapter also mentions in the later part that “there are various demigods and spirits such as the Hearth Spirit and Gods of the North who shadow each individual and record (impartially and without mistake) each their offenses”<sup>13</sup>, which we usually can't see and touch, concretize the objects mentioned in the *the Doctrine of the Mean*, making people feel more intuitive.

With the understanding of the specific meaning of “Bu lü xie jing, bu qi an shi” 不履邪徑，不欺暗室, we come to the second part: what is the practical value to be found in this phrase. In modern society, there are fewer and fewer people who can practice these two doctrines. People tend to think more about their personal interests. According to our previous explanation of the meaning of “bad path”, when people only concern about their own interests, more or less, they are following it. However, Mencius said, “All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others.”<sup>14</sup> The morality of benevolence and righteousness referred as the “right path” should be of human nature. Why are we not able to adopt it? Although kindness is our innate nature, it also depends on

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<sup>9</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 *sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 [The annotation of *the Four Books*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p73.

<sup>10</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 *sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 [The annotation of *the Four Books*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p17.

<sup>11</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 *sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 [The annotation of *the Four Books*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p7.

<sup>12</sup> Yu Yue 俞樾, *taishang ganyingpian zuanyi* 太上感應篇續義 [The annotation of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*], (Shanghai, East China Normal University Press), p7.

<sup>13</sup> Yu Yue 俞樾, *taishang ganyingpian zuanyi* 太上感應篇續義 [The annotation of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution*], (Shanghai, East China Normal University Press), p8.

<sup>14</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 *sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 [The annotation of *the Four Books*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p237.

nurturing. Just as the saying goes, “What the Great Learning teaches, is to illustrate illustrious virtue”<sup>15</sup>. Without nurturing and guidance, the kindness in our nature will be blinded by the desire for gain. Then all our behavior and thoughts will always revolve around “self-interest”. And “Superiors and inferiors will try to snatch this profit the one from the other, and the kingdom will be endangered.”<sup>16</sup>. Then our behavior and thoughts will refer to deviation from the right path.

From above we can see that the education is very important, just as the saying goes "Before building the country and leading the people, education is the first priority". What education should come the first? The family education. “The habits formed at an early age will turn into natural and solid human nature”. Like the old saying goes “one's character is formed at a young age and lasts till he is eighty”, which is quite sensible. If a child can be given correct guidance and instruction at a young age, he will be laid with solid foundation for whole life and will not go astray. How to do family education well? The idea of “Bu lǚ xié jīng, bù qī àn shì”不履邪徑，不欺暗室 is very precious. These words not only requires education by behavior, but also by spirit.

Parents must be able to set a good example for their children. Children at school age period are especially good at imitation. If parents can exercise the doctrine of “Bu lǚ xié jīng, bù qī àn shì”不履邪徑，不欺暗室, and always set a good example for their children, then their children will naturally be virtuous and filial. At the same time, they can also use these doctrines to demand their own behavior and thoughts, and devote themselves to the welfare of the country and society.

There is often a wrong understanding in modern society, that is, those who can make money and who are knowledgeable and skillful are good children. There is obviously a deviation. It is certainly a good thing that if one is equipped with science and technology, he can benefit more people and make their life more convenient under the guidance of good thinking. However, it is obviously that if under the guidance of self-interest and desire, more science and technology will bring greater disaster to the society. Therefore, it is urgently needed to improve the sense of morality under the words and deeds from their parents with the doctrine of “Bu lǚ xié jīng, bù qī àn shì”不履邪徑，不欺暗室, so that the young generation will benefit but not to damage the society.

To sum up, the practical value of the phrase “Bu lǚ xié jīng, bù qī àn shì”不履邪徑，不欺暗室 in the Chapter of *The Treatise on Response and Retribution* exactly reveals that selfishness is the reason behind the modern society's “people vying with each other for benefit”. To reverse this situation, we need to build a good family education, and this phrase reveals the most important concept of behavior education and spirit education in a family. If everyone can abide by this doctrine and set a good example for young generations, the World Unity is in the foreseeable future.

This is all for my presentation today, any suggestion and feedback would be appreciated. Thank you for listening.

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<sup>15</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 *sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 [The annotation of *the Four Books*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p3.

<sup>16</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹 *sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集註 [The annotation of *the Four Books*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p201.

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