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A Discussion on the Importance of Keeping Away from Ignorance in Self-Cultivation and How to Be Free from Ignorance

Abstract

Being free from ignorance is the foundation of self-cultivation. The essay aims at discussing it from two aspects, that is, 'keeping away from ignorance could help people enjoy life under any circumstance' and 'keeping away from ignorance people will love others as loving themselves'. Moreover, the essay also provides a few practical methods for being free from ignorance.

Keywords: Ignorance, Pure, One Entity

Preface

Professor Chin Kung states that ignorance is the origin of greed, anger, violence, theft, sexual misconduct and falsehood[1]. Therefore, being free from ignorance is crucial for self-cultivation. It not only can keep people away from miseries and sins, but also let everybody feel the real joy of life anytime and anywhere.

Keeping away from ignorance could help people enjoy life under any circumstance

When people are free from ignorance, their life state will be peaceful and cheerful, like the expression *in The Doctrine of the Mean*: 'In a position of wealth and honour, he does what is proper to a position of wealth and honour. In a poor and low position, he does what is proper to a poor and low position. Situated among barbarous tribes, he does what is proper to a situation among barbarous tribes. In a position of sorrow and difficulty, he does what is proper to a

[1] Shi Chi-Kung 釋淨空, *Commentaries on 'The Ten Virtuous Karmas Sutra'*《十善業道經講記》[In Chinese] (Taiwan: The Corporation Republic Of Hwa Dzan Society), p.329.

position of sorrow and difficulty’ [2].

This energetic and optimistic attitude is based on the profound understanding of the reality of life. Venerable Master Hanshan explained that ‘The pure self-nature is within everybody’[3]. Therefore, the self-nature does not increase or decrease with the change of circumstances such as wealth, status, ethnicity and hardship. The renowned Zen master Sengcan also stated that ‘Just being there with no judging, the innate wisdom will be revealed’[4]. When people live in every present moment with complete openness, the innate wisdom and bravery will be discovered.

Hence, when in a position of wealth and honour, a man who is free from ignorance will live completely in this situation with no anxiety.Take Emperor Shun as an example， in spite of possessing immense wealth and power, he was ‘not affected by them as if those things had always belonged to him’[5]. His inner peace had not been disturbed by the fortune and power, so that through innate wisdom he could grasp the tendency of the development of the country, creating a peaceful golden era rarely found in history.

When in a poor and low position, a man who is free from ignorance will also live completely in this situation with no anxiety. Take Tao Yuanming as an example, although he was sometimes even forced to beg for food, his optimistic attitude enabled him to rise above material happiness. His inner peace had not been disturbed by poverty and the humble status. With innate bravery and wisdom, he could maintain his moral integrity, transcending harsh material conditions, enjoying the warmth of the world and the beauty of the universe.

When being exiled to barbarous tribes, a man who is free from ignorance will still live

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[2] Translation by James Legge, with modification as appropriate. J. Legge, *The Doctrine of the Mean·the Great Learning*《中庸 · 大學》(ZhengZhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Classics Press 中州古籍出版社, 2016), pp.19-21.

[3] Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Commentaries on ‘The Doctrine of the Mean’*《中庸直指》[In Chinese] (Nanjing: Jinling Buddhist Scriptures Publishing 金陵刻經處), p.35.

[4] Shi Sengcan 釋僧璨, *Xin Xin Ming*《信心銘》[In Chinese], <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%BF%A1%E5%BF%83%E9%93%AD/16936> [accessed 27 November 2017].

[5] Translation by James Legge, with modification as appropriate. J. Legge, *The Works of Mencius*《孟子》(ZhengZhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Classics Press 中州古籍出版社, 2016), p515.

completely in this situation with no anxiety. Su Dongpo is another example. Despite having been exiled to one of the most isolated islands in the south of ancient China, Hainan, he taught the local people how to dig well, how to develop agriculture and education, spreading the seeds of civilization across the remote and uncivilised Hainan . His inner peace had not been disturbed by the external situation of living in an isolated area and barbarous tribes. Therefore, he did not complain about the unfair fate and harsh environment. Conversely, he was together with the local people to construct their home and shared the achievements with them. He said humorously in his poem, 'I am a son of Hainan Island although I was born in Xishu'[6].

When facing difficulties and adversities, a man who is free from ignorance will continue to live completely in this situation with no anxiety. Take Wen Tianxiang as an example, although had been imprisoned by the enemies and lured with the position of prime minister, he still held fast the moral principles and would rather die than surrender. His inner peace had not been disturbed by external difficulties and adversities. Hence, he had no hesitation to devote himself to protecting his country and nationality at the crucial moment. He once wrote in the poem, 'Everyone must die; let me but leave a loyal heart shining on the pages of history'[7]. His righteousness has been inspiring the Chinese people for thousands of years.

By contrast, those unwise are always anxious about everything and constantly cling on what is so called 'nice' and reject what is so called 'terrible'. In the position of wealth and honour, they will be arrogant and dissolute; in the position of poverty and humbleness, they will blame destiny and others; when living in barbarous tribes, they will abandon themselves to despair; when facing difficulties and adversities, they will sacrifice moral principles for self-interests, which causes not only tremendous miseries to themselves, but also huge damages to society.

Therefore, only keeping away from ignorance and connecting with the pure innate nature, can

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[6] Su Shi 蘇軾，*Bie Hainan Li Min Biao*《别海南黎民表》[In Chinese], <https://baike.baidu.com/item/别海南黎民表/12691737?fr> [accessed 27 November 2017].

[7] Wen Tianxiang 文天祥，*Guo Ling Ding Yang*《過零丁洋》[In Chinese], <http://hanyu.baidu.com/s?wd=%E8%BF%87%E9%9B%B6%E4%B8%81%E6%B4%8B&from=poem>, the English Translation: <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/407643922.html> .[accessed 27 November 2017]

people transcend the external conditions including social status, living environment and so forth to discover the real beauty of life and enjoy it.

Nowadays, the significance of freedom is always emphasised. However, the greatest freedom is to enjoy life no matter what the external circumstance is.

By keeping away from ignorance, people will love others as loving themselves

Wang Yangming stated in *The Discussion of the Great Learning* that 'The great man understands that all sentient beings are of the same origin. Therefore, he regards the whole world as his family, the nation as his own body'[8]. A man who keep himself away from ignorance is just like the great man mentioned by Wang，regarding all sentient beings as his own, loving them as loving himself.

However, building up this kind of concept is not easy. Due to ignorance, the limits between selves and others are always highlighted. The perspective of harming others to benefit oneself is not uncommon. When it becomes one's outlook on life, the sufferings of individuals will be caused; when it becomes a national leader's outlook on life, undoubtedly, the sufferings of the nation will be caused.

This could be easily found in history. For instance, the notorious traitor ministers and corrupted officials, Zhao Gao（趙高）in the Qin dynasty, the Ten Eunuchs（十常侍） in the Han dynasty, An Lushan（安祿山） in the Tang Dynasty, Qin Hui（秦檜） in the Song dynasty, Yan Song（嚴嵩） in the Ming dynasty, He Shen（和珅） in the Qing dynasty, and corrupted officials in modern society, none of them could escape punishments from the law of cause and effect.

Moreover, sovereigns separating their individual interests from people's interests will also lead

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[8] Wang Shouren 王守仁，*The discussion on 'The Great Learning'*,《大學問》[In Chinese], <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%A4%A7%E5%AD%A6%E9%97%AE/6248335?fr=aladdin>[accessed 27 November 2017].

to ruin. It is well known that during the late Qing dynasty, Empress Dowager Cixi had misappropriated the naval military expenditure to build the Summer Palace, and it resulted in the complete failure of the Beiyang Fleet as well as hastened the downfall of the Qing dynasty. At the same time, Cixi's ridiculous delusion of seeking self-interest by harming the benefits of the people and the country was also broken[9].

Thus, it is crucial for an individual's self-cultivation, especially for leader's self-cultivation, to keep away from ignorance and recognize that all sentient beings are united as one. In the late Qing dynasty, sovereigns' ignorance caused the decline of modern China. By contrast, due to the selfless spirit of the leaders, to serve the people wholeheartedly, just like what Wang Yangming said, ' Regarding the whole world as my family, the nation as my own body', China have been developing rapidly in recent years.

In the Eighteenth National Congress of CPC, President Xi Jinping proposed, 'We must always bear in mind what the people think and share weal and woe with them, and we must work together with them diligently for the public good and for the expectations of history and of the people'[10]. Is it not the modern interpretation of uniting oneself and others as one? In addition, President Xi has also been promoting the establishment of the One Belt One Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which have even been uniting the whole world as one to pursue the common well-being of human beings. The fruitful results of these projects are obvious. Take China Railway Express as an example, currently, the trade volumes in China and the countries along the routes have already been more than one trillion dollars. This kind of win-win cooperation has enabled the people of different countries to share the common prosperity[11]. Are they not the excellent achievements of uniting selves and others as one?

All sentient beings are of the same origin. Therefore, loving and respecting each other is the

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[9] Historical Documentary 'The History of Beiyang Fleet' , episode 4《北洋水軍興亡史》第 4 集, produced by Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy 中國人民解放軍海軍出品,
<http://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rr9mh9n0.html?src=frbdaldjunest&vfm=bdvtx&frp=v.baidu.com%2Ftv_intro%2F&bl=jp_video&kwid=24533> [accessed 27 November 2017].

[10] *Xi Jinping The Governance of China* (Beijing：Foreign Languages Press Co.Ltd 2014), p.5.

[11] the Documentary 'Major Country Diplomacy', episode 5 大型政論專題片《大國外交》第 5 集,
<http://tv.cctv.com/2017/09/04/VIDE4Nm5YBTeW5lJ27z2QgYW170904.shtml> [accessed 27 November 2017].

significant way of achieving personal success, national prosperity and global stability. People who keep away from ignorance always guide their life with this principle. Therefore, when they are offspring in a family, they will show filial piety; when they are ministers in a government, they will be loyal to their duty; when they are national leaders, they will work wholeheartedly to serve the nation and its people.

Two practical methods for being free from ignorance

Only being free from ignorance can people connect with the pure self-nature to enjoy life under any circumstance, and recognise the truth that all beings are One. But how can a person keep away from ignorance?

(1) Getting Rid Of Personal Desires

Sima Guang once wrote in *Yushu*, 'Ego-centre results in selfishness, and selfishness hides the true nature. In this case, one cannot see even when a huge mountain is striking his forehead, and cannot hear even when a pillar is broken by thunder and lightning'.[12]For example, Li Si had known clearly that Zhao Gao's decision, assisting the younger prince to succeed to the throne by killing the crown prince, was dangerous for the dynasty. However, because of the desire for power, he followed Zhao Gao. In addition, Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty also understood clearly that the sage Emperors Yao and Shun should be taken as good role models and Emperors Jie and Zhou should be taken as warning[13]. But because of the extreme expansion of personal desires, he wallowed in a luxurious and dissipated life just like what Emperors Jie and Zhou did. Both Li Si and Emperor Yang met the same fate of a tragic ending. Their ignorance not only led them to personal failure but also resulted in the downfall of the dynasties. Thus, getting rid of personal desires is crucial for keeping away from ignorance.

Personal desires are from the strong sense of 'self'. Therefore, getting rid of individual desire should start from tearing down the barrier between 'self' and 'others'. Ancient sages frequently emphasised the great significance of filial piety and sibling duty, as that is one of the most

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[12] Sima Guang 司馬光, *Yu Shu*《迂書》[In Chinese], <http://www.360doc.com/content/15/0614/02/13617787_477963174.shtml> [accessed 27 November 2017].

[13] Sima Guang 司馬光, *History as a mirror*《資治通鑒》[In Chinese] (Bejing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1956), p.6053.

practical ways to weaken the strong sense of 'self'. When one is considerate of their parents and siblings, the strong sense of 'self ' will gradually vanish. At the same time, a sense of oneness with parents and siblings will arise, even willing to dedicate the whole life to them.

There are many excellent examples in history. For instance, Shen Zhou（沈周）, a famous painter in the Ming dynasty, never travelled far from home for a lifelong time in order to support his mother. Laiguo（來果）, the renowned Zen master in modern China, took the kitchen knife in a night to cut his liver in order to cure his father's serious disease. Moreover, Zhao Xiao（趙孝）, Zhao Li（趙禮）, Kong Rong（孔融）, Kong Bao（孔褒）, Wang Xiang（王祥）, Wang Lan（王覽）, were even willing to devote their lives to protect their siblings from dangerous situations.

When the invisible barrier between 'self' and 'others' gradually vanishes, people will take their parents' happiness and sufferings as their own happiness and sufferings, and take others' happiness and sufferings as their own happiness and sufferings. With this kind of open mind, ignorant actions will certainly be avoided.

（2）With Meditative Concentration the innate wisdom will be uncovered

Surangama Sutra states, 'Dharma means not being distracted by anything. On the basis of this, people could develop meditative concentration, and the innate wisdom will successively be discovered'[14]. Therefore, like what is said in *the Flower Ornament*, 'Do not cling on anything, including what you see, what you hear, what you smell, what you taste and what you contact'[15], to cultivate meditative concentration by not being distracted by anything is also a practical method to keep away from ignorance and discover the innate wisdom.

Although there are eighty-four thousand Buddhist dharma doors, the pith of them is the same: to

[14] *The Surangama Sutra* 《大佛頂首楞嚴經》(Shanghai: Shanghai Buddhist Scriptures Publishing 上海佛學書局), vol.Ⅵ, p.29.

[15] *'Flower Ornament'* 《大方廣佛華嚴經》, <http://www.fomen123.com/fo/jingdian/huayanjing/Index.html>[accessed 27 November 2017].

cultivate meditative concentration by practising the dharma and to reveal the innate wisdom. Among the Buddha's teachings, one of the most effective practices is to chant the holy name of Amitabha Buddha, which helps people convert all of the annoyances, including greed, angry, ignorance, and arrogance, into the single holy name 'Amitabha Buddha'. Just by chanting the Buddha's name anytime and anywhere, such as eating, sleeping, walking, and the spare time of study and work, gradually, with the blessing of Amitabha Buddha, ignorance will convert into wisdom.

Mater Haixian who was greatly praised by Professor Chin Kung was an excellent example of chanting Amitabha Buddha's name. For ninety years, the Master had chanted the holy name ceaselessly in his mind, even when he was eating, dressing, farming and cutting firewood. Because of the extremely pure and peaceful mind, his innate wisdom was uncovered. Although the Master was illiterate, when he had heard the contents of sutras he could interpret them correctly. He had a great insight into both human knowledge and transmundane dharma. By just reciting the holy name wholeheartedly, he reached the state of consciousness as what is said in sutras, 'With the very simple practice, the innate wisdom is naturally uncovered'[16].

The Master experienced much social turmoil, but his style of diligence and willing to contribute was never changed. At the age of 112, he had predicted his death and was reborn in the Pure Land[17]. This kind of examples, having no fear for both life and death, are also commonly found in the *Accounts of Pure Land Sages.*

Undoubtedly, this kind of courage is from the great wisdom. Chanting the holy name can help people develop meditative concentration and reach the deepest inner peace and uncover the innate wisdom, as well as help them escape from the Cycle of Birth and Death by the blessings of the Buddha. This practice can be considered as a supreme method of keeping away from ignorance.

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[16] *The Surangama Sutra* 《大佛頂首楞嚴經》(Shanghai: Shanghai Buddhist Scriptures Publishing 上海佛學書局), vol. Ⅴ, p.35.

[17] Miao Yin 妙音, *The Mater Haixian* 《海賢和尚》(Beijing: United Publishing Company 團結出版社，2015).

Conclusions

Everyone has innate wisdom, but it is covered by personal desires and distractions. If someone is determined to get rid of personal desires and cultivate inner peace, they will be free from ignorance and return to the self-nature.

People who keep away from ignorance will be serene since wherever the external circumstances are, their inner peace will never be disturbed. Meanwhile, they love others as loving themselves, because they really understand that all sentient beings are as one.

The great education is to teach every student to keep away from ignorance and the great politics is to lead every person to keep away from ignorance. If everyone in the world is free from ignorance, their inner world will be peaceful, and they will love others as loving themselves. Then we will achieve the ultimate goal mentioned in *The Great Learning*, 'to help everyone recover their innate virtues'[18], and the peaceful and harmonious world is not far away from us.

[18] *Exegesis of the Thirteen Canons*《十三经注疏》(Bejing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1980, the photocopy of *Exegesis of the Thirteen Canons*, proofread by Ruan Yuan in the Qing Dynasty 影印[清]阮元校刻《十三經註疏》), vol.LX, p.1673. [Translated by The Academy of Sinology.]

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<https://baike.baidu.com/item/別海南黎民表/12691737?fr>[accessed 27 November 2017].

12. Wen Tianxiang 文天祥，*Guo Ling Ding Yang*《過零丁洋》

<http://hanyu.baidu.com/s?wd=%E8%BF%87%E9%9B%B6%E4%B8%81%E6%B4%8B&from=poem>[accessed 27 November 2017].

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<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%A4%A7%E5%AD%A6%E9%97%AE/6248335?fr=aladdin>[accessed 27 November 2017].

14. Historical Documentary 'The History of Beiyang Fleet' 《北洋水軍興亡史》, produced by Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy 中國人民解放軍海軍出品

<http://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rr9mh9n0.html?src=frbdaldjunest&vfm=bdvtx&frp=v.baidu.com%2Ftv_intro%2F&bl=jp_video&kwid=24533>[accessed 27 November 2017].

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<http://tv.cctv.com/2017/09/04/VIDE4Nm5YBTeW5lJ27z2QgYW170904.shtml>[accessed 27 November 2017].

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